

7 Καὶ εἶπέν μοι ὁ ἄγγελος· διὰ τί ἐθαύμασας; ἐγὼ ἐρῶ σοι τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναίκος καὶ τοῦ θηρίου τοῦ βαστάζοντος αὐτήν τοῦ ἔχοντος τὰς ἑπτὰ κεφαλὰς καὶ τὰ δέκα κέρατα.

de la bestia que la lleva, la que tiene las siete cabezas y los diez cuernos.

woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.

at her completely amazed. 7 “Why are you so amazed?” the angel asked. “I will tell you the mystery of this woman and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns.



INTRODUCTION

In the last three bowls of wrath in 16:10-21 the focus of divine punishment centered on the throne of the beast, with its forces gathering at Harmagedon for a great battle, and the splitting of the great city into pieces. In a variety of ways these bowls of wrath were setting us as readers up for the more explicit and detailed depiction of chapters seventeen and eighteen. The central theme of these two chapters is the collapse of Rome as the center of the evil empire of the world standing in opposition to God and His people.

In these two chapters two perspectives are presented to John’s readers. In chapter seventeen the city is portrayed as a gigantic whore and one of the seven angels who dumped bowls of wrath is charged with the responsibility of describing and depicting her to John. Then in chapter eighteen another angel celebrates her downfall that is impending.

Finally in 19:1-10, all of heaven celebrates her downfall. Then in 19:11-16, the rider on the white horse, Christ, appears as the conquering warrior who will take her on and destroy the city. He does battle against the city destroying her along with the beast, who is her ruler, and all those with the mark of the beast (19:17-21).

For John’s initial readers living in the Roman province of Asia at the end of the first century, this was especially welcomed news. The corrupting influence of the empire stood largely behind the hostile atmosphere of their cities where they sought to faithfully serve Christ. The divine promise of its elimination was reason for rejoicing.

For us as believers living centuries after the time of the writing of Revelation, this message remains good news as well. We are assured by this that evil rulers and evil people in our world are doomed. They have no future except in the everlasting torments of Hell itself. Their opposition to God is utterly futile. This stands in stark contrast to the glorious future ahead for the people of God in everlasting Heaven.

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

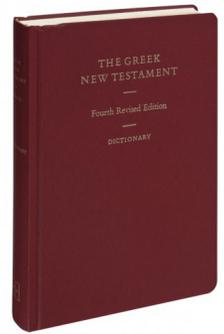
Once again the background issues are important,

and as has been the case in the most recent studies the literary dimensions play a greater role than the historical aspects.

Historical Aspects:

External History. In the history of the hand copying of this text only one variation in wording appears in the UBS 4th rev. ed. of *The Greek New Testament Text Apparatus*.

17:4 πορνείας αὐτῆς, her fornication.¹ The variation reads πορνείας τῆς γῆς, **fornications of the earth**. This seems to be a scribal mistake in copying.² The weight of evidence favors the adopted text reading πορνείας αὐτῆς.



In the Text Apparatus of the Nestle-Aland 28th rev. edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece*, numerous other variations are listed.³ The variations listed

¹{B} πορνείας αὐτῆς A 051 209 209 1006 1841 2344 it^{ar} vg syr^{ph} (arm) eth Andrew; Beatus // πορνείας τῆς γῆς 1611 (1854 πονηρίας for πορνείας) 2030 2053 2062 2329 Byz [046] Hippolytus; (Cyprian) (Quodvultdeus) (Primasius) // πορνείας αὐτῆ καὶ τῆς γῆς & syr^h with * (cop^{sa, bo}) // γῆς it^{eg}

[Kurt Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (with Apparatus); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition (with Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000).]

²“Among the several readings πορνείας αὐτῆς appears to be best attested, being supported by A 1006 2344 vg syr^{ph} al. The substitution of τῆς γῆς for αὐτῆς seems to be due to a copyist’s blunder. Codex Sinaiticus presents the conflate reading πορνείας αὐτῆς καὶ τῆς γῆς (cf. the Sahidic ‘of her fornication with those of the earth’ and the Bohairic ‘... with all the earth’).” [Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 681–682.]

³17,1

° & 1006. 1841 (the preposition ἐκ is omitted)

* μοι 1854. 2344 M^A (the pronoun μοι is added after λέγων)

* τῶν (– P⁴⁷) ὑδάτων τῶν P^{47vid} 046. 2030 M^K (alternative constructions for ὑδάτων)

reflect either efforts at stylistic improvements or careless copying of the text. Additionally, these surface mostly in isolated texts that play only a minor role in text determination.

Consequently we can exegete the adopted reading of the text in full confidence of it being the most likely original reading.

Internal History. With the time and place markers inside 17:1-7 identifying traits of the Babylonian whore are more oriented toward exegetical qualities than to background issues. These will be therefore treated under the exegesis below. Although they seem to mark a historical spot, the contradictory signals given by John reflect apocalyptic thinking and depiction rather than historical based referencing.



Literary Aspects:

These qualities of the text remain critical to identify if we are to correctly understand the meaning of the passage.

Genre: The broad genre of apocalyptic vision continues here and establishes the angle of interpretive understanding. Clearly in his depiction of the great whore of Babylon he is alluding to Rome as the imperial capital of the Mediterranean world of his day. But the widely used and very popular use of the ancient city of Babylon as a symbol of concentrated evil frees him to portray it with graphic imagery as the very epitome of evil in opposition to God. Remember that this document had to clear a Roman censor on Patmos before being released to the seven churches. My suspicion is that John figured the censor would never make it to the scroll containing this section before concluding that this was meaningless religious writings with no threat to the empire. If he did, Babylon could easily have been taken to refer to Jerusalem, given the tensions between Christians and Jews by this point in time.

No distinctive sub genre emerges here. Although the figure of Babylon was often a symbol of Rome in ancient literature, no set genre form emerged on how this was used.

One unusual trait here, however, is that the image of Babylon in vv. 3b-6a (δείξω σοι...) has an interpretation in vv. 8-14 (ἐγὼ ἐρῶ σοι...) given by an 'interpreting' angel in v. 7, first alluded to in 1:1. This angel is one of the seven who had the bowls of wrath (17:1-3). Elsewhere in Rev. explanations given to John by heavenly beings are either by Christ Himself (1:9-20; 4:1) or by one of the 24 elders (7:13-14). In 21:9-22:9, another angel -- perhaps the same one -- gives John a 'guided tour' of the new Jerusalem: δείξω σοι.... But no explanation of the new Jerusalem is provided to John in this later vision.

Literary Setting: The context of 17:1-7 is clear. It belongs to the larger unit of 17:1-18. What is not so clear are the sub units inside vv. 1-18. The paragraphing breaks across different Greek texts and English translations differ greatly. Clearly v. 1 introduces a new unit with ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων, and there came on of the seven angels. The next clear shift comes in v. 3b with 3a, καὶ ἀπήνεγκέν με εἰς ἔρημον ἐν πνεύματι, and he carried me away into a desert in the Spirit, concluding the first unit of vv. 1-3a. Καὶ εἶδον γυναῖκα, And I saw a woman, in v. 3b introduces a new sentence and unit of ideas. καὶ εἶδον τὴν γυναῖκα, and I saw the woman, in v. 6 seems to finish this unit. But John adds Καὶ ἐθαύμασα ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα, And I was amazed with great marvel upon seeing her. What is not so clear is whether this concludes vv. 3b-6a (as per the N-A 28th) or introduces the next unit of vv. 7-9, (as per

2

* εποιησαν πορνειαν κ (ἐπόρνευσαν is replaced)

3

° 2030 M^K (the preposition ἐν is omitted)

* γεμον κ² 046. 051. 1006. 1611. 1841. 1854. 2030. 2344 M (alternative spelling for γέμοντα)

| txt (vel γεμον τα) κ* A P 2053. 2062. 2329

* ονοματων 051. 2344 M^A (alternative spellings of ὀνόματα)

| ονομα 046*; Bea

*¹ εχοντα κ P 2053^{com}. 2062^{com} (alternative spellings of ἔχων)

| εχον 046. 051. 1611. 1841. 1854. 2030. 2053txt. 2062txt.

2344 M

| txt A 1006. 2329

4

* πορφυραν 051 M^A (alternative spelling of πορφυροῦν)

° P 046. 051. 1006. 1841. 2344 M sy (καὶ is omitted before κεχρυσωμένη)

| txt κ A 1611. 1854. 2030. 2053. 2062. 2329 latt syh

* χρυσω κ P 051. 1006. 1611. 1841. 2329. 2344 M^A (alternative spelling of χρυσίῳ)

* P (the phrase ἔχουσα ποτήριον χρυσοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτῆς γέμον βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς is omitted)

¹ γεμων κ 1006. 1854* (alternative spellings of γέμον)

| γεμοντα 2053. 2062. 2344

*² της γης 046. 1611. 1854. 2030. 2053. 2062. 2329 M^K g^{ig};

Hipp (Cyp Prim) (αὐτῆς is replaced)

| αυτης και της γης κ syh** (co)

6

* του αιματος κ² P 046. 1854. 2030. 2329 M^K (alternative spelling of ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος)

| τω αιματι κ*

° 046. 2030 M^K (καὶ before ἐκ is omitted)

°¹ 1854 (ar) (Ἰησοῦ is omitted)

* 3 4 1 2 κ (alternative sequence for ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα)

| ιδων αυτην μεθουσαν θαυμα μεγα 1611

7

* κ P 051. 1854. 2329. 2344 M^A (reverse sequence for ἐρῶ σοι)

[Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle, *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28. revidierte Auflage. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 772–773.]

| of her immorality
 | and
 | on her forehead
a name written
 a mystery
 Babylon
 the great
 the mother
 of the whores
 and
 of the abominations of the earth.

17.6 And
508 I saw the woman
 being drunk
 out of the blood
 of the saints,
 and
 of the witnesses to Jesus.

And
509 I was astounded
 at seeing her
 with great astonishment

17.7 And
510 said to me the angel:

Why
are you astounded?
I will show you the mystery

| of the woman
 | and
 | of the beast
 | that is carrying her
 | that has seven heads
 | and
 | ten horns.

Summary of Rhetorical Structure

Determining the subunits in chapter seventeen are more difficult than has been the case for the past several chapters. Topic shift signals come at the angel speaking to John in v. 1, ἐλάλησεν, and v. 7 εἶπέν, but tucked in between is John's standard Καὶ εἶδον, **and I saw**, in v. 3b. Clearly the Καὶ εἶπέν μοι ὁ ἄγγελος, **and the angel said to me**, in v. 7a begins a direct discourse section that continues through v. 18. It is clearly divided into two sections with Καὶ λέγει μοι, **and he says to me**, in v. 15a. Thus the uncertainty comes in the first seven verses of this 18 verse chapter. This is reflected in the variation of paragraphing that one finds across both printed Greek texts and modern translations.

The speaking of an angel carries with it the implication usually stated directly by John as καὶ ἤκουσα, **and I heard** (46x in Rev). But John doesn't seem to employ the Καὶ εἶδον, **And I saw**, (56x in Rev) main topic introduction with καὶ ἤκουσα, **I heard**, sub topic introduction

here. But unquestionably from a narrative critical view point scene shifts come with ἐλάλησεν, εἶδον, εἶπέν. In this chapter the dominate element then becomes the speaking of the angel to John.

Thus the passage breaks down into three sub-units: 1) Angel speaks to John (#s503-505); 2) John saw the woman (#s506-509); 3) Angel describes the woman to John (#510 et als).

In #s 503-505, a logical progression is developed of an angel coming (#503); speaking (#504); then carrying John away (#505). In #s 506-509, the twofold seeing of the woman provides the structure: #s 506-507 (sees; describes); and #s 508-509 (sees; is astounded). In #510 the angel interprets the woman to John with the extended direct discourse continuing from vv. 7b to 14 in part one and then vv. 15-18 in part two.

Exegesis of the Text:

The natural divisions of the passage as defined above in the Block Diagram provide the legitimate out-

line structure for exegeting the passage. Because of the angel's interpretation of what John saw some overlap with the next study will take place in this exegesis.

A. An angel comes to John, vv. 1-3a

17.1 Καὶ ἦλθεν εἷς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ' ἐμοῦ λέγων· δεῦρο, δείξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, 2 μεθ' ἧς ἐπόρνευσαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς. 3 καὶ ἀπήνεγκέν με εἰς ἔρημον ἐν πνεύματι.

17.1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk." 3 So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness.

In the final three bowls of wrath (16:10-21) the emphasis focused upon divine judgment coming upon a gathering of rulers and their armies to opposed God and His people. Everything climaxed upon the wrath of God to come upon the great city Babylon. The picture in the seventh bowl is of a gigantic earthquake and hail storm occurring so as to split the city into three parts.

This city called by its code name Babylon will now come in for much greater analysis and divine punishment in chapters seventeen and eighteen. In chapter seventeen the city is pictured as a gigantic whore who has seduced the kings and people of the earth. In chapter eighteen her downfall is celebrated with the angelic song and then followed by the standard mourning of the people loyal to her. With the symbolic action of the angel throwing a huge millstone into the sea to depict her burial, he declares her dead and gone forever. In 19:1-10, there follows a celebrating of her death and destruction in heaven. Then in 19:11-21, a heavenly banquet takes place celebrating the destruction of the beasts and the evil people of the earth. The images of destruction are stark, dramatic, and often gory. But they spoke clearly to John's initial readers who lived under the oppression of the Roman empire that could be just as gruesome to people as are these images of divine wrath upon the woman and her followers.

The narrative depiction is set up with the appearance of one of the seven angels with the bowls of wrath: Καὶ ἦλθεν εἷς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας, and there came one of the seven angels possessing the seven bowls. Later in 21:9 the angel's coming will be much more pleasant, although described in the same language as here: Καὶ ἦλθεν εἷς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας τῶν γεμόντων τῶν

ἑπτὰ πληγῶν τῶν ἐσχάτων καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ' ἐμοῦ λέγων· δεῦρο, δείξω σοι τὴν νύμφην τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀρνίου. Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." The sequence of events there matches those depicted here as well, except that John then sees the new Jerusalem as the bride of Christ.⁴

In neither instance the particular angel is not identified beyond being of the seven angels with the bowls. Perhaps this is because it didn't matter which one of the seven it was.

What the angel tells John forms the bulk of this unit of text material in vv. 1b-2. Essentially he indicates to John that he will show him the woman. She is identified in detail. Also, as the details here and below will make clear, this 'woman' is the city of Babylon that was the center of the seventh bowl of wrath in 16:17-21. In all of these details from 16:17 through 19:10 this image will be presented in numerous ways with graphic symbols. Gradually it becomes clear that John is alluding to the city of Rome at the end of the first century as representative of evil powers opposing God and His people. Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of this identification comes with the angel's interpretation of the symbolism of these various images in 17:8-18. In this he makes oftentimes a very arbitrary "this equals that" identification that has little or no logical basis. Often this part of Revelation is labeled the "allegorical vision of Babylon." What it does accomplish is a dramatic reminder that any historical oriented reading of these texts, which are presented internally as apocalyptic vision, is completely wrong and totally misses the point of the text.

After the angel comes to John, he speaks with him: καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ' ἐμοῦ λέγων, and he spoke with me saying. The exact expression will show up again in 21:9 with the same angel speaking to John. These two expressions form a parallel where the angel indicates first his intention to show John the wrath of God (chap. 17) and then the city of God (chap. 21). Thus the dominating motif in chaps. 17-20 is going to be upon the wrath of God, while chaps 21-22 stress the blessing of God to

⁴One very helpful perspective is the reminder that what we have here are two parallel visions. The first one in 17:1-19:10 focuses on the judgment of Babylon. In this, 17:1-2 should be seen as introductory to 17:1-19:10, even though it could be taken secondarily as introducing 17:3-18.

The second one is 21:9-22:9 with 21:9-10a parallel to 17:1-2. In the first scene of 17:1-19:10, the evil city of Babylon is destroyed; but, in the second one of 21:9-22:9, the new city of Jerusalem is eternal and totally free of the corruptions typical in the evil Babylon. The significant difference between the depictions of these two cities is that evil Babylon needs an angelic interpretation in order to be clearly understood, but the new Jerusalem doesn't.

His people.

The woman is pictured as: δεῦρο, δείξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθήμενης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, μεθ' ἧς ἐπόρνευσαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς. "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."

The urging of the angel to John is δεῦρο, δείξω σοι, Come, I will show you...⁵ What we see here is another

⁵For an interesting but very different depiction, see the Slavonic text of [3 Baruch](#) 1:1-3:8 especially. The [Greek text](#) unfortunately contains a "Christian" re-write of this originally [Jewish text](#) most likely composed in the early decades of the second century AD. The setting is the mourning over the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem first by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and then in the "Christian version" again by the Romans in 70 AD. The person mourning is supposedly Baruch, secretary to the prophet Jeremiah in the OT. The text below is the original Jewish version.

when the angel Phanuel^c was sent to him on the holy mountain Zion^d beside the river, as he cried over the captivity of Jerusalem. Lord, give thy blessing.^e

1.1 When King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and enriched Babylon,^a then I Baruch cried loudly and said, 2 "Lord, in what way was King Nebuchadnezzar righteous?^d Why did you not spare your city Jerusalem which is your vineyard of glory?^c Why have you acted so, Lord?"

3 And behold, as I was crying to myself, an angel of the Lord appeared and said to me, "Be silent, O man of his pleasure!^e Jerusalem had to suffer this. But thus speaks the Lord Almighty to you, 4 and he sent me before your face so that I could show you all the mysteries of God.⁵ 5 For both your tears and your voice entered the ears of the Almighty God. 6 Only tell me that you will neither add nor omit (anything), and I will show you mysteries which no man has ever seen."

7* And I Baruch said to the angel, "As the Lord God lives, if you will show me, I will listen; I will not subtract nor will I add one word.^h If I do omit (anything), then may the Lord pass judgment upon me on the Day of Judgment."

2.1 And the angel of hosts took me and carried me where the firmament of heaven^a is. 2 And it was the first heaven,^d and in that heaven he showed me very large doors.^e And the angel said to me, "Let us pass through these doors." And we passed through like the passing of 30 days. He showed me salvation.⁵ 3 And I saw a plain;^h there were menⁱ living there whose faces were those of cattle, with the horns of deer, the feet of goats, and the loins of rams.

4 And I Baruch asked the angel, "Tell me what is the thickness of the heaven which we have crossed, and what is the plain, so that I can tell the sons of men." 5 Phanael^k said to me, "The gates which you saw are as large as (the distance) from east to west; the thickness of heaven is equal to the distance from earth to heaven, the plain where we are standing is equal to its width (i.e. heaven's)."

6 He said to me, "Go and I will show you the mysteries."

7 I said to the angel, "Lord, who are these strangely shaped creatures?" And the angel said to me, "These are those who built the tower of the war against God.^l The Lord threw them out."

instance of the angelus interpres where an angel interprets to John what he has seen: note 4:1; 17:1; 21:9, 10; 21:1, 6, 8. What is meant by this use of δείκνυμι is simply that a verbal description of the symbolical meaning of what John sees will be provided to him. Also included is a visual picture that 'fleshes' out the symbolical meaning.

Here she is portrayed in several ways. First, the bowl of wrath depicted in 16:17-21 is now labeled as τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθήμενης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, [the judgment on the great whore sitting upon many waters](#). In the seventh bowl divine wrath is pictured as a violent thunder storm with 100 pound balls of hail falling and also as an earthquake such as has never happened before on earth (16:18, 20-21). But these images of punishment are but 'appetizers' for the depiction of judgment in 18:1-24.

Second, what does she look like? She is labeled a τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης, a great whore. This label shows up also in 19:2, and a reference to her



simply as a prostitute in 19:5, 15, and 16. The image plays off the OT background use of the image of a whore reference godless cities as well as disobedient Israelites.⁶ Although not viewed as particularly evil in

3.1 And the angel took me and led me to the second heaven and showed me large open^a doors, and the angel said to me, "Let us pass through them." 2 And we passed through, flying like the passing of 7 days.^b 3 And he showed me a great prison,^c and there were strangely shaped creatures living in it, with the faces of dogs, the horns of deer, and the feet of goats.^d

4 And I asked the angel of the Lord, "Who are these?" 5 And he said to me, "These are the ones who had planned^e to build the tower, for at that time they forced men and a multitude of women to make bricks.^f Among them was one woman who was near to giving birth, and they did not release her, but, working, she gave birth, and took her cloak and wrapped the infant, and left her infant, and made bricks again. 6 And the Lord God appeared to them and confused their languages.⁵ And they built their tower 80 thousand cubits in height, and in width 5 hundred and twenty. 7 They took an auger so that they could proceed to bore heaven so that they could see whether heaven is (made) of stone or of glass or of copper. 8 And God saw them and did not heed them, but he chastened them invisibly."ⁱⁱ

[James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 1:662-664.]

⁶"The image of the prostitute is frequently found in the OT, where it is applied to godless cities (Isa 1:21 [Jerusalem]; Isa

the Greco-Roman societies, the Israelite societies had a severely negative view of these individuals. It is out of this background that John develops the image.

Third, is where she is sitting: τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, *who is sitting upon many waters*. In v. 3, however, she is καθημένην ἐπὶ θηρίον κόκκινον, *sitting upon a scarlet beast*. But in v. 9 she is seated on top of seven mountains: Αἱ ἑπτὰ κεφαλαὶ ἑπτὰ ὄρη εἰσὶν, ὅπου ἡ γυνὴ κάθηται ἐπ’ αὐτῶν, *the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated*. The many waters, however, is then interpreted to mean multitudes of people in v. 15: τὰ ὕδατα ἃ εἶδες οὗ ἡ πόρνη κάθηται, λαοὶ καὶ ὄχλοι εἰσὶν καὶ ἔθνη καὶ γλῶσσαι, *the waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages*. Clearly the symbolism of the many waters and the beast point to a spiritual reality.⁷

23:16–17 [Tyre]; Nah 3:4 [Nineveh]). Idolatrous and disobedient Israel is also compared to a prostitute (Jer 3:6–10; Ezek 16:15–22; 23:1–49; Hos 4:12–13; 5:3). Bruns (CBQ 26 [1964] 459–63) has suggested that while the great whore represents Rome, it might secondarily refer to the Roman empress Messalina, wife of Claudius, who indulged in a variety of sexual escapades, including an infamous drunken sexual orgy (Tacitus *Annals* 11.31; Juvenal *Satires* 6.116–24). The problem with this proposal, however, is that it is based on rumor preserved in a few literary sources and, despite its possible currency in Rome, would in all probability not have been widely known or reported in the provinces.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 929.]

⁷“The ‘many waters’ is interpreted in v 15 as ‘peoples and crowds and nations and languages,’ based in part on an OT metaphor in which peoples or armies are symbolized by ‘(many) waters’ (Ps 144:7; Isa 8:6–7; 17:12–14; 28:17; Jer 47:2). This is particularly clear in Isa 17:12–14, where the comparison of the roaring of many peoples or nations is like the roaring of ‘many waters.’ Ps 29 is striking because it depicts Yahweh as enthroned on many waters. The phrase ‘many waters’ occurs in the OT (see May, JBL 74 [1955] 9–21), with the suggestion of chaos and disorder that are sometimes in conflict with Yahweh and therefore are occasionally used as an equivalent to the dragon or Rahab (Pss 18:16; 29:3; 32:6; 77:19 [‘many waters’ = Red Sea]; 93:4; 144:7; Ezek 32:13 [the Nile]; Hab 3:15).

“The sestertius of Vespasian on which the goddess Roma is shown seated on the Seven Hills (described above under Form/Structure/Setting) also shows her with her right foot touching the Tiber river, personified as a reclining bearded male figure. This descriptive feature, however, is also characteristic of historical Babylon, which was surrounded by a moat filled with water (Herodotus 1.178). In addition, the Euphrates river flowed through the middle of the city (Herodotus 1.185; Strabo 16.1.5), and the surrounding region was criss-crossed with canals and irrigation ditches (Strabo 16.1.9). LXX Jer 28:13 (MT 51:13) describes Babylon as ‘you who dwell near many waters [Hebrew מַיִם רַבִּים *mayim rabbim*; misunderstood by the Greek translator as ἐφ’ ὕδασι πολλοῖς] in the multitude of her treasures.’ The wealth of Babylon briefly mentioned here in Jeremiah may be expanded on in Rev 17:4 (C. Wolff, Jeremiah, 167).

“The fact that the woman is sitting is obviously an important feature of the description since the verb καθῆσθαι, ‘to sit,’ is used of the woman’s posture also in vv 3, 9, and 15, i.e., four times in

The posture of being seated signals that she exercises ruling control over the people. This is a symbol of significant power and authority.

Fourth, μεθ’ ἧς ἐπόρνευσαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς, *and with her the kings of the earth have committed immorality*. The image here is symbolical more than literal, even though the wives of some Roman emperors were known to function as whores on occasion. In the background of this expression stands Jer. 51:7 (LXX 28:7).⁸

7 καὶ νῦν οὕτως εἶπεν κύριος παντοκράτωρ ἵνα τί ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε κακὰ μεγάλα ἐπὶ ψυχᾷς ὑμῶν ἐκκόψαι ὑμῶν ἄνθρωπον καὶ γυναῖκα, νήπιον καὶ θηλάζοντα ἐκ μέσου Ιουδα πρὸς τὸ μὴ καταλειφθῆναι ὑμῶν μηδένα,†

7 Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad.

The widespread corrupting of the earth by the woman is emphasized also in Rev. 18:3, 9; 19:2. The image of kings being corrupted comes out of Isa. 23:17 in the Hebrew text: וזנתה הארץ כל־ממלכות הארץ *wēzāntā ’et-kol-mamlēkōt hā’āreṣ*, ‘and she [Tyre] fornicated with all the kingdoms of the earth.’⁹

all. Sitting in these contexts is primarily an indication of enthronement. According to v 9, ‘the seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman is seated.’ Several denominations of coins minted during the reign of Nero show the goddess Roma, dressed in military garments, with a miniature winged victory in her right hand and a parazonium in her left, and seated (Cayón, 1:141 [no. 29], 149 [nos. 58–60], 152 [no. 69], 158 [no. 94]).”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 929–930.]

⁸“Though the previous phrase in v 3a is an allusion to Jer 51:7 (LXX 28:7), this particular phrase has no counterpart in Jeremiah, except for the interpretive expansion found in Tg. Jer. 51:7 (tr. Hayward), ‘All the kings of the nations are about to be inebriated from her with langour, and the nations shall drink from the cup of her punishment.’ The phrase also has two close parallels in Rev 18:3 and 9; 19:2 (all allusions to Isa 23:17).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 930.]

⁹“It is clear that the author is dependent on the Hebrew text of Isa 23:17, וזנתה הארץ כל־ממלכות הארץ *wēzāntā ’et-kol-mamlēkōt hā’āreṣ*, ‘and she [Tyre] fornicated with all the kingdoms of the earth,’ for the LXX contains quite a different reading, καὶ ἔσται ἐμπόριον πάσαις ταῖς βασιλείαις τῆς οἰκουμένης, ‘and will be a market for all the kingdoms of the earth.’ In the OT the term זָנָה *zānā*, ‘fornicate, be a prostitute,’ is frequently used in a figurative sense of Israel’s faithless behavior toward Yahweh as manifested in her frequent lapses into idolatry. This is based on the analogy of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel and marriage contracts (Lev 17:7; 20:5–6; Num 14:33; 15:39; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27; 1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 21:11; Ps 73:27), a metaphor found with particular frequency in the prophets Hosea (1:2; 2:4[MT: 6]; 4:15; 9:1), Jeremiah (2:20; 3:2, 9, 13; 5:7, 11; 13:27), and Ezekiel (6:9; 16; 23; 43:7, 9); see Erlandsson, TDOT 4:101–4.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 930.]

The image of prostitution here signals commercial trade leading to religious practices, all of which corrupt those engaging in them.¹⁰ Rome was viewed as the source of tremendous corruption of the territories all across the Mediterranean world. This was often seen among Jews as being true for the Jewish people.¹¹

¹⁰“Considered against this OT background, the metaphor of sexual immorality appears at first sight to have little to do with the author’s condemnation of Babylon-Rome. In a very few places in the OT, however, there are instances in which the commercial trade of a city is described with the metaphor of prostitution (Kuhn, TDNT 1:515 n. 11), doubtless because economic relationships frequently led to the exchange of religious practices (Mic 1:7; Nah 3:4; 2 Kgs 9:22). In Isa 23:17, Tyre’s commercial contacts are called ‘prostitution,’ and the profits of such trade are called ‘the price of a prostitute’ (similar language is used of Nineveh in Nah 3:4). However, the historical context of both Isa 23:17 and Nah 3:4 suggests that neither prophet is interested in Tyre or Nineveh in themselves; rather the prophets condemn the negative influences the cities have exerted on the Near East, particularly on Israel.

“If we ask why John used the metaphor of sexual immorality to characterize the relationship between Babylon and the kings of the earth, it seems reasonable to suppose that he is denouncing the political alliances between Babylon and her client kingdoms. The fact that Babylon-Rome, under the metaphor of a prostitute, is blamed for the immoral behavior of the kings of the earth is a striking reminder of the ancient and modern double standard that places the blame for an illicit sexual union more on the woman than on her male partner. Such alliances inevitably had significant economic, social, and religious implications and usually worked to the detriment of the kingdoms involved. If we press the matter further and ask why the author is so outraged by such political alliances, it is reasonable to suppose that he shares the hostility that many Jews from Palestine had toward the Romans and the various rulers of Judea that the Romans manipulated from 63 B.C. on to the first Jewish revolt of A.D. 66–73 and that he has universalized his outrage on the basis of his experiences and historical legacy as a Palestinian Jew who may have known Roman violence firsthand.”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 930–931.]

¹¹“Diplomatic contacts between the Romans and the Jews (with either the Hasmoneans or Hellenizing Jewish leaders) may go back as far as 164 B.C., during the reign of Judas Maccabaeus (2 Macc 11:34–38), and a treaty may have been concluded shortly thereafter in 161 B.C. (1 Macc 8:1–32; 12:1–4, 16; Jos. Ant. 13.163–65, 169; Gruen, *Hellenistic World* 2:745–51). Pompey conquered Syria and then Palestine in 63 B.C., conquering Jerusalem, desecrating the temple by slaughtering priests and people in the temple and by entering the holy of holies, and earned Jewish hatred in the process (Jos. Ant. 14.37–79). He then installed Hyrcanus as a puppet monarch. Hyrcanus was taken prisoner by the Parthians in 40 B.C., providing the Roman senate with an excuse to declare Herod king of Judea (on the condition that he subdue it, which he did by 37 B.C.). The nobility in Judea, however, regarded Antigonus as the legitimate king and Herod as a usurper. Gaius Caligula’s plans to erect a statue of himself in the temple in A.D. 40, vehemently opposed by Jews (Jos. Ant. 18.263, 270), was prevented only by Caligula’s death. Events leading up to the first revolt in A.D. 66–73 resulted in a complete meltdown of Roman-Judean relations. The revolt itself was a political and religious disaster of enormous proportions for Palestinian Judaism. On the complexities of Roman-Judean relations from 164 B.C. on, see M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman*

Fifth, καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. Some unusual grammar surfaces here with no reason that should be noted. The common reference to the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 13:8, 14; 17:8) is replaced with οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν, those inhabiting the earth.¹² Also the mixing of the metaphors of sexual immorality with drunkenness suggests victimization of the people of the world by Rome through their kings. The drunkenness via the cup of wine pictures God’s wrath in numerous OT references: Isa 51:17–23; Jer 13:13–14; 25:15–29 [in vv 28–29 becoming drunk from God’s cup of wrath is explicitly called punishment]; 48:26; 51:39, 57; Lam 4:21. The punishment of Babylon-Rome is pictured several ways especially in 17:1–19:10 in terms of her corrupting influence:¹³

Rev 14:8:

ἢ ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς
who of the wine which is her immoral passion

πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη

gave all nations to drink

Rev 17:2b:

καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν
and the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk

ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς
from the wine which is her immorality

Rev 18:3a:

ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας
From the wine which is her immoral passion

Rule (Leiden: Brill, 1976); U. Baumann, *Rom und die Juden: Die römisch-jüdischen Beziehungen von Pompeius bis zum Tode des Herodes* (63 v. Chr–4 v. Chr.) (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1983); A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Foreign Policy in the East* (London, 1984); M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987); R. D. Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome, 100–30 B.C.* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990); L. L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). For a broader approach to the problem see W. Dahlheim, *Gewalt und Herrschaft: Das provinzielle Herrschaftssystem der römischen Republik* (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1977); M. Stahl, *Imperial Herrschaft und provinzielle Stadt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 931.]

¹²“The phrase ‘the inhabitants of the earth’ occurs frequently in Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 13:8, 14; 17:8), but only here is the phrase τὴν γῆν in the accusative, and only here is the preposition ἐπὶ missing. In this clause the author combines the metaphor of sexual immorality (= disastrous political alliances; cf. v 2a) with the metaphor of intoxication, which suggests the victimization of the people of the world by Rome, as mediated by their kings.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 932.]

¹³David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 932.

πέπτωκαν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη
all nations have collapsed.

Rev 19:2

ἣτις ἔφθειρεν τὴν γῆν ἐν τῇ πορνείᾳ αὐτῆς
who corrupted the earth with her immorality

What the angel says about the woman to John at the beginning certainly created curiosity about this person and her destiny in the wrath of God. But such images of a drunken woman, especially of a bride, were relatively common images across the ancient world of John, so that his readers could have readily grasped the significance of his words to them.¹⁴

The third movement in this opening segment of vv. 1-3 signals that John is being ‘carried away’ by the angel to a location where he could show John all about the woman: καὶ ἀπήνεγκέν με εἰς ἔρημον ἐν πνεύματι, So he carried me away into a wilderness in the Spirit. The exact location of John when the angel came to him is not spelled out clearly. In 16:1 when the actions of the seven angels with bowls begins John is in heaven, but the seven actions of the angels takes place on or connected to the earth, and so presumably John is situated

¹⁴“A thematic parallel is found in Odes Sol. 38:9–14 (tr. Sparks, AOT, 726):

9 And the corrupter of corruption

I saw while the bride who is corrupted was adorning herself,
Even the bridegroom who corrupts and is corrupted;

10 And I asked Truth, Who are these? And he said to me,
This is the Deceiver, and that is Error;

11 And they imitate the Beloved One and his bride,
And cause the world to err, and corrupt it;

12 And they invite many to a banquet,

And give them to drink of the wine of their intoxication,

13 And they cause them to vomit their wisdom and understanding,
And they render them irrational;

14 And then they abandon them,

But they go about raving and corrupting,
Because they are without understanding,

For neither do they seek it.

“Here a bride and bridegroom are metaphors for Error and Deceit, and they imitate the Beloved One and his bride. The wine served at the wedding feast makes the guests drunk, and they vomit out the understanding they previously had. The allegorical figures of the corrupt bride and bridegroom have many similarities to the female figures used to personify Virtue and Vice (cf. the myth of Prodicus in Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34), Kingship and Tyranny (Dio Chrysostom Or. 1.69–84, an adaptation of the Prodicus myth), or *Philosophy and Error* (Lucian Piscator 11ff.). Ovid (Art. amat. 3.23; LCL tr.) observes, ‘Virtue too herself is by dress and name a woman.’ In *Amores* 3.1, Ovid uses two female figures, Elegy and Tragedy (the former described using features drawn from the courtesan motif), to depict a struggle within the artist between these two genres (cf. L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955], 115–16). Female figures can personify entire nations; in Aeschylus *Persians* 176–99, Atossa queen of Persia describes a dream in which two beautiful women represent Persia and the Dorian Greeks, respectively.”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 932–933.]

there. At least the narrative viewpoint is written as if he were. If so, then the angel comes to him on the earth and takes him to a wilderness located somewhere on the earth. But one must remember that this is an apocalyptic desert, since it has rivers and lots of water flowing through it.

The language of John falling into a prophetic trance is common in Revelation: 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10. The expression ἐν πνεύματι is difficult to capture in translation. It signals entrance into a prophetic trance, but also indicates that the Spirit of God is the source of this trance. Thus in English it surfaces as ‘in the spirit’ or ‘in the Spirit.’ And both expressions are correct at the same time but not possible to express in one phrase.

The closest exact parallel to 17:3 is 21:10, καὶ ἀπήνεγκέν με ἐν πνεύματι ἐπὶ ὄρος μέγα καὶ ὑψηλόν, καὶ ἔδειξέν μοι τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν Ἰερουσαλὴμ καταβαίνουσαν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

But whereas in 21:10 John is carried away to a high mountain in order to see the holy city, here in 17:3 he is taken εἰς ἔρημον which can specify either a wilderness or a desert. Here the term is used negatively, although in 12:6, 14 it provides a place of safety for the mother of Christ fleeing the dragon. The location of εἰς ἔρημον is not geographical but spiritual. Interestingly in only a couple of decades after Revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas describes two similar trips in great detail.¹⁵ But both John and the Shepherd are drawing

¹⁵“The Shepherd of Hermas contains two extensive vision reports that are introduced by similar supernatural journeys to remote locations. According to Hermas Vis. 1.1.3, καὶ πνεῦμά με ἔλαβεν καὶ ἀπήνεγκέ με δι’ ἀνοδίας τινός, δι’ ἧς ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἐδύνατο ὁδεῦσαι, ‘Then a spirit took me and carried me through a trackless region through which a person could not travel’ (here the spirit referred to functions like the angel in Rev 17:3; 21:10). The second vision is introduced similarly (2.1.1): καὶ πάλιν με αἶρει πνεῦμα καὶ ἀποφέρει εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν τόπον, ‘And again a spirit takes me and carries me to the same place.’ Yet here the spirit is conceived of as an external force, very similar to the conception behind a stereotypical formula found five times in Ezekiel: רוּחַ יְהוָה wattiššā’ēnī rūah (LXX καὶ ἀνέλαβέν με πνεῦμα), ‘Then a spirit took me up’ (3:12; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5). He also uses the phrase וַיִּקַּח רוּחַ יְהוָה wērūah nēšā’atnī wattiqqāhēnī (LXX καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἐξῆρέν με καὶ ἀνέλαβέν με), ‘Then the spirit took me up and carried me’ (Ezek 3:14; cf. 2:2). This language of being carried off by the spirit (rūah), probably originally meaning ‘disappear,’ is also found in 1 Kgs 18:12 and 2 Kgs 2:16, where Elijah was reportedly transported by the רוּחַ יְהוָה rūah YHWH, the ‘wind of the Lord’ (nb. that רוּחַ יְהוָה rūah YHWH is construed with masculine verbs, though רוּחַ rūah is a feminine noun), and Ezekiel was reportedly transported by the רוּחַ rūah, ‘spirit’ or ‘wind’ (Ezek 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5; construed with feminine verbs); cf. M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, AB 22 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 70. For the notion of physical transport ‘in the spirit,’ John is dependent on Ezekiel, as Ezekiel was dependent on the Elijah tradition.”

upon the experience of Ezekiel for the image of being carried away in the spirit. The sense of εἰς ἔρημον stresses to a place not accessible to humans in regular experience. It is from here that John will gain a clear picture of the significance of the whore that is falling under divine judgment. John sees the city from the safety of the desert, but the city is not located in the desert.

B. John sees the woman sitting on the beast, vv. 3b-6

3b Καὶ εἶδον γυναῖκα καθημένην ἐπὶ θηρίον κόκκινον, γέμον[τα] ὀνόματα βλασφημίας, ἔχων κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ καὶ κέρατα δέκα. 4 καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἦν περιβεβλημένη πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον καὶ κεχρυσωμένη χρυσίῳ καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῳ καὶ μαργαρίταις, ἔχουσα ποτήριον χρυσοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτῆς γέμον βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς 5 καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῆς ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς. 6 καὶ εἶδον τὴν γυναῖκα μεθύουσαν ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ. Καὶ ἐθαύμασα ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα.

3b And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; 5 and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." 6 And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly amazed.

This second scene in chapter seventeen depicts what John saw while εἰς ἔρημον. John will see an image of a woman¹⁶ sitting on a beast with a detailed description of both provided. But he will need the allegorical interpretation provided by the angel in vv. 8-18 before he can comprehend what he is seeing spiritually. At the very end of this, the whore is identified as ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη ἡ ἔχουσα βασιλείαν ἐπὶ τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς, the great city that has ruler-ship over the kings of the earth, i.e.,

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 933–934.]

¹⁶"It is striking that the term πόρνη, 'whore,' is not applied directly to the woman within the vision narrated in 17:3b–6a, though it can be inferred since her golden cup is filled with 'fornication' and the 'crime' tattooed on the forehead of the woman is 'mother of whores' (v 5). However, the verb πορνεύειν, 'to fornicate' (17:2; 18:3, 9), and the noun πορνεία, 'fornication' (17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2), both occur several times in the larger textual unit in 17:1–19:10. In many respects the πορν-cognates provide the catchwords about which this entire section has been formed." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 916.]



Rome.

The details of his vision are supplied and serve as a foundation for the subsequent interpretation given to him by the angel. The initial description in 1b-2 is now expanded in 3b-6a and includes both the woman and the beast.

γυναῖκα καθημένην ἐπὶ θηρίον κόκκινον, a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast. Clearly from the depiction of this beast here it is the same beast described the identical way in 13:1, Καὶ εἶδον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον, ἔχον κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν κεράτων αὐτοῦ δέκα διαδήματα καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτοῦ ὀνόμα[τα] βλασφημίας, *And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.* The difference is the location here of the desert and of the sea in 13:1. Yet the initial image of the woman τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, *seated upon many waters* in 17:1b provides a connecting link. The ὑδάτων πολλῶν, "many waters," becomes a beast when John sees more clearly. The beast consistently in Revelation represents a world ruler controlling and deceiving the world and whose base of power is Rome.

The scarlet color, κόκκινον, of this beast links it back to the *great red dragon*, δράκων μέγας πυρρὸς, in 12:3. The dragon is the source of power for both the beast and the woman.

γέμον[τα] ὀνόματα βλασφημίας, full of blasphemous names. This trait goes back to the beast and parallels ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτοῦ ὀνόμα[τα] βλασφημίας., *upon its heads were blasphemous names* in 13:1b. Again the point is a picture of identifications of the beast designed and intended to slander and defame the name of God.

ἔχων¹⁷ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ καὶ κέρατα δέκα., having seven

¹⁷"Some textual witnesses have neuter εχων in place of masculine ἔχων ('having') to conform the participle to the neuter gender of the antecedent θηρίον ('beast,' so 051 M). Masculine ἔχων may be a *constructio ad sensum*, that is, an attempt to refer to the male person represented by the figure of the beast; that person is the subject of the following clause.¹⁹ Other witnesses have masculine accusative εχοντα in place of masculine nominative ἔχων to conform to the accusative case of θηρίον (⊗ P 2053^{com} 2062^{com})." [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, Page 849

heads and ten horns. This also matches the depiction of the beast in 13:1b, ἔχον κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ, **having ten horns and seven heads.** In the background of both depictions stands the depiction of the image of the fourth beast in Daniel 7:7, 20, 24.¹⁸ John borrows some of the terminology from this image in order to describe what he sees in the desert.

Thus the beast is truly a gruesome creature with supernatural power and a determination to oppose everything connected to God.

καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἦν περιβεβλημένη πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον καὶ κεχρυσωμένη χρυσίῳ καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῳ καὶ μαργαρίταις, and the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls. Now he comes back to describing the woman in greater detail. The mentioning of her clothing and adornment exactly matches that of the city in 18:16, οὐαὶ οὐαὶ, ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ περιβεβλημένη βύσσινον καὶ πορφυροῦν¹⁹ καὶ κόκκινον καὶ κεχρυσωμένη [ἐν] χρυσίῳ καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῳ καὶ μαργαρίτῃ, **Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls!** In 18:17 all of these items are labeled as ὁ τοσοῦτος πλοῦτος, **all this wealth.** These items are also mentioned as part of the trade merchandise from the merchants of the world in 18:12.²⁰ The woman and the

New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 853–854.]

¹⁸**Dan. 7:7** μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐθεώρουν ἐν ὄραματι τῆς νυκτὸς θηρίον τέταρτον φοβερόν, καὶ ὁ φόβος αὐτοῦ ὑπερέφρων ἰσχύι, ἔχον ὀδόντας σιδηροῦς μεγάλους, ἐσθιον καὶ κοπανίζον, κύκλω τοῖς ποσὶ καταπατοῦν, διαφόρως χρῶμενον παρὰ πάντα τὰ πρὸ αὐτοῦ θηρία· **εἶχε δὲ κέρατα δέκα.**†

After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and **it had ten horns.**

¹⁹“The term πορφυροῦς, usually translated ‘purple,’ actually describes a spectrum of colors in antiquity from red to purple to black (Dürbeck, Charakteristik, 129–39). Purple garments were worn in antiquity to symbolize status and particularly royalty (Judg 8:26; Esth 8:15; Lam 4:5; Dan 5:7, 16, 29; 1 Macc 10:20, 62, 64; 11:58; 14:43; Sir 40:4; Mark 15:17; John 19:2; Gos. Pet. 3.5; see Reinhold, Purple). Porphyry, on the other hand (whose own name was derived from the word πορφυροῦς), associated the color purple with carnality (*De antro* 14). Scarlet, however, does not represent royalty (the *χλαμὺς κοκκίνη*, ‘scarlet cloak,’ in Matt 27:28, where Mark 15:17 has πορφύρα, ‘purple,’ may also represent royalty) so much as the status associated with wealth (2 Sam 1:24; Prov 31:21; Jer 4:30; Epictetus 3.22.10; 4.11.34).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 934–935.]

²⁰**Rev. 18:11–13.** 11 Καὶ οἱ ἔμποροι τῆς γῆς κλαίουσιν καὶ πενθοῦσιν ἐπ’ αὐτήν, ὅτι τὸν γόμον αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς ἀγοράζει οὐκέτι 12 γόμον χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου καὶ λίθου τιμίου καὶ μαργαριτῶν καὶ βυσσίνου καὶ πορφύρας καὶ σιρικοῦ καὶ κοκκίνου, καὶ πᾶν ξύλον θύϊνον καὶ πᾶν σκεῦος ἐλεφάντινον καὶ πᾶν σκεῦος ἐκ ξύλου τιμιωτάτου καὶ χαλκοῦ καὶ σιδήρου καὶ μαρμάρου, 13 καὶ

city are the same, and are described in terms of wealth and affluence. Her appearance comes out of the background of moral philosophers describing prostitutes as symbols of decadence and affluence in ancient Rome.²¹ Jewish tradition also portrayed the harlot or prostitute in similar ways as well. Thus John’s initial labeling of her as τῆς πόρνης τῆς μεγάλης, **the great whore**, in v. 1b.

ἔχουσα ποτήριον χρυσοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτῆς γέμον βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς., holding a gold cup in her hand full of abominations and the impurities of her immorality. In part, Jer 28:7 (LXX; MT 51:7) stands in the background here.²²

κιννάμωμον καὶ ἄμωμον καὶ θυμιάματα καὶ μύρον καὶ λίβανον καὶ οἶνον καὶ ἔλαιον καὶ σεμίδαλιν καὶ σῖτον καὶ κτήνη καὶ πρόβατα, καὶ ἵππων καὶ ῥεδῶν καὶ σωμάτων, καὶ ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων.

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 **cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet**, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.

²¹“The description of the woman is drawn at least in part from the ancient *courtesan topos*, as the author suggests by using the phrase ἡ πόρνη ἡ μεγάλη, ‘the great whore,’ in v. 1b. Courtesans were used, particularly by moralist writers, as personifications of the vices, including incontinence, profligacy, covetousness, and flattery (Cebes Ταβυλα 9.1–4; Fitzgerald-White, *Tabula*, 142 n. 33). They had a recognizable way of dressing (Cebes Ταβυλα 9.1) and are often depicted as conspicuously well dressed (Lucian Dial. meretr. 286, 294; Alciphron Ep. court. 9.1). Successful courtesans could be very rich (Lucian Dial. meretr. 295) and sported gaudy jewelry (Lucian Piscator 12; Dial. meretr. 296–97, 321; Alciphron Ep. court. 12.2), exacted from their lovers (Alciphron Ep. court. 17.5). Plutarch records a speech condemning Pericles’s building program in mid-fifth century B.C. Athens (Περικλῆς 12.2; LCL tr. with modifications): ‘We are gilding and beautifying our city which, like a shameless woman [ὡσπερ ἀλαζόνα γυναῖκα], adds to her wardrobe precious stones and costly statues and temples worth millions.’ Here these anonymous critics compare the city of Athens with a prostitute’s expensive and gaudy wardrobe.

“The figure of the harlot is also used in the OT and early Jewish literature. A poetic text (4Q184) in J. Allegro, ed., *Qumran Cave 4*, DJD 5 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 82–85, on “The Wiles of the Wicked Woman,” is a pastiche of harlotry passages from Proverbs (2:16–19; 5:3–6; 6:24–35; 7:5–27; 22:14; 23:27–28; cf. R. D. Moore, RQ 10 [1979–81] 505–6). The harlot described in the poem may symbolize the enemy of the community, or she may be used not for polemical purposes but for an exposition of theological truth (as Moore argues, RQ 10 [1979–81] 506–7).”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 935.]

²²“This is in part an allusion to LXX Jer 28:7 (MT 51:7), though there the golden cup is a metaphor for Babylon itself: ‘Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad.’ In Tg. Jer. 51:7 (tr. Hayward), however, the cup is turned into a metaphor for the sin of Babylon, which is precisely the symbolism of the cup in Rev 17:4, ‘Behold like the cup of gold which was precious among all the vessels, so is the sin of Babylon ex-

ποτήριον χρυσοῦν Βαβυλῶν ἐν χειρὶ κυρίου μεθύσκον πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν· ἀπὸ τοῦ οἴνου αὐτῆς ἐπίοσαν ἔθνη, διὰ τοῦτο ἐσαλεύθησαν.†

Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad.

The word βδέλυγμα, abomination, is used only three times in Revelation: 17:4, 5; 21:27. In 21:27, those practicing βδέλυγμα are excluded from heaven. It closely linked to telling lies.²³ By definition a βδέλυγμα is something disgusting that arouses wrath. It has a defiling impact. One cannot limit the reference to an idol in its usage, although these are certainly included in the scope of the meaning of the word. Interestingly, in Lk, 16:15 Jesus makes the intriguing statement to the money loving Pharisees (v. 14) in His day about what

altered! The golden cup held by the woman is described as filled with two ingredients: 'what is detestable' and 'the impurities of her fornication' (repeated in v 5), i.e., an allegorical explanation that is presented as if it is inherent in the vision itself, though it is obviously the kind of interpretive addition appropriate for an *ekphrasis*. Both terms occur in LXX Job 15:16, ἐβδελυγμένος καὶ ἀκάθαρτος, 'one who is detestable and impure,' arguably a *hendiatys*. A shift in meaning appears to have occurred between v 2 and vv 4–5, for since the βδελύγματα, 'abominations,' of vv 4–5 refer primarily to pagan religious practices (i.e., idolatry) and have no deeper allegorical significance, the phrase 'impurities of her fornication' probably refers not to political alliances (as in v 2a) but rather to pagan sexual immorality. The term βδέλυγμα (see TDNT 1:598–600), 'that which is disgusting, abhorrent, detestable' (cf. Frisk, Wörterbuch 1:229–30), occurs three times in Revelation (17:4, 5; 21:27). Elsewhere in the NT (in addition to Luke 16:15), the term occurs twice in the eschatological discourse in Mark 13:14 = Matt 24:15 (where the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα [τῆς] ἐρημώσεως, 'the abomination of desolation,' is an allusion to LXX Dan 12:11; cf. 9:27; 11:31), where it means a sacrilegious object or rite causing the desecration of a sacred place (GELS 1:79). In Dan 9:27 and 1 Macc 1:54, βδέλυγμα clearly refers to an idol, while in LXX Zech 9:7 it refers to sacrificial meat offered to idols (Murao-ka, Septuagint, 36). In the LXX βδέλυγμα and βδελύγματα are designations for idols (e.g., Jer 13:27; 39:35[MT 32:35]; 51:22[MT 44:22]; Ezek 5:9, 11; 6:9; 10; 11:18). In v 6 Babylon is described as drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus, which apparently has no connection with the 'wine' in the gold cup that she holds, which has been given quite a different meaning in v 4 (on the widespread ancient association between wine and blood, see Comment on v 6a). A close parallel occurs in Cebes Ταβυλα 5.1–3, where a woman, named Ἀπάτη, "Deceit," seated on a throne, holds a cup and leads people astray who drink of it (i.e., those who are about to enter the world through the gateway of life). This parallel is quite significant because it too is part of an elaborate *ekphrasis*, or description of a work of art." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 935–936.]

²³Rev. 21:27. καὶ οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτὴν πᾶν κοινὸν καὶ [ὁ] ποιῶν βδέλυγμα καὶ ψεῦδος εἰ μὴ οἱ γεγραμμένοι ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἁρνίου.

But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone *who practices abomination or falsehood*, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

incurs God's wrath:

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ὑμεῖς ἐστε οἱ δικαιοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁ δὲ θεὸς γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν· ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ὑψηλὸν βδέλυγμα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; *for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.*

What individual's put great value on in terms of public recognition stands as an βδέλυγμα in the sight of God.

The second item contained in her cup was τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς, *the impurities of her immorality*. The cup contains all of the collective pollution and corruption of the woman's immorality. The image of 'whore' defines clearly her immorality, but the τὰ ἀκάθαρτα, *the impurities*, stresses the corrupting influence she had upon her clients as a whore. These were the kings of the earth and through them the people of the earth.

καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῆς ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς, *and upon her forehead was written a name, a mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of the abominations of the earth*. The term μυστήριον, *mystery*, may be intended as a part of the inscription on the forehead of this woman. In either case, the meaning remains the same, however.²⁴ The term

²⁴"It is grammatically possible to construe μυστήριον, 'mystery, secret meaning,' as part of the inscription with Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν, 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores,' in apposition to μυστήριον, i.e., 'and upon her forehead was written a name, 'Mystery, Babylon the Great the Mother of Whores' ' (Zahn, 2:554; Mounce, 306–7; AV; NIV), and in support of this the Greek text can be punctuated ὄνομα γεγραμμένον· μυστήριον, 'name written: mystery' (Tischendorf, NT Graece). Or it is possible to construe μυστήριον as part of the preceding clause in apposition to ὄνομα, 'name,' i.e., 'and upon her forehead was written a name, a mystery, 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores' ' (Charles, 2:428, RSV; NRSV; REB), with the punctuation ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον· Βαβυλῶν, 'name written, a mystery: Babylon' (von Soden, Text). The text can also be punctuated ambiguously, as in Nestle-Aland²⁷ and UBSGNT⁴: ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, Βαβυλῶν, 'a name written, (a) mystery, Babylon.' Since the angel offers to explain 'the mystery of the woman' in v 7, it is probable that the term μυστήριον, 'mystery,' is not part of what is written on the woman's forehead in v 5 but a way of indicating that the phrase 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores' itself is a mystery in need of interpretation. μυστήριον, 'mystery' (used also in 1:20; 16:7; 17:7), indicates that 'Babylon' is a name that must be understood symbolically, as are the names 'Balaam' (2:14), 'Jezebel' (2:20), and the city that is understood figuratively as 'Sodom and Egypt' (11:8). The inscription on the forehead of this female figure suggests that, in addition to being a whore, she is 'a whore of the most degraded kind, a tattooed slave' (C. P. Jones, "Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman

signals that Babylon is not her real identity. Instead, it is something else that is hidden from plain view. Having this inscription written on her forehead signals that she is a tattooed slave, the most degraded of kind of prostitute in first century Rome.

What may very well lie in the background here is a veiled reference to *Dea Roma*, the goddess of Rome. The city was personified into a female goddess to be worshiped along side other deities in that day, and she symbolized the Roman empire as well. The cult for worshiping her was established at Smyrna in 195 BCE in order to mark a successful alliance of this Greek colony with Rome in opposition to Antiochus III.

The full title ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς, *the mother of whores and of the abominations of the earth*, play off the picture of the contents of the cup she was holding in her hand (v. 4). The phrase ‘mother of’ signals that she was something of an archetype for evil spilling out into human society.²⁵ Quite likely John also implies that the cities in Asia with temple cults worshiping her were also ‘whores’ as her daughters. This included most of the seven cities in chapters two and three.

Antiquity,” JRS 77 [1987] 151); for a discussion of ancient branding and tattooing on the face and forehead, cf. Excursus 7A. This recumbent female figure represents Rome, often personified in the female divinity Dea Roma, ‘the goddess Rome.’ Though Jupiter Optimus Maximus was the patron god of Rome, the city itself was regarded as a deity with a carefully concealed name (see the discussion above in Form/Structure/Setting, IV. E. Components of the Ekphrasis Form in Rev 17).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 936–937.]

²⁵“ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς, ‘the mother of whores and of earthly abominations.’ These two categories of sinfulness refer to sexual promiscuity and idolatry and repeat the two ingredients that fill the golden cup in v 4. In the phrase ‘the mother of whores,’ the term μήτηρ, ‘mother,’ is a figurative extension that means something like ‘archetype,’ i.e., something ‘anticipating a later reality and suggesting a derivative relationship’ (Louw-Nida § 58.64), or that indicates the source or origin of some activity or quality. In Hos 2:2–5 (cf. Isa 50:1), Israel is personified as a ‘mother’ who has played the whore and has bastard children. The word is used with this meaning in Greek, Jewish, and Christian literature: Tob 4:13 (‘shiftlessness is the mother of famine’); T. Sim. 5:3 (‘fornication is the mother of all wicked deeds’); Gal 4:26; Hermas Vis. 3.8.5; Ps.-Phocylides 42; Hierocles 11; Clement Alex. Strom. 2.5; Gregory Thaum. Pan. or. 12; Cyril Hom. pasch. 4; Pindar Ol. 8.1; Aeschylus Septem contra Thebas 225. It is also possible that the phrase ‘mother of whores’ is used in a superlative sense meaning ‘the most depraved whore.’ In Jer 27:12 (MT: 50:12), Babylon is called ‘mother’ in the context of a prophetic judgment oracle (the Tg. Jer. 50:12 substitutes a word meaning ‘assembly’ for ‘mother’). If Rome is the great whore, it is likely that the whores referred to here are cities under the domination of Rome. Perhaps the specific cities in Asia Minor that had temples and cults in honor of Dea Roma are intended.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 937.]

καὶ εἶδον τὴν γυναῖκα μεθύουσαν ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ, *and I saw the woman drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses to Jesus*. The use of the second phrase καὶ εἶδον τὴν γυναῖκα, *and I saw the woman*, reaches back to v. 3b, Καὶ εἶδον γυναῖκα, *And I saw a woman*, and signals a different direction in his depiction. In v. 2b, the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk from her wine. Now she is pictured as also drunk from her wine. But the wine is the shed blood of God’s people persecuted and killed for their devotion to Christ. Wine being associated with human blood was a common motif in John’s world.²⁶ The metaphor signaled intensity of action. That the whore was drunk on blood signals persecution to death of God’s people in intense action on her part.²⁷

Some take the two references to the saints and the witnesses as two separate categories of God’s people. But the very similar phrase in 16:6, ὅτι αἷμα ἁγίων καὶ προφητῶν ἐξέχεαν καὶ αἷμα αὐτοῖς [δ]έδωκας πιεῖν, *because they shed the blood of saints and of prophets and You have given them blood to drink*, rather clearly signals that saints and prophets are the one people of God in Christ, this phrase should be taken the same way here

²⁶“The motif of ‘becoming drunk on blood’ is found in Ezek 39:18–19; Jdt 6:4 (cf. Isa 49:26). LXX Jer 26:10 (MT 46:10) has the metaphor of the sword of the Lord ‘being drunk from their blood [μεθυσθήσεται ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτῶν],’ i.e., the blood of God’s enemies. In Pliny Hist. nat. 14.148, Mark Antony is described before the battle of Actium as *ebrius iam sanguine civium*, ‘drunk with the blood of his compatriots’ (Neuer Wettstein, ad Rev 16:6). A different but related motif of ‘drinking the cup of God’s wrath’ (cf. Isa 51:17, 22) is also found in Revelation (see Comment on 14:10). The topos of the courtesan usually depicts her as a moderate drinker for business reasons (Lucian Dial. meretr. 294), though drinking bouts with lovers are also a standard part of the topos (Alciphron Ep. court. 13.11, 18; 13.3, 7).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 937.]

²⁷“There is a shift in meaning of the cup metaphor when it is said that the harlot is ‘drunk on the blood’ of the saints, which suggests that the cup is filled with blood symbolizing the murder of her opponents. There was a widespread ancient association between blood and wine reflected in such expressions as αἷμα σταφυλῆς, ‘the blood of the grape’ (see Gen 49:11; Deut 32:14; Sir 39:26; 50:15; 1 Macc 6:34; ANET, 133; Achilles Tatius 2.2; Clement Alex. Paed. 2.19.3; 2.29.1; Strom. 5.8.48.8; Pliny Hist. nat. 14.58; Burkert, *Ἄρτος Νεχάνς*, 224 n. 38), undoubtedly because the juice of red grapes resembled blood (Stephanus, TGL 1:972). The phrase ‘with the blood of the saints and the blood of those killed for their loyalty to Jesus’ appears to be a gloss added during the final revision of Revelation (cf. J. Weiss, *offenbarung*, 31) since it is not a description of what could be seen in a vision but rather an allegorical interpretation of the drunkenness of the woman based on a shift in metaphors. In v 4 the contents of the cup are described as ‘full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication.’” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 938.]

in 17:6.²⁸

What John saw was an exceedingly brutal woman plying her trade as a prostitute. And in the process she contaminated all of society. But the brutality she expressed centered on persecuting God's people, and killing many of them because their faith in Christ.

Καὶ ἐθαύμασα ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα. And I was astounded at seeing her in great amazement. This very intense expression describes John's reaction to seeing the vision of the whore in the desert. Literary wise, it both brings to a climax the description of her in vv. 3b-5 and serves to set up the following interpretation by the angel of what John saw in vv. 7-18. Often in the ancient world, dreams needed to be interpreted before they could be properly understood. Sometimes the interpretation was 'as seen,' but more often the interpretation was allegorical, as clearly is the case here.²⁹ Daniel after seeing the four beasts in a visionary dream in 7:1-14 was troubled (v. 15) and sought an interpretation of what he had seen (vv. 16-28). John follows this example here in chapter seventeen.

C. The angel explains the woman to John, v. 7-18

7 Καὶ εἶπέν μοι ὁ ἄγγελος· διὰ τί ἐθαύμασας; ἐγὼ ἐρῶ σοι τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναικὸς καὶ τοῦ θηρίου τοῦ βαστάζοντος αὐτὴν τοῦ ἔχοντος τὰς ἑπτὰ κεφαλὰς καὶ

²⁸“Since it is difficult to distinguish between ‘God’s people’ (literally ‘the holy ones’; see Comment on 5:8) and ‘those killed for their loyalty to Jesus,’ it is possible that the καί, ‘and,’ connecting the two noun phrases is expegetical and should therefore be understood as ‘with the blood of the saints, that is, with the blood of those killed for their loyalty to Jesus,’ thereby understanding the second phrase as a further explanation of the first (E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* [London: SPCK, 1961] 134–35). However, the parallel in 16:6, ‘they poured out the blood of the saints and prophets,’ suggests rather that the terms ‘prophets’ and ‘witnesses’ (i.e., “those killed for their loyalty”) should be equated (Hill, NTS 18 [1971–72] 409).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 937.]

²⁹“Dreams, particularly those of an oracular or revelatory nature, are usually descriptive and just as often require interpretation (cf. Artemidorus *Ὀνειροχρητικὰ* Aelius Aristides Or. 47–52 [Sacred Tales]; cf. Bartsch, *Decoding*, 32–35). According to Artemidorus (Oneir. 1.2), dreams can be either literal (θεωρηματικός, ‘to be interpreted as seen,’ LSJ, 796) or allegorical (ἀλληγορικός). The dreams interpreted in the stories of Joseph and Daniel in the OT are all described before they are interpreted. S. Thompson (*Apocalypse*, 12) has suggested that LXX Dan 4:19 is parallel to Rev 17:6; in Dan 4:19, after Nebuchadrezzar has narrated his dream to Daniel, the narrator says that ‘Daniel ... was dismayed for a moment [μεγάλως δὲ ἐθαύμασεν ὁ Δανιήλ.]’ (cf. LXX Dan 8:27). Neither of these passages, however, conveys a lack of understanding or perplexity in Daniel, for it is Daniel himself who provides the interpretation of these dreams. A closer parallel to Rev 17:6 is found in Dan 7:15, where Daniel’s perplexity causes him to seek an interpretation of the vision narrated in 7:1–14 (cf. Dan 8:15).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 938.]

τὰ δέκα κέρατα.

7 But the angel said to me, “Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.

The angel offers to explain to John what he has seen. But does so in a manner typical of such explanations. First, in the form of a rhetorical question the angel specifies the aspects of the woman and the beast that he will interpret to John (v. 7). Second, he proceeds to give an allegorical interpretation (vv. 8-18). This study will only give attention to v. 7, while the next study will concentrate on the allegorical interpretation of vv. 8-18 as a continuation of this unit of vv. 7-18.

It is important to clearly understand the sequence of movements in the apocalyptic vision here in chapter seventeen.

- 1) Introduction, 17:1-2 to the larger unit of 17:3-19:9.
- 2) Short commentary providing two reasons for the judgment of Babylon, vv. 2-3a
 - a) The kings of the earth have committed fornication with the whore Babylon (v. 2a)
 - b) The inhabitants of the earth have become drunk from the wine of that fornication (v. 2b)
- 3) Vision proper of vv. 3b-6
- 4) Interpretation of that vision, vv. 7-18.

This interpretation, i.e., an *ekphrasis*, has a some distinctive traits that are important to note due to its complexity of presentation.³⁰ The puzzled narrator, v. 6b, καὶ ἐθαύμασα ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα, is an additional trait of this literary form of *ekphrasis* in the ancient world and provides the motivation for the interpretation.³¹

³⁰“First, in v 15 ‘the waters’ by which the apocalypticist saw the whore sitting are interpreted by the *angelus interpretes* as ‘peoples and crowds and nations and languages,’ an interpretation that has nothing to do with what precedes or follows. Further, the apocalypticist did not ‘see’ the waters in his vision (reported in vv 3b–6); they were simply mentioned to him by the *angelus interpretes* as what he was invited to see (vv 1b–2). Second, the stereotypical aorist verb εἶδον, ‘I saw,’ used five times to introduce portions of the interpretation (vv 8, 12, 15, 16, 18), suggests that the apocalypticist has seen the vision in the past, not that he is presently viewing it, as vv 3b–6 seem to imply.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 925.]

³¹“The puzzled narrator is often a literary motif in *ekphrasis*, ‘descriptions,’ of pictures with hidden allegorical significance. In v 6b, the apocalypticist says that ‘when I saw her, I was greatly amazed.’ The expression of confusion and perplexity is juxtaposed with the introduction of the learned interpreter, a stock figure usually found conveniently at the narrator’s elbow (Bartsch, *Decoding*, 25–27). After describing a strange picture of Heracles, the narrator of Lucian’s *Hercules* says (Herc. 4; LCL tr.), ‘I had stood for a long time, looking, wondering [θαυμάζων] and fuming,’ when a Celt offers to explain the riddle of the picture (λύσω τῆς γραφῆς

Thus the angel's question, διὰ τί ἐθαύμασας;, *Why are you astounded?*, grows directly out of John's statement in 6b, καὶ ἐθαύμασα ἰδὼν αὐτὴν θαῦμα μέγα, *And I was astounded with great amazement at seeing her.*

This opens the door for the interpretation whose core essence is then stated as ἐγὼ ἐρῶ σοὶ τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναίκος καὶ τοῦ θηρίου τοῦ βαστάζοντος αὐτὴν τοῦ ἔχοντος τὰς ἑπτὰ κεφαλὰς καὶ τὰ δέκα κέρατα, *I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast carrying her and which possesses seven heads and ten horns.* This focuses upon the woman and then upon the beast.

The woman. ἐγὼ ἐρῶ σοὶ τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναίκος. Up to this point what we have learned about the woman is:

- a) that she is under divine judgment (v. 1);
- b) she is a whore (v. 1);
- c) she sits on many waters (v. 1);
- d) the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her (v. 2);
- e) the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk from her fornication (v. 2);
- f) she is sitting on a scarlet beast (v. 3);
- g) she is decked out in luxurious clothes and jewelry (v. 4);
- h) she holds a golden cup full of abominations and impurities (v. 4);
- i) on her forehead is tattooed a degrading title (v. 5);
- j) she was drunk with the blood of God's people (v. 6a).

What the interpreting angel signals that he wants to explain to John about her is simply τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναίκος, *the mystery of the woman*, i.e., point i). Interestingly, this explanation doesn't happen until the very end in v. 18, καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἣν εἶδες ἔστιν ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη ἡ ἔχουσα βασιλείαν ἐπὶ τῶν βασιλείων τῆς γῆς, *and the woman which you saw is the great city that holds rulership over*

τὸ αἶνιγμα). A similar confusion is expressed by the narrator of Cebes Ταβυλα 2.1, who sees a painting he cannot understand; fortunately, an old man is standing by who can explain what the painting means. Again in *Callistratus Imagines* 6, the narrator describes a statue of Lysippus and then states, 'Such was the marvel [θαῦμα], as it seemed to us; but a man who was skilled in the arts' explained the meaning of the statue (LCL tr.). In Achilles Tatius Leucippe and Clitophon 5.3–5, a picture of the rape of Philomela is described by the narrator. A puzzled Leukippe asks, 'What does this picture mean?' The narrator then explains the meaning of the picture. Menelaos, one of the characters in the story, has earlier observed (5.4; tr. Reardon, *Novels*), 'Interpreters of signs tell us to consider the story of any painting we chance to see as we set out on business.' That is, the allegorical meaning of pictures may serve as a means of divine revelation. Other examples of this pattern (ekphrasis—puzzled viewer—informed interpreter) are found in Philostratus Vita Apoll. 4.28 and Lucian Amores 8." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 927.



the kings of the earth. This creates an informal chiasmus of a *b // b' a'* between the woman and the beast. The τὸ μυστήριον, *mystery*, about the woman is not the symbolic identification of the various traits provided in the previous depiction. Instead, it is her identity as the imperial city of Rome, which is only given after extensive interpretation of the beast and the waters that she sits upon. It seems that the beast is the more important of the two images and produces the greater harm.

The beast, καὶ τοῦ θηρίου τοῦ βαστάζοντος αὐτὴν τοῦ ἔχοντος τὰς ἑπτὰ κεφαλὰς καὶ τὰ δέκα κέρατα. In comparison we know less about the beast from this depiction, although the original depiction of it in 13:1-10 is more detailed than here.³² In 17:1-6 a few details are

³²In Rev. 13:1-10, the depiction of the beast includes the following:

- a) It rose up out of the sea, v. 1
- b) It had ten horns and seven heads, v. 1
- c) On each of the ten horns was a diadem crown, v. 1
- d) On its seven heads were blasphemous names, v. 1
- e) Had a body that looked like a leopard, v. 2
- f) Had feet like a bear's feet, v. 2
- g) Had a mouth like a lion's mouth, v. 2
- h) Received power and authority from the dragon, v. 2
- i) One of its heads had received a death blow, but recovered, v. 3
- j) The whole world followed it in amazement, v. 3
- k) The whole world worshiped it, v. 4

given:

- a) the woman sits on its back, v. 3b
- b) it is a scarlet color, v. 3b
- c) it was full of blasphemous names, v. 3b
- d) It has seven heads and ten horns, v. 3b

Quite clearly John does not feel the need to repeat all the traits given initially in chapter thirteen.

The interpreting angel signals here that his interpretation will only concentrate on three of the four qualities, and mostly on point d). Yet, when the interpretation is given in vv. 8-18, the angel injects other qualities into the interpretation not previewed either in 13:1-10 or 17:7b.

Why is there focused interest on the ten horns and seven heads? As we will see in the next study, the beast's heads become seven hills and the ten horns turn into a complete number of kings who will be unified in their loyalty to the beast in joining in the futile attempt to make war on the Lamb. These and some other interesting twists given by the angel form a picture of Rome under an evil emperor who stands as the beast itself in opposition to God and His people. The allegorical approach by the interpreting angel is complex and involves reduplication and contradicting associations. But also it stands in the stream of such allegorical interpretations of visions typical of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

When John transitions from the seventh bowl of wrath in 16:17-21 into the depiction of the city first as a whore (chap. 17) and then as an evil influence as a city (18:1-19:10), the complexity of his images shoots up to a much higher level. Somewhat in realization of this, we find an angelic interpretation in the second half of chapter seventeen. All of this makes sense only if we are reading the text apocalyptically. If a literal, historical oriented reading is being attempted, the mixture of images, sometimes contradictory different for the same being, will come across as a bewildering maze with little meaning at all.

Revelation is an apocalyptic vision as the document title in 1:1 clearly indicates. And for us to grasp the core message of this apocalyptic vision, we must learn to read it apocalyptically. But this is not easy to do! Particularly in our western culturally conditioned minds and ways of thinking we are coming up against a

- l) It was given a mouth uttering 'haughty and blasphemous words,' v. 5
- m) It was allowed its authority for 42 months, v. 5
- n) It spoke blasphemies against God, His name, and dwelling, v. 6
- o) It was allowed to make war on the saints of God, v. 7
- p) It was given authority over all people on earth, v. 7
- q) Everyone will worship it except the people of God, v. 8

manner to thinking so uniquely ancient Jewish and thus utterly different from anything in our culture that it is very challenging to learn to set aside all of our preconceived western thinking and learn how to think apocalyptically.

The Jewish Christians among John's readers had the distinct advantage over us here. Living at the end of the first Christian century, they had been exposed to this way of thinking through the abundant apocalyptic writings from a Jewish, Torah obedient view, for a long time. And by living in the Roman province of Asia, they had grown up in a part of the first century world where a large portion of these writings had first been composed and circulated among the Diaspora Jews living in Asia.³³ The non-Jews converted to Christianity also frequently came out of the ranks Torah friendly individuals who were sympathetic to Judaism in varying degrees. The likelihood of many of them having been exposed to these Jewish apocalyptic writings is great.

These folks had a 'running start' on us in thinking apocalyptically. But with effort we can learn how to think this way as well. And as we do, the message of Revelation becomes clearer and clearer. At its heart is the claim of God being in total control over everything in both heaven and hearth. This control is also eternal. He has been in complete control; He is now in complete control; and He forever will be in complete control. Evil although at times powerful and harmful to His people is ultimately doomed to damnation in an eternal Hell. And as His people, we are on the side that will prevail over evil no matter how powerful it may seem to be.

Chapter seventeen seeks to drive home these points more forcefully than any previous text that we have studied thus far. This is a message that had profound importance to the first readers at the end of the beginning Christian century. But that message remains the same for us twenty centuries later!

³³One should remember that by the end of the first century, the largest concentration of Jews in that world now was located in the Roman province of Asia. Although rabbinic Judaism would gradually emerge out of the limited number of Jewish people still living in scattered parts of the middle east, Hellenistic Judaism with a substantial diversity of viewpoint thrived in Asia and in Alexandria, Egypt which accounted for well over two thirds of Diaspora Jews at this point in time. Both these centers had large numbers of prolific writers who produced an enormous number of religious documents giving birth to a large diversity of view point, often in direct conflict with the emerging rabbinic views developing in Damascus, Antioch, Cesarea and a few other places in the middle east.