

## When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

### Study Guide on Revelation 17-18 Week 10: (Sunday, November 8)

**Background:** Warning: This text is PG-13 due to its sexual and violent content. It is a close-up view of the destruction of Babylon (Rome) following the emptying of the seventh bowl in 16:17-21. With its talk of prostitutes, adultery, intoxication, eating flesh, and being burned with fire, this is not a passage for children. Its shocking images are meant to help John's readers grasp the truly horrible nature of Rome's sins and the deserved punishment she will receive.

As has been the case throughout the book, Revelation 17-18 will seem very strange to the reader who is not familiar with its OT background. It is especially important to be aware of Jeremiah 51, which describes the fall of ancient Babylon after it destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Babylon is described there as "the great prostitute," among other images borrowed by John. Nahum 3 also describes Babylon as a drunken prostitute "who enslaves nations through her debaucheries."

**Text:** Chapter 17 is not terribly difficult to understand, as long as one remembers that the prostitute Babylon (also called the mother of prostitutes) is the imperial city of Rome; the beast on which she rides is the whole of the Roman Empire, often symbolized by the emperor himself; and her customers are all the nations, cities, and merchants who have aligned themselves with Rome in order to gain wealth and power.

The wilderness of 17:3 probably reflects in this case a place of disobedience or evil, the haunt of demons. The blasphemous names are likely those applied to the Roman emperors, such as "lord," "god," and "savior." The woman is dressed to indicate her power, status, and affluence. She holds a cup made of precious gold, but it was filled with her sinfulness, including the blood of the Christian martyrs. Instead of the beautiful *Dea Roma*, (the goddess Rome), John sees her as a repulsive drunk who destroys people.

The beast which was, is not, and will come up out of the Abyss to its destruction (17:8-10) refers once again to the myth about Nero, who had killed many Christians in the decade of the 60's. It was rumored that he would be reborn and come to power again. John is suggesting that the horrors of Nero will be visited on the empire again; but the forces of "Nero" will not last. (It would appear that the beastly empire is now represented by the emperor himself. This is not surprising, since the greatest problem for the Christians in Asia Minor was forced worship of the emperor.)

The first interpretation of the beast's seven heads is easy: Rome was built on and around seven hills. The second is more problematic. Where does one start in counting seven kings (emperors): Augustus, Julius Caesar, or another? And does one count the three emperors who reigned so briefly in AD 68-69? Because of these and other questions, there is no agreement about who John intends in 17:10-11. There is general consensus that the "one who is" is Domitian, who wants to be called "lord" and "god." But many interpreters think that the number seven is more symbolic than historic. Similarly, the ten rulers likely refer to provincial governors and other local rulers in general, not a specific group of ten. It is especially interesting that they themselves eventually turn against the prostitute (17:16-18).

Chapter 18 makes much of Rome's wealth and power and therefore the desire of nations and merchants to be a part of her economy. God's people are admonished to "come out of her," meaning not to leave the city physically but rather to avoid the spirit that it represents. The merchants and sailors mourn because their source of wealth has been destroyed. The reader must note that the merchants' items are luxuries rather than necessities.

The angel's throwing a millstone into the sea recalls Jeremiah 51:63-64, in which Babylon sinks to rise no more. It also reminds us of Jesus' statement about those who lead others to sin (Matthew 18:6).

## Discussion Questions

1. A number of today's interpreters are uncomfortable with John's use of the prostitute image, in light of the fact that many if not most prostitutes are victims of abuse of various types. Are they right to be concerned about how passages such as this are used? Does this text lead us to despise prostitutes? Do you know churches that have a ministry to prostitutes?

2. Why do you think that the rulers eventually turn against the prostitute (17:15-18)? Have you seen situations in which those involved with evil forces finally become their enemies? Why do they do so? Why are the bonds that hold evil forces together internally unstable?

3. Most of us are fully aware of the seduction of a luxurious standard of living consisting of fine houses and cars, the best food and clothing, expensive vacations, and the like. Are these things being condemned in Revelation 18? If so, why?

4. How do we "come out of" the materialistic world in which we live, in which it seems sometimes that everything but God is worshiped?

5. The economic basis of Rome's condemnation may make us very uncomfortable, given the power of the U.S. economy and the merchants on Wall Street who are "the world's important people" (18:23). Are there similarities between the power of our economy and multinational corporations and those of ancient Rome? Is it possible that American political, social, and economic systems sometimes dehumanize, oppress, and exploit people? If so, how should we react to these excesses?

6. Heaven calls on God's people to rejoice at the downfall of the city of Rome. Have you ever rejoiced at the downfall of an evil institution? How do we yearn for justice without giving in to hatred?