

Revelation Chapters 17 & 18 (Week 13)

Chapters 17 and 18 form a single dramatic unit in John's vision: the unveiling and destruction of 'Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth' (17:5). Chapter 17 introduces the harlot (a woman riding a scarlet beast) — drunk on the blood of the saints — and explains her identity and relationship to the beast with seven heads and ten horns. Chapter 18 then depicts her sudden, catastrophic fall: kings, merchants, and sailors mourn while heaven rejoices, and a voice calls God's people to 'come out of her' (18:4).

Chapter 17: "The Woman on the Scarlet Beast"

- **Preterist**

Babylon the Great is **apostate first-century Jerusalem** (the harlot), who has become spiritually unfaithful by rejecting the Messiah and allying herself with the Roman beast (the empire). She is "drunk with the blood of God's holy people" because Jerusalem persecuted the early church and the prophets. The beast's seven heads are the seven hills of Rome (and successive emperors), and the ten horns are client kings who eventually turn on the harlot. The vision depicts God's covenant judgment/divorce on unfaithful Israel, fulfilled when Rome destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 17:5–6, 18 ("great city" drunk on saints' blood); Revelation 11:8 ("great city... where also their Lord was crucified" — clearly Jerusalem); OT harlot imagery for Israel (Jeremiah 2–3; Ezekiel 16 & 23; Hosea 1–3); Matthew 23:37–38 (Jesus' judgment on Jerusalem).

How this differs: Unlike the idealist (timeless symbol) or futurist views (future event), this is a specific past historical fulfillment tied to the first century; unlike progressive dispensationalism, it does not layer in future or multiple referents — the judgment is complete in A.D. 70.

- **Idealist**

The woman is a **timeless symbol of any anti-Christian world system** (political, economic, or cultural) that seduces people away from God and persecutes believers. The beast represents worldly political power in every age. In John's day it resembled imperial Rome (seven hills), but it could be Berlin in the 1930s, modern secular culture, or any center of godless luxury and immorality. The vision is not about one event but recurring spiritual warfare between the city of God and the city of man.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 17:1–2, 15–18 (prostitute sits on "many waters" = peoples/nations; kings commit adultery with her); Revelation 11:8 (spiritual "Sodom and Egypt" language shows symbolism, not literal geography); Daniel 7 (beasts as successive kingdoms, applied symbolically).

How this differs: It rejects any single historical fulfillment (preterist or futurist) and avoids future speculation; instead of progressive dispensationalism's layered history-to-future progression, it stays purely symbolic and transtemporal.

- **Progressive Dispensationalist**

Babylon is primarily a **future end-time world religious/economic system**, but the vision is multi-layered: it echoes Rome in John's day (seven hills as a near referent), draws on Jerusalem's guilt (harlot imagery from the Old Testament), and applies to any shifting center of godless empire throughout history until the final fulfillment. The beast is the final world empire/Antichrist, but earlier empires preview it.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 17:9–11 (seven hills/kings — Rome now, but forward-looking); Revelation 16:19 and 18:10, 16, 18–19 (“great city” allowing multiple referents); Daniel 2 & 7 (successive empires culminating in the final one).

How this differs: It combines elements of the other three (historical echoes + future focus) rather than choosing one; unlike strict futurism (purely future/literal Babylon) or preterism (solely past Jerusalem), it sees progressive fulfillment across redemptive history.

- **Classical Dispensational**

The prostitute is a **future literal world religious/economic system** (centered in a rebuilt Babylon on the Euphrates or a global hub) during the Tribulation, allied with the Antichrist (the beast). This is a previously unrevealed “mystery” (17:5) of the final satanic world center that will rule over the kings of the earth and be destroyed just before Christ's return. The beast's seven heads/ten horns point to a revived Roman Empire or future ten-nation confederacy under the Antichrist.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 17:5 (“Mystery, Babylon the Great”); Revelation 17:18 (“great city that rules over the kings of the earth”); Jeremiah 50–51 and Isaiah 13–14, 47 (detailed prophecies of Babylon's fall never fully realized in ancient history); Revelation 17:9–11 (kings/emperors pointing forward).

How this differs: Purely future and often literal where possible — unlike preterist (past Jerusalem) or idealist (anytime symbol); unlike progressive dispensationalism, it does not blend historical previews or Jerusalem elements but insists on a distinct end-time fulfillment.

Chapter 18: “The Fall of Babylon”

- **Preterist View**

This graphically describes Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70 — merchants and kings mourn the loss of Israel's economic/religious center. God avenges His saints; the call to “come out” urged early Christians to flee Jerusalem before the siege. Strictly past event — no future or recurring application.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 18:2–3, 21–24 (falls in “one hour”; blood of prophets/saints); Revelation 18:4 (“Come out of her”); Luke 21:20–24 (Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's fall).

- **Idealist**

Every age sees the sudden collapse of proud anti-God systems. The three-fold lament (kings, merchants, sailors) shows how the world profits from evil's "good life" and then mourns its loss; the call is always to separate from worldly seduction. Timeless principle, not one event.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 18:9–19 (laments); Revelation 18:20, 24 (heaven rejoices); 1 John 2:15–17 (do not love the world).

- **Progressive Dispensationalist**

Multi-layered judgment: Rome's fall previews it, but ultimate fulfillment is the final world system's collapse. Both historical comfort and future hope. Blends near/far fulfillments.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 18:4–8 (judgment in one day); Isaiah 47:7–9 (shattered boast).

- **Classical Dispensational**

Future collapse of the end-time Babylon/system at the Tribulation's end — world economy crashes in one hour; heaven rejoices as earth mourns, clearing the way for Christ's return and the millennium. Specific future cataclysm.

Supporting Scriptures: Revelation 18:8, 10, 17, 19 ("in one hour"); Revelation 18:21–23 (millstone; no more commerce); Jeremiah 51:63–64 (permanent fall).

Comparison Chart

Aspect	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Futurist	Progressive Dispensationalist
Identity of Babylon (Harlot)	Apostate 1st-century Jerusalem	Any anti-Christian world system (timeless)	Future literal rebuilt Babylon or global religious/economic system	Future world system with echoes of Rome & Jerusalem elements
Identity of Beast	Roman Empire (7 hills = Rome; 10 horns = client kings)	Worldly political power in every age	Future Antichrist & revived empire	Final world empire/Antichrist (with historical previews)
Timing of Judgment	A.D. 70 (Jerusalem's fall)	Recurring throughout history	End of future Tribulation	Progressive: past previews + ultimate future fulfillment
Key Symbols (e.g., "great city," "mystery")	Literal Jerusalem ("great city" = Rev 11:8)	Purely symbolic of evil's seduction	Literal future city/system ("mystery" = new revelation)	Multi-layered (Rome now + future)
Primary Application	God's judgment on unfaithful Israel; call to flee	Persevere against any seductive evil system	Warning & hope for Tribulation saints; prepares for millennium	Encouragement that evil empires end; "already/not yet" hope
How It Differs	Strictly past & historical	No specific time/place	Purely future & often literal	Blends all three with progressive fulfillment

Questions:

1. Which view resonates most, and why? How do the differences affect your reading of Revelation?
2. What modern "Babylons" tempt the church today?
3. How do these chapters encourage perseverance?

Next Class April 22: Read Chapter 19

Dr. M. Robert Mulholland Jr. (in his book *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World* and related lectures) interprets **Revelation 17–18** as a powerful visionary interlude that details the judgment and fall of “**Fallen Babylon.**” This section expands on the seventh bowl judgment announced in Revelation 16:17–19 (“It is done!”), providing background on the seductive, rebellious world system that opposes God and persecutes His people. Mulholland views these chapters not as a strictly chronological future prediction but as a symbolic unveiling of spiritual realities intersecting with history—particularly Rome in John’s day—while calling believers to radical discipleship.

Identity of Babylon and the Harlot (Chapter 17) Babylon represents the fallen, rebellious human order or worldview that turns away from God. In John’s context, it is incarnated in the Roman Empire as a political, economic, and cultural power structure. The “great harlot” (prostitute) seated on many waters (17:1) symbolizes **spiritual adultery**—not primarily literal sexual immorality, but the inward reality of bonding oneself to anything other than God (turning from our true “husband”/bridegroom relationship with God). She is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (17:6), clothed in imperial purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and jewels, and holding a cup full of abominations. Her title, “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth” (17:5), indicates she spawns ongoing historical manifestations (“daughters”) of the same rebellious spirit. The harlot rides a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns (echoing the dragon and sea beast of chapters 12–13). The seven heads refer to Rome’s seven hills and a sequence of emperors; the ten horns are client kings who briefly ally with the beast but ultimately turn on the harlot. The beast “was and is not and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit” (17:8), pointing to the deceptive, mortal-wounded-yet-reviving nature of satanic power. Ultimately, God puts it in the hearts of the beast and kings to destroy the harlot—making her desolate, devouring her flesh, and burning her (17:16)—revealing the self-destructive essence of rebellion when it is no longer useful.

The Fall of Babylon (Chapter 18) Chapter 18 dramatically portrays the sudden, catastrophic collapse of this system “in one hour” (18:8, 10, 17, 19). A mighty angel announces, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!” (18:2), and the city becomes a haunt for demons and unclean spirits. Three groups mourn from afar in fear:

- **Kings** (political powers) lament the loss of their luxurious alliance.
- **Merchants** weep over destroyed trade in luxury goods, slaves, and even “human souls” (18:11–13), exposing Babylon’s commodification of people and greed-driven economy.
- **Seafarers and sailors** grieve the end of their profitable shipping.

Heaven and the saints, however, rejoice because God has avenged the blood of His servants (18:20, 24). A voice from heaven calls, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins or receive any of her plagues” (18:4)—a urgent summons to separate from Babylon’s worldview, values, and lifestyle. The chapter ends with a symbolic millstone thrown into the sea (18:21, echoing Jeremiah 51), declaring Babylon’s irreversible destruction: she “will be found no more.”

Mulholland emphasizes that the fall is accomplished through the **cross of Christ**, which consummates God’s judgment on the old rebellious order (“It is done!”). The bowls of wrath are ultimately redemptive in intent, exposing illusions and inviting repentance, though many refuse it. Babylon’s judgment flows from lives lived out of harmony with God, resulting in self-inflicted consequences rather than arbitrary punishment.

Overarching Themes and Application

Mulholland stresses the contrast between two cities: **Fallen Babylon** (the harlot, seductive and destructive) versus **New Jerusalem** (the bride of the Lamb, holy and life-giving). Believers live as citizens of the latter while residing in the midst of the former, facing pressure, persecution, or martyrdom.

The visions encourage faithfulness by revealing that Babylon is already judged and hollow at its core—fragile despite appearances of invincibility (as seen in Rome’s civil wars after Nero).

The core message is **holy living in an unholy world**:

- Embrace the cross as liberation from the world’s illusions, possessiveness, greed, and “identity theft” (the false self shaped by Babylon instead of Christ).
- Reject spiritual fornication and the commodification of people.
- Live as awake, clothed-in-white citizens of New Jerusalem, finding true identity in Christ and unity through love.
- The call to “come out” means refusing to accommodate or Christianize Babylon’s values, even when it costs dearly.

Mulholland’s approach blends historical reference (Rome as the primary first-century embodiment) with timeless spiritual application. Babylon recurs in history as any system that seduces people away from God through power, wealth, and self-centered rebellion. The victory belongs to the Lamb, and believers share in it now through faithful endurance.

Preterist Parallels: Revelation 17–18 and Josephus’ The Jewish War

Revelation 17: The Woman (Harlot) on the Scarlet Beast

Preterists see this as Jerusalem’s spiritual adultery (alliance with/rejection of God while collaborating with or provoking Rome) and her self-destructive alliance with the beast, culminating in Rome’s (and internal factions’) judgment on her.

- **Rev 17:5, 18** – “**Mystery, Babylon the Great... the great city that rules over the kings of the earth**” Jerusalem (not literal Babylon or Rome) is the “great city” (cf. Rev 11:8, where it is explicitly “where also their Lord was crucified”). Josephus repeatedly highlights Jerusalem’s central religious, political, and symbolic importance in Judea, which “ruled” influence over client kings and regions until its fall (e.g., *Wars* 2.20; 5.1.1). The temple’s destruction on the 9th/10th of Av mirrors the earlier Babylonian destruction (Josephus notes the coincidental timing).
- **Rev 17:6** – **Harlot “drunk with the blood of the saints and the witnesses of Jesus”** Apostate Jerusalem persecuted prophets, Jesus, and early Christians. Josephus records Jewish leaders and Zealots shedding innocent blood in the city, including high priests and peace advocates (*Wars* 4.5.2). This fulfills Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:34–38 and Luke 13:33–34.
- **Rev 17:9–11** – **Seven heads (seven hills/kings); beast “was, is not, and is about to come”** Seven hills can refer to Rome (the beast’s empire), with kings as emperors or high priests. The “was, is not” language fits the chaotic year of the four emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) in AD 68–69, as Josephus describes the empire’s turmoil while Vespasian rose (*Wars* 4.9).
- **Rev 17:12–14, 16–17** – **Ten horns (ten kings) receive authority “for one hour” with the beast; they hate the harlot, make her desolate, eat her flesh, and burn her with fire Strongest and most-cited parallel:** Josephus lists **exactly ten Jewish generals/leaders** appointed in late AD 66 (December) to prepare for war against Rome and govern districts (*Wars* 2.20.3–4). The list includes:
 1. Joseph son of Gorion (governor of Jerusalem)
 2. Ananus the high priest (governor of Jerusalem) 3–10. Others assigned to Idumea, Jericho, Perea, Galilee, etc. (full list in Josephus).

These “ten horns” had brief authority (“one hour” = the short period of unified revolt before internal collapse, roughly late AD 66 to AD 70). Three were later killed or sidelined by Zealots (fitting Daniel 7:8, 20, 24). The horns (Jewish factions/leaders) turn on the harlot (Jerusalem) through sedition, civil war, and self-destruction (“eat her flesh” via famine and cannibalism—*Wars* 6.3.3–4). Zealots set fires within the

city/temple (*Wars* 5.1.1; 6.4.5; 6.6.2). Ultimately, the beast (Rome under Titus) completes the burning and desolation (*Wars* 6.4–6; 7.1.1). God puts it in their hearts to fulfill His will (Rev 17:17). This is a core preterist distinctive: the harlot's destruction comes from **internal Jewish betrayal + Roman execution**, exactly as Josephus records.

Revelation 18: The Fall of Babylon

This chapter details the sudden, mournful collapse of the seductive system. Preterists see it as Jerusalem's economic/religious center being wiped out in one generation, with heaven rejoicing while earth mourns the loss of its former glory.

- **Rev 18:2–3, 21–24 – “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great... a haunt for demons... in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste... the blood of prophets and of saints... was found in her”** Josephus describes the city's total desolation after the temple and walls were burned: it became a ruinous wasteland (*Wars* 7.1.1; 6.8–9). The sudden final assault and burning of the temple (despite the long siege) matches the “in one hour” language. Blood of the righteous (including prophets and Christians) was shed in the temple and streets (*Wars* 4.5.1–2; 5.1).
- **Rev 18:9–19 – Kings, merchants, and seafarers mourn from afar over the city's luxury, trade, and sudden fall** Jerusalem's loss devastated the Jewish religious/economic network (temple offerings, pilgrimage trade, regional commerce). Josephus notes the mourning and economic ruin across Judea and beyond as the center of Jewish life was destroyed (*Wars* 6.9; 7.1). The “merchants” symbolize those profiting from the temple system; the “kings” are client rulers or Jewish leaders who lost their influence.
- **Rev 18:4 – “Come out of her, my people”** Echoes Jesus' warnings (Luke 21:20–21). Early Christians fled Jerusalem (to Pella, per Eusebius), avoiding the judgment. Josephus indirectly supports safe escape routes before the full siege.
- **Contextual link from Rev 16:19 (often tied to chs. 17–18):** “The great city was split into three parts.” Josephus records Jerusalem divided into **three warring factions** by late AD 69: Zealots (under Eleazar), followers of John of Gischala, and Simon bar Giora (*Wars* 5.1.1; 5.6). This internal division weakened the city and hastened its fall.