

Homiletics Analysis: Revelation 17

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Revelation 17 presents one of the most visually arresting visions in the entire Apocalypse: a great prostitute sitting on many waters, drunk with the blood of the saints, arrayed in scarlet and purple, adorned with gold and precious stones, holding a golden cup full of abominations. She rides a scarlet beast covered with blasphemous names — the seven-headed, ten-horned beast already introduced in chapter 13. An angel interprets the vision for John, identifying the woman as “Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes,” and explicating the symbolic geography of the beast’s heads (seven hills; seven kings, five fallen, one reigning, one yet to come) and the ten horns (ten kings who receive authority for one hour and give their power to the beast). The chapter closes with a revelation of striking irony: the beast and the ten kings will turn on the woman, strip her, devour her flesh, and burn her with fire — and this very act of destruction will be accomplished by God, who puts it into their hearts to carry out His purpose. The woman is finally identified as “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to strip the false glory from the world-system that seduces His people, so that they see it for what it is — not a rival to be feared or a lover to be desired, but a doomed harlot already marked for destruction by the God who reigns over her. The vision is simultaneously an exposure and a reassurance: the church living under imperial pressure needs to see that the power arrayed against her is not ultimate power. The intent is to loosen the grip of worldly seduction and fear on the hearts of the saints by granting them God’s-eye clarity about the true nature and true end of the world-system.

Subject Sentence: The world-system as harlot — seductive, blood-guilty, and doomed by the God she defies.

Primary Claim: God pulls back the curtain on the world’s power and beauty to reveal a prostitute already condemned — so that His people will neither fear her threats nor desire her pleasures, but wait in faith for her certain fall.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of Babylon/the prostitute: The most significant interpretive question in this chapter is whether “Babylon” refers specifically and exclusively to Rome (first-century referent), to a reconstituted literal Babylon (dispensational futurist reading), to an eschatological world-city at history’s end (modified futurism), or to the world-system in its totality across history (idealist/Reformed reading). The seven hills (v. 9) strongly suggest Rome to the original audience, and the reference to “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth” (v. 18) confirms that first-century readers would have understood the primary referent. To ignore this is to sever the text from its pastoral purpose — it was written to people living *under* Rome, not to a distant future generation.

The dispensational insistence on a literal rebuilt Babylon in modern Iraq requires the interpreter to override the text’s own internal symbolism (the angel says these things “have a meaning” — v. 7) and to treat the symbolic framework as somehow pointing to a literal geography elsewhere. This reading imports significant architectural assumptions from outside the text. It should be *refuted* as the controlling lens, though one may *acknowledge* that the vision has eschatological as well as historical dimensions — the angel’s interpretive framework seems to reach beyond any single empire.

The idealist reading (Babylon = the world-system in every age) is correct in recognizing that the vision cannot be exhausted by Rome alone — the seductive power of empire, commerce, and false religion has manifested in every age and will find its ultimate expression in the last days. The Reformed reading integrates historical and idealist elements: Rome is the primary first-century referent, but Babylon is a *type* — the world-system in its God-defying, saint-persecuting, self-glorifying form — whose ultimate instantiation awaits the end. This reading is preferred because it honors the text’s symbolic register, respects the original pastoral context, and takes seriously both the historical and eschatological horizons of the vision.

The beast’s seven heads/ten horns and their identification: Elaborate schemes to identify specific Roman emperors (the “five fallen” = Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero; the “one who is” = Domitian or Vespasian) have occupied commentators for centuries. While these identifications may illuminate the first-century backdrop, the text itself resists the precision such schemes require — different starting points yield different results, and the angel’s language (“this calls for a mind with wisdom,” v. 9) suggests the vision is interpretively demanding precisely because it is *not* a coded newspaper. The specific king-count should be *qualified* — illuminating as historical backdrop, not determinative as prophetic timetable.

The woman’s relationship to the beast: Some readings conflate the woman and the beast as a single entity (the world-system in all its forms). The text distinguishes them: the beast *carries* the woman (v. 7), and the beast ultimately *destroys* her (v. 16). This internal tension is exegetically significant. The woman represents the seductive, commercial, religious dimension of world-empire; the beast represents its raw coercive power. Their

eventual conflict demonstrates that evil is not a unified kingdom — it is self-devouring. This distinction should be preserved in exposition and not collapsed.

The harlot's cup and the blood of saints (v. 6): Some Wesleyan/Baptist readings focus heavily on the moral-reform dimension — Babylon as a social critique of economic exploitation and injustice. This emphasis is not wrong and deserves to be *acknowledged* — the vision does condemn commercial excess and the shedding of innocent blood. But the primary frame is theological and ecclesiological, not social: the church is being called to *separation* and *endurance*, not to a reform program. The social-justice reading, if it becomes the dominant hermeneutical key, redirects the text's energy from its actual intent.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 11:1–9 (Babel)** — The original Babylon: humanity's organized attempt to build a civilization apart from God, marked by pride, false unity, and the aspiration to self-glory. Revelation 17's Babylon is the eschatological fulfillment of what began at Babel.
 - **Isaiah 47:1–15** — God's oracle against historical Babylon as “the virgin daughter of Babylon” and “Lady of Kingdoms” — language of false grandeur stripped away by divine judgment. The same stripping and burning motif anticipates Revelation 17-18.
 - **Jeremiah 51:6–9** — “Flee from Babylon... she is a golden cup in the LORD's hand making all the earth drunk” — the golden cup of Babylon's seduction is the direct background to Revelation 17:4. God's sovereignty over Babylon's judgment is already established here.
 - **Daniel 2 and 7** — The succession of world-empires (head of gold → beast from the sea) provides the symbolic vocabulary Revelation 17 deploys. Daniel's vision of kingdoms that rise and fall under God's sovereign hand is the canonical grammar for the beast's heads and horns.
 - **James 4:4** — “Friendship with the world is enmity with God” — the New Testament's compressed statement of what Revelation 17 dramatizes at length. The choice between the harlot and the Lamb is not a future political choice; it is the present spiritual condition of every believer in every age.
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Aim: To expose the false glory and true end of the world-system so that hearers are freed from both its seductions and its intimidations, and grounded instead in the certainty of God's sovereign purposes.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17:1	Angel invites John to see the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters	“Many waters” = peoples, multitudes, nations (v. 15) — her dominion is global
17:2	Kings of the earth have committed immorality with her; earth-dwellers are drunk with her wine	“Immorality” = political-religious seduction, not merely sexual; idolatry as spiritual adultery throughout OT prophets
17:3	John carried in Spirit to wilderness; sees woman sitting on scarlet beast full of blasphemous names, seven heads and ten horns	“Wilderness” — contrast to the woman clothed with the sun (ch. 12) in heaven; the beast is the same as ch. 13
17:4	Woman arrayed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, pearls; holding a golden cup full of abominations	Imperial luxury on display; the golden cup echoes Jer. 51:7; beauty masking corruption
17:5	On her forehead: “Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes and of Earth’s Abominations”	Roman prostitutes wore name-tablets on their foreheads; name is public, not hidden; she is the source, not merely an instance
17:6	John sees her drunk with the blood of saints and martyrs of Jesus; he marvels greatly	John’s astonishment signals the vision’s shock value — the seductress is a murderer
17:7	Angel rebukes John’s marveling; offers to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast	Interpretation is coming — this is not left to speculation
17:8	The beast was, is not, and is about to rise from the abyss and go to destruction; earth-dwellers (whose names are not in the book of life) will marvel	Parody of the divine “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4); the beast’s apparent resurrection is a demonic counterfeit
17:9–10	Seven heads = seven	Calls for wisdom; likely

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	mountains (Rome) and seven kings; five fallen, one reigning, one yet to come briefly	coded reference to Roman emperors with broader typological significance
17:11	The beast is an eighth king, belonging to the seven, going to destruction	The beast transcends any single emperor — it is the principle of anti-God empire itself
17:12–13	Ten horns = ten kings, no kingdom yet, receive authority one hour with beast; give their power to the beast	Coalition of vassal powers; their “one hour” = brevity; they are united in opposition to the Lamb
17:14	They will make war on the Lamb; the Lamb will conquer because He is Lord of lords and King of kings; those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful	The entire chapter’s turning point: the Lamb wins; the saints are identified by their relationship to the Lamb
17:15	Waters where the prostitute sits = peoples, multitudes, nations, languages	Globalizes the vision — Babylon’s dominion is not merely Roman but universal
17:16–17	The beast and ten horns will hate the prostitute, devour her, burn her — God put it in their hearts to carry out His purpose	The world-system is self-devouring; God sovereignly orchestrates even the destruction of Babylon through her own allies
17:18	The woman is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth	The primary referent is Rome; the typological referent is every manifestation of Babylon

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	17:1–6	The Vision: The Harlot Displayed
2	17:7–14	The Interpretation: The Beast Explained
3	17:15–18	The Verdict: The Harlot Destroyed by Her Own

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The world-system as harlot — seductive, blood-guilty, and doomed by the God she defies.

Primary Claim: God pulls back the curtain on the world's power and beauty to reveal a prostitute already condemned — so that His people will neither fear her threats nor desire her pleasures, but wait in faith for her certain fall.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize the world-system's seduction for what it is. [*Mind/belief*] The golden cup is beautiful; the wine is intoxicating; the adornment is breathtaking — and that is exactly the point. Babylon does not announce itself as destruction; it announces itself as fulfillment. Every generation of believers must learn to read the beauty of worldly power, comfort, and status with the angel's own clarity: the cup is full of abominations, the woman is drunk with the blood of the saints, and the name on her forehead is not glory but judgment. Ask yourself what in your life looks like a golden cup and may be something darker — career advancement built on compromise, comfort purchased at the cost of witness, belonging secured by silence about Christ.

2. Stop being astonished by the world's apparent power. [*Affections/worship*] John marvels — and the angel rebukes him for it. The astonishment of God's people before worldly power is itself a spiritual failure. When governments persecute, when institutions exclude, when cultures mock, the temptation is to marvel — to treat the opposition as something surprising and overwhelming. The vision recalibrates: the beast was, is not, and goes to destruction. Its apparent invincibility is a parody of divine eternity. The people of God are called to a settled, unastonished confidence that comes not from political optimism but from knowing that the Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings, and that His people are called, chosen, and faithful.

3. Do not love what God has condemned. [*Affections/worship*] The church in John's day was tempted to accommodation — to find a way to live peaceably within the Roman order by making small religious compromises. The church in every day faces the same temptation. Revelation 17 makes the cost of clarity explicit: Babylon is already a corpse wearing jewelry. To love her pleasures, to seek her approval, to crave her comfort, is to commit spiritual adultery against the Lamb to whom you are betrothed. The call is not to political withdrawal but to theological clarity: you cannot hold the golden cup and serve the Lamb who was slain.

4. Trust God's sovereignty over the very powers arrayed against you. [*Mind/belief*] Verses 16–17 contain one of the most remarkable assertions in the entire Apocalypse: the beast and the ten kings destroy Babylon — and God put it in their hearts to do so. The destruction of the world-system is not an accident of history, not the result of internal

contradictions finally catching up, and not a victory of reforming forces. It is the sovereign execution of God's own purpose, carried out through the instruments of evil themselves. This means that nothing in the political, cultural, or military situation of the church is outside God's control. The powers that seem to threaten you are themselves on a leash held by the God who has already written their end.

5. Live now as those who belong to the Lamb, not to Babylon. [*Will/behavior*] Verse 14 identifies the saints not by their courage or their endurance but by their relationship: they are "called, chosen, and faithful" — and they are *with* the Lamb. The question for daily life is not primarily "how do I resist Babylon?" but "am I with the Lamb?" Concretely: are your financial decisions made as someone whose treasure is already secured in the Lamb's victory, or as someone who needs Babylon's economy to underwrite your security? Are your social decisions made as someone whose identity is fixed in the Lamb's call, or as someone who cannot afford to lose Babylon's approval? The saints who overcome are those whose primary relational reality is "with Him" — and that relationship reshapes everything else.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Revelation 17 is one of Scripture's most sustained and dramatic expositions of God's absolute sovereignty over human power — including power that is explicitly anti-God. The chapter demonstrates that the beast and all his confederates operate within the limits God has assigned ("one hour," v. 12), serve purposes God has ordained (v. 17), and move toward an end God has predetermined ("goes to destruction," v. 11). This is not an abstract doctrinal point; it is the pastoral foundation of the entire vision. The God who names Babylon's judgment before her fall is the same God who numbers His people as "called, chosen, and faithful" before their conflict with the beast is resolved. The chapter also exposes the nature of idolatry with unusual precision: Babylon is not merely immoral but spiritually adulterous, not merely powerful but deceptively beautiful, not merely cruel but seductive — which is why the primary danger it poses to the church is not persecution alone but attraction.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Revelation 17 puts God's sovereignty on display in its most counterintuitive form: He governs through the very instruments of His enemies' self-destruction. This is not merely providential oversight — the text says God "put it into their hearts to carry out His purpose" (v. 17), language that maps directly onto the Reformed doctrine of concurrence: God ordains ends and governs means, including means that are morally responsible human (and demonic) acts. The destruction of Babylon is simultaneously a free act of the beast and a sovereign act of God — with no contradiction and no mitigation of either party's moral responsibility. The elect are also

secured here in distinctly Reformed terms: not “those who chose the Lamb” but those who are “called, chosen, and faithful” — the order is deliberate and the source is divine. The practical application of these doctrines is not speculative but pastoral: a church that truly believes in divine sovereignty over history can face empire without either capitulating to it or being paralyzed by it.

Main Takeaway

The world-system is not what it appears. The golden cup is poisoned, the beauty is a disguise, and the power is already on its way to destruction — God has ordained it so, and the Lamb has already won. You are not called to fear Babylon, manage Babylon, or be seduced by Babylon; you are called to be *with the Lamb* — and that is the only place you need to be.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning the chapter into a political prophecy chart.** The most common misuse of Revelation 17 is spending the bulk of exposition identifying the ten kings with contemporary nations, the beast with a specific political figure, and the seven hills with a particular global city. This converts a pastoral vision into a geopolitical puzzle and leaves the congregation with speculation rather than transformation. The text’s own angel does not give John a newspaper; he gives him a theological framework. Preach the framework.
- **Reducing “Babylon” to a single institution.** Whether the interpreter identifies Babylon exclusively as Rome, the Roman Catholic Church, the United States, the United Nations, or the European Union, the effect is the same: the universal, every-age force of the vision is domesticated into a single contemporary referent, and hearers who are not immediately threatened by that referent disengage. The text’s own symbolism resists this — “peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages” (v. 15) is as universal as language gets.
- **Preaching fear of Babylon rather than freedom from it.** The angel rebukes John’s marveling. A sermon that leaves the congregation awed, frightened, or overwhelmed by Babylon’s power has replicated John’s error, not corrected it. The intent of the vision is to *diminish* Babylon in the eyes of the saints, not to enlarge it. The sermon should leave hearers less impressed by worldly power than when they arrived, not more.
- **Missing the seduction dimension and preaching only persecution.** Many expositors focus on Babylon’s violence against the saints (v. 6) while underemphasizing her seduction of the kings and earth-dwellers (vv. 2, 4). The

church's primary danger in most eras and most contexts is not the blood of martyrdom but the wine of accommodation — the slow drift toward Babylon's values, pleasures, and approval. The vision addresses both, and so should the sermon.

- **Collapsing the woman and the beast into a single entity.** The text carefully distinguishes the seductive-religious-commercial dimension (the woman) from the raw coercive power dimension (the beast), and then shows them in conflict. This internal self-destruction is theologically significant: evil is not a unified empire. It is a coalition of competing interests that God turns against itself. A sermon that conflates the two misses this point and misses the pastoral reassurance of verses 16–17.
- **Leaving out verse 14.** The chapter's turning point — “the Lamb will conquer, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful” — is easily buried in the interpretive apparatus of heads, horns, and hills. But it is the pastoral heart of the entire vision. Every element of the chapter's complexity serves this single declaration. Do not let the symbolism eclipse the sentence that resolves it.