



[Revelation 17:1-18](#)

The great whore

Date: 80 CE to 100 CE

Place: Patmos

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Literary genre: Apocalypse and Letter

Title of work: Revelation

Reference: 17:1-18

Commentary:

Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, is one of the most complex works in the New Testament. Before addressing the present passage it will be useful, particularly for contextual purposes, to briefly introduce the text as a whole. Most scholars agree that we can know little about the author, except that he was accepted by those he wrote to as a Jewish-Christian prophet. Revelation begins with a certain "John" on the island of Patmos in the Aegean, writing to the "Seven Churches of Asia." What follows is a description of prophetic visions, leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. The text as we now have it has often been dated to 81-96 CE, while the emperor Domitian was in power. However, some have also argued for composition under Vespasian (69-79 CE) (see Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, p. 3). Composition under Domitian still remains the most popular argument (for a list of the supporting factors, see Ben Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 3-4), although a safer estimate is some time between 80-100 CE. Revelation does not often quote directly from the Hebrew Bible, but heavily alludes to and echoes the Scriptures. In particular, Daniel, Ezekiel, Psalms, and Isaiah are clearly sources of influence (on this topic, see Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament*). The once popular view was that the text was written to offer encouragement to persecuted Christians at the hands of Domitian (see Philip A. Harland, "Honouring the Emperor," and for an analysis of Suetonius, *Domitian XIII.2*, from which the argument for persecution was developed, see Stephen J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, p. 147-148). However, recently this understanding has been abandoned by many scholars, as Domitian is no longer viewed as a tyrant imposing the imperial cult, and it is no longer believed that under this emperor there was any kind of systematic persecution of Christians across the empire (see Mark Stephens, *Annihilation Or Renewal* p. 143-145, and Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, esp. p. 171-172, who argues that the tyrannical image of Domitian is misleading, and partly due to his presentation by senatorial writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius, whom he was regularly at odds with). Consequently, scholars have tended to focus in more recent years on the fact that Revelation stems from intra-community conflict among the Christians of Asia Minor, arguing over how much, if at all, they should continue to be a part of wider Greco-Roman society. Essentially, Revelation speaks against those wishing to accommodate with wider society, and "reveals" it as evil, demonic, and the recipient of eventual divine wrath and punishment.

The motif of a whore/harlot to depict a wicked city is very common in the Hebrew Bible's prophetic books. For instance, Nahum describes Ninevah as a whore (Nahum 3:4), and Isaiah also speaks this way of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:21). Moreover, fornication is frequently an image both for idolatry, and perhaps significantly for the interpretation of Revelation, for the engagement in commerce with an agent/agents that is disapproved of. For Nelson Kraybill, the "fornication" (???????) which the author speaks of is the "reciprocal exchange of benefits and loyalties that bonded provincials to the imperial rulers" (*Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 58). In his view, what the majority of Asia Minor saw as useful and lucrative was actually highly immoral. Isaiah, for instance, speaks of the city of Tyre in such a way, prostituting herself with all the kingdoms of the earth (Isaiah 23:17). Kraybill discusses the commercial success of Asia Minor, particularly in terms of maritime trade, which by the second century CE he argues saw shippers in particular as among the wealthiest members of the population. Kraybill posits that the status and respectability gained from being successful in this area can be seen in inscriptions such as that on a sarcophagus from Hierapolis, which identifies a certain M. Aurelius Alexander Moschianus as a "purple-seller" and "town-councillor" (*Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 83-86; for the inscription, see p. 85, footnote 139). However, a purple seller is hardly a merchant, and the idea of Christian merchants more generally in Asia Minor during the period in which Revelation was written is very problematic, and arises from the erroneous assumption that there were Jewish merchants at this time, an assumption for which we have no strong evidence. Most Diaspora Jews at



this point were small artisans, not wealthy merchants who would be rich enough to worry about losing economic standing as Kraybill suggests.

As John is carried away by the spirit into the wilderness (???????) (verses 3-4), he sees the whore dressed in scarlet and purple, riding a scarlet beast. The wilderness is often associated with desolation, danger, and demonic powers (see [Matthew 4:1-11](#)), and it is significant that later on in the passage (17:16) the whore herself is made desolate (???????) (i.e. made into a wilderness). The colours that the whore wears of course signify in one sense high social status and wealth. Scarlet was an expensive colour, and denoted a certain degree of honour (see [Matthew 27:28](#) where a scarlet robe is placed on Jesus prior to his crucifixion as a form of mockery at his supposed claims to kingship). However, in this instance, it is used in quite the opposite manner, as an image for sinfulness (see [Isaiah 1:18](#) and [1 Clement 8:4](#), where sins are described as like scarlet; see also [Leviticus 16](#) for the tradition of the scapegoat, which was sent out into the desert symbolically carrying the sins of Israel on the Day of Atonement; according to the Mishnah, this ritual came to be carried out with red string tied to the scapegoat - if the string turned white when the goat reached the desert, Israel's sins were forgiven; see [Yoma 4:2, 6:8](#)). Like the beast from the sea in [Revelation 13](#), the scarlet beast of this passage has seven heads, ten horns, and blasphemous names. In addition to her scarlet attire, the whore is also adorned in gold, jewels, and pearls, similarly to how the New Jerusalem is described in [Revelation 21:11, 19, 21](#). In fact, the entire vision of the whore forms an antithetical parallel to that of the New Jerusalem ([21 9-22:5](#)), which far from a whore, is described as the "bride of the Lamb" (i.e. Jesus) ([21:9; 19:8-9; 21:2](#)) (see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "Revelation," p. 1561). The golden cup which the whore holds perhaps alludes to the fact that [Jeremiah 51:7](#) refers to Babylon (which itself is used in [Revelation](#) to denote Rome, drawing on similar practice in numerous other Jewish writings; see the discussion of [Revelation 16:1-20](#)) as a golden cup in the Lord's hands which made the entire earth drunk. The whore's cup, however, is full of abomination (???????) and impurity (compare here [Matthew 24:15](#), where a "desolating sacrilege/abomination" (???????) entering the holy of holies signals the onset of the end times; see also [Daniel 11:31](#)).

The whore wears a mysterious sign on her forehead (verse 5) (just as the beast's worshippers – i.e. those who participate in the imperial cult – are also marked on the forehead in [Revelation 14:16](#)), which marks her out as "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." She is described as being drunk with the blood of the holy ones and those who have been witnesses (???????) to Jesus (verse 6). It could be very tempting to read Christian martyrdom into this verse. J. Massyngberde Ford points out that the use of ?????? to mean someone who has died for their cause (Jesus) only seems to occur in this particular verse in [Revelation](#). Elsewhere in the text phrases such as "those slain for the word" ([6:9](#)) are used instead. Indeed, the New Testament in general uses ?????? to mean a witness in general terms, not as someone who has been killed. Therefore, for Massyngberde Ford it is possible that this verse represents a later, heavily Christianised interpolation (*Revelation*, p. 279). Moreover, as discussed above, it is unlikely that any widespread persecutions were occurring at the time the text was composed. Of course, the author could be referring to smaller, isolated instances of persecution, but there is another possible interpretation. In [Revelation 14:8](#), the inhabitants of the earth are said to be drunk on the whore's wine, which can be taken to stand for all the temptations and security which the Roman empire provided, including of course, but not exclusive to, the benefits for trade and commerce discussed above. Here, however, the whore herself is drunk on blood. Perhaps one implication could be that while Roman imperialism offered many tempting prospects, it is ultimately a malevolent force masquerading as one which is protective and beneficial to its subjects. If this is the case, then this part of the passage could be understood as the author's warning to his audience not to be taken in by Rome.

Verses 8-11 have proved to be difficult to understand, and have been variously interpreted in relation to who or what are represented by the beast's horns and heads. Generally, most scholars see the likelihood of various Roman emperors being alluded to here. It is worth pointing out first of all that on one level, the stages of the beast's life, death, and return from death parody those of Christ in [Revelation 1:18](#), the difference being that unlike Christ, the beast ultimately goes to its eternal destruction (see Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 160). The seven heads are initially described in verse 9 as seven mountains or hills (compare [1 Enoch 24:1-4](#)), and it is possible that the seven hills of Rome are alluded to here. The angel then proceeds to state that the seven heads also represent seven kings as well. The term "king" (???????) is often used to refer to the Roman emperor (for another New Testament example, see [1 Peter 2:17](#)). We are told that of these seven kings (emperors), five have fallen (not necessarily meaning that they have died – this could simply mean a fall from a position of authority or exaltedness), one is alive, and one is still to come, but will only remain for a short time (verse 10). Moreover, verse 11 cryptically speaks of an eighth figure who is somehow still part of the original seven, who "was," "is not," and will eventually go to its destruction. In his third-century *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Victorinus argued that the seven kings stood for the following Roman emperors: Otho, Vitellius, Galba, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, and



- [???????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [?????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [abomination](#)
- [angel](#)
- [authority](#)
- [Babylon](#)
- [beast](#)
- [blasphemy](#)
- [blood](#)
- [destruction](#)
- [fornication](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [judgement](#)
- [king](#)
- [kingdom](#)
- [language](#)
- [martyr](#)
- [mystery](#)
- [nation](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [power](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Seven Hills of Rome](#)
- [spirit](#)
- [war](#)
- [whore](#)
- [wisdom](#)

Bibliographical references: Frilingos, Christopher A. , [Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

Kraybill, J. Nelson, [Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse](#) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)

Witherington III, Ben, [Revelation](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Massyngberde Ford, J., [Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1975)

Smalley, Stephen S., [The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse](#) (London: SPCK, 2005)

Moyise, Steve, [The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation](#) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994)

Thompson, Leonard L., [The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Friesen, Steven J., [Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Harland, Philip A., "[Honouring the Emperor or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life Among Associations \(Christian, Jewish, and Other\) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John](#)", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000) : 99-121

Stephens, Mark B., [Annihilation Or Renewal? The Meaning and Function of New Creation in the Book of Revelation](#) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011)

Pippin, Tina, "[The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John](#)", *Semeia* 60 (1992) : 67-82



Bauckham, Richard, [*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*](#) (London: T&T Clark, 1998)
Aune, David E., [*Revelation*](#) (Word Biblical Commentaries; 3 Volumes; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997)
Koester, Craig R., [*Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[1 Peter 2:12-17](#)

Christians urged to honour the emperor

- [Read more about 1 Peter 2:12-17](#)

Text

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness

- [Read more about Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Text

[Matthew 24:3-31](#)

Eschatological woes and Jesus's parousia

- [Read more about Matthew 24:3-31](#)

Text

[Revelation 16:1-19](#)

The fall of the kingdom of the beast

- [Read more about Revelation 16:1-19](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



Source URL: <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/revelation-171-18>