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Revelation Text 09: Chapter 15:5-19:10

Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting					15:5H				
Scene 1					↓				
Scene 2					2				
Scene 3					3				
Scene 4					4				
Scene 5					5				
Scene 6					6				
Church Interlude									
Scene 7					7				

Where are we in the book? We are about to begin another series of seven scenes. Starting in 15:5, we first get the setting for this series, another look at the heavenly sanctuary. This time, it is filled with the glory of God, preventing anyone from entering. This suggests the time of grace, with its option of approaching God for mercy, has finished.

Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting									
Scene 1			earth	—	earth				
Scene 2			sea		sea				
Scene 3			rivers		rivers				
Scene 4			heaven		heaven				
Scene 5			Beast		Beast				
Scene 6			Euphrates	—	Euphrates				
Church Interlude									
Scene 7									

This series closely parallels the seven trumpets. There is a correspondence between trumpets and bowls in which part of creation is impacted in each scene: the earth, the sea, the rivers, heaven or the sky, the realm and followers of the beast, and the Euphrates. The difference is, of course, that this time not merely one-third of something is hit but the totality of it. They are, after all, as we were told in 15:1, the last plagues that finish the wrath of God.

However, we should not understand 'last' chronologically, as if these plagues happen at the very end. If my interpretation of the beast is correct and it includes Rome and other expressions, judgement on these manifestations of the beast and its realm cannot be limited to the end but must also take place within history. After all, the Roman Empire no longer exists; its end was within history.

- Bowl 1 "the people who bore the mark of the beast" (16:2)
- Bowl 4 those who "shed the blood of saints and prophets" (16:6)
- Bowl 5 the throne of the beast (16:10)
- Bowl 6 "the kings of the whole world" (16:14)
- Bowl 7 "the air" (16:17)

It is also worth noting that, in a sense, the circle of judgement has begun to shrink. Here and later in the book, the focus of judgement is increasingly the beast and Babylon, symbols that represent the structures of evil in the world (and their supporters) – rather than people in general.

Bowl 1: "the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image" (16:2).

Bowl 4: those who "have shed the blood of saints and prophets" (16:6).

Bowl 5: the throne of the beast (16:10). Those who do not repent in verse 11 are the people of the beast.

Bowl 6: "the kings of the whole world (16:14).

Bowl 7: "the air" (16:17; in Eph. 2:2, Satan is the "prince of the power of the air").

God is not out to destroy humanity. On the contrary, this is a project of liberation: liberation from oppressive and exploitative systems and rulers. Evil gets its due; it is payday for the destroyers of the earth – a necessary step to save humanity.

PLAGUES

The seven bowls do not convey specific information, predicting a sequence of events still in the future; it is the overall impression that counts: God deals with evil and with those who oppress his people. For this reason, I won't comment on every scene.

Bowl 1	Sores or boils	Plague 6
Bowl 2	Water into blood	Plague 1
Bowl 3	Water into blood	Plague 1
Bowl 5	Darkness	Plague 9
Bowl 6	Frogs	Plague 2

However, I do want to make a few points. I said that these plagues parallel the trumpets. They also mirror the plagues in Egypt as shown here.

Bowl 1 Sores or boils Plague 6

Bowl 2 Water turned into blood 1

Bowl 3 Water turned into blood 1

Bowl 5 Darkness 9

Bowl 6 Frogs 2

IT BECAME LIKE THE BLOOD OF A CORPSE (REV. 16:3 ESV)

However, in Revelation, the plagues become grotesque when taken literally. Imagine, for instance, all the water of the sea turning into the blood of a corpse, as in 16:3. With the third bowl, all the potable water is turned into blood.

By the way, the angel who pours out this bowl (he is called the angel of the waters in 16:5) and the altar comment on this and explain the plague: it is because they have shed the blood of God's people that they are given blood to drink. The punishment fits the crime.

How long before you will judge and avenge our
blood on those who dwell on the earth? (Rev. 6:10 ESV)

This answers the question of the martyrs in 6:10: “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” In chapter 6, these martyrs were located under the altar. It is therefore fitting that this altar now speaks and affirms God’s justice.

How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (Rev. 6:10 ESV)

He has judged the great prostitute ... and has avenged on her the blood of his servants (Rev. 19:2 ESV)

Later, in 19:2, as part of the victory celebration over the fall of Babylon, this statement is made: “He has judged the great prostitute ... and has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (Rev. 19:2). This answers the question in full: it is only in 6:10 and 19:2 that this verb *to avenge* appears in the book of Revelation.

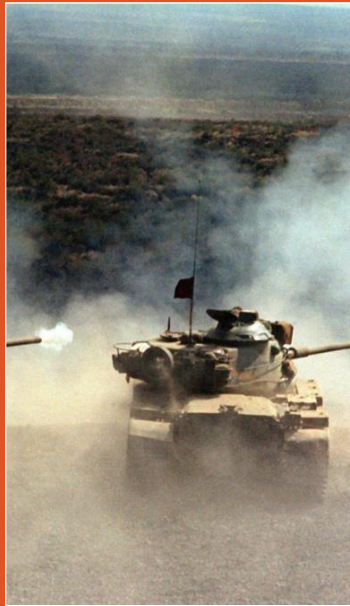
EUPHRATES



Muser (2005), CC BY-SA 2.5

In scene number six, things once again happen at the Euphrates, the easternmost boundary of the Roman Empire. The scene reminds us of the Persian king Cyrus, who came from the East and made the Euphrates dry up so that he could march into Babylon and take the city, putting an end to the Babylonian empire in the year 539 BC. It also plays with Rome's fear of the Parthians and their cavalry.

Euphrates: Muser, Karl (2005), <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Tigr-euph.png>, CC BY-SA 2.5



The battle

Sixth seal

Sixth trumpet

The wine press

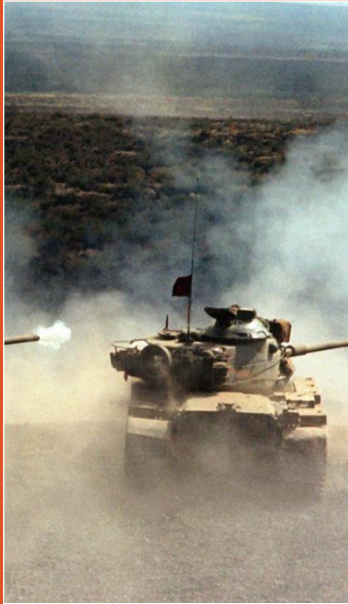
17:14

Chapter 19

20:7-10

At the same time, this scene shows us, once again, the final battle or war. It was hinted at when the sixth seal was broken and with the image of the winepress in chapter 14. It was explicitly described when the sixth trumpet was blown and will reappear in 17:14, chapter 19, and 20:7-10. (By the way, this demonstrates the nonchronological nature of the book.)

M-60A1 Reliability Improved System Equipment (RISE) main battle tanks of A Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry Division, fire their guns during a live-fire training exercise on the tank range. (Substandard image), <https://picryl.com/media/m-60a1-reliability-improved-system-equipment-rise-main-battle-tanks-of-a-troop-d3e0e3>, Public Domain



The battle

Sixth seal: human armies

Sixth trumpet: demonic forces

The wine press: unbelievers

17:14: the beast

Chapter 19: the beast, the false prophet, the kings of the earth, and their armies

20:7-10: Satan and the nations

Interestingly, the different scenes put the spotlight on different participants in this battle:

Sixth seal: human armies

Sixth trumpet: demonic forces

14:20: unbelievers

17:14: the beast

19: the beast, the false prophet, the kings of the earth, and their armies

20:7-10 Satan and the nations

M-60A1 Reliability Improved System Equipment (RISE) main battle tanks of A Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry Division, fire their guns during a live-fire training exercise on the tank range. (Substandard image), <https://picryl.com/media/m-60a1-reliability-improved-system-equipment-rise-main-battle-tanks-of-a-troop-d3e0e3>, Public Domain



In preparation for this battle, the unholy trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet sends out three unclean spirits, like frogs, to gather the kings of the earth. The location where they are gathered is called...

<https://pixabay.com/en/frog-batrachian-1445824/>, CC0

Armageddon

... Armageddon.

The concept of a final battle is a familiar theme in the Old Testament prophets, although it is not called or linked with the name Armageddon elsewhere: God gathers the nations of the world in an attack on Israel to enter into judgement with them. But in Revelation, it is no longer a physical location or a military war.



Armageddon is a symbolic and typological name, not a geographical location in Israel. There is no such location mentioned in the Old Testament or elsewhere. The name appears to be Hebrew and means mountain or hill of Megiddo. Megiddo was indeed a city in Israel, but it was not located on a hill, but at the edge of the Valley of Jezreel. This photo shows the remains of the city, with the plains in the background. Several significant battles were fought on this plain, including the battle fought by Barak and Deborah against Sisera in Judges 4. This makes it a fitting typological symbol for the perennial war of the kingdoms of this world against the people of God.

I will take a more thorough look at how to understand this battle and its relationship to history and the end when dealing with chapter 19.

Graicer, Avram (2011), Aerial view of Tel Megiddo,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:%D7%AA%D7%9C_%D7%9E%D7%92%D7%99%D7%93%D7%95.JPG, (CC BY-SA 3.0)



As before, the seventh scene takes us to the completion: "It is done!" we read in 16:17.

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place (Rev. 6:14 ESV)

And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found (Rev. 16:20 ESV)

From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them (Rev. 20:11 ESV)

We are told in 16:20: “And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.” Surely, this marks the end. But notice it has happened before in the book, in 6:14, when the sixth seal was broken: “The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

And it will happen again, in 20:11: “From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.” Yet another example of parallelism and repetition!

And then, as 16:19 tells us, God remembered Babylon. The time has come in the vision to speak of Babylon.



BABYLON

Babylon is introduced and her judgement is described in 17:1-19:10. In this section, seven voices speak out and seem to give the section its structure. Babylon stands in obvious contrast to Jerusalem. It is worth noting that these two cities or women are introduced in a parallel way.

Babylon

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 prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality ..." And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast (Rev. 17:1-3 ESV)

Jerusalem

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:9-10 ESV)

We find the exact same elements in both introductions, as marked here [point out]. This is a clear indication that we are to read and interpret these two portraits side by side, as the concluding contrast at the end of this book: two images that sum up the essence of reality: reality reduced to two options.

This is true throughout the book: for instance, people either wear the seal of God or the mark of the beast, they are followers of the lamb or worshipers of the beast. So it is with Babylon and Jerusalem. Revelation presents a black-and-white picture of reality. This is not how things are in the present time. Things are mixed and ambiguous. Nothing and no one in the world of humans is utterly evil. Nothing and no one is perfectly good. But ultimately, it is one or the other. Ultimately, there are only these two options.



What does Babylon
mean?

So... What does *Babylon* mean? Well, how would the first readers of the book have answered this question?

They would immediately have thought of Rome. No doubt about it. To them, no other city or location could possibly qualify. However, Rome does not exhaust the idea of Babylon; it is not its only or complete fulfilment. Ultimately, Babylon is much bigger than Rome; ancient Rome is merely one manifestation of this.



Some interpreters have insisted on a literal interpretation and therefore argue that this must be the literal geographical location of Babylon in what today is Iraq (the illustration shows some of its restored remains). In their view, the city will have to be rebuilt and become a major world power once again. I find this an extremely unlikely interpretation. In this highly symbolic book, Babylon is bound to have a symbolic and typological meaning.

Babylon: Soldiers stand guard within the walls of the ancient city of Babylon, July 18, 2009. Some of the ruins were reconstructed by Saddam Hussein. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Debralee P. Crankshaw, http://archive.defense.gov/DODCMSShare/NewsStoryPhoto/2009-07/hrs_090718-A-8796C-043.jpg, Public Domain



Others understand Babylon as a religious force. Leaders of the Protestant Reformation recognized Babylon in the Roman Catholic Church. Others have argued that Babylon represents the apostate church or some sort of one-world church or religion, uniting all false religions and believers together in a giant anti-church.

Colored version of the Whore of Babylon illustration from Martin Luther's 1534 translation of the Bible, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Whore-babylon-luther-bible-1534.jpg>, Public Domain

- Built on seven hills (17:9)
- Has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18)
- Seduces through riches, splendour, luxuries (17:4; 18:11-13, 16)
- Represents commerce and economic power (18:18, 11-13)
- „In her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth“ (18:24 ESV)

I believe the evidence points in a different direction. Here are some things to consider.

Babylon is built on seven hills (17:9). This is what was said about Rome in the first century: it was a city built on seven hills.

She has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18). This was true of Rome, of course.

Babylon seduces through riches, splendour, and luxuries (17:4; 18:11-13, 16). Not through false teaching or worship. Prostitution is an apt illustration or metaphor to use for what international politics, at its worst, can be like. Already in the OT, it is often used as such. John simply reapplies a familiar image. Of course, this also makes Babylon the perfect counterpart to the pure and holy bride at the end of the book.

Babylon represents commerce and economic power (18:18, 11-13), not religious power.

„In her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth“ (18:24 ESV) – this clearly transcends Rome; it encompasses all of human

history and slaughter.



Last but not least, we should consider the OT background of Babylon. It was the world empire that destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. More importantly, it was the location of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, where humanity collectively rebelled against God and declared its independence. I therefore propose the following interpretation of Babylon in the book of Revelation.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder - The Tower of Babel (Vienna),
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_\(Vienna\)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_(Vienna)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg), Public Domain



First of all:



The economic and seductive power of Rome



Ultimately:



Human civilization in rebellion against God

Babylon is first of all: The economic and seductive power of Rome.

But ultimately: Human civilization in rebellion against God.

As such, Babylon is not a geographical location. It is not something we can point out on a map. Something of Babylon is everywhere.

WAS AND IS NOT

Before we move on, a few comments on the description of the beast in 17:7-14. That the beast was and is not and is to rise and go to destruction (17:8) is sarcasm. Notice how this is parallel to and differs from what we are told about God as the one was and who is and who is to come. The beast cannot match this.



The interpretation of the seven heads as seven kings is one of the most difficult statements in the book. There has been much debate about it, but there is no agreement as to what it means. Attempts to link the heads with individual emperors do not lead to a satisfying solution. There is no reason why any one emperor would be 'the' beast.

More likely, the seven do not carry a specific historical reference. Evil in the form of oppressive government power has its fullness of manifestations, both in terms of individual rulers or 'kings' and in terms of successive empires. Remember the dragon has seven heads as well.

The same applies to the ten horns or kings; they are sometimes understood as the rulers or governors of the ten senatorial provinces of the Roman empire, but they may just as well refer to the next level of government giving its support to the oppressing tyrant. They may be identical to "the kings of the earth" elsewhere in the book, who also oppose God's Messiah.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Whore_of_Babylon.jpg, Public Domain

Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? (Rev. 13:4 ESV)

They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful. (Rev. 17:14 ESV)

In 13:4, people asked: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” 17:14 answers the question.

Back in chapter 13:7, the beast was allowed to make war on the saints and conquer them. Here, in 17:14, the beast makes war on the lamb and it is the lamb that conquers – and those with him, who “are called and chosen and faithful”. The phrase refers to believers; after all, believers are called and chosen, and hopefully faithful.

It is crucial to recognize that it is not just Jesus who conquers the beast, but also we as believers who are with him. The church participates in bringing Christ’s ultimate victory about. And it does so through suffering and faithful witness.



This picture shows Babylon today (the literal, geographical Babylon, that is).

I won't discuss the remainder of this long section on Babylon. It describes Babylon's judgement in terms almost entirely borrowed from the OT prophets, especially oracles against Babylon and Tyre – Tyre, because it was a significant commercial power in the ancient world and therefore parallels the economic power of Rome and other empires. Whereas on earth certain groups of people lament the fall of Babylon, in heaven, there is a victory celebration.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_030529-N-5362A-001_A_U.S._Marine_Corps_Humvee_vehicle_drives_down_a_road_at_the_foot_of_Saddam_Hussein%27s_former_Summer_palace_with_ruins_of_ancient_Babylon_in_the_background.jpg, Public Domain



INTIMIDATION

SEDUCTION

In closing, a word on application. If the beast represents the power of empire and of human government gone wrong, its danger for us is intimidation. This is how empire seeks to impose its will on others, through intimidation.

If Babylon represents human civilisation, commerce, and wealth, it threatens us by luring and seducing by what it has to offer.

As believers in the world, we face both dangers: fear and seduction. It is part of the reason why Jesus taught us to pray: Do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil.

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