**“What I Think I Know About Revelation 17”**

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**Introduction**

 Revelation 17 is one of the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret, particularly verses 7-11. When I was teaching at Andrews University, therefore, I decided to make Revelation 17:7-11 the topic of a doctoral seminar. Five Ph.D students signed up for the class. For the first fifteen hours of class time, I offered guidance from my experience in handling difficult Bible texts, and a basic overview of Revelation 15-18. I also led the students through the Greek of Revelation 17, word by word and sentence by sentence. The five doctoral students selected topics related to portions of Revelation 17:7-11, after which they researched and wrote 40-60 page papers on their respective portions of the passage. Each student then took a three-hour segment of the class to share their paper and lead out in the discussion on that topic. During the last class session we debriefed on what we had all learned from our intensive engagement with the passage. We all concluded that we were ***less*** certain about the meaning of Revelation 17:7-11 than we had been when the class began. Putting that in other words, the less you know about Revelation 17, the more confidence in your conclusions you are likely to have.

 I learned a number of things from that experience: 1) A “problem text” is one where it is ten times easier to shoot down someone else’s interpretation of the passage than to create a compelling interpretation yourself. 2) The more time you spend on Revelation 17, the more challenges you see in the text. 3) If the result of group study on a passage results in a lack of consensus on the meaning of the chapter, that group has probably done their work well. 4) It’s not hard to have strong convictions on a difficult text, as long as you are willing to ignore some of the evidence.

But let’s not linger on that negative note. Through the decades I have discovered a number of things about Revelation 17 that can be stated with some confidence. Hence the title: “What I Think I Know About Revelation 17.” I share the following conclusions with this group as a culmination of more than 40 years of specialized study and as a starting point for further consideration of the difficulties in this chapter.

1. **Rev 17 Is an Elaboration of the Sixth and Seventh Bowl-Plagues**

**(Rev 16:12-21)**

This connection is signaled in the very first verse of chapter 17, ESV: “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me. . . .” This is a clear connection between chapter 17 and the content of chapter 16. But the question remains: *Which of the seven bowl angels is interacting with the Seer of Patmos here?* A clue to the answer lies in the fact that the angel’s message has something to do with water: “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute, who is seated on ***many waters***” (Rev 17:1, ESV). Three of the bowl-plagues have something to do with water. The second bowl falls on the sea (Rev 16:3), the third bowl falls on the rivers and springs (Rev 16:4-7), and the sixth bowl falls on the Euphrates River (16:12). *Which of the three bowl-angels is the one we encounter in Revelation 17?* Since the waters of verse 1 are associated with the great prostitute, and she is later defined as Babylon (Rev 17:5), the angel of the sixth bowl (the one associated with the drying up of the Euphrates River) is the one in view when you get to 17:1.

This makes sense in light of the Old Testament background to Revelation 17. The “many waters” is a striking verbal parallel to Jeremiah 51:13. There, Babylon is addressed as “you who dwell by many waters”. Ancient Babylon was a twin city located in the midst of an extremely dry desert. Its “many waters”, therefore, can only be a reference to the mighty Euphrates River that passed through the very center of the ancient city (cf. Jer 50:33-38; 51:36). So I think I know that Revelation 17 is closely related to the sixth bowl-plague, in which the Euphrates River is dried up.

The parallel with Revelation 16 also extends to the seventh bowl plague (Rev 16:17-21). The immediate introduction to the Babylon visions of chapters 17 and 18 is in 16:19: “God remembered Babylon the Great.” The details of what happens when God “remembers” Babylon are found in Revelation 17 and 18. In addition, the battle of Armageddon in 16:16 finds its counterpart in Revelation 17:14, where the ten horns, the counterpart to the “kings of the whole world” (Rev 16:14, ESV), make war with the Lamb. So I think I know that Revelation 17 is an elaboration of the sixth and seventh bowl-plagues of chapter 16.

**2) Multiple Symbols in Rev 17 Can Represent the Same Entity in Reality**

This principle is stated explicitly in Revelation 17:9-10, ESV: “. . . the seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman is seated, they are also seven kings. . . .” Revelation 17 can be totally bewildering if each symbol is treated as a unique entity. But the chapter simplifies quite a bit when you realize that the same entity in reality can be represented by more than one symbol in Revelation. For example, Jesus is represented in Revelation as a son of man, a Lamb, a male child, and as simply Jesus Christ. The end-time people of God are represented by the woman of Revelation 12, the 144,000, the great multitude, the saints, and the remnant.

This principle can be seen at work in the first three verses of Revelation 17. In 17:1 a prostitute sits on many waters. In 17:2 she commits adultery with the kings of the earth. In 17:3 a woman sits on a beast. That woman is called both prostitute and Babylon in verse 5. So it is clear that the prostitute of verses 1 and 2 is the same entity as the woman of verse 3 and as Babylon: A worldwide unity of institutional religion in opposition to God and His people. Similarly, the waters of verse 1 (defined as the political powers of the world in verse 15), the kings of the earth in verse 2, and the beast of verse 3 all represent the same entity: The secular, political powers of the world who support Babylon for a time but then destroy her at the End (17:16). So I think I know that multiple symbols in Revelation can represent a single entity in real life. The enemies of God at the End are not multiple in the chapter, they are two in number (more on this later), Babylon and the beast.

**3) There Are Three Worldwide, End-Time Realities in Rev 17**

The confluence of symbols in Revelation 17 lead me to believe that three main entities are in view. The first entity is Babylon, represented as a woman/prostitute in Revelation 17 and as a great city in Revelation 18. I understand Babylon to be a worldwide alliance of religious institutions that rises and falls in the context of the final events of earth’s history. This alliance is named by many names in Revelation: Babylon (17:5, etc.), the great city (18:9-19), the great prostitute (17:1), and the woman who rides the beast. That Babylon is a religious entity seems evident for a number of reasons. For one thing, the woman appears in the desert (17:3), which recalls the final appearance of the woman of Revelation 12, who clearly represents the people of God (cf. especially 12:14-16). As such, Babylon is also parallel to Jezebel in 2:20 and in contrast with the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem (19:7-8; 21:9-10). All the women of Revelation are religious figures, two in relationship with God and two in opposition to God. Babylon is also a persecuting power that turns the “saints” into the “martyrs of Jesus” (17:6). This suggests a focus on religion.

Many scholars have also noticed that the description of the woman/Babylon in 17:4 is highly reminiscent of Israel’s High Priest. The High Priest’s ephod contained purple, scarlet and gold (Exod 28:5-6). The ephod and breast plate contained precious stones (Exodus 28:9-13 and 17-21). The cup in this case may represent the drink offerings of the sanctuary (Exodus 29:40-41 and 30:9; Leviticus 23:13, 18, and 37). And the inscription on Babylon’s forehead resembles the title HOLY TO THE LORD on the High Priest’s miter (Exodus 28:36-38). If Babylon is the sum total of the unholy trinity of Revelation 13 (cf. Rev 16:13, 19), I think I know that she represents worldwide religious authority in opposition to God and His people.

The second main entity is symbolized by the beast upon which the woman rides (17:3). In Revelation 17:1, prostitute Babylon is sitting on “many waters”. We have noted that the waters of Babylon are the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12) and that these are defined later in the chapter as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” (Rev 17:15). The waters of Babylon represent the civil and secular powers of this world that come to support the end-time religious alliance. They are, therefore, parallel to the “kings of the earth” and the “inhabitants of the earth” that commit fornication with the prostitute in verse 2.

The scarlet beast of verse 3 reminds us of the sea beast of Revelation 13, a counterfeit of the work of Jesus Christ. But while the scarlet beast wears the names of blasphemy, it primarily represents another way of describing the worldwide political confederacy. This becomes clear from the explanation of the vision offered in Rev 17:7-18. The scarlet beast has seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads represent seven kings (Rev 17:9-10). The ten horns represent ten kings (Rev 17:12). So the beast itself is the sum total of political and military power in the world (Rev 17:12-13). The Euphrates River and the scarlet beast are two different ways of describing the same thing. The blasphemy in which this beast engages occurs as part of its union with the aims and activities of Babylon.

The relationship between the prostitute and the political confederacy is a central feature of Revelation 17. She commits adultery with the kings of the earth. She intoxicates their citizens with the wine of her adulteries (17:2). The purpose of the union between the prostitute and the kings of the earth is worldwide dominance and control. This union is also illustrated by the image of the woman riding the beast (17:3, 7). These symbols indicate that there is a short period in the last days where worldwide religious authority dominates the political landscape of the world. Aspects of this relationship are also seen in the sixth and seventh bowl-plagues. The dragon, beast and false prophet (the unholy trinity of Revelation 13 that unites together in the end-time to become Babylon, cf. 13:15, 16:19) send out demonic frogs to gather the kings of the whole inhabited world for the battle of Armageddon (16:14-16). Then, when Babylon splits into three parts, the cities of the nations also fall (16:19). So the two entities, secular and religious, are anticipated in chapter 16. They unite in opposition to the third worldwide alliance in Revelation 17.

The third alliance in Revelation 17 is a worldwide unity of the “saints”. This alliance makes no appearance in Revelation 17:1-3, but it is visible elsewhere in chapter 17 and in the rest of the book of Revelation. It comes into view in 17:6, where Babylon is described as drunk with the blood of the “saints” and of the “martyrs of Jesus”. Those “with the Lamb” are described as the “called, chosen and faithful” in verse 14. In Revelation 16:15, the faithful are called those who keep watch and hang onto their garments. The people of God in Revelation are elsewhere called the 144,000 (Rev 7:4; 14:1), the great multitude (7:9; 19:1), the remnant (12:17), those who follow the Lamb (14:4), and the saints (14:12). These are not discreet titles for various entities, they are many different symbols to represent the one end-time people of God.

So, according to Revelation 17, there will be three, great, worldwide alliances at the very End, an alliance of the saints, an alliance of religious institutions, and an alliance of worldwide secular and political power. (1) The confederacy of the saints will probably not be organized in institutional terms. It is likely that any religious institutions which are truly faithful to God will be destroyed in the run-up to the battle of Armageddon. (2) The confederacy of religion is a worldwide alliance of religious authority. While the pope would no doubt be the logical choice to head such a confederacy, Babylon will in fact be much bigger than any single religion (Rev 16:13, 19). The union of religious institutions will likely occur out of a need to co-ordinate spiritual effort in the face of the significant challenges described in the first five plagues (Rev 16:1-11). (3) Events of the end-time will be such that the confederacy of secular and political power will arise and work with Babylon in a fruitless attempt to overcome the environmental and other challenges that the world faces as it approaches the End. For a short time, the worldwide political alliance places its power and resources in the service of the religious alliance. The final outcome of this grand alliance is addressed in Revelation 17:16. So I think I know that Revelation 17 outlines three worldwide alliances as the human race approaches the End.

**4) Revelation 17’s Structure Has Two Main Parts:**

**A Vision (17:3-6a) and an Angelic Explanation of the Vision (17:7-18)**

This distinction has important implications for interpreting the heads of the beast in this chapter. Like Daniel 2 and 7, Revelation 17 contains a clearly defined contrast between vision and explanation. The first two verses of the chapter are an audition that serves duodirectionally, looking back to the bowl-plagues, and looking forward to the vision of the woman riding on the beast (Rev 17:3-6a). The prophet's reaction to the vision is given at the end of verse six (Revelation 17:6b). The rest of the chapter (Rev 17:7-18) involves an angel interpreting the audition and vision of the first six verses to John. In the vision, John is carried to the time of the seven last plagues. In the explanation, he is addressed in terms of his own time and place.

This means that in assessing Revelation 17, a distinction must be made between the time of the vision and the time of its interpretation. Within a vision, the prophet can travel from earth to heaven and range back and forth from time past to the end of time. Apocalyptic visions are rarely located in the prophet’s time and place. But when an apocalyptic vision is explained to the prophet afterward, the explanation comes in the time, place, and circumstances of the visionary, since the angel is speaking to the prophet about the prophet’s concerns (“the beast that you saw”[17:8], “the ten horns that you saw [17:12]”, “the waters that you saw” [17:15], “the ten horns that you saw [17:16]”, “the woman that you saw [17:18]”). The language of the explanation, therefore, needs to make sense from the prophet’s point of view.

Going back to earlier visionary texts, in Daniel 2 the vision of the image carries Nebuchadnezzar down the course of history to its very end (Dan 2:31-35). The explanation of the vision given to him by Daniel, however, is firmly grounded in the time and place of Nebuchadnezzar. The interpretation begins with a straightforward, unambiguous assertion, “You are that head of gold (Dan 2:38).” Nebuchadnezzar is then told that the series of kingdoms that follow are “after you” (2:39) in point of time.

As was the case with Daniel 2, the apocalyptic prophecy of Dan 7 is divided into two parts; a description of the vision, in which the prophet is transported through time and space (Dan 7:2-14), and an explanation of the vision, given in the language, time, and place of the prophet (Dan 7:15-27). The explanation comes at the request of Daniel (Dan 7:15-16) who then says about the angel: “So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things” (Dan 7:16, ESV). The interpretation was for Daniel’s benefit, just as the interpretation of the dream/vision in Daniel 2 was for the benefit of Nebuchadnezzar. So the angel begins by explaining that the vision is about things in Daniel’s future: “These large beasts, which are four in number, represent four kings who ***will arise*** from the earth” (Dan 7:17, ESV). So whenever apocalyptic visions are followed by an explanation, the principle of “God meets people where they are” must be applied to the explanations given. This has profound implications for the interpretation of difficult apocalyptic texts like Rev 17:7-11.

After the vision of the woman and the beast in Revelation 17:3-6a, John’s interpreting angel comes to explain the vision. Among other things, he tells John that the seven heads of beast “are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come. . . .” (Rev 17:10). The crucial question is how to interpret the sequence of the seven heads of the beast (Rev 17:10). When is the time of the “one is,” the head that comes between the five that are fallen and the one that is “not yet come?” Is it the time of John, who received the vision, or is it the time of the vision itself, which is an addendum to the bowl-plagues? In Scripture, visionary explanations like this are always given in the time, place and language of the one receiving the vision. The explanation needs to make sense to the one who received the vision.

If the explanation comes in the time and place of John, the five kings that “are fallen” are already in the past when John writes the book of Revelation. These are probably to be understood as the five Old Testament superpowers that oppressed the people of God: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. The one that “is” would be the empire of pagan Rome, which dominated the world of John’s day. The one yet to come would exist between John’s time and the very final events in which the beast becomes an “eighth” (Rev 17:11), which is “of the seven”. In other words, I think I know that the apocalyptic pattern of vision and explanation gives us the key to understanding the sequence of kings represented by the seven heads of the beast.

**5) Babylon (Rev 17:1 - 19:10) Is Strongly Parallel to the New Jerusalem**

**(Rev 21:9 – 22:5)**

In the latter part of the book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem as the bride of the Lamb is set in contrast to Babylon the prostitute. This parallel is signaled by the opening lines of 17:1 and 21:9. Each verse begins with “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me” (Greek of 17:1: *kai ēlthen eis ek tōn hepta angelōn tōn echontōn tas hepta phialas kai elalēsen met emou*; Greek of 21:9: *kai ēlthen eis ek tōn hepta angelōn tōn echontōn tas hepta phialas . . . kai elalēsen met emou*). The Greek of the two verses is identical with the exception that in 21:9 there is an explanatory insertion “which are filled with the seven last plagues” (Greek: *tōn gemontōn tōn hepta plēgōn tōn eschatōn*). This is way too many words in common to be an accident. The bowl angel of chapter 17 and the bowl angel of chapter 21 are one and the same.

The speech that follows in each case opens in the same way. “Come, I will show you” (Greek: *deuro, deixō soi*). In 17:1 the angel shows John the judgment of the great prostitute. In 21:9 the angel shows John the bride, the wife of the lamb, which is the New Jerusalem (21:9-11). The intention that the reader explore the parallels between Babylon and the New Jerusalem could not be any clearer. The New Jerusalem comes down from heaven and settles on the ruins of Babylon (Robert Badenas, “New Jerusalem—The Holy City”, in *Symposium on Revelation—Book II,* edited by Frank B. Holbrook [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992], 255-257).

There are numerous parallels that flow from this double introduction. In each case John is carried away in the Spirit (17:3; 21:10). He sees the great city Babylon (17:5, 18) and the holy city Jerusalem (21:10). The prostitute sits on many waters and the beast (17:1, 3), the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God (21:10). Both “women” are covered with previous jewels (17:4; 21:11). One city is the dwelling place of demons (18:2), the other is the dwelling place of God and His people (21:3). One is filled with unclean spirits, the other is empty of anything unclean (18:2; 21:27). The inhabitants of Babylon do not have their names written in the Book of Life (17:8), the inhabitants of Jerusalem do (21:27). The kings of the earth give their power to the beast (17:12-15), the same bring glory and honor into the New Jerusalem (21:24).

The fates of the two cities are also in strong comparison and contrast. The fate of both cities is introduced with “It is done” (16:17; 21:6). Babylon receives the wine of God’s wrath (16:19), Jerusalem is for those who desire the water of life (21:6). The plagues of Babylon result in death (18:8), the New Jerusalem is a place where there is no more death (21:4). In Babylon the lamps go dark (18:23), the New Jerusalem is brightly lit (21:23, 25, 22:5). Babylon is thrown down with violence (18:23), the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem reign forever and ever (22:5). Underlying this whole contrast is the imagery of a prostitute (unfaithfulness) and the image of a bride (faithfulness). Human beings get to decide which city to live in and which fate will be theirs. So I think I know that the Babylon of Revelation 17 is strongly parallel to the New Jerusalem of 21-22.

**6) While Rev 17 Takes a Global Approach to the End-times,**

***The Great Controversy* Approaches the Same Events from a Local Perspective**

Revelation’s global (world-wide) approach to the final events of earth’s history is evident in the description of the major players. The secular/political entity of Revelation 17 involves “the kings of the earth”, “the inhabitants of the earth” (Rev 17:2), and “the kings of the whole inhabited world” (Rev 16:14). When “the cities of the nations fell”, every mountain and island was affected-- also a very global picture. The beast is venerated by “those who live on the earth” (Rev 17:8). The waters of 17:1 are “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages” (Rev 17:15).

Babylon is likewise global in scope. It is “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18). It rides the beast, which represents the people and kings of the earth. So the interaction between Babylon and the beast, including Babylon’s destruction by the ten kings, is portrayed in world-wide, global terms. The experience of the saints at this time, therefore, is also seen in terms of the world-wide situation (Rev 17:6), the attack of the dragon (Rev 12:17) and the universal death decree (Rev 13:15).

In the final crisis of earth’s history (as portrayed in Revelation 17) Babylon, which represents a worldwide alliance of religious institutions, controls the beast, which represents a worldwide alliance of secular, political, military institutions. Like the papacy in the Middle Ages, Babylon dominates “the kings of the earth” for a short time. But when the kings of the earth realize that in joining Babylon they have ended up on the losing side (Rev 17:14), they take out their frustration on the religious alliance that led them astray (Rev 17:16).

In sharp contrast, Ellen White, in the book *The Great Controversy*, approaches the same events from a local perspective. She begins her account of the final events with the close of probation, which she describes as “Christ ceasing His intercession in the sanctuary” (GC 627.3—this parallels Revelation 15:5-8). On page 628 of GC, she then describes the first four plagues of Revelation 16 with appropriate citations. She then pauses to describe the physical and emotional trauma that individuals among both God’s people and their opponents will experience during the plagues (GC 628-634). She also describes God’s efforts to help and encourage the saints during that time when some are in prison cells, and others are hidden in solitary retreats in the forests and the mountains (GC 635). She sees “angry multitudes” (GC 636), provoked by their “ministers” and “religious teachers” (GC 640) approaching these solitary groups to execute the death decree (Rev 13:15—GC 640). To human sight, it appears that they are about to die (GC 630).

Ellen White then resumes her midrash on the seven bowl-plagues on page 636. God intervenes with a dense blackness, deeper than the darkness of the night (corresponding to the fifth bowl-plague (Rev 16:10-11). God then stops the angry multitudes in their tracks with a shining token of His approval of the huddled and praying saints. The angry mobs realize they have been deceived by their religious teachers. This corresponds to the sixth bowl-plague, with its drying up of the Euphrates (16:12), and its elaboration of that image in 17:14-16. She then quotes portions of the seventh bowl-plague to describe the terror of the unsaved at many heavenly and earthly signs (GC 636-640).

Ellen White then returns to the forest scene where God’s people were suddenly delivered from the angry mobs (GC 640). She notes that the enemies of God’s law include from the ministers (religious leaders) down to the least among them (the angry multitudes). They find out “they have been fighting against God. Religious teachers have led souls to perdition while professing to guide them to the gates of Paradise” (still GC 640). Local religious leaders are the equivalent of Babylon in Revelation 17. The angry multitudes who follow the religious leaders are the local equivalent of the beast and its ten horns. The angry mobs’ change of heart (GC 640) is the local equivalent of the drying up of the Euphrates. So I think I know that while Revelation 17 takes a global approach to the end-times, *The Great Controversy* approaches the same events from a local perspective.

**7) The Ten Horns of Revelation 17 Are Distinct in Meaning from the Seven Heads of the Beast**

In Revelation 16 and 17 one encounters the kings of the east (16:12), the kings of the whole inhabited world (16:14), the kings of the earth (17:2), the seven kings (17:10), and now the ten kings (17:12)! We have seen that the kings of the whole inhabited world and the kings of the earth both represent the secular political alliance of the end-time. As such, they are to be equated with the Euphrates River and with the beast of Revelation itself in its final phase. The kings of the east (Rev 16:12) are the end-time equivalent of Cyrus the Persian and his allies who conquered Babylon by drying up the Euphrates River. The kings of the east are represented by the Lamb and His called, chosen and faithful followers in Revelation 17:14. This leaves two groupings of kings unaccounted for, the seven heads of the beast, which are seven kings (Rev 17:9), and the ten horns of the beast, which are explained in 17:12-14. Both the seven heads and the ten horns are attached to the beast in the initial vision (Rev 17:3). What relationship do the seven kings and the ten kings have with each other, if any?

We have noticed already that the seven kings (the seven heads of the beast) are consecutive. In the explanation (17:7-18) of the vision (17:3-6), John is told that five are fallen, one is now, and one is yet to come. So while the beast is pictured with seven heads, the heads are not contemporaneous, they are consecutive. As in Revelation 13:14, when one of the beast’s heads is wounded to death (Rev 13:3), the whole beast dies and is then resurrected with a new head (Rev 13:14). So the seven heads (kings) represent seven consecutive phases of the beast.

The ten horns, which are also pictured on the beast (17:3), are also ten kings (Rev 17:12). Whoever they are, they are not an entity that existed in John’s day. They do not, in reality, have any connection with the seven heads except that all seventeen kings have some relation to the beast. But the seven and the ten are not contemporaneous with each other. The ten kings do not come into play on the world scene until the seventh head has passed off the scene. They are an end-time group without a pedigree or back story. Rather than being consecutive, they come to power together (17:12), they have authority together and take actions together (Rev 17:13-14), and they go out together (Rev 17:12, 14, 17). They receive their dominion along with the beast (17:12) in the last period of earth's history, the time of the “eighth” (Rev 17:11), earth's final crisis. It is not until the beast rises in support of Babylon during the final crisis that they come into play.

**8) The Major Old Testament Background to Rev 17 Is the Fall of Babylon Motif**

The fall of Babylon motif is signaled by Revelation 16:12 and 17:1, as noted earlier. The drying up of the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12) and the “many waters” on which Babylon sits (Rev 17:1) are clear allusions to ancient Babylon and its fall to the armies of Cyrus, King of Persia. To understand this relationship, it is helpful to visit the fall of Babylon texts in Jeremiah and Isaiah. A good beginning point is Jeremiah 50:33-34 (NIV): “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘The people of Israel are oppressed, and the people of Judah as well. All their captors hold them fast, refusing to let them go. Yet their Redeemer is strong; the LORD Almighty is his name. He will vigorously defend their cause so that he may bring rest to their land, but unrest to those who live in Babylon.’” This text makes it clear that Babylon’s fall was not an accident. It was part of the direct purpose of God on account of Babylon’s oppression of God’s people.

 God continues His indictment of the Babylonians in Jeremiah 50:35-36: “‘A sword against the Babylonians!’ declares the LORD—‘against those who live in Babylon and against her ***officials*** and ***wise men***! A sword against her ***false prophets***! They will become fools. A sword against her ***warriors***! They will be filled with terror.’” I have highlighted several key words in this passage to show that Yahweh’s attack against the Babylonians specifically targets Babylon’s officials, her wise men, her false prophets, and her warriors. This is a listing of the people who made Babylon strong; her administrators, her thinkers, her religious leaders, and her military personnel.

 The prophecy continues in verse 37: “A sword against her ***horses and chariots*** and all the ***foreigners*** in her ranks! They will become women. A sword against her ***treasures***! They will be plundered.” The previous verses talk about officials, wise men and warriors. Now this verse talks about horses and chariots, mercenary troops, and treasures. Again, this is a listing of the resources that make Babylon strong! But there is one more resource that has not yet been listed (Jer 50:38 [NIV]): “A drought on her ***waters***! They will dry up. For it is a land of idols, idols that will go mad with terror.” What are the waters that are being dried up here? The waters of Babylon, the Euphrates River!

The Euphrates River was part of the defense system of ancient Babylon. It provided a moat around the city that made an attack against the walls almost impossible to carry out. But the Euphrates River was even more than this in Jeremiah 50:38. It had become a symbol of all the resources that supported ancient Babylon, including the warriors and officials and treasures that made Babylon strong. When Revelation 17:15 interprets the Euphrates River as a symbol of the civil and secular powers of this world in support of end-time Babylon, it is using the Euphrates River in a way consistent with its usage in the Old Testament. The drying up of the Euphrates symbolizes the loss of Babylon’s strength to defend herself. This theme is repeated in Jeremiah 51:36-37 and Isaiah 44:24-28, with the inclusion, in Isaiah, of Cyrus as a key player in the drama of drying up the Euphrates (Isa 45:1-4).

With this in mind, let’s summarize the fall of Babylon, as narrated in the Old Testament, in a sequence of five events. Cyrus, king of Persia (a “king from the east”—Rev 16:12), dried up the literal Euphrates River, conquered the city of Babylon, permitted Israel to go free, and arranged for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This five-part narrative clearly sets the foundation for the last portion of the Book of Revelation (chapter 16-22). In the Book of Revelation an end-time Cyrus (the “kings from the rising of the sun”—Rev 16:12), dries up the end-time Euphrates River (Rev 16:12, cf. 17:15), delivers end-time Israel (Rev 18:20 – 19:1-5), leading to a New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). In other words, the fundamental narrative substructure of Revelation 16-22 is grounded in the Old Testament story of Cyrus and Babylon’s fall. The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus is, so to speak, a subtext for everything that happens in Revelation 16-22.

**Conclusion**

Revelation 17 is one of the most difficult passages in the whole Bible. For many years, it made little sense to me. But little by little, some things began to fall into place, and in this essay I have attempted share those things I think I have come to know about the chapter. There are many aspects of the chapter that are still a puzzle to me. I am hoping that, working together, we might be able to expand the elements of the chapter that I think I know.