The Possibe Identity of Image of the Beast in Rev 13:14,15 as Babylon the Great

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This presentation is a summery of chapters 3-5 of my dissertation “The Meaning and Background of the Image of the Beast in Rev. 13:14,15.” Through this presentation, I’m going to provide main reasons for my proposal of identifying the image of the beast as Babylon the Great. Due to limit of space, conclusions not directly related to the identification of the miage of the beast as Babylon the Great will be given without much explaination. Questions regarding how these conclusions are reached could be answered by referring back to pertinent portions of my dissertation.

I will first provide a brief summary of the meaning and cultic background of the image of the beast in Rev 13:14,15 as a starting point for further discussion on identifying the image of the beast as Babylon the Great. Second, will provide reasons of my identification of image of the beast as Babylon the Great by studies done on the image of the beast and Babylon the Great in latter half of the book of Revelation.

The Image of the Beast in Rev 13:14,15

A word study of *eikōn* shows a word rich in theological meanings: it points back to when human beings were created in the image of God and points forward to the *eschaton*, when God will restore in full *Imago Dei* in his believers. Paul portrays Jesus as the perfect *eikōn* of God, the ideal Adam, a perfect manifestation of God’s character, through whose blood a new humanity was brought forth and recreated in the image of God by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The restoration of *Imago Dei* in humanity is the ultimate goal of redemption, and is perceived as the eschatological blessing from the Creator God. The book of Revelation revealed the other side of the redemptive story: instead of the restoration of God’s image in humanity, at the end of the great conflict between Satan and Christ, there will be a creation of the *eikōn* of the beast which will reflect the character of Satan. Its worship is put in direct contrast with the worship of God and the call to give him glory as Creator. The worship of the *eikōn* of the beast is seen as counteracting the divine program of restoring the image of God in human beings in the *eschaton*.

A word study on *thērion* shows that this word is connected with covenantal blessings and curses. Created on the fifth and sixth days of the creation, the sea and land *thērion* were put under the dominion of human beings created in the image of God. After the fall, *thērion* became wild animals, hostile to human beings and were distinctly separated from the human world. The dominion of human beings over *thērion* is conditional, depending upon human attitudes toward the covenant: if they obey they will have dominion over *thērion*, otherwise, a reversal will happen. Thus, to be devoured by *thērion* is seen as the fulfillment of a covenantal curse and a divine judgment upon the wicked, while having dominion over *thērion* implies divine favor.

In the book of Revelation, the beasts are symbols of hellish powers hostile to God and his believers. Like the *eikōn* of the beast, they appear in the latter half of Revelation as part of the bestial forces. The faithful followers of the Lamb will gain victory over the beast and its image (Rev 15:2), which implies their dominion over the beast. Those who worship the beast and its image have exchanged God’s glory for the image of the beast, and they are given over by God to believe a lie told by the beasts, and to follow the bestial trinity. Thus, in a symbolic way, they suffer the covenantal curse and are devoured by the beast, as stated by Paul in Romans 1.

The language of Rev 13:14, 15 alludes several passages of the Bbible. First, it alludes to Genesis 2. It shows that Rev 13:14, 15 is an eschatological counterfeit of the creation of the first human beings in the image of God. It narrates how the beast carries out the will of Satan by creating a living entity in its own image to counteract the divine program of recreating the image of God in human beings. Thus, Rev 13:14, 15 notes that, in the *eschaton* the sea beast, a counterfeit of Jesus Christ, will bring forth on earth a new group of humanity in the image of the beast through the transforming power of the evil spirit breathed by the land beast, the counterfeit of the Holy Spirit. These beastly human beings serve as agents of Satan, an assembly of Satan, to fight against the church of God on earth, and to convert the inhabitants of earth to Satan’s side.

Second, Rev 13:14, 15 also alludes to Acts 2. It confirms this interpretation of the image as being the assembly of Satan. It asserts that a false Pentecost will happen, resulting in the forming of the image of the beast in human beings. These will in turn be false apostles of Satan serving as propaganda agents to convert the inhabitants of the earth to the side of Satan.

Third, Rev 13:14, 15 alludes to Daniel 3 which indicates that the eschatological program of setting up the image of the beast to be worshipped by the inhabitants of the earth refers to is a false gathering intended to challenge the divine plan for history and hinder the fulfillment of the divine covenant of the gathering of the faithful believers of God to establish God’s kingdom on earth. Daniel 3 also provides a promise to the faithful believers of God that a reversal will happen once again in history: instead of the faithful believers of God bowing down to the image of the beast, the assembly of Satan will finally fall down at the feet of the faithful.

 The allusions of Rev 13:14, 15 to passages from the Old and New Testaments show that the key issue in Revelation 13 is not so much idolatry as a phenomenon, but is about a deeper existential question: the root problem of humanity, i.e., the image of beings who reflect their Creator. I suggested that the image of the beast is a symbol for the unfaithful community within the Christian Church.

The language of Rev 13:14, 15 also reflects cultic practices of the ANE and Greco-Roman cultic practices. It uses the language of the ANE and Greco-Roman induction of cult images through the mouth-opening ritual after which the cult image became a living being in its own right. In Rev 13:15, the image of the beast following the prevailing cultic customs also undergoes a mouth-opening ritual as the spirit of the land beast is breathed into it. After this, it begins to give oracles, having a threefold religio-political-economic power serving as the medium through which the sea beast establishes its contact with the inhabitants of the earth.

The study of the cultic background also pointed to a clear distinction between the cult image and its deity, in this case, the image and the beast. The destruction of the image of the beast does not entail the destruction of the sea beast. This point is crucial to the identity of the image of the beast. The book of Revelation explicitly mentions the destruction of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet, but remains silent about the destruction of the image of the beast. Since the book of Revelation is also classified as a wall scroll, depicting the final battle between Good and Evil, and based upon ANE and biblical war customs, the destruction of the idol image, in the case of the book of Revelation, the image of the beast should not be left unmentioned.

The Image of the Beast and Babylon the Great in Revelation 14

Babylon the Great first appeas in Reveation 14. The first mention of Babylon in 14:8 is written as if the readers already knew about the identity of this name. The crime of Babylon the Great is described as *ek tou oinou tou thumou tēs porneias autēs pepotiken panta ta ethnē*, literally translated as “because of the wine of the wrath of her unfaithfulness she has given drink to all the nations.” The verb *pepotiken*, lit. “has given drink” is an indicative perfect active verb, and the stress is on a past action. This means that Babylon the Great in Revelation 14 has a pedigree.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Paulien observes that most new players in Revelation have an “introductory description that gives some sense of their previous history.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Therefore the sentence “because of the wine of the wrath of her unfaithfulness she has given drink to all the nations” could be viewed as Babylon’s introductory description that summarizes her previous history. Almost every major player appears under the rubric of characterizations, or different names. It may be possible that Babylon the Great also has more than one characterizations. It may also be possible that Babylon appeared before Revelation 14. That may be the reason why John did not need to introduce her in more detail. Thus, it is necessary to go back to Revelation 13 and compare the text of Revelation 13 with Revelation 14, and see if there is a possibility that Babylon is somewhere present in Revelation 13.

The language of Revelation 13 and 14 has many parallels.[[3]](#footnote-4) The parallels between Revelation 13 and 14 show that these two chapters are correlated and should interpret each other.[[4]](#footnote-5) There are four pairs of parallel passages in Revelation 13 and 14. The first pair is Rev 13:1-6 and 14:1-5. These parallels make it clear that the sea beast has characteristics in direct contrast to both the characteristics of Christ and the 144,000.

The second pair of parallelisms is between Rev 13:11-14 and Rev 14:6-7. The activities of the land beast is in direct contrast to the activity and message of the first angel.

The third pair of parallels is between Rev 13:15 and Rev 14:8. The activities of Babylon the Great correspond to those of the image of the beast. Just as the image of the beast causes the inhabitants of the earth to worship the beast and its image on pain of death, Babylon the Great causes the nations to drink the wine of her adultery. Thus it is reasonable to suggest that the past action of Babylon’s causing all the nations to drink the wine of her fornication is the action done by the image of the beast in Revelation 13, which is forcing everyone to worship the beast and its image. Following this line of thinking, it is understandable that John does not feel the need to make any introduction of Babylon the Great when she appears in Revelation 14 because this is not her first appearance.

The fourth pair of parallels is Rev 13:16 and Rev 14:9. The focus here is obvious: the mark of the beast, and the consequences of receiving it.

Revelation 14 itself reveals that there is an intimate relationship between Babylon’s causing all nations to drink the wine of her fornication and the worshipping of the beast and its image. The divine punishment those false worshippers receive is that they “too, will drink of the wine of God's fury” (v. 10). In Revelation, the punishment received always matches the crime committed, so v. 10 could be interpreted as “since you are so willing to worship the beast and its image, which, in a symbolic way, is to be caused to drink the wine of the wrath of fornication, you will also be caused to drink the wine of God’s fury.” The worshipping of the beast and its image in v. 10 is to be equated with drinking the wine of wrath of the fornication of Babylon the Great in v. 8. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that the one who *causes people to* worship the beast and its image is the same one who *causes* the nations *to drink* the wine. Therefore, the image of the beast in Revelation 13 could be identified with Babylon the Great.

The Image of the Beast and Babylon the Great in Revelation 16

There are thematic parallels between Revelation 13 and Rev 16:13-16. First is the motif of unholy trinity. Besides Revelation 13, Rev 16:13-16 is the only place where the unholy trinity, i.e., the dragon, the beast, and the land beast/false prophet, appear together and work together for a common cause. In Rev 16:13-16, all three of them send spirits out to gather the kings of the world to the place called Armageddon for the eschatological battle. In Revelation 13, the common goal of the unholy trinity is to cause the inhabitants of the world to worship the beast and its image (vv. 8, 14, 15). In order to achieve that goal, the dragon gave his throne and authority to the sea beast (v. 2). When the land beast who is later called the false prophet arises, he exercises power on behalf of the sea beast (v. 12) which implies that the land beast’s authority came from the sea beast whose authority in turn originated from the dragon. Then the land beast breathed into the image of the beast so that it could in turn speak to command the people of the earth to worship of the beast and its image (v. 15). It could be said that in Revelation 13 there is a chain of authority from the dragon to the sea beast to the land beast, and then to the image of the beast.

The second thematic parallel between the two passages is the mouth motif. In Revelation 13, the dragon is the only member of the unholy trinity who is excluded; the actions of the sea beast and the land beast as well as the image of the beast all have something to do with their mouth. The sea beast received a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemy (v. 5). The same is true for the land beast and the image of the beast. The land beast used his mouth commanding[[5]](#footnote-6) the inhabitants of the world to make an image of the beast, and he used his mouth to breathe spirit into the image of the beast to make it alive (v. 15). The image of the beast in turn opened its mouth to *command* all to worship the beast and its image (v. 15).

Thus, through the commanding mouths of the sea beast, the land beast and the image of the beast, the dragon is able to gather the inhabitants of the earth to assemble before the image of the beast and worship it. The dragon is also enabled to kill all who do not worship the image of the beast; in other words, to wage the end time war against the faithful believers of God and ultimately against God. In Revelation 16, out of the mouths of the dragon, the [sea] beast, and the false prophet/the land beast, came three unclean spirits (v. 13); they go out *sunagagein* (to call) together the kings of the world (vv. 14-16) to join in the eschatological battle at Armageddon.

The third thematic parallel is the motif of a worldwide deception through miraculous signs. In Revelation 13, the land beast/the false prophet performed miraculous signs and deceived the inhabitants of the earth (vv. 13, 14), and the image of the beast forced all the people on earth to worship it (v. 14). In Revelation 16, the frog like spirits from the mouths of the unholy trinity also performed miraculous signs and became the deceptive agents through whom the kings of the whole world are gathered to Armageddon (v. 14).

The study of the parallels between Rev 16:13-16 and Rev 13:13-15, in addition to the information provided by Revelation 17, showed that the events described in those passages are the same. The worship of the image of the beast in Revelation 13 is the battle of Armageddon in Revelation 16. This parallelism is in line with the Old Testament idea that worship is battle.

There are also verbal parallels between these two passages, i.e., *poiei sēmeia* (performs miraculous signs) (Rev 13:13) and *poiounta sēmeia* (performing miraculous signs) in Rev 16:14; another is *pneuma*, which is translated as “breath” in Rev 13:15, and “spirit” in Rev 16:13, 14.

There is another commonality between Rev 13:13-15 and Rev 16:13-16, i.e., they both have Daniel 3 as their backgrounds. Daniel 3 as a background for Rev 13:13-15 has been dealt with in Chapter 3. Here I will only repeat its parallels to Daniel 3. The verbal parallels are *image* and the number *six*; the thematic parallels are the worldwide worship of the image, and the death decree. Rev 16:13-16 also has verbal parallels with Daniel 3. In Daniel 3, King Nebuchadnezzar sends forth *episunagagein* (to gather), *basileōn tēs oikoumenēs holēs* (the kings of the whole world), to the plain of Dura to worship the golden image. In Rev 16:14, the spirits go out *sunagagein* (to gather) *tous basileis tēs oikoumenēs holēs* (the kings of the whole world) to “a place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”

The above comparison between Rev 13:13-15 and Rev 16:13-16 and their common Daniel 3 background shows that they are two parallel passages with common motifs. There is no reason not to conclude that they are actually describing the same eschatological event, which is the last worldwide deception and the eschatological battle against God and his believers on earth. In Revelation 13 this event is described as the worldwide gathering to worship the image of the beast, while in Rev 16:13-16 and Revelation 17, it is described as the battle of Armageddon which is the worldwide gathering under the ruler of Babylon to wage war against God.

The worldwide worshiping of the image of the beast may be the same event as the worldwide gathering under the dominance of Babylon, and that the image of the beast may be the end time Babylon, because to worship is to be ruled by the one worshipped. Once again, as in the Old Testament, in Revelation, the battle of Armageddon is still a war about worship. The final battle stirred up by the unholy trinity is the gathering of the kings of the world to the symbolic battleground of Armageddon to worship the image of the beast. This is a challenge to God’s sovereignty of history just as Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon gathered all the kings of the world to worship his golden statue.

The Image of the Beast and Babylon the Great in Revelation 19 and 20

The study of Revelation 19 in connection with ANE war conduct raised a question about the fate of the image of the beast, which is the cult image of the bestial army. According to the war conduct of the ANE, the ultimate defeat of an enemy army was symbolized by the destruction or capture of the idols of the enemy nations. In the case of the nation of Israel, the burning of the idols of the Gentile nations was prescribed by the Mosaic law. The book of Revelation is a war scroll, and in particular, Revelation 19 is filled with war imagery. It portrays the ultimate victory of God and his believers over the bestial forces. Revelation 19 reports the destruction of the key entities of the bestial forces, i.e., the beast and the false prophet, but keeps silent concerning the destruction of their cult image, i.e., the image of the beast. Revelation 20 mentions the destruction of Satan but also keeps silent about the destruction of the image of the beast. The destruction of the cult image was a crucial step in the war custom of the ANE to signify ultimate victory over the defeated army. Without the destruction of the image of the beast, the war between God and Satan cannot reach its completion. The image of the beast must in some way be destroyed. There is a lawful expectation of seeing the final destruction of the cult image of the bestial forces as recorded in the book of Revelation. Thus the silence of Revelation 19 and 20 on the fate of the image of the beast prompted a further study of Revelation 17 and 18, since these two chapters are the only chapters which mention destruction by fire.

The Image of the Beast and Babylon the Great in Revelation 17

Interestingly, chapters 17 and 18, which do not contain explicit reference to the image of the beast, are the very chapters that feature the end time Babylon the Great. Before and after these two chapters, there are direct references to the image of the beast, always coupled with reference to the actual beast. But Revelation 17 and 18 seem to keep silent about the image of the beast. The sudden disappearance of the motif of the image of the beast in these two chapters is worth investigating. Could it be that the very reason for the absence of direct references to the image of the beast in these two chapters is simply because the image of the beast is overwhelmingly, but indirectly, present throughout them?

Since the time of Irenaeus, scholars have identified the beast of Revelation 17 with the beast of Rev 13:1-8.[[6]](#footnote-7) Indeed, the beast in Revelation 17 has several similarities to the one in Rev 13:1-8. Both beasts have a similar origin, appearances and activities. The call for wisdom is applied to understand both, and the same call is found only in Revelation 13 and 17 in all of Revelation. All these evidences suggest that it is plausible to identify the beast of Revelation 17 with the beast of Rev 13:1-8. And if Babylon the Great is symbolized by the image of the beast, as I have pointed out in this study, then the call for wisdom occurs only in these two chapters, in which the beast actually appears together with its idolatrous image. The combined use of *nous* (mind) and *sophia* (understanding) in the call of Rev 13:18 and 17:9 have a common Danielic background in “the idea of eschatological insight” for those who live in the last days.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Based upon his study of a relief on the Schimmel stag rhyton, B. J. Collins suggests that the deity and his/her statue could be shown together in one relief.[[8]](#footnote-9) So the picture presented in Revelation 17 could be seen as showing the deity and the image together in one setting, i.e., the beast and its image simultaneously. With this interpretation in mind, it is easier to understand why “the beast dominates the contents of the explanation,” because “the beast provides the hermeneutical key to the vision of the prostitute.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Furthermore the prostitute is his image, which originates from him, as De Villiers rightly says, “To some extent one could even say that the beast is revealed as the real ‘explanation’ of who she is. It discloses her true identity.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Through comparing the characteristics of Babylon the Great with those of a cult image in general and the image of the goddess Ištar in particular, John appears to have used the cult image of the Babylonian goddess Ištar to symbolize Babylon the Great. This leaves a hint to the reader to identify Babylon with the only cult image in the book of Revelation, i.e., the image of the beast.

The description of Babylon the Great in Rev 17:1-6 is antithetically parallel[[11]](#footnote-12) to the description of the woman in Revelation 12:[[12]](#footnote-13) (1) both contain elaborate descriptions of the women; (2) both women are mothers; (3) both are defined in terms of their relationship to God and his believers; (4) both are defined in terms of their relationship to God’s enemies; (5) both are located in the desert;[[13]](#footnote-14) (6) salvation comes from the child of the woman of Revelation 12 while death and punishment come from the whore and her offspring.[[14]](#footnote-15)

The “introductory formulas”[[15]](#footnote-16) for Babylon in Rev 17:1-18:24 and the bride of the Lamb in Rev 21:9-22:5 also appear in striking antithetical parallel to each other in terms of words and structures.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The difference between the two texts is the location of the women: one is in the desert and the other one is on the mountain. Another difference is found in their associates—one has the Lamb as her spouse (21:9b) and the other one has a monster as her mount.[[17]](#footnote-18) Thus, “the two male figures (beast and Lamb) with the two female figures (whore and bride)” are put into sharp contrast.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In connection with my conclusion in chapter 3, the above observation appears to be significant for decoding the identity of Babylon the Great. The whole section of Rev 17:1-19:10 starts with the union of Babylon, a parody of Jerusalem, which is the community of the saints, with her consort, the beast, a parody of Christ. The section ends with the wedding announcement of the bride and the Lamb, which is the final union of the church and Christ,[[19]](#footnote-20) the completion of the restoration of the image of God in the church. Since the relationship between the bride and the Lamb is an image-deity relationship, the relationship between Babylon the Great and the beast should also be understood the same: the image of the beast and the beast.

The close link between the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 and the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22 indicates that the New Jerusalem represents the community of the saints.[[20]](#footnote-21) Each of the messages to the seven churches ends with a promise to the conqueror and each message finds fulfillment in the description of the New Jerusalem (Rev 20-22). Thus, between Revelation 2, 3 and Revelation 21, 22 there is a “Promise and Fulfillment formula.”[[21]](#footnote-22) Therefore it is right to suggest that part of the members of the New Jerusalem are the ones in the seven churches who heed the call of the Spirit for repentance, while Babylon the Great includes those in the seven churches who heed not the call, and represent “humanity in chaos and in rebellion against God.”[[22]](#footnote-23)

More evidence for interpreting Babylon the Great as the community which includes those people in the seven churches who did not repent of their sins comes from Osborne’s observation. He notes that the expression to be “stripped naked” actually is built on the warning that the Holy Spirit gave to the church of Laodicea. The Holy Spirit urges the Laodiceans to buy white garments[[23]](#footnote-24) to cover their “shameful nakedness.” A few chapters later, in 16:15, Jesus also gives this admonition in order to urge the believers to “keep their clothes on, so that they might not walk around naked and people see their shame.”[[24]](#footnote-25) This motif of being stripped naked again connects Babylon the Great to the community of those in the seven churches who failed to heed the call of the Holy Spirit. As a conclusion to my study of the image of the beast in Revelation 13, I suggested that the image of the beast is a symbol for the unfaithful community within the Christian Church, and that this interpretation of Babylon as the community of the unrepentant links Babylon to the image of the beast.

Revelation 17 appears to make reference to Daniel 5, which records the fall of historical Babylon. There are thematic and verbal parallels between these two chapters. Thematically both chapters share the theme of imminent judgment, and a subsequent swift fall.[[25]](#footnote-26) In Daniel 5, it was a mysterious, disembodied hand writing on the wall that announced the overnight fall of historical Babylon; in Revelation 17 and 18, it was the angel who announced the fall of apocalyptic Babylon the Great, and it fall “in one hour” (Rev 18:10, 17, 19). Verbally, both chapters have three motifs or words in common: a “king” drinking “wine” (Dan 5:2; Rev 17:2) from “golden” vessels (Dan. 5:2; Rev 17:4). But Daniel 5 has one more motif not explicitly mentioned in Revelation 17, that is, the praising of the “gods” or idols of Babylon. This is the only thing seemingly missing from Revelation 17. If one understands Babylon the Great in Revelation 17 as the idolatrous image of the beast, then the parallels between Daniel 5 and Revelation 17 and 18 are complete in regard to the fall of Babylon.

Studies done by some biblical scholars point to that possibility. Gordon Zerbe observes that in the book of Revelation, the posture of sitting on the waters is actually a posture of worldly enthronement which “poses a sharp contrast to the rule of God, who is ‘seated’ on a throne in the midst of a pacified, crystal clear sea (4:1-5:1).”[[26]](#footnote-27) This deliberate contrast between Babylon the Great, enthroned in the midst of the chaotic sea as the center of the false worship, and the true God, enthroned in the midst of the sea of glass as the center of true worship, once again shows the intention of the author to disclose the identity of Babylon as the image of the beast which is in direct opposition to God. Furthermore, the interpretation of Babylon sitting on the waters as a posture of enthronement reminds the reader of the scene of the worship of the image of the beast in Rev 13:15-18, where the false worship in opposition to the worship of the true God is mentioned explicitly. Thus, Revelation 17 has the same combination of king, wine, gold, and god as Daniel 5.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Ruiz’s study of the relationship between Babylon and the beast is enlightening. He finds that in Rev 17:3, the beast was presented with three characteristics: “its color, the blasphemous names with which it is covered, and its heads and horns.”[[28]](#footnote-29) All these three characteristics “have to do with describing the relationship between the Prostitute” and the beast, her mount.[[29]](#footnote-30) The beast has the same scarlet color as Babylon; his name is as blasphemous as that of Babylon, which is “Babylon the Great.” The seven heads of the beast and the ten horns also are connected to the relationship between the beast and Babylon: the heads symbolize the seven mountains upon which Babylon is seated, while the horns represent the powers which ally themselves with the beast in order to destroy Babylon. Thus, Ruiz concludes that no aspect of the Beast’s description “is without its link to the figure of the Prostitute.”

Ruiz’s interpretations show that it is the relationship between Babylon and the beast that John is trying to communicate to the audience. That is why the beast occupies so much space in Revelation 17. The similarities between these two figures are best explained if Babylon is interpreted as the image of the beast.

Now I will explore from a cultural perspective the possibility of Babylon the Great being the image of the beast. Before doing this, it is necessary to look at the profile of Babylon and to list her literal characteristics as provided by John. In Revelation 17, end time Babylon has seven characteristics: (1) she is presented as the great prostitute (v. 1); (2) she sits on many waters (v. 1) and later was seen as sitting on a scarlet beast (v. 3); (3) the kings of earth committed adultery with her, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries; (4) she “was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls” (v. 4); (5) she held a golden cup in her hand which was filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries (v. 4); (6) she has a title written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (v. 5); (7) she was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony of Jesus (v. 6).

The above profile could be divided into three major areas: first, the external appearance of Babylon, including her sitting on a beast, her dress and ornaments, and the holding of a golden cup in her hand. Second, the activities of Babylon: She is a great prostitute, the mother of prostitutes; she commits adultery with the kings of earth; she is drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore the testimony of Jesus. Third, Babylon is the mother of the abominations of the earth. In the following section, I will explore these three aspects and see if the characteristics of Babylon the Great match the characteristics of the cult image of the beast.

**The external appearance of Babylon the Great.** Babylon is first seen sitting on many waters and later the waters became a scarlet composite beast. What would be the common mental association made when seeing a woman sitting on a composite beast (the *mushshushu* in Akkadian) in the ANE context? A cult image of a goddess.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Based upon the evidence I collected in examining the description of the external appearance of Babylon the Great, I propose that Babylon is portrayed as a cult image of the goddess Inanna (in Sumerian) or Ištar (in Akkadian).[[31]](#footnote-32) The goddess Ištar is “the multifaceted and most enduring of all the powerful Sumerian goddesses,”[[32]](#footnote-33) as well as “the most revered and popular goddess of ancient Mesopotamia.”[[33]](#footnote-34)

After interpreting the picture of Babylon sitting on the composite beast as Ištar, the first problem encountered is: being an ANE goddess, was Ištar still popular in John’s time? The answer is affirmative. In fact, the cult of Ištar was not only active and popular in John’s time but was also considered important due to the following evidence: First, scholars have found the existence of the cult of Ištar of Babylon and her temple Eturkalamma well attested in archaeological remains and fragments from Hellenistic Babylon.[[34]](#footnote-35)

Second, extensive building activities and reconstructions were recorded in building inscriptions on the Ešgal-temple of Ištar during the Hellenistic period.[[35]](#footnote-36) Third, a few fragments of a famous myth, “The Exaltation of Ištar,” were actually copied during the Hellenistic period, implying its popularity and active use.[[36]](#footnote-37) Fourth, one of the ritual texts records that during a special festival for Ištar, even the Hellenistic king took part in the ritual.[[37]](#footnote-38) So it was possible for John to use the picture of the goddess Ištar to describe Babylon the Great.

One thing worth noting is that while “Ištar is the one and only deity whose worship is known from the dawn of Babylonian civilization,”[[38]](#footnote-39) over the thousands of years of history, the identity of Ištar “underwent a continual process of reinterpretation and syncretism, mutation and fossilization, fusion and fission which generated a goddess who was a complex multi-layered conglomerate.”[[39]](#footnote-40) While the features of Ištar that I will present in relationship to Babylon the Great might seem to be anachronistic at times, just as end time Babylon is an anachronistic sum total of all the features of historical Babylon, i.e., the city and the empire, so the features of Ištar from her historical pool may serve my purpose of connecting her to end time Babylon.

The second problem with this identification of Ištar with Babylon the Great is the beast that Babylon rides. It is well known that Ištar rode on a lion,[[40]](#footnote-41) not a composite beast like the one in Revelation 17. But John’s use of goddess figures could be innovative. A. Y. Collins notes that, “Any apocalyptic work reflects elements of the religious tradition with which its author primarily identified. At the same time, however, those traditional elements have often been modified through the author’s experience of world thoughts of other ethnic or cultural groups in his environment. Future work on the origins and history-of-religions context of apocalyptic writings should pay careful attention to both facets of the cultural process at issue—continuity and innovation.”[[41]](#footnote-42) Thus the image of the woman riding on a composite beast may belong to John’s innovation of the picture of Ištar. It may also be John’s deliberate disfiguration of or reaction against the goddess tradition[[42]](#footnote-43) to change the lion, a symbol of war and victory, into a composite beast.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The following study on the other external appearance of Babylon the Great will present more continuity of John’s use of the conventional picture of the goddess Ištar in describing Babylon.

First, Babylon was seen as dressed “in purple, and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls” (v. 4). Rev 18:16 adds one more element, which is that she was also dressed in fine linen.

In the Old Testament, purple mostly occurs within cultic contexts in relation to priestly garments and sanctuary furnishings.[[44]](#footnote-45) Furthermore there is a passage in the Old Testament that shows that cultic images also were dressed in purple; this passage is found in Jer 10:9.

Extra-biblical sources, such as economic texts and letters, mention jewelry and clothing dedicated to Babylonian gods and goddesses and placed upon the idols to be worn by them. References are made to the garments of the cult images as being clothes of linen with the coloring of scarlet, purple, bluish-purple, and multicolored wool.[[45]](#footnote-46)

The Babylonian cult images are also known for their value and gaudy appearance due to the gold ornaments attached to their garments. The gold ornaments are described as rosettes, stars, disks, and rings made by goldsmiths and sewed onto the garment. Sometimes golden bracteates were attached to the surface of the garment.[[46]](#footnote-47)

Sack states that, “Jewelry with gold, silver and precious stones was also manufactured, maintained and repaired to decorate divine images.”[[47]](#footnote-48) Ištar was especially famous for her physical splendor.[[48]](#footnote-49) Her cult images were decorated with precious stones.[[49]](#footnote-50) In her temple treasury there were large amounts of jewelry stored for the fashioning of the idol of the goddess and her sacred ornaments.[[50]](#footnote-51)

In the cult inventories of Hittite archival documents, among the “cult image descriptions,” there are descriptions of the posture of the cult images and the objects they hold in their hands; these descriptions are illustrated by many cult figures depicted on reliefs. One description of Ištar reads: “*Ištar* (Šauška) [a cult-image ……] *seated*; from (her) shoulders [wings protrude;] in (her) right *hand [she holds] a gold cup*; [in her left hand] she holds a gold (hieroglyphic sign for ‘Good(ness).’ […] Below her is a silver-plated base. [Under] the base lies a silver-plated *awiti*-animal. To the right [and left] of the *awiti*-animal’s wings stand Ninatta and Kulitta, their silver eyes plated with gold. And under the *awiti*-animal is a wooden base. Her daily offering is ‘thick bread’ made from a handful of flour, and a clay cupful of wine.”[[51]](#footnote-52)

From the above historical evidences, it is plausible to conclude that the picture of Babylon the Great sitting on the composite beast in an attire of purple and scarlet linen and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls, while holding a cup in her hand, fits perfectly with the general picture of a Babylonian cult image of a goddess, and, in particular, the goddess Ištar.

The following study will focus on the other characteristics which Babylon the Great shares with the ancient Babylonian goddess Ištar.

**Activities of Babylon the Great.** Babylon (1) is called the great prostitute because she is the mother of prostitutes, and (2) she commits adultery with the kings on earth.

Babylon is called the great prostitute and the mother of prostitutes. Although “the epithet ‘whore’ (Heb. *zana*; Gr. *Pornē*) is never leveled at Babylon in the Jewish scriptures,”[[52]](#footnote-53) the image of a city being a prostitute is rooted in Old Testament prophetic literature. I would like to propose a cultural reading of the prostitute Babylon in connection to the goddess Ištar.

In Babylonian mythology, Ištar was once “the manifestation of sex and eroticism.”[[53]](#footnote-54) She “played the role of the seductive woman flaunting her sexual attraction.”[[54]](#footnote-55) The goddess was known as a prostitute and a patron of prostitutes.[[55]](#footnote-56) There is a hymn in which Ištar says these words: “When I sit in the ale house, I am a woman, and I am an exuberant young man. When I am present at the place of quarreling, I am a woman, a figurine brought to life. When I sit by the gate of the tavern, I am a prostitute familiar with the penis; the friend of a man, the girl friend of a woman.”[[56]](#footnote-57) The prostitute is called the daughter of Ištar in the Sumerian love incantation.[[57]](#footnote-58) Besides being herself a prostitute and a mother of prostitutes, her cult also had temple prostitutes who celebrated the sexual aspects of the goddess.[[58]](#footnote-59)

From the above historical evidences, Ištar being the great prostitute herself and the mother of prostitutes fits well with the picture of Babylon the Great as depicted in Revelation 17.

Babylon is also accused of committing adultery with the kings. The relationship of the gods and goddesses with the Babylonian kings in general was that “of collaboration and mutual ideological assistance.”[[59]](#footnote-60) The goddess Ištar in particular had close relationships with the kings in two aspects. She “may accompany kings into war but, on other occasions, she may function as their symbolic sexual partner**,** in both ways sustaining royalty.”[[60]](#footnote-61)

Ištar as the divine bride, having sexual relationships with the kings through sacred marriage, fits well with the picture of Babylon the Great committing adultery with the kings of the world, and ruling over them. Ištar as a war goddess fits particularly well with the overall context of Revelation 16 and 17 because “the language of Revelation 16 and 17 is military in nature.”[[61]](#footnote-62) As a mistress of war, she is drunk with human blood; to apply this image to Babylon the Great, she makes war against the saints and is likewise drunk with their blood.

In Rev 17:5, Babylon the Great is also called the mother of the abominations of the earth, which means that she is the abomination above all the abominations of the earth, the source of all abominations, the abomination *par excellence*. The word *bdelugma* (abomination), which is not used often in the New Testament, is frequently found in the LXX.[[62]](#footnote-63) Three out of five NT occurrences are found in Revelation, the rest are in Luke 16:15; Mark 13:14 and Matt 24:15. Ruiz thinks that Luke 16:15 provides “the basic sense” of the meaning: “What is exalted among men is an abomination before God.”[[63]](#footnote-64) In the LXX, *bdelugma* is often used to denote idolatry.[[64]](#footnote-65) Beale states that: “This additional reference to ‘abominations’ in Rev 17:4 establishes beyond doubt the connection of Babylon the great with idolatry, since this is one of the common words for idol or idolatrous sacrifice in the LXX (so at least forty-seven of about one hundred twenty-two total uses).”[[65]](#footnote-66) This connection of Babylon the great with idolatry is one more reason to interpret Babylon in Revelation 17 as synonymous with the image of the beast in Rev 13:14, 15.

Revelation 18 describes the “ultimate destruction”[[66]](#footnote-67) of Babylon the Great. Paulien observes that “Revelation 18 is, in some ways, a mirror image of Revelation 17, they are two sides of the same coin.”[[67]](#footnote-68) Babylon is portrayed as a prostitute in Revelation 17, while she becomes the Great City in Revelation 18.[[68]](#footnote-69)

Scholars have noticed that John uses phraseology similar to Ezekiel's in his oracle against the city of Tyre, a great commercial center.[[69]](#footnote-70) Many experts have also noted that there are thematic and verbal parallels to be found between Ezekiel 26-28 and Revelation 17-18, making it certain that Revelation 17-18 is an allusion to Ezekiel 26-28. Thematically, both passages have the progressive theme of judgment first and lamentation afterwards, because of the fall and ruin of two cities. Both judgments are executed through the agency of waters. Each passage provides two reasons for both cities to be judged. The first reason is the cities’ oppression of the believers of God. The second reason is their pride in their wealth (Ezek 28:5; Rev 18:7).

Two significant verbal parallels deserve to be discussed in some detail. The first can be found in the words uttered by the two cities about themselves. In Ezekiel 28, Tyre is described by the following words: “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the sea.’” (v. 2). In Revelation 18, Babylon is described as speaking: “In her heart she says, ‘I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.’” In Ezekiel, Tyre claims to be a god sitting on the throne of the seas; in Revelation, Babylon claims to be a queen, sitting on the throne of the waters (cf. Rev 17:1). The change of wording from “god” to “queen” may be due to the covenantal framework. The language of Revelation 18 also alludes to Jeremiah’s lamentations over Jerusalem: “How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies” (1:1, 2). Both cities are spoken of as queens-turned-widows, and both cities are betrayed by their former “lovers” or supporters. Because Babylon is a symbol for the apostatized people of God, and is the very opposite of the new-covenantal “Jerusalem,” John describes it in feminine terms. In particular the allusion to Ezek 28:2 hints at Babylon’s identity as a goddess sitting in the center of the “waters.” This imagery discloses Babylon’s identity as the idolatrous image of the beast which demanded divine worship.

Western Semitic and Hellenistic cities “were often understood and depicted literarily and visually as goddesses and women.”[[70]](#footnote-71) Goddesses were the embodiments of the cities which were under their protection and service.[[71]](#footnote-72) In Babylon, Ištar of the Eturkalamma (her temple in Babylon) presided over the city and was known as Ištar of Babylon or the Lady of Babylon and even as the Queen of Babylon.[[72]](#footnote-73) An Akkadian invocation to Ištar reads: “Highly exalted is Ištar, Ištar is the (true) queen, highly exalted is the lady, the lady is the (true) queen!”[[73]](#footnote-74)

One extant hymn dedicated by the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus to the goddess Ištar has the following sentence: “To Ištar, the supreme, beloved of the gods, the valiant, . . . which is in the midst of Babylon, my Lady.”[[74]](#footnote-75)

In the ANE context, the symbol of a great city had at least three aspects: first, a city is a community; second, a city is a religious center; and third, a city is a political center. I will explore each of the three aspects to see if they correspond with the picture of the image of the beast.

**First, a city is a community**. John’s use of the symbol of the great city of Babylon is simply a continuation of “a long tradition of biblical and extrabiblical writings” which uses the city and the woman as symbol for “human communities or groups, either in faithful relationship to God, or in rebellion and infidelity.”[[75]](#footnote-76)

The concept of a city as a community in relationship with God develops as Revelation unfolds its apocalyptic scenes. From the very beginning, the letters are addressed to the churches of the cities in Asia Minor. Then, in the letter to the church in Pergamum, Antipas was put to death in “your city where Satan lives” (2:13). In the letter to the church of Philadelphia, the symbol of a city “is not merely suggested, but makes a brief cameo appearance.”[[76]](#footnote-77) The Holy Spirit says to the church: “I will make him a pillar in the temple of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (3:12). In Revelation 11, the two witnesses were killed by the beast coming out of the Abyss, and their bodies lay openly in the street of the great city where their Lord was also crucified (v. 8). The city collapsed after the two witnesses ascended to heaven (v. 13). In Revelation 14, the winepress is trampled outside the city (v. 20). In Revelation 16, the great city splits into three parts (v. 19); then in Revelation 17 and 18 Babylon the Great is identified as the great city (Rev 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21). In Revelation 20, the Holy City comes down from heaven like a bride (v. 9). In Revelation 21, the New Jerusalem has twelve gates which bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (v. 12), and twelve foundations which have the names of the twelve apostles (v. 14), and in this city God and the Lamb are the temple, the center of worship (v. 22). So throughout Revelation, two cities stand side by side, one having Satan’s throne, and the other containing God’s throne.

**Second, a city is a religious center.** In ANE and biblical literature, cities were not just communities with dense populations, they were also the homes of gods and goddesses. Every major god or goddess served as the patron deity of a city.[[77]](#footnote-78) In fact, cities were thought to have been built by their patron gods.[[78]](#footnote-79) A city was so closely associated with the god that the decline of a city was thought to be the result of its being abandoned by its patron god.

In a biblical psalm, the city of Jerusalem is called “the holy place where the Most High dwells” (Ps 46:4). This kind of description made the city appear “as a theological or mythological, rather than a political or economical entity.”[[79]](#footnote-80) The city thus becomes “a space of the divine presence where heaven touches earth.”[[80]](#footnote-81) This mythological function was not unique to Jerusalem, but is commonly recognized in ANE sources.[[81]](#footnote-82) Thus, on the figurative level, an ANE city manifested the presence of its gods.

**Third, a city is a political center.** In the ANE, political power was not located in a nation nor in a region but in a city.[[82]](#footnote-83) This concept originated from the time of the earliest city states, when every city was a separate political power.[[83]](#footnote-84) The palace, the residence of the king, was located in the city.[[84]](#footnote-85) This concept of locating political power in a city persisted even after Babylon developed and expanded into a territorial state, for the rulers continued to use the title of “king of the city of Babylon” and not of the entire country.[[85]](#footnote-86)

Thus in ANE conception, a city is both a religious and a political center. In Van de Mieroop’s words, “Temple and palace were basic urban institutions, and they were the institutions that defined a city.”[[86]](#footnote-87) The relationship of the temple and the palace is that of “collaboration and mutual ideological assistance.”[[87]](#footnote-88)

From the study of the motif of the image of the beast in Rev 13:14, 15, it appears that the image of the beast is a symbol for a hypocritical community of people within the church, i.e., the synagogue of Satan (Rev 2:9). It is a religious entity but is also influential in politics and economy. The symbol of Babylon the Great as a powerful seductress supports my proposal, which is that Babylon may be the image of the beast who leads the inhabitants of the earth away from the worship of God through the means of seduction and coercion.

The verdict against Babylon the Great is in harmony with two Old Testament laws, i.e., the law of bloodshed (Gen 9:5-6) and the law of malicious witnessing (Deut 19:16-19).[[88]](#footnote-89) Babylon has shed the innocent blood of the saints (v. 24) and she has also falsely accused them (v. 20).

Scholars have found it difficult to understand Rev 18:20b. Verse 20b could be translated literally as, “God has judged your sentence against her.” There are two ways to understand “your sentence.” It could either be understood as the sentence the saints have passed on “you,” or the sentence which Babylon the Great has passed on “you.”[[89]](#footnote-90) Caird, by appealing to the law of bloodshed and the law of malicious witnessing, argues that v. 20b should be read as “God has imposed on her the sentence she passed on you.”[[90]](#footnote-91)

The questions which follow ask when Babylon passed the sentence on the saints, and what was the sentence which later proved that Babylon was, in fact, a malicious witness. Ruiz dismissed Caird’s proposal of applying the “law of malicious witness” on the ground that “we are never told that the Prostitute Babylon has borne witness against the saints.”[[91]](#footnote-92) Searching throughout the book of Revelation, the answer is found in Rev 13:15, in which the image of the beast passes and enforces the death penalty (cf. John 5:27; Jude 1:15) on those who do not worship the beast and its image. Once again, Babylon is identified with the image of the beast in her sentencing of the saints. Thus, Paul Decock concludes that the judgment of Babylon the Great in Revelation 18 “connects the passing on of death sentence in Rev 13:15.”[[92]](#footnote-93)

Decock associates the church of Laodicea with Babylon by saying that “The church in Laodicea seems to be a copy of Babylon in their blind reliance on wealth (3:17). John points out that they have a false appreciation of themselves as being rich, while in fact they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”[[93]](#footnote-94) This observation recalls the warning issued in the midst of the battle of Armageddon in Rev 16:15. Docock’s observation confirms Paulien’s, which notices a strong spiritual dimension to the battle of Armageddon by pointing out that Rev 16:15 reads “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.” He clearly connects this with the message to the Laodiceans.[[94]](#footnote-95)

Babylon the Great could represent those unrepentant people of God within the church of Laodicea, who were found naked and shamefully exposed. If this is so, then it confirms my conclusion that Babylon symbolizes the apostate people of God, who have been transformed into the image of the beast instead of turning into the image of God.

Many biblical scholars think that one of the crimes of Babylon the Great is excessive wealth. This is illustrated by the trading items. The list in Revelation 18 signifies an economic critique of Rome’s vast wealth.[[95]](#footnote-96)

Scholars have noticed some verbal parallels between Ezekiel 28 and Revelation 18 in terms of the trading lists.[[96]](#footnote-97) Ezekiel 28:5-24 lists the following items: pine trees, cedar (v. 5), oaks, cypress wood (v. 6), linen, blue and purple awnings (v. 7), silver, iron, tin, lead (v. 12), slaves, articles of bronze (v. 13), work horses, war horses, mules (v. 14), ivory tusks, ebony (v. 15), turquoise, purple fabric, embroidered work, fine linen, coral, rubies (v. 16), wheat, confections, honey, oil, balm (v. 17), wine, wool (v. 18), wrought iron, cassia and calamus (v. 19), saddle blankets (v. 20), lambs, rams, goats (v. 21), all kinds of spices and precious stones, and gold (v. 22), beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords (v. 23).

The items Revelation 18 lists are: cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble (v. 12); cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and the bodies and souls of human beings (v. 13).

Comparing these two lists, following the sequence of lists in Revelation 18, both lists have cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones (v. 12; cf. Ezek 28:12, 22); both have linen, and expensive cloth and fabric (v. 12; cf. Ezek 28:16, 23); both have wood (v. 12; cf. Ezek 28:12); both have ivory (v. 12; cf. Ezek 28:15); both have spices (v. 13; cf. Ezek 28:22) ; both have horses (v. 13; cf. Ezek 28:14); both have wine, oil and wheat (v. 13; cf. Ezek 28:17, 18); both have cattle (v. 13; cf. Ezek 28:21); both have slaves (v. 13; cf. Ezek 28:13).

Several items in Ezekiel 28 are not found in Revelation 18; these are mules, honey, balm, wool, saddle blankets, and war horses. Several items in Revelation 18 which are not found in Ezekiel 28: cargoes of incense, myrrh and frankincense.

Most scholars tend to take the trade items as a part of Roman international trade in general, with which view I fully agree. However, to specify these trade items in a religious context may be more significant. The items found in Revelation 18 are all associated with temples. For the decoration of the cult statues of the gods or goddesses, the temple needed gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. For the clothing of the cult image, the temple needed fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet cloth. For temple furniture and utensils, the temple needed citron wood, articles made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble. For the daily rituals, the temple needed cinnamon and spice, incense, myrrh and frankincense, wine and olive oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep. For the cultivation of the land and for taking care of the daily chores in the temple, the temple needed slaves.

Among the items listed in Rev 18:12, 13, frankincense and myrrh, which were imported from Arabia, were not only expensive,[[97]](#footnote-98) but were also important to religious observance. A wide range of Roman and other literary documents has clearly shown that “frankincense and myrrh were predominantly considered to be items of religious significance rather than luxury goods. These incenses had been burned in honor of the gods at temples and at funerals for centuries, both in Roman religious practice as well as in Hellenistic and Near Eastern cults.”[[98]](#footnote-99)

The economic aspect of temples actually expresses the economic aspect of cult images. ANE temples were active in international trade and were wealthy. I would like to propose that the evidence points to the identification of Babylon the Great as a cult image of a goddess who was wealthy, dominant in the economy, active in international trade, and a great consumer of a variety of valuable goods.

If Babylon is identified with the image of the beast, it becomes easy to solve the puzzle in Revelation 19, which is the absence of the punishment of the image of the beast. It is possible that the reason for the absence of the punishment of the image of the beast could be that it has already suffered punishment by burning in Revelation 18, under a different title, Babylon the Great.

Could it be that the reason for Babylon to suffer death by burning is that, according to the commandment of Moses, as the cult image of the army of bestial forces, it was to be burned (Deut 7:5)? Paulien notes that the attire worn by Babylon is similar to that worn by the High Priest of Israel, and that furthermore death by burning is the punishment for the prostitution of a priest’s daughter (cf. Lev 21:9).[[99]](#footnote-100) Paulien’s observation is consistent with my proposal that Babylon can be viewed as a cult image because symbols could have multiple meanings. Looking at a symbol from various aspects can only enrich and deepen the understanding of it, as in the case with Babylon the Great. In fact, Paulien’s view supports my conclusion that the image of the beast represents the end time synagogue of Satan (Rev 2:9) within the Christian church, since a daughter of a priest lives within the greater community of believers of God.

As noted earlier, the reason for the absence of direct references to the image of the beast in Revelation 17 and 18 could also be that, the image of the beast is overwhelmingly present throughout Revelation 17 and 18 in the guise of Babylon the Great.

In Revelation 18, Babylon the Great is also called a great city, implying that she stands for a community of people as well as a religio-politico-economic center. These symbolic meanings all fit well with the conclusions reached on the image of the beast in Chapter 3, which is that it is a religious community of people reflecting the image of Satan, at the same time having politico-economic power to enforce false worship at the end time.

The identification of end time Babylon the Great with the image of the beast could solve the puzzle of the fate of the image of the beast which was left unsolved in Revelation 19 and 20. Since the burning mentioned in Revelation 17, 18 is the only punishment by fire that happens outside of Revelation 19 and 20, with the silence of both chapters on the punishment of the image of the beast, and with all the other evidence in Chapters 3 and 4 of this research pointing to the possibility of identifying Babylon the Great as the image of the beast, it is very possible to conclude that the image of the beast indeed suffered its ultimate destruction in Revelation 17, 18, under the name of Babylon the Great. This destruction was a sign of God’s total victory over the bestial forces. That explains why there is no mention of the destruction of the image of the beast in Revelation 19 and 20 when all other bestial entities are being destroyed.

1. Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 89. See also Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 441; Gordon Zerbe, “Revelation’s Exposé of Two Cities: Babylon and New Jerusalem,” *Direction* 32 (2003): 57, footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Jon Paulien, *Armageddon at the Door* (Hagerstown, MD: Autumn House, 2008), 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 221; J. M. Ford, *Revelation*, 239-244; Osborne, *Revelation*, 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. J. M. Ford, *Revelation*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Greek verb *legō* can be understood as “order” and “command.” See “*legō*” in BDAG, 589. See also Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 710. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Irenaeus *Adversus haereses*, 5.30.4 (ANF 1:560); see also Bauckham, *The Climax*, 395; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 864, 865; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 215; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 2:68; Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 349; Kramer, “Contrast,” 111; Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 226; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 309, J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 192; Osborne, *Revelation*, 615; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 491; Witherington, *Revelation*, 219; John Sweet, *Revelation*, TPI New Testament Commentaries, eds. Howard Clark Kee and Dennis Nineham (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. G. K. Beale, “Danielic Background for Revelation 13:18 and 17:9,” *TynBul* 31 (1980): 165. These texts are Dan 1:4, 17; 9:22-23 (25); 11:33 and 12:10. In Dan 1:4, 17, the combination refers to Daniel and his friends. The two Revelation texts have the following ideas in common with the texts in Daniel 9, 11 and 12: (1) the call for “insight and understanding” for the sake of comprehension; (2) tribulation events at the *eschaton*; (3) brought about by an evil king(s), who attacks the faithful believers and exercises deception to lure others under his rulership; (4) finally, this call for understanding is mediated through a vision of a prophet. In light of these common ideas, Beale concludes that Dan 9, 11, and 12 are “the best background against which to understand Revelation 13:18 and 17:9.” The combination of *nous* and *sophia* in John’s call indicates that John understands Christians as the fulfillment of “the prophesied *maśkilîm*,” *the wise* in Daniel 11 and 12. Beale argues that Revelation 2-3 make it more understandable to think that John sees Christians as the Danielic *maśkilîm* in Rev 13:18 and 17:9. The message to the seven churches shows that there are some supposed believers who live in compromise with pagan society (cf. Rev 2:14; 3:2-4, 16-17). Thus, Beale suggests that John associate these people with “those who forsake the holy covenant” in Dan 11:30b, and with the “hypocrites” in Dan 11:34b. This association is particularly clear in Rev 2:9 and 3:9 where these people are said to be those “who say they are Jews and are not.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. B. J. Collins, “A Statue for the Deity,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. De Villiers, “The Composition of Revelation 17,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Pilchan Lee, *The New Jerusalem*, 264. Barbara Rossing suggests that Revelation presents the two cities as two contrasting women in order to “invoke recognition of a ‘two-women’ ethical *topos* that was well-known in Jewish, pagan and early Christian context.” This *topos* urges the audience to avoid the evil alternative and choose the good. See Barbara R. Rossing, “City Visions, Feminine Figures and Economic Critique: A Sapiential *Topos* in the Apocalypse,” in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 35, eds. Benjamin G. Wright III, and Lawrence M. Wills (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Michelle Lee, “A Call to Martyrdom,” 188; J. Edgar Bruns, “The Contrasted Women of Apocalypse 12 and 17,” *CBQ* 26 (1964): 459-463; Werner Foerster, “Die Bilder in Offenbarung 12f. und 17f.,” *TSK* 104 (1932): 279-310. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Michelle Lee, “A Call to Martyrdom,” 188, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Robert L. Thomas, “An Analysis of the Seventh Bowl,” 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. W. G. Campbell, “Antithetical Feminine-Urban Imagery and a Tale of Two Women-Cities in the Book of Revelation,” *TynBul* 55 (2004): 95; Robert L. Thomas, “An Analysis of the Seventh Bowl,” 76-80; Barbara Wootten Snyder, ‘Triple-Form and Space/Time Transitions: Literary Structuring Devices in the Apocalypse,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 440-460. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid., 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Snyder, ‘Triple-Form and Space/Time Transitions,” 447. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Miller, “The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19-22,” 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Pilchan Lee, *The New Jerusalem*, 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. This formula is demonstrated by Fiorenza’s concentric structure; see Fiorenza “Composition and Structure,” 359-360. See also table 1 in Newton, “Reading Revelation Romantically,”198.

Minear summarizes the promise and fulfillment correspondences between Revelation 2, 3 and Revelation 21, 22: the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life (2:7) is fulfilled in 22:2, 14, 19; not to suffer the second death (2:11), in 20:6, 21:4; having a new name (2:17), in 19:12, 22:4; ruling over the nations and having the morning star (2:26-27), in 22:16; white clothes (3:5), in 22:14, 21:17; a pillar in the Temple of God and the New Jerusalem (3:12), in 21:2, 10 and 22, 22:4; sitting on the throne (3:21), in 22:3; 21:7 is the summary of the fulfillment of all the promises. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Thomas E. Schmidt, “‘And the Sea Was No More’: Water as People, Not Place,” in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, JSNTSup 100, eds. Thomas E. Schmidt and Moisés Silva (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. A. Y. Collins considers that in the book of Revelation, garments have “a double significance.” First, they represent the character of the Christians on earth. The ones who have kept their garments are those who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus and the word of God (3:4). Second, white garments also represent “the state of eschatological salvation” for the saved will walk with Jesus in white (3:4). A. Y. Collins, “Eschatology,” 63, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Osborne, *Revelation*, 627. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid., 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Gordon Zerbe, “Revelation’s Exposé of Two Cities: Babylon and New Jerusalem,” *Direction* 32 (2003), 51. J. M. Ford also notes that the picture of Rev 17:1 “is well known from ancient iconography: a city represented as a goddess, enthroned on the shore of the river which suggests its richness and power,” *Revelation*, 277. Some may argue that in the OT, the LORD is also depicted as sitting enthroned over the flood, cf. Ps 29:10 “the LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever” (NRSV), but studies have shown that the book of Revelation has a “distinctive mental map of the cosmos,” which reflects a “triple-decker cosmos: single heaven, earth, subterranean abyss.” In the book of Revelation, water, sea or abyss always associate with chaos, death, and punishment. See Sean Michael Ryan, *Hearing at the Boundaries of Vision: Education Informing Cosmology in Revelation 9* (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 60-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Gregory, “Its End Is Destruction,” 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Ibid., 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Prigent thinks that this scene “was suggested to our author by one representation or another of divinity riding an animal.” Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 487; see also David A. DeSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. There are two ways of writing the name of this goddess, i.e., Ištar and Ishtar. These spellings sound the same, but one transliteration uses a diacritic for the “sh” sound and the other does not. I will use Ištar throughout this dissertation except when quoting other authors who may use the other spelling, Ishtar. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Judith Ochshorn, “Ishtar and Her Cult,” in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World,” in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (New York: Routledge, 2007), 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 14, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Ibid., 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World,” 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. W. F. Leemans, *Ishtar of Lagaba and Her Dress* (Leiden: Brill, 1952), 24. Ištar is depicted as either standing or seated on a lion. See Izak Cornelius, “Aspects of the Iconography of the Warrior Goddess Ištar and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecies,” in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean*, FRLANT, eds. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 15-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. A. Y. Collins, “The History-of-Religion Approach to Apocalypticism and ‘The Angel of the Waters’ (Rev 16:4-7),” *CBQ* 39 (1977): 380-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Huber holds that the inclusion of feminine figures which resemble the ancient goddesses is John’s “consciously or unconsciously reaction to the variety of goddess traditions prevalent within the milieu of the first century Asia Minor.” Huber, *Like A Bride Adorned*, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. John may have put Ištar on the *mushshushu* (snake-dragon) of Marduk, the city-god of Babylon, thereby conflating Ištar and Marduk to combine their Babylonian characteristics. Quoted from Roy Gane’s comments on my dissertation draft, August 28, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Diane M. Sharon, “Echoes of Gideon’s Ephod: An Intertextual Reading,” *JANES* 30 (2006): 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. See Matsushima, “Divine Statues in Ancient Mesopotamia, 216.

The text on a stela set up by Nabopolassar, the king of Babylon, notes that the statue of the god Šamaš wears a linen garment. “Šamaš the great lord, the resident of the Ebabbar, the Lord of Sippar, a wardrobe for the great lord Šamaš; on the seventh day of the month of Nisannu, two linen garments-*šalḫu*, four garments-*ṣibtu* of linen, their weight being forty manas” (Ibid., 213).

Oppenheim especially notes that “The garment *pišannu* was reserved—in the Neo-Babylonian period—exclusively for the clothing of images. It is often made of linen.” A. Leo Oppenheim, “The Golden Garments of the Gods,” *JNES* 8 (1949): 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Ibid., 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. For details see R. H. Sack, “Some Remarks on Jewelry Inventories from Sixth Century B. C. Erech,” *ZA* 69 (1979): 41-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Leemans, *Ishtar of Lagaba*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. See J. Bottéro, “Les inventaires de Qatna,” *RA* 43 (1949): 1- 40; 137-125. An extensive variety of jewelry is listed in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Matsushima, “Divine Statues in Ancient Mesopotamia,” 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. “Cult Image Descriptions,” trans. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. (*COS* 3.35:64, 65). Most likely, the *awiti-*animal is a lion-griffin or lion-sphynx, italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Moore, “Metonymies of Empire,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World,” 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Ibid., 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Ibid., 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. “A *šir-namšub* to Inana,” Segment A, 16-22, *ETCSL*, No. 4.07.9. Accessed 29 August 2011, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.4.07.9#. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Ochshorn, “Ishtar and Her Cult,” 23, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Oppenheim, “The Significance of the Temple,” 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Brigitte Groneberg, “The Role and Function of Goddesses in Mesopotamia,” in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (New York: Routledge, 2007), 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Paulien, *Armageddon*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Ibid., Bible translation Ruiz’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Ibid., 331; see also Z. Stefanović, *Daniel*, 358. Cf. Deut 7:25; 12:31; 2 Chron 28:3; Isa 2:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 856. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Paulien, “Revelation 17 and the Papacy,” 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Osborne observes that while there have been attempts to see two different “Babylons” in Revelation 17 and 18, the unity of these two chapters has been well demonstrated. Thus there is ample evidence to take the prostitute Babylon as one and the same city Babylon, Osborne, *Revelation*, 631, n 1; see also Alan F Johnson, “Revelation 18:1-24,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12:564-568. For the two Babylons view, see Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation* (Glenside, PA: Larkin, 1919), 150-155; Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1983), 360. For one Babylon view, see Charles H. Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-19, Part 1,” *BSac* 144 (1987): 305-316; Charles H. Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18, Part 2,” 433-449; Charles H. Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18” (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 17-38; Andrew M. Woods, “Have the Prophecies in Revelation 17-18 about Babylon Been Fulfilled? (Part 6),” *BSac* 170 (2013): 194-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. William H. Shea, “Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18,” *AUSS* 20 (1982): 251; Gregory, “Its End Is Destruction,” 145; Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 412, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Huber, *Like A Bride Adorned*, 92. Phoenician cities were regarded as “goddesses, royal figures, mothers of their inhabitants and daughter cities.” Aloysius Fitzgerald, “The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the OT,” *CBQ* 34 (1972): 406, 407. Phoenician coins bore legends and images explicitly portraying cities as goddesses. One of the coins describes the city of Sidon as a goddess. Huber, *Like A Bride Adorned*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World,” 342. Also George Aaron Barton, *The Semitic Ishtar Cult* (Piscateway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 22; see also *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 111; “The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna,” trans. Thorkild Jacobsen (*COS* 1.173:554-559). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 111; a hymn calling Ištar the queen is also found in “Hymn to Ishtar,” trans. Ferris J. Stephens (*ANET*, 383). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World,” 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. Humphrey, “A Tale of the Two Cities,” 83. See also Eva Maria Räpple, *The Metaphor of the City in the Apocalypse of John* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 127, 128; Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Räpple, *The Metaphor of the City*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Ibid., 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Martti Nissinen, “City as Lofty as Heaven: Arbela and Other Cities in Neo-Assyrian Prophecy,” in *“Every City Shall Be Forsaken”: Urbanism and Prophecy in Ancient Israel and the Near East,* JSOTSup 330, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Ibid., 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, 48, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. Nissinen,“City as Lofty as Heaven,” 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamia City*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Oppenheim, “The Significance of the Temple,” 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Strand, “Two Aspects of Babylon’s Judgment,” 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 460, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. Decock, “Hostility against the Wealth of Babylon,” 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. Ibid., 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. Paulien, *Armageddon*, 120. Aune also notes that this “motif of watchfulness” is only found elsewhere in the Bible in Revelation 3, *Revelation 6-16*, 896; see also Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 216; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 472-473. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 896; Bauckham, “Economic Critique”; Eileen Poh Chu Luan, “The Acquisition and Use of Wealth: Some Reflections from Revelation 18,” *Jian Dao* 41 (2014): 255-298. Robert M. Royalty produced a monograph on the ideology of wealth in Revelation; particular attention is paid to the economic critique of the wealth of Babylon; see Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, especially the section of “The Destruction of Babylon,” 187-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 909; Bauckham, “Economic Critique,” 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. See Gary K. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD 305* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. Paulien, *Armageddon*, 104; Osborne, *Revelation*, 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)