

“Come Out of Her, My People”:

Living Ethically *in* Babylon

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As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live out the ethics of Jesus. The ethics of Jesus are the ethics of the kingdom of God. We don't have to turn too many pages in the New Testament to discover that ethical thinking and ethical living are required on this journey we call the Christian life. Your mind is probably already thinking about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has a lot to say in Matthew's Gospel, and Matthew groups or arranges Jesus' teaching into 5 blocks. Matthew gives prominence to Jesus' ethical teaching by placing the Sermon on the Mount as the first of the five teaching blocks. This suggests its vital importance for living as citizens of the kingdom. We should not murder, but we also should not hate; we should not commit adultery, but we also should not lust. We are to give, pray, and fast with proper motives. We should be meek, merciful, pure of heart, and peacemakers. We are to be salt and light, treating others as we would want to be treated, going the extra mile even when not asked. We should love our neighbor and our enemy, tread the narrow path, and seek first the kingdom of God.

We could move on in the New Testament and read the words of Paul: "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice ... do not be conformed to this world ...live peaceably with all...feed your enemy...overcome evil with good (Romans 12). In 1 Corinthians we learn we are not to be sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, or drunkards (5:11). According to Ephesians, our lives are to be marked by truthfulness, pure speech, kindness and forgiveness (4:25-32). We are to be imitators of God and live in love as Christ loved us (5:1)

We could continue traversing the pages of the New Testament, learning much from the author of Hebrews, followed by James, Peter, John, and even Jude. When we come to the last book of the Bible, we close the book. *Revelation*? Just saying the name induces anxiety, causing a rush of images to flood our minds: 666, Armageddon, Antichrist, plagues, the Dragon and his

beasts. Maybe it is just American Christianity that has this love-hate relationship with the book of Revelation. I grew up in a pastor's home. My dad had books on Revelation with fold-out charts and maps of the end times that were the scariest, most fascinating books I had ever seen. I didn't understand them one bit, but they were supposed to lay out the script for the end of the world. If I would come home and my parents were not there for some reason, I was sure I missed the rapture!

If you haven't grown up with a dread about reading Revelation, praise the Lord! Revelation fascinates and confuses us for many reasons. One is because of the type of literature that it is—it has the structure of a letter and borrows freely from the entirety of the Old Testament, including the genre we now call apocalyptic literature (parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, and Zechariah). The formal definition of apocalyptic literature formulated by J. J. Collins and the Society for Biblical Literature Apocalypse Group reads: “A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”¹ This sounds like Revelation, right? Yet it disregards that Revelation calls itself a prophecy in the beginning (1.3) and the end (22.7, 10, 18-19). The only use of the word ἀποκάλυψις is as the opening word of Revelation: ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, the *revelation* of Jesus Christ. I choose to call Revelation an apocalyptic prophecy from and about Jesus Christ addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor to call them to patient endurance as they wait for the Lord's second coming.

¹ John J. Collins, “Introduction: Toward the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins (Semeia 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 1-20.

Yet even with that said, it is hard to deny that Revelation feels strange from start to finish. In keeping with apocalyptic literature, Revelation uses bizarre symbolism which confuse us such as cosmic female figures, locust dressed in armor, the four horsemen, and 666. In Revelation the earth seems to get destroyed, only to reappear in the next scenes. The narrative creates sensory overload as along with John, we hear, see, smell, and taste. Conversely, Revelation is also filled with symbolic depictions of the Triune God, with glorious worship, and with a resplendent vision of New Jerusalem. Even clothing colors functions symbolically: White is for the righteous and the martyrs (e.g., 3.4-5; 4.4; 6.11; 7.13); the Bride of the Lamb wears “fine linen, bright and clean” (19.8). Scarlet and purple are for those associated with empire. It is no accident that Babylon the Whore wears scarlet and purple and sits on a scarlet beast (17.4). Stetson Glass notes in his unpublished thesis on apparel in Revelation that “costuming carried immediate social resonance” for John’s hearers. He explains:

The toga, the purple robe, the laurel wreath—all were recognizable symbols of power and status in Roman culture. When John described the beast adorned with blasphemous crowns or the harlot clothed in imperial hues, his audience would have heard allusion, not abstraction. The performance exposed the counterfeit glamour of empire by exaggerating its costume. In contrast, the white garments of the saints signified a different citizenship, one grounded not in conquest but in communion.

This performative opposition—Babylon’s luxury versus the Lamb’s simplicity—transformed Revelation into an act of resistance. By clothing faithfulness in white and idolatry in scarlet, John inverted the social symbolism of his world. The drama invited hearers to choose their wardrobe carefully, for their garments revealed their allegiance.²

The many symbols employed by John both reveal and conceal, like a secret code. They provide a “re-interpretation” and dramatization of the world of the seven churches.³ John expects the churches to discern the entirety of the prophecy by means of the Spirit—*pneumatic*

² Stetson Glass, “Costumes of Consequence: A Pentecostal Exploration of Apparel and Adornment in the Apocalypse.” Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Bangor University, 2026, 7.

³ Glass, “Costumes of Consequence,” 7.

discernment—to ensure that they are aligned with the Lamb and not the Dragon. Their behavior, their worship and witness, and even their garments reflect their allegiance and their ethical state.

STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

Before we get to Revelation 17-18, which is our focus for this presentation, it might be helpful for you to understand how I view Revelation's structure and what takes place in the narrative prior to chapter 17. The author of Revelation, who identifies himself only as John, writes to seven house churches in Asia Minor sometime likely near the end of the first century CE. We might call these communities the Johannine churches.⁴ John recounts the visions that he experienced while on the island of Patmos. John states that he is on Patmos for "the word of God and the testimony about Jesus" (Rev. 1.9). This suggests John was banished or exiled to Patmos.⁵ The only thing he reveals about being on Patmos is that "on the Lord's Day" he was "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1.10). I have argued elsewhere that this phrase is intended to tell us that John is worshipping on the Lord's Day even as the Johannine churches would be worshipping.⁶ Thus, just as John is in solidarity with the churches in "the tribulation and kingdom and endurance that are ours in Christ Jesus" (1.9), he is joined with them in worship despite his circumstances. The worship of God is not dependent on circumstances; rather, it is the primary task of all creation. Caught up in the Spirit in worship, John *hears* a voice commissioning him to write what he sees and send it to the seven churches, and upon turning to see who is speaking to him, he sees the

⁴ Thomas, *The Apocalypse*, 22-23.

⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 251, writes that John was probably banished because of his preaching, with his exile "bind[ing] him to those who are ostracized or threatened with imprisonment, since he knows what hardship for the faith means."

⁶ Melissa Archer, *I Was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day: A Pentecostal Engagement with Worship in the Apocalypse* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015), 130-131.

glorified and ascended Christ (Rev. 1.12-16). As noted in the opening words, Revelation is the revealing of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1.1).

A short outline of Revelation that I find helpful is as follows:

1:1-8	Prologue
1:9-3:22	<i>In the Spirit</i> on Patmos
4:1 – 16:21	<i>In the Spirit</i> in Heaven
17:1-21:8	<i>In the Spirit</i> in the Wilderness
21:9-22:7	<i>In the Spirit</i> on a Mountain

Four times in Revelation, John is said to be ἐν πνεύματι—*in the Spirit*. I take this as a reference to the Holy Spirit, which indicates that the Spirit is with John throughout his visionary experiences. John is having pneumatic experiences while on Patmos. Each ‘in the Spirit’ phrase is accompanied by a change in location as John is taken by the Spirit to heaven, to a wilderness, and to a mountain, respectively. From each venue, John sees, hears, and experiences things taking place in his visions. By far the largest portion of John’s vision is viewed from heaven’s vantage point where John sees the One sitting upon the throne, hears heavenly worship, sees the Lamb-standing-as slaughtered, and watches as three cycles of judgment occur on earth. Juxtaposed with the judgments are extraordinary scenes of worship where God and the Lamb are extolled. The juxtaposition serves as a constant encouragement to the churches to persevere in their witness of and worship to God and the Lamb no matter what is taking place around them. Still in heaven, John is shown the Dragon and his two beasts in chapter 13. The Dragon is clearly identified for the readers as “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12.9). He makes war against all who “keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 12.17). His acolytes, the beast from the sea and the

beast from the land, join the Dragon as a pseudo-trinity, an evil trinity parodying the Triune God. John does not identify the beasts by name but by their *actions*: demanding worship, imposing economic hardship, and killing all who refuse to worship the beast or take his mark (Revelation 13). The actions of the beasts would likely cause John's hearers to think of political rulers as the beasts, especially in places where localized persecution might have been happening (2.10, 13) or where there was fear of coming persecution.⁷ God is seemingly absent from Revelation 13's story, leaving the churches to wonder if evil has won the day. Yet in the very next chapter, John sees the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion with the 144,000 who have the name of God written on their foreheads (Rev. 14.1). In chapter 15, John sees "those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!'" (15.2-3). In these two symbolic groups, the 144,000 on Mt. Zion and the great multitude beside the sea of glass, John reveals the reality of martyrdom facing some—if not all—of the seven churches.⁸ The martyrs have overcome the Dragon and his beasts "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, not loving their lives so much as to shrink back from death" (Rev. 12.11, my translation). Like the martyrs who have come through a great yet unspecified tribulation and now worship around the throne in Revelation 7, the saints killed by the Dragon and his beasts are alive and well in the presence of the Triune God. It is the martyrs whom John calls the seven churches to emulate in their witness and worship.

⁷ Greg Carey, *Reading Revelation: Theology, Ethics, and Resistance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 2025), 164-65.

⁸ Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, structure, and exegesis* (SNTS 128; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 217: "If persecution is not yet widespread and official in John's day, he certainly foresees an increasing polarization and conflict between the Christian community and the centres of power."

REVELATION 17-18

From the venue of heaven, John is taken *in the Spirit* to the wilderness from where he is to witness the judgment of the great Whore - ἡ πόρνη - sitting on many waters (Rev. 17.2). Jennifer Glancey and Stephen Moore, in their examination of prostitution in the first century, state that the term *pornē* was used for a sex worker who had multiple partners: “She is a πόρνη because she has had many sexual partners, and she has had many sexual partners because she is a πόρνη.”⁹ The use of ‘whore’—while offensive—captures the sense of the first century word.¹⁰ The Whore has committed fornication with the kings of the earth and caused the inhabitants of the earth to be drunk on her wine (v. 3). It is important for us to recognize that twice before John has heard about the judgment of Babylon. In chapter 14, John hears an angel say, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (v. 8). In chapter 16, John sees the seventh of seven angels pour out bowls filled with the wrath of God. At the pouring of the seventh bowl, John says, “The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered Babylon the great and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath” (v. 19). These announcements point to the assuredness of Babylon’s destruction even before John describes it in the narrative.

After *hearing* about this great Whore to be judged, John *sees* a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. The beast is covered in blasphemous names, and it has seven heads and ten horns (v. 3). John describes the woman in detail. First, the woman is resplendent in her attire, “clothed in

⁹ Jennifer A. Glancey and Stephen D. Moore, “How Typical a Prostitute is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore’?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 3 (2011): 555.

¹⁰ Melissa Archer, “Feminine Symbols in John’s Apocalypse: Reading for and with Women,” in *The Pneumatological Imagination: A Theological Concert in Honor of Amos Yong*, eds. Christopher A. Stephenson & L. William Oliverio, Jr. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2026), 82.

purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls.” Second, she holds a golden chalice in her hand, filled with abominations and the impurities of her fornication (v. 4). Third, written upon her forehead is a name which is identified as a mystery, “Babylon the Great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” (v. 5). Finally, the woman is drunk on the blood of the saints *and* the blood of the witnesses of Jesus (Rev. 17. 5-6). John’s churches have heard much about witnesses to this point: John is a witness (1.2); Jesus is the Faithful Witness (1.5); Antipas is Jesus’s faithful witness killed in Pergamum (2.13); and the two witnesses killed by the beast after completing their witness are raised to life by the breath of God 3 ½ days later and taken into heaven (Rev. 11.3-12). All the witnesses are connected to Jesus. John is filled with wonder as he sees the woman, necessitating a rebuke from the angel, “Why are you filled with wonder?” (vv. 6b-7).

The angel indicates that he will tell John the mystery of the woman and the beast. He begins with the beast with seven heads and ten horns. The hearers—John’s churches—have already encountered this beast in chapter 13 where the beast from the sea was described as having ten horns and seven heads (v. 1). The beast from the sea was the beast whom the whole world worships, except for the followers of the Lamb. The beast from the sea was the one for whom the second beast made an image that all must worship or be put to death. The beast from the sea, along with the Dragon and second beast, formed an evil trinity; now in chapter 17 the churches are to understand that the woman, the great Whore Babylon, rides the beast. The seven heads of the beast are identified as seven mountains on which the woman sits *and* as seven kings (v. 9). This calls for wisdom, says the angel. Likewise, the ten horns of the beast are ten kings who will receive authority as kings from the beast for one hour during which they will join the beast in making war against the Lamb. Like the Dragon who makes war against the saints

(12.17), so the beast moves upon the hearts of the kings to make war against the Lamb. Where the beast conquers the two witness and the saints (11.7; 13.15), the Lamb conquers the beast because “he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (vv. 12-14).

In verse 15, the angel goes on to decode three of the symbols pertaining to the Whore. First, the waters upon which she sits are “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” Strikingly, an almost identical description occurs in Revelation 5 to denote those whom the Lamb’s blood has purchased (v. 9) and in chapter seven describing the great crowd around the throne from every nation and tribe and people and language (v. 9). These are all who have called on the name of the Lord; these are the global Church, the bride of Christ. Of further interest is that the great crowd around the throne is identified as “those who have come out of the great tribulation” who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14). They are the martyrs—those who have given their lives for the testimony of Jesus Christ. In the vision of the Whore, the woman sits on all the people of the world, symbolizing the extent of her rule and their subjugation by her. Second, the ten kings symbolized by the ten horns and the beast will hate the Whore, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh, and burn her up with fire (v. 16). This is violent language—the language of warfare, of genocide, of annihilation, but we are told that God put it in the hearts of the kings to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled (v. 17).¹¹ God will vindicate God’s people; the question of theodicy will be answered. Finally, the angel states that the woman is the great city who rules over the

¹¹ Elizabeth Shussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 96, suggests that John is mirroring the prophets who often used female imagery to characterize Israel and/or other cities and nations. She states, “The female imagery of Revelation, therefore, would be completely misconstrued if it were understood as referring to the actual behavior of individual women. On the contrary, here more than in other sections, Revelation relies on the prophetic language of the Hebrew Bible, which was by then conventional for its gendered imagery and language. Just as, for example, the image of the Lamb refers to an actual historical person and not to animals, so the images of the heavenly woman, the bride, or the harlot symbolize cities as the places of human culture and political institutions and do not tell us anything about the author’s understanding of actual women.”

kings of the earth (v. 18). The Whore is Babylon the Great *and* the great city. Revelation has already referenced the ‘great city’ in chapter eleven. In the story of the two witnesses, the unburied bodies of the two witnesses (who were killed by beasts from the Abyss) lie in the street of the *great city* which is “pneumatically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (v. 8). *That* great city in chapter 11 sounds like Jerusalem; *this* great city in chapter 17 sounds like Rome. Are the great cities the same city just described differently? While it seems reasonable to think that John’s churches would have associated Babylon with Rome, could John be using the symbolism of the great city as a location for *any* place where the people of God are under threat of death? If so, the ‘great city’ and ‘Babylon’ push the identification beyond the Roman Empire of John’s day. Readers in every time and place are called to discern their surroundings—their Babylon.

In chapter 18, John hears a mighty angel declaring words already heard in chapter 14: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great” (v. 2). Revelation 18 invokes the ancient prophecies against historical Babylon from Jeremiah 50-51. Of crucial importance for us today are verses 4-5, where John hears another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.” While Revelation 16.19 stated that God remembered Babylon the great, Revelation 18 depicts Babylon’s assured demise. Indeed, the heavens resound with a four-fold Hallelujah at her destruction in chapter 19. The cup of God’s wrath that she will drink will result in her destruction—a political death at the hands of the kings. Once a place inhabited by peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues, Babylon will now be devoid of humans and inhabited by demons, unclean spirits, unclean birds, and unclean beasts (18.2). Throughout the 18th chapter, Babylon’s sins are catalogued, her weaknesses are exposed, and her

demise is mourned by those who profited from her. Babylon is condemned for her self-glorification and luxurious living (7) and her arrogant sense of security— “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief” (v. 7b). She is materialistic and a consumer of the finest products from around the world. Her appetite for luxury items, spices, meats, weapons of war, and human slaves is insatiable as evidenced by the catalog of cargo coming to Babylon (12-13). Her wealth comes from the oppression of the nations upon which she sits and the exploitation of their resources, including human trafficking. Indeed, the nations were deceived by her sorcery (v. 23), and in her was found the blood of the prophets, the saints, and all the ones who have been slaughtered on earth (v. 24).

Who would want to live in such a place as Babylon, and yet this is exactly where the seven churches find themselves. They are part of the many waters upon which the Whore sits. The urgent summons to come out of her in 18.4 calls not for physical relocation, for Babylon is every place, but spiritual realignment. The churches live in Babylon, but Babylon must not live in them. The allure and pull of empire, of worldly systems is strong—John marvels!—but the followers of the Lamb must embrace an ethic of non-conformity, prophetic witness, and purity.

CONCLUSION

As we conclude, we must look briefly at John’s final symbol in Revelation. As mentioned above, Babylon’s demise results in the final worship scene in Revelation in chapter 19. The extraordinary nature of the worship given is evidenced by the fourfold Hallelujah (vv. 1, 3, 4, 6). As part of the final Hallelujah, John hears the announcement of the wedding of the Lamb (v. 7). While the sound of bridegroom and bride will no longer be heard in Babylon (18.23), it will be heard in heaven. The bride stands in stark contrast to the Whore. The bride has made herself

ready and is given fine linen, bright and pure, to wear for her wedding. The linen is identified as the righteous deeds of the saints (v. 8). The Bride of the Lamb is none other than the Church! She never clothes herself in scarlet and purple but in white linen. She does not associate with the beast but waits for her groom, the one who comes riding on a white horse whose name is Faithful and True (v. 11). This is the destiny for which she waits with fervent hope and patient endurance. But John has more to say about the bride. In 21.2, John says, “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Babylon may have been the *great* city, but New Jerusalem is the *holy* city. But wait, there is more! In the last ‘in the Spirit’ phrase, John says, “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (21.9-10). He hears about a bride; he sees the holy city Jerusalem descending from God (21.9-10). Twice John is shown the same thing: the descent of New Jerusalem. Twice the connection is made between the bride and New Jerusalem, but now the bride is the *wife* of the Lamb. New Jerusalem represents the ultimate union of the Triune God and the Bride where God will dwell with humanity (21.3), where the Lamb will be the light (21. 23), and where God and the Lamb is (not are!) the temple (21.22). The final mention of the Bride occurs at the end of the book. The Bride and the Lamb join their voices in unison to call the world out of Babylon and unto Jesus so that all can drink freely of the water of life (22.17).

For John and his hearers, Babylon was most likely a reference to Rome and the Roman Empire as were his two symbols of the Beast from the sea and the Great Whore. As noted by

Greg Carey, “Revelation’s critique is neither hidden nor subtle; it is simply indirect.”¹² He further states, “By adopting and giving voice to John’s view, hearers necessarily made public their rejection of Roman legitimacy at the risk of both life and property.”¹³ John calls his hearers—the seven churches—to live in their identity as the Bride of the Lamb, as citizens of New Jerusalem, even while residing in Babylon. The key is to live in Babylon without Babylon living in them; therefore, Revelation affirms the churches in their witness to Jesus and their worship of the Triune God. It is through worship and witness that John’s churches can refuse to worship the beast; it is through worship and witness that John’s churches can refuse to worship the emperor, the Roman gods, or the *Pax Romana*. If such resistance costs them their lives, as it already did for Antipas, they know that Jesus holds the keys to death. Because he lives, they too shall live.

Revelation does not call its hearers—either then or today—to revolution or revolt; instead, Revelation calls its hearers—then *and* today—to active resistance against our “Babylons” through our witness and our worship. Our ethic—our way of *knowing, being, and doing* in this world—must be shaped by the cross and grounded in our identity as the Bride of the Lamb. Beast or Lamb? Bride or Whore? Lake of fire or New Jerusalem? Revelation calls us to choose. It sounds easy, but like John found himself in awe of Babylon, coming out of Babylon is not easy. The glitz and glamour of Babylon mesmerizes us into complacency. We are unwitting participants in Babylon’s exploitative and oppressive practices demanded by our excessive consumerism. We find ourselves worshipping at the feet of stock markets rather than washing the feet of the homeless. We pledge our allegiance to nationalism rather than to the Lord of the

¹² Greg Carey, *Rereading Revelation: Theology, Ethics, and Resistance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2025), 164.

¹³ Carey, *Rereading Revelation*, 165.

nations. Yet, the word of the Lord to us today has not changed: we, too, must come out of Babylon so that we do not take part in her sins or share in her plagues (18:4). The Church, in every generation who has read John's words, has had to discern its place in the world around it, and it is no different for the global Church today. May we have the courage to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

DRAFT