

The scene opens with a statement of purpose, v1-2.

John is to be informed about **the judgement of the great harlot** who sits on many waters.

The great harlot, c.f. 14:8, 16:19, 18:2, 10..

The vision is introduced by one of the plague angels.

The same angel, or another one of the seven, will introduce the bride, the Lamb's wife, 21:9 .

Unusually, he also provides some interpretation of the vision, v7, 15.

This will help us to understand how to deal with symbols, here and in other parts of Revelation.

Symbols are not puzzles to be solved. They reveal the nature of the things that they symbolize rather than their identity. We have already seen that, e.g. with the number of the beast.

This chapter teaches us how to deal with the symbols.

The woman is a harlot, v1, 5, c.f. Hos. 2:5, 4:10, 12, 18, 5:3-4, 6:10, 9:1, Jer. 3:1-3, Ezek. 16:15-17, Is. 1:21, Nah 3:4, 23:15-17.

She is **seated on many waters, v1.** These are revealed as "peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages", v15.

She is seated on the beast, v3.

She sits on the seven heads of the beast. These are also seven mountains, v9, and are also seven kings, v10.

She is the great city, (the location of the throne of the beast, 16:10) that reigns over the kings of the earth, using her seductive power, v2, 18.

Different symbols point to different aspects of the same reality and are used in a flexible way.

From one point of view "she" is a **prostitute (her character)**; from another point of view "she" is a **city (her organization and activity)**.

In a similar way the people of God are revealed as lamp stands (lights revealing the glory of God), virgins (pure wholehearted devotion to Jesus), a bride/wife (love relationship with Him), and a city (Heavenly Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God).

These are not "**coded identities**" but **descriptions of essential nature, like a diamond with multiple facets.**

Her identity will soon be disclosed but the initial emphasis is first on **her character, v2-3.** She is **corrupt, unclean, and seductive.** Her activity affects people on a worldwide scale, rulers more by conscious choice and "earth dwellers" caught in a web of addiction and deception (drunk, c.f. 14:8, c.f. 17:6). The Greek root "pornea" occurs many times in this section, translated "**fornication**". It is used in two senses - **sexual and spiritual sin (idolatry)**, with all their attendant vices (to be described in chapter 18).

What would John have made of this statement? Who/what is the angel talking about?

The vision, v3-6a

John is in a heightened spiritual state, energized by the Holy Spirit, and is transported, in his vision by the angel, to **the wilderness.** In Revelation **the wilderness is a place of protection and provision,** from the dragon/serpent, 12:3, 14 (and the corresponding beast of 13:1 and 17:3, 7).

The city - another symbolic way of understanding the reality which the woman/harlot also symbolizes - also stands **in contrast to the wilderness.**

The harlot sits on the beast; he carries her, v7.

John has been told that he will see the judgement of the great harlot but **the first thing he sees is her apparently secure position,** seated on (in close relationship with) the immensely powerful and victorious beast of chapter 13.

There is nothing subtle about the beast, (ruthless ungodly political ruler/state) ; he is unashamedly blasphemous towards the God of Heaven, v3, c.f. 13:5-6.

The harlot and the beast form a unit - she has no separate existence, like a Siamese twin that feeds on the dominant one and is finally killed off, v16. In the vision **the beast takes the primary role** and the harlot is in a secondary one.

She is dependent on the beast and he uses her to achieve his purpose - to corrupt society and direct human creatures into the service of the dragon, whose servant he is and from whom he derives his own power (chapters 12-13).

Through her relationship with the beast she dominates the life of human society and deceives/seduces/enslaves individual human beings to follow ungodly/immoral/idolatrous ways of life, c.f. Jer. 51:7.

This is how she exercises her power, "sitting on" men and women in every part of world society, v2, 15, c.f. 18:7.

She appears in stark contrast with the woman in 12:1 - truly glorious and yet suffering for the purposes of God, v2, and with a very different relationship to the dragon, v3.

At first sight the harlot is glorious and attractive, v4. Purple symbolizes wealth and luxury; scarlet symbolizes power and majesty, 18:16. It contrasts with the white robes of the followers of the Lamb, 3:4, 18, 7:9, 21:2,

She is adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls - a parody of Heavenly Jerusalem, 21:10-11, 18-21.

This is not the story of Beauty and the Beast! Her garb is that of a prostitute - gaudy rather than glorious but nevertheless dazzling and dangerous, Prov. 7:6-27. **She holds a golden cup,** but its contents are polluted and those who drink become drunk Jer. 51:7. **Abominations typically involve idolatry,** Jer. 13:27, 32:35, 44:22, Ezek. 5:9, 6:9. **Immorality renders the participants unclean.** Together they attract the wrath of the Holy God, 15:7, c.f. Isaiah 51:17, Jer. 25:15-16.

"Mystery!" Her character is revealed by the name on her forehead - perhaps following the practice of Roman courtesans. Mystery is not a puzzle to be solved, i.e. her identity. It is a revelation of her nature/character.

The unbelieving world is dazzled and captivated by her charms and superficial appearance of glory and the pleasures she has on offer. **God reveals the true nature of what resides in her golden cup and behind her attractive clothing.**

- **Babylon the Great.** We have already encountered her in a preliminary way in 14:8 and 16:19 and we will have a full description of her character and behaviour in chapter 18. The symbol is based on **ancient physical Babylon, with roots in Babel,** Gen. 11. The city was located by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, Psalm 137. It was the great empire that destroyed Jerusalem and took Judah into exile. **It was the first of the four successive empires in Daniel's visions,** each of which achieved almost absolute power and was characterised by pride, power, and cruelty. Babylon was suddenly brought to an end but remains in Scripture as **the prototype of the true nature of ungodly, immoral, and persecuting empires to the end of time.** It is symbolic of all that is evil in organized human society. **Rome was the current version of Babylon in John's day,** displaying all the evil practices described in chapter 18. Many subsequent manifestations have come and gone; **Revelation points to the final, universal, one..**
- **The mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.** "Mother" can be taken in two senses - the one who gives birth to **children like herself,** (satellite cities of the main centre), and also characterizing the extremity of **her wickedness.** **"Filthiness of her fornications"** - she is like a sewer pouring moral and spiritual pollution throughout the earth, Nahum 3:4, Is. 23:17.
- **Drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Her philosophy is pervaded by the spirit of antichrist - an insatiable hatred of Jesus and everything He represents. He is beyond reach so she, through her devotees, targets the saints,** v15, c.f. Acts 9:4-5. She serves the purposes of the dragon 12:17 and the beast, 13:6-7. All concerned will drink the wine of the wrath of her fornication, 14:8-10, when she receives the cup of the wine of the fierceness of God's wrath, 16:19.

So what is she? She is not the beast, as empire or as antichrist.

She is a philosophy, a worldview, a spiritual atmosphere.

She is God-denying, humanistic, anti-Christian, amoral and immoral, despises created boundaries, demands total freedom of choice, is intolerant of those who dissent and side with the Creator, and persecutes those who will not conform.

She is the prevailing spirit in much of the media, politics, and entertainment. John elsewhere describes her as "the world" that "lies under the sway of the evil one", 1John 5:19, c.f. 1John 2:15-17, 4:1-6, 5:4-5.

She is also the global city, (cities), the environment where all this is expressed - human civilization with common values and accepted standards of behaviour, now with greater and greater uniformity as a result of increasing ease of communication.

She will have her epicentre in a particular city, the centre of power and influence, site of the throne of the beast, 16:10.

The mystery of the woman and the beast, v6b-18.

John was overcome by what he saw - "marvelled with great amazement".

What he has seen has overwhelmed his senses - admiration/confusion/revulsion, horror/fear (as in experiencing ancient Rome). What has all this to do with v1? **Mystery requires revelation/interpretation, which the angel now gives.**

This is not about clues to enable John/us solve a puzzle about identity. The angel **reveals the essential nature, inter-relationships, and activity of the woman and the beast**, c.f. Rev. 5:4, Dan.4:19, 7:15. **God is in control.**

It is not the mystery of the woman but the mystery of the woman and the beast, v7. They are partners in crime.

- **The beast needs the woman** to captivate the minds and hearts of the "earth dwellers" with the spirit of antichrist, backed up with her enticements of pleasure, wealth, and power. They become his duped but willing servants to oppose the Kingdom of God and destroy the people of God.
- **Babylon needs the beast** as her source of spiritual power.

The beast is the same as in 13:1-3, made in the image of the dragon, 12:3.

It encompasses the power and ruthless cruelty of the ancient empires that affected Israel (Babylon, Persia and Greece, 13:2, c.f. Dan. 7:1-6), culminating in the fulfilment of the vision of the 4th beast, Dan.7:7-8.

Rome prefigured its full expression during the final phase of history.

- **The history and destiny of the beast, v 8.**

He/it was and is not and is coming, c.f. v10-11. and c.f. 13:3, 14. This is **an imitation of God**, 1:4, 8, 4:8, 11:17, including the death and resurrection of Jesus, 1:18. It probably refers to **the beast as empire**, the cycle of rise and fall and replacement by a new manifestation of empire, as in Daniel 7. People welcome the new "hope" of peace and prosperity, v8, only to have their hopes dashed - it is the old failed solution in new clothes.

The final manifestation will have its origin from "the abyss or bottomless pit" v8, c.f. 11:7, probably referring to **the "emperor"** - the satanically inspired antichrist/man of lawlessness described in 1John 2:18 and 2Thess. 2:3-12.

"Earth dwellers" will be deceived, and marvel, 13:8. Even John had to be challenged about this, v6, c.f. Mark 13:21-22.

The destiny of the beast is "to go to perdition, v7, 11, c.f. 19:19-20, 2Thess. 2:8.

- **The complex nature of the beast - the heads and the horns, v9-14.**

We need wisdom in order to understand - do not jump to conclusions, v9, c.f. 13:18.

Remember that we are dealing with a mystery and not a puzzle. Numbers are usually symbolic.

We need to know the truth about the beast and his purpose and strategy, not his identity.

The beast has seven heads, which are also seven hills, and which are also seven kings, v9-10. Seven is a number symbolizing completeness.

Heads probably symbolize authority - the successive empires exercised almost complete power/authority.

Mountains symbolize permanence/stability, e.g. Ps. 36:6, 46:2-3 (how unlikely this is to happen), 65:6, 90:2, 104:6, Is. 54:10. Rome was the manifestation of the beast at the time John saw the vision. It was built on seven hills, acting as an appropriate illustration but not a precedent for all future empires.

Seven kings are the "roll call" of the rulers of the successive empires. Five represent those in the past. Number six is currently ruling. (John may have understood this as a succession of Roman Emperors, the current one being Domitian (81-96)). **Number seven stands for the remaining empires until complete**, v10.

Number eight, although of the same kind as its predecessors but of a different order of power and authority.

Antichrist will be the very personification of the beast - the beast, c.f. 2Thess. 2:4, 9. . In him the empire and its ruler become one thing. (There are lesser historical parallels - Napoleon, Hitler). He may ascend to power during the last days of the seventh (final) empire, from a position of apparent defeat and powerlessness, c.f. 13:3

The beast also has ten horns - symbolizing power. The background is in Daniel 7:23-27 and 8:23-25. The fourth beast is prophetic of the final empire, involving ten kings. The "little horn" (Antiochus Epiphanes IV) served as a prototype for the final ruler, the antichrist, although some of the details were restricted to the time of Antiochus.

His reign was three and a half years, c.f. Rev. 13:5 - a symbolic short period of time.

Ten should also probably be taken as a symbolic number - the major world powers in agreement to submit to the beast and support his rule, v13. "They receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast", v12. This is ambiguous; where does the authority come from? It is conferred by the beast, as in 13:11-12, but is ultimately from God, v17, c.f. 13:5-7.

The central message of this section is the sovereignty of God, even in the motives and choices of His enemies, v14, 17.

This confederation of ten kings become the agents of the beast to "make war on the Lamb". Clearly we must understand the beast as an empire (the ten horns are part of the beast), and also as an individual to whom the ten kings pledge allegiance. The period of their activity is short - "one hour" is symbolic c.f. 8:1. The beast's authority is, again symbolically, for forty two months, 13:5 but the relationship between the two periods is probably not a mathematical equation.

The "kings" are active in the great persecution of the followers of the Lamb, He himself being unassailable, 12:5, 13, 17, 13:5. Here it is stated that the Lamb will overcome them, whereas in 12:11 it is the saints who overcome, even in their suffering and martyrdom. There is no conflict between the two - they are with Him in the war and are "called, chosen and faithful". **The Lamb has conquered by His faithfulness, c.f. chapter 5 and is now the mighty, invincible Lamb - "Lord of Lords and King of Kings"**.

This verse acts as a marker for the detailed description of the final battle, when the beast is destroyed, 19:11-21.

There was a previous marker for this in 16:12-16.

In the structure of Revelation there is a sometimes a short introduction of a theme that is subsequently addressed in detail, e.g. the beast, 11:7, following on to 13:1-18, 17:1-18, and 19:19-21, and Babylon, 14:8, 16:19 following on to 17:1-19:5.