

A thick black L-shaped border is positioned on the left and bottom edges of the page, framing the central text.

# THE BOOK OF REVELATION

## Chapter 17

# Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Direct, O Lord, we beseech you,  
all our actions by your holy inspirations,  
and carry them on by your gracious assistance,  
that every prayer and work of ours  
may begin always from you,  
and by you be happily ended.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Source Material

- *Revelation*, Peter S. Williamson
- *Revelation, Sacra Pagina*, Wilfrid J. Harrington, OP
- *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger
- *The Antichrist*, Vincent P. Miceli, SJ
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- *New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)*
- *Douay-Rheims Bible*

# Summary of Chapter 16

As we recall, the opening of the seven seals (Rev 6-7) and the sounding of the seven trumpets (Rev 8-9) – together with the events they unleashed – were meant as calls to conversion aimed at the ‘inhabitants of the earth’

- In chapter 16, we came to the final judgment on the evil of the world and those who remain obstinate in their sins, symbolized as the pouring forth of seven bowls of God’s wrath
- The ‘contents’ of the bowls unleashed various plagues, like those in the Book of Exodus sent against Pharaoh – who was likewise hard of heart and refused to submit to God’s will.
- The bowls increased in intensity, symbolizing the judgment of God against those who persist in sin
- There was, even at this point, an element of God’s patience and mercy throughout these events, waiting for the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ to repent.
  - *As we saw mentioned three times, they did not repent*

# Preview of Chapter 17

- Chapter 17 begins the conclusion of the Book of Revelation. Together with chapter 18, we will see the judgment of God fall upon the world and its sin
  - *Though we've seen the final judgment begin with the seventh trumpet (ch11) and the seventh bowl (ch16), here we will see the details of that judgment*
  - *Our final 'new' character is introduced fully in chapter 17 – the harlot Babylon*
  - *We will see who she represents, her allies and her final destruction*
- The following chapters will detail the final judgment against the dragon, the beast and the false prophet as well as all the 'inhabitants of the earth'
- Then the glorious rewards of the faithful are detailed in the conclusion.

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

## ■ The image of the harlot

- *There is a long OT tradition in associating not only immorality but also idolatry, evil practices, corruption, etc. with the image of a harlot*
- *The idea is that people were 'seduced' by such practices and turned away from the Commandments*
- *The image connotes a society in which crime, illicit enrichment, oppression of people, sexual immorality and corrupt economic, social and political practices were the norm*
- *It is the image of total corruption*

## ■ "Kings of the earth"

- *A new term for us, but similar to the 'inhabitants of the earth,' and with a similar meaning – leaders/governments who are against God and who persecute the faithful*
- *To have 'intercourse' with the harlot Babylon is to share in her corrupt practices*

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

## ■ “Wine of her harlotry”

- *As with the ‘kings,’ the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ are seduced by Babylon, drinking her ‘wine,’ meaning to become intoxicated with those corrupt practices*
- *In the short term, these lead to wealth and pleasure, but we will see where they ultimately lead to shortly.*

## ■ The “Woman”

- *Perhaps the reader will think back to the ‘woman’ of chapter 12, representing variously the Blessed Mother in particular and the holy people of God in general.*
- *But on closer inspection, she not the same woman. In fact, she’s the opposite!*
- *She represents the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ those who do not belong to God’s people, and we see in her physical characteristics a portrayal of her moral qualities*

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

## ■ “Seated on a scarlet beast”

- *From the description of the beast (blasphemous names, seven heads, ten horns) we know this is the beast we first met in ch13, the spawn of the dragon and part of the ‘unholy trinity’*
- *The harlot riding the beast reveals the relationship between the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ and the spiritual forces of evil who oppose God*
  - (Doesn’t this remind us that to participate in evil is really to be in league with the devil!)

## ■ Description of the harlot

- *She is adorned in purple and scarlet, both expensive to produce and considered a sign of luxuriant wealth*
- *She wears jewelry of the finest materials – gold, precious stones and pearls*
- *An enormous contrast with the woman of ch12, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars*

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

## ■ Gold cup

- *Another sign of great wealth, but the contents reveal the truth*
- *It is filled with the “abominable and sordid deeds of her harlotry,” also translated graphically as the “disgusting filth of her prostitution” or the “abominations and the impurities of her fornication.”*
- *The contents of the cup reflect her sinfulness, which is vividly portrayed here as unclean, detestable to God and unfit for his presence*

## ■ Name of her headband

- *Another indication of her identity and her evil*
- *“mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth”*
- *Indicated here not as a physical attribute but as a description – she is the source, the archetype and fullest expression of the evil of the world opposed to God and the Kingdom*

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

- Drunk on blood
  - *An image of violence and cruelty*
  - *What's worse, her victims are the 'holy ones and the witnesses to Jesus'*
  - *She represents the worldly forces opposing the Church*
- In general, the picture painted for us of the harlot Babylon is one of total wickedness and evil
  - *The worst crimes of Scripture are indicated in her description: idolatry, murder, sacrilege, immorality, greed, etc.*
  - *She is distinct from the beast but in league with him*
  - *Her luxury, wealth and the pleasures she represents are the seducing source of the corruption of the 'inhabitants of the earth,' who flock to her for her worldly benefits, at the expense of their souls!*

# Babylon the Great (17:1-6a)

- Who does Babylon represent?
  - *As we can imagine, the first century readers linked both the beast and the harlot Babylon with Rome*
  - *But both characters represent different aspects of Rome*
  - *The beast represents the political power of Rome, opposed to Christ and the people of God*
  - *The harlot represents the socioeconomic and cultural corruption, immorality, evil within Rome, which is also opposed to Christ*
  - *The two of them together form a picture of a great human society that is in rebellion with God and what Scripture sometimes simply calls the “world.”*
  - *This vivid picture was meant to shake up the first-century readers to a radical re-evaluation of their view of the world in which they lived, but to which they no longer belong*
  - *Though Rome embodied the beast and harlot in the first century, we can validly see manifestations of the same evil in other eras, including our own.*

# Meaning of the beast and harlot (17:6b-14)

- These verses are among the most difficult in Revelation for scholars to interpret. (Ironically, the angel's explanation of the vision can cause even more confusion!)
- "Existed once but now exists no longer"
  - *Literally "was, and is not" – what a contrast to the description of God, "who is, who was and who is to come"*
  - *At the time of writing, John is describing a past and future threat. The devil was defeated by the death and resurrection of Christ, but will increasingly threaten the Church through the centuries until the end.*
  - *Recalls the earlier description of the beast, which seemed to be "mortally wounded" and then healed (13:2)*

# Meaning of the beast and harlot (17:6b-14)

## ■ “It will come again”

- *Seemingly killed (mortally wounded), the beast will return, appearing to imitate the resurrection of Christ*
- *(As we’ve said, evil will look like Christ, but twisted)*
- *This apparent inability to vanquish evil will “amaze” many people and will sway the ‘inhabitants of the earth’ to his side*
- *But the comparison to Jesus ends abruptly when the angel tells him the beast’s fate: “It is headed for destruction”*

## ■ Book of Life

- *Another reference to the heavenly “book” into which God “writes” the names of his faithful ones*
- *As we’ve seen increasingly the case, at the end, humanity will be divided clearly between the faithful and the wicked – either they are written in the book, or they are the ‘inhabitants of the earth’*

# Meaning of the beast and harlot (17:6b-14)

## ■ “Seven kings” “Ten horns”

- *Admittedly confusing, scholars for centuries have tried to identify which kings John may have referred to*
- *They were likely in the series of Roman emperors, but no consensus has been reached as to their identity*
- *A better overall approach may be to look symbolically at the numbers – seven and ten – representing totality or completeness*
- *The impression here is that the “whole world,” represented by their kings, will be in opposition to God and the Kingdom, and will persecute the Church, especially before the end.*
- *This reign will be impressive and will cause awe in the ‘inhabitants of the earth,’ such that the faith will seem absolutely backwards and worthy of persecution*
- *But that reign will last only “one hour,” in other words, a short time. (Compared to the glorious eternity of heaven, the temporal persecutions of the faithful on earth will seem very short indeed)*

# Meaning of the beast and harlot (17:6b-14)

## ■ “Fight against the Lamb”

- *The ‘inhabitants of the earth’ and their leaders, the Kings, will do battle against Christ*
- *How do they do this?*
- *By attacking his faithful ones. The war will be waged against the Church, the members of Christ’s body.*
- *But just like with the fate of the beast, that of the Kings and the inhabitants of the earth is clearly foretold: “The Lamb will conquer” because he is “Lord of lords and King of kings”*
- *No power, earthly or spiritual, can stand against Christ!*
- *The faithful who remain steadfast will share in that victory – by Christ they are “called, chosen and faithful”*

# Meaning of the beast and harlot (17:6b-14)

- Reflection
- It is a fair question to ask if we are seeing the prophecies of Revelation playing out today
  - *We cannot know with any certainty if the events described in the text correspond to historical events of the past or present*
  - *We can come to recognize a ‘family resemblance’ between the harlot Babylon and the beast in various eras, including our own.*
  - *Their attributes of political power and oppression against the Church, and the social, economic and cultural evil that they promote can validly be seen as current manifestations of these perennial enemies of God*
  - *It is a good thing to be mindful of them and to be clear as to whether political things (laws, policies and programs, etc.) or social things (culture, movements, etc.) are in line with the Gospel or not.*

# Destruction of the harlot (17:15-18)

- A rather unexpected development.
- Babylon will be destroyed by the very beast (and his allies) on which she rode
  - *Though they are on the same side, and both persecuted God's people, the true hatred for Babylon by the beast is ultimately revealed*
  - *Though the devil may ally himself with certain people or cultural movements, in truth he hates humanity – this is the reason for his battle against them.*
  - *The beast's hatred for Babylon is expressed in a sudden turn upon her in a vicious attack.*
  - *Evil always turns upon itself, and God inspires evil to destroy itself. God always remains in control!*

# The fall of Babylon (18:1-3)

## ■ Angel from heaven

- *The appearance of another angel tells us a further message from God is coming, part of the accomplishment of his judgment upon the evil of the world*
- *“illuminated by its splendor” – the whole world is lit up by the appearance of this angel, revealing the importance and solemnity of this message*

## ■ ”Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great”

- *A repeat of the words we heard at 14:8. Notice the ‘prophetic past tense’ again.*
- *So great and complete is the destruction of this city (and the evil it represents) that it is fit only to house wild animals (unclean birds and beasts) and a dwelling place for demons (unclean spirits)*
- *Quite a change from her formerly luxuriant outward appearance*
- *Note the lesson: pursuing the evils represented by Babylon may lead to temporary pleasure and wealth, but remember the end!*

# The fall of Babylon (18:1-3)

- The reasons for the severity of this judgment is made clear: she has corrupted the whole world, represented by three classes of people:
  - *All the nations have drunk the wine of her licentious passion*
  - *The Kings of the earth had intercourse with her*
  - *The merchants of the earth have become rich from her drive for luxury*
- In other words, the evil she embodies has brought immorality, greed and oppression to the whole world.

# A warning to the faithful (18:4-8)

- A rare and specific warning aimed directly at God's faithful ones
  - *The message is to depart, not physically but spiritually*
  - *The faithful of God are to discern those spiritual and moral evils represented by the harlot Babylon (and with which they are surrounded in their culture) and to "depart" from it, to have no participation in it.*
  - *As we saw in chapters 2-3 in the various admonitions to the seven cities, Jesus rebukes those faithful who tolerate the mixture of the evil of the world with the purity of the faith.*
  - *The faithful are to have nothing to do with evil or its corruption*
- The reason for the warning not to share in her sins is clear
  - *So as not to share in her 'plagues,' her punishments, which will soon be revealed in detail*

# A warning to the faithful (18:4-8)

- The sins of evildoers (represented by Babylon) are so great they “pile to the sky”
- In God’s justice, they are to receive a “pay back” for the evil they have done
  - *This is the divine recompense foretold by Christ to his disciples (Mt 13:39, Jn 5:29)*
  - *She will drink the “cup” of God’s wrath, the terrible image of receiving God’s justice*

# A warning to the faithful (18:4-8)

- Reflection
- It is less common today to focus on the divine recompense for evil (we moderns prefer to focus on the divine rewards for goodness), but the lesson is there for us
- We might consider the modern manifestations of 'Babylon,' perhaps not as a persecuting force against the Church (though those do exist) but rather as a cultural influence of evil in the world
  - *How might we hear the call to 'depart from her?' Perhaps to be mindful of those parts of our culture (mass media, internet, popular entertainment, music, movements and people) who 'seduce' us away from the faith*
  - *Recall how the first century churches were tiny minorities, little 'islands of faith' amidst great immoral cities. Perhaps we can think of our parish that way!*

# In two weeks...

- Next class Wednesday, April 7
  
- Come to the Holy Week liturgies!
  - *Palm Sunday this weekend*
  - *Wednesday, March 31 – Solemn Vespers at 7pm*
  - *Holy Thursday, April 1 – Mass of the Lord's Supper*
  - *Good Friday – various liturgies*
  - *Easter Vigil – Saturday, April 3 at 8pm*
  - *Easter Sunday - April 4*
  
- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.