

## 10. Apocalypse 15:1 - 18:24

TRANSCENDENT (5) : Apocalypse 15:1-8

SCENE 5 : The seven plagues / basins : 16:1-21

INTERLUDE : The Fall of Rome : 17:1 - 18:24

‘Then the 7th angel blew his trumpet’(11:15)

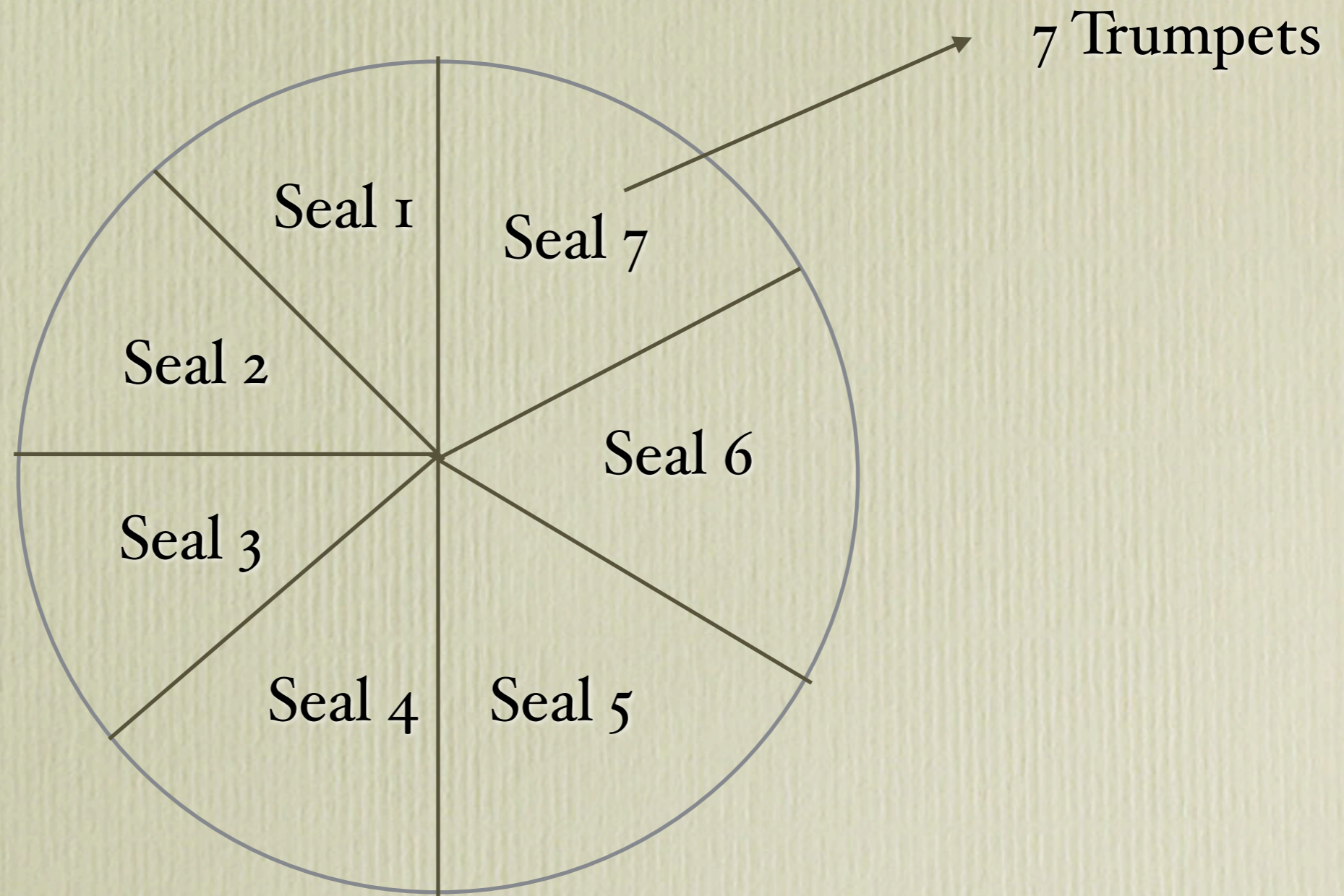
**Trumpet 7** God’s judgment is carried out in 7 stages  
– 7 Plagues (15:1)

Those who proved victorious proclaim the  
justice of God’s judgments (15:2-4)

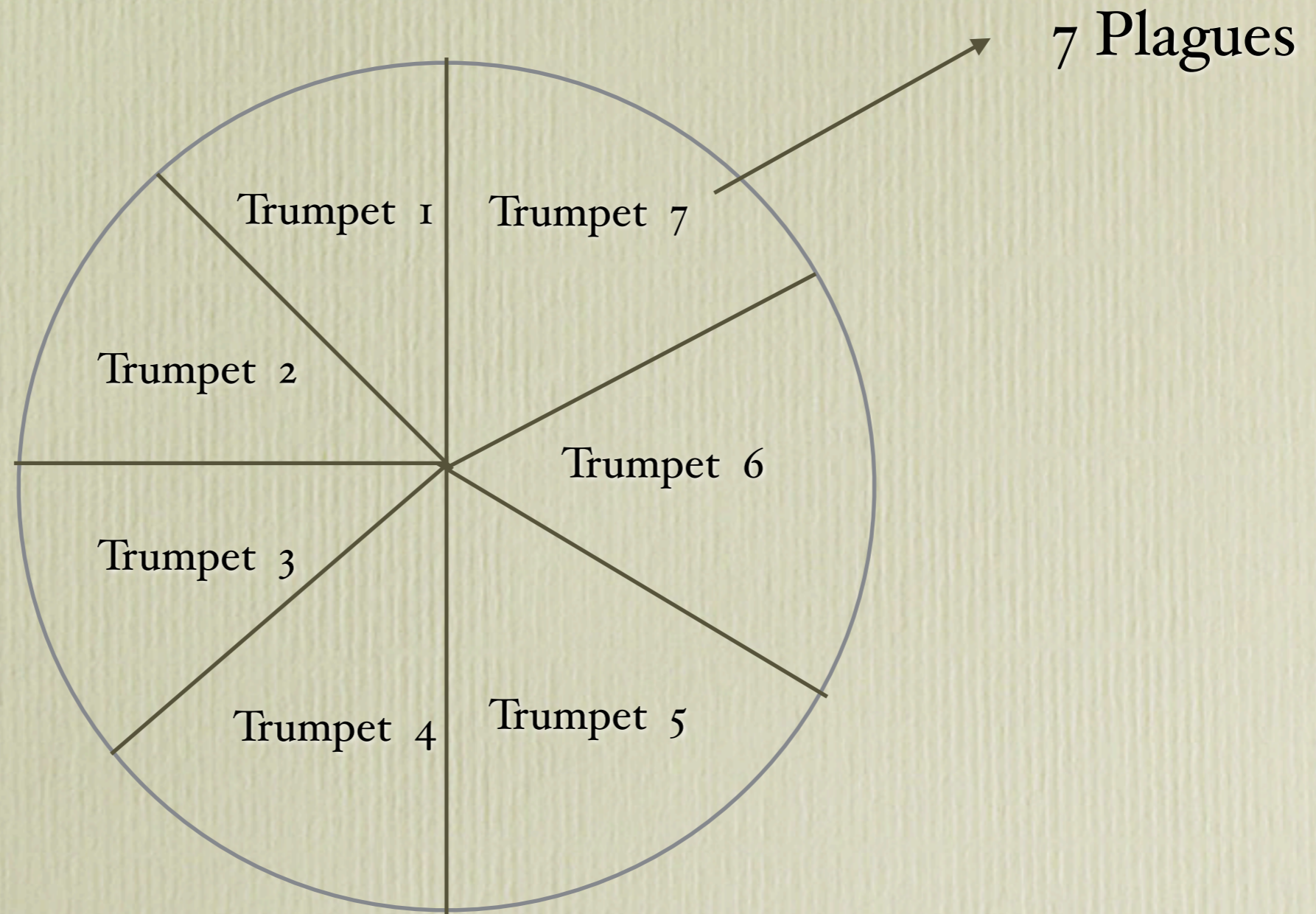
The crucified and risen Christ has revealed the meaning of history in seven stages, dramatised by the breaking of seven seals. The breaking of the seventh and final seal (8:1) opened the way for seven revelations, each accompanied by the blast of a trumpet. The blast of the seventh and final trumpet (11:15) revealed three signs: the woman (12:1), the dragon (12:3), and now the third and final sign or portent, announcing the ‘hour of God’s judgment’(14:7).

## Apocalypse 8:2

I saw the seven angels who stand before God,  
and seven trumpets were given to them.



‘Then the 7th angel blew his trumpet’(II:15)



## Penetrating to THE TRANSCENDENT (5)

### Apocalypse 15:1

Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

This portent is described as ‘great’, for it is most important that we discern its meaning (compare 12:1). It announces seven plagues.

We recall the following text:

‘If you continue hostile to me and will not obey me I will continue to plague you seven times for your sins’(Leviticus 26:21).

## Apocalypse 15:2-3

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass [no place for chaos in heaven] mixed with fire [purifying judgment, 1:14], and 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, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.

The martyrs who have withstood the power of Rome and refused to partake in the cult of the emperor are singing the song of Moses: the triumphant song of the Exodus heard on the occasion of God's victory over the pharaoh and his liberation of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 15:1). Its mention here prepares us for the final and eternal liberation effected by God's final judgment of history. It is also the song of the crucified and risen Christ ('the Lamb', 5:6),

## Apocalypse 15:3-4

‘Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed’.

Their triumphant hymn echoes phrases from the Old Testament liturgy: ‘Great and amazing are your deeds’(Psalm 111:2; 139:14; Exodus 34:10); ‘just and true are your ways’(Psalm 145:17; Deuteronomy 32:4); ‘all nations will come and worship before you’(Psalm 10:5; Psalm 98:2; Malachi 1:11; Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah (16:19).

## Apocalypse 15:5-6

After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness [11:19] in heaven was opened, and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests [priestly vestments].

John takes his readers back to the opening scene of the previous section (11:19). The temple is called here the tent of witness, for it stands as a witness to God's presence and action in history. What we are about to witness is the final action of the risen Christ in history: God's judgment of the world as revealed in him who fulfils in his person all that is signified by the tent.

Those who are carrying out God's judgment are wearing clothing which highlights the priestly nature of their mission.

## Apocalypse 15:7-8

Then one of the four animal-like creatures [4:6] gave the seven angels seven golden basins [basins for the blood of the sacrifice] full of the wrath of God [6:16-17], who lives forever and ever; and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.

The plagues are contained in basins which are given to the angels by one of the four living creatures (see 4:6). These basins are the sprinkling basins which held the blood for the temple sacrifice. This is a further allusion to the blood of the martyrs, whose witness to Christ is about to be vindicated.

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle'(Exodus 40:34).

‘Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended’(15:1).

Plagues 1-4

16:1-9

Affects all  
cosmos

Plague 7

‘The 7th angel  
poured his basin  
over the air.’(16:17)

Plagues 5-6

16:10-16

Empire  
Evil gathers

Interlude 4    Fall of Rome    (17-18)

## SCENE 5 : The Seven Basins

We must not think of this as a kind of cosmic tit for tat in which a vengeful god gets even with the wicked. Evil brings its own punishment and it is self-inflicted. This self-destruction does, however, demonstrate God's justice.

God is to be revealed in the judgment that is to be passed upon the world. Those who are obstinate in perpetrating evil will suffer the consequences of their behaviour. Those who have given their lives as instruments of Christ to bring about the reign of God on earth will reap the fruit of their commitment

## SCENE 5 : The Seven Basins

### Apocalypse 16:1-3

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, 'Go and pour out on the earth the seven basins of the wrath of God'. So the first angel went and poured his basin on the earth, and a foul and painful sore [6th plague] came upon those who had the mark of the beast and who worshipped its image. The second angel poured his basin into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died [1st plague].

The voice from the temple recalls the following from Isaiah: 'A voice from the temple! The voice of the Lord, dealing retribution to his enemies'(Isaiah 66:6).

John uses traditional language in speaking about the terrible effects of evil as God's punishment, an expression of God's anger. 'Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you'(Jeremiah 10:25).

## Apocalypse 16:4-7

The third angel poured his basin into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the water say, 'You are just, O Holy One who are and were [note absence of 'is coming'], for you have judged these things; because they shed the blood of saints and prophets [6:10], thou have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!'

And I heard the altar respond, 'Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and just!'

Those who have inflicted death will die. They must suffer the consequences of their causing the death of the innocent martyrs (6:10).

'I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind'(Genesis 9:5-6).

## Apocalypse 16:8-9

The **fourth** angel poured his basin on the **sun**, and it was allowed to scorch them with fire; they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent [9:20] and give him glory.

The fourth plague is that of the fire of God's judgment. John highlights the basic problem clearly. They are suffering the consequences of their own obstinate behaviour: they 'did not repent'(see 9:20); they did not manifest in their lives the radiant beauty of God's liberating action in history; they chose, rather, to refuse liberation and remain enslaved to false gods.

## Apocalypse 16:10-14

The **fifth** angel poured his basin on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into **darkness** [6th plague]; people gnawed their tongues in agony, and cursed the God of heaven because of their pain and sores, and **they did not repent** of their deeds.

The **sixth** angel poured his basin on the great river **Euphrates**, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. And I saw three foul spirits like **frogs** [2nd plague] coming from the mouth of the **dragon**, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the **false prophet** [13:13]. These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great Day of God the Almighty.

## Apocalypse 16:15-16

‘See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed [3rd of 7] is the one who stays awake, and is clothed, not going naked and exposed to shame’).

And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called **Harmagedon**. [Mountain of Megiddo; 2Kings 23:29 - death of King Josiah]

The first time that the risen Jesus has addressed the assembly in the first person since the opening verse of chapter four. He repeats a warning already given to the church in Sardis (3:3), but this time he follows it with a beatitude. The unexpected direct address from Jesus highlights the critical importance of the message. We cannot read history properly without being aware of the constant presence and action of the risen Jesus in history. We must be alert to this and we must remain clothed, that is to say, we must stay in communion with Jesus and others must see us as belonging to him.

## Apocalypse 16:17-18

The seventh angel poured his basin over the air [9:2], and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake.

When the seventh seal was broken (8:1), the final meaning of history was revealed by Christ. This is declared in seven announcements. The final announcement came with the sound of the seventh trumpet (11:15). It concerned the final judgment of God, dramatised by the pouring out of blood from seven sacrificial basins. We have now come to the seventh basin, and so 'It is done!' The description is to follow, but we are told here that this is the end.

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The announcement comes in a loud voice, out of the temple, from the throne. It is the transcendent God who, through the risen Christ, is responding to the prayers of the saints in a judgment which consists in the ultimate vindication of the good and the final destruction of the wicked. This bowl is poured over the air, the realm of the evil spirits (9:2). The cataclysmic signs are a climax of a gradual crescendo which we have observed from 4:5 to 8:5 to 11:19 to 16:18. We have come to the climax of judgment, to something so awesome that it 'had not occurred since people were upon the earth'.

## Apocalypse 16:19-21

The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon, and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. And every island fled away and no mountains were to be found; and huge hailstones [7th plague], each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

Babylon is Rome (11:8, 11:13, 14:8, 14:20); in fact, any earthly power that opposes the creator and oppresses God's people. It will suffer the consequences of its obstinate injustice (= 'God's wrath', 6:16-17, 14:10). God's judgment reaches to the extremities of the earth ('islands' and 'mountains', see 6:14). The hailstones (11:19) remind us of the seventh plague of Egypt (Exodus 9:24).

## INTERLUDE (4): The Fall of Rome

### 1. The judgment is announced – rampant injustice

#### Apocalypse 17:1-3

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven basins came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication, the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk’. So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness.

This is a flash-back, focusing on the most significant element of the judgment which has just been completed.

‘Inhabitants of Babylon, you who live by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come, the thread of your life is cut ... Babylon made all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine and so the nations went mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen!’(Jeremiah 51:13, 7).

## Apocalypse 17:3-6

### 2. Rome is to be destroyed

And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet [pomp & luxury] beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns [12:3; 13:1]. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup [pagan Roman cult] full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: [1:20; 10:78] 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'. And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly amazed.

Rome claimed divine status for its emperor and its law.

## Apocalypse 17:7-10

But the angel said to me, ‘Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with **seven heads** [deciphered below] and **ten horns** [deciphered next slide] that carries her. The beast that you saw **was, and is not**, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and goes to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it **was and is not and will be present**. [caricature of the true God, [1:4]. This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are **seven mountains** on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while.

## Apocalypse 17:11-14

As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth, but it belongs to the seven [Domitian = Nero], and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are **ten kings** who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; they will **make war on the Lamb**, and the **Lamb will conquer** them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

Those with the glorified Jesus are the 144,000 of 14:1-5: those who, here on earth, are faithful to the call and the choice to be disciples of Jesus in effecting the reign of God.

## Apocalypse 17:15-18

The power of Rome will be broken  
through revolt from within the empire.

He said to me, 'The waters [subject peoples of Roman Empire] that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. The woman that you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth'.

# A dramatico-liturgical enactment of the destruction of Rome

## Apocalypse 18:1-24

### Scene 1. From heaven: an announcement of judgment

#### Apocalypse 18:1-2

[Narrator]:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendour. He called out with a mighty voice

[Angel]:

‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast.’

## Apocalypse 18:3-5

[Angel]:

‘For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury’.

[Narrator]:

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,

[Voice from heaven]:

‘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 injustices.

## Apocalypse 18:6-8

[Voice from heaven continued]:

Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief”, therefore her plagues will come in a single day – pestilence and mourning and famine – and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her’.

# Apocalypse 18:9-10

## Scene 2. Rome's cronies lament

[Narrator]:

And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

[Kings of the earth]:

‘Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come’.

## Apocalypse 18:11-13

[Narrator]:

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human souls.

Luxury goods and basic foodstuffs. Rome had the power to force subject states to organise production to suit, not the needs of their own people, but the needs of Rome. People themselves are a commodity. Not only their bodies, but their very souls, are subject to Roman exploitation. All Rome's wealth has been laid waste.

## Apocalypse 18:14-17

[Narrator]:

‘The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendour are lost to you, never to be found again!’  
The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

[Merchants of the earth]:

‘Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels and with pearls!  
For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.’

## Apocalypse 18:17-19

[Narrator]:

And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors, and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,

[Sailors]:

‘What city was like the great city?’

[Narrator]:

And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out,

[Sailors]:

‘Alas, alas, the great city,  
where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth!  
For in one hour she has been laid waste’.

## Apocalypse 18:20

Scene 3. The liturgical assembly breaks into shouts of joy

‘Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her.’

Those who lament the fall of Rome are those who have joined in the profiteering. The vast multitude of subjects who have suffered exploitation are delighted at its fall. John is inviting the Christian community to rejoice that the oppressor (the harlot, the slaughterer and the economic exploiter) has fallen. Justice has prevailed.

# Apocalypse 18:21-23

## Scene 4. A symbolic action by the angel

[Narrator]:

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,

[Angel]:

‘With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; and the sound of harpists and minstrels, and of flute players and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the great men of the earth, and all the nations were deceived by your sorcery’.

## Apocalypse 18:24

[Narrator]:

And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,  
and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.