Visions & Symbols

Decoding the Imagery of Revelation

The Corrupt Empire: Rome as "Babylon the Great"

This imagery establishes Rome as a powerful, idolatrous, and oppressive system that stands in direct opposition to God's kingdom.

> *"And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names... And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." (Revelation 17:3-6a, ESV)*

John labels Rome as "Babylon the Great," a name that would have struck a deep chord with his Jewish-Christian readers. Ancient Babylon was the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. By calling Rome "Babylon," John identifies it as the new world power that oppresses God's people. The depiction of the city as a wealthy but immoral "harlot" symbolizes Rome's corrupting influence, economic exploitation, and seductive power.

> **Discussion Question:** How do powerful systems or cultures today (e.g., in politics, consumerism, or ideology) promote values that conflict with Christian faith? In what ways can we identify a modern "Babylon"?

An Unmistakable Landmark: The City on "Seven Hills"

This is one of the clearest clues in the text that identifies "Babylon" with a specific, real-world city.

> *"This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated." (Revelation 17:9, ESV)*

The city of Rome was famously and universally known in the ancient world as "the city on seven hills." By stating that the woman (Babylon) is seated on "seven mountains" (the Greek word can mean either mountain or hill), John removes all doubt for his original audience. He isn't talking about a mythical city; he is grounding his divine vision in the political and geographical reality of his day. This detail made the prophecy immediate and urgent.

> **Discussion Question:** Why was it important for John's audience to know he was talking about a real, specific empire and not just a vague evil force?

A Clash of Thrones: The Beast and Imperial Worship

This section explores the central conflict of Revelation: who is worthy of worship? The Empire, personified by the Beast, demands the ultimate allegiance that belongs only to God.

> *"And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast... and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain." (Revelation 13:4, 7-8, ESV)*

"The Beast" that rises from the sea is John's symbol for the Roman Empire and its emperor. The central issue was the Imperial Cult, which mandated worship of the emperor as a divine figure. For Christians, this was idolatry. Revelation portrays this as the ultimate test of faith: you either worship the Beast and receive its "mark," or you worship the Lamb (Jesus), even if it leads to economic exclusion or martyrdom.

> **Discussion Question:** What are some subtle forms of "emperor worship" we see today? In what areas of life are we tempted to give our ultimate allegiance to something other than Christ?

Naming the Emperor: The Number "666"

This infamous number was not a mysterious, unsolvable riddle for the first-century church but a specific and dangerous indictment of a particular Roman emperor.

> *"This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666." (Revelation 13:18, ESV)*

This number is a form of gematria, an ancient practice where letters were assigned a numerical value. When the Greek name "Neron Kaisar" (Nero Caesar) is transliterated into Hebrew letters, the sum is 666. Nero was the first emperor to violently persecute Christians and was seen as the embodiment of evil. The number was a clear, "calculated" way for John to point to the emperor as the human face of the evil "Beast" without explicitly naming him, which would have been suicidal.

> **Discussion Question:** The "mark of the beast" was tied to the ability to buy and sell. In what ways can today's economic systems pressure Christians to compromise their values?



The Cost of Faithfulness: Persecution and Endurance

Revelation was not written in a time of peace. It is a letter from a persecuted leader to persecuted churches, offering hope and a call for nonviolent resistance.

> *"I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." (Revelation 1:9, ESV)*

John begins his letter by identifying his own situation. He is in exile on Patmos as a direct result of his Christian faith. He writes as a "partner in the tribulation," assuring his readers that he understands their suffering. The book is a powerful call for "patient endurance" (or nonviolent resistance). It assures believers that even though Rome seems all-powerful, God is ultimately in control, and justice will prevail.

Discussion Question: Revelation calls for "patient endurance" in the face of oppression. What does this kind of faithful, nonviolent resistance look like in practice today?