Revelation

Lesson #14

The Whore of Babylon

(17: 1 – 18: 24)

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Review

With the seals opened and the trumpets blown, God's warnings to humanity end . . . and judgment begins. In Lesson #13, seven angels were handed seven bowls, *"the seven bowls of God's fury upon the earth"* (16: 1):

The Seven Bowls

1—Ugly and painful sores (16: 2)

2—Blood, like that of a dead man (16: 3)

3—Rivers and springs of water turned to blood (16: 4-7)

4—Sun, scorching people with fire (16: 8-9)

5—Satan's kingdom plunged into darkness (16: 10-11)

6—Euphrates River dried up (16: 12-16)

7—Massive earthquake—*"It is done!"* (16: 17-21)

The seventh bowl brings the final judgment. Once it is emptied, the earth is little more than a smoking cinder, wobbling in space!

Preview

Now, chapters 17-19 form a recapitulation, taking us to "ground zero," the epicenter of the seventh bowl's impact. In Lesson #14 we meet the great "Whore of Babylon" riding upon a beast with seven heads: Babylon the great, *"the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth"* (17: 5), and *"the great city that has sovereignty over the kings of the earth"* (18: 18).

The "Whore of Babylon" has seduced the kings of the earth who have "had intercourse with her," as well as the people of the earth who have drunk the "wine of her harlotry" (17: 2).

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Martin Luther, trans. *Luther Bible* (with 117 woodcuts by Lucas Cranach, this one colored). Wittenberg: Hans Lufft Press,1534.

[This is the first complete Bible published in the German language.]

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In John's gospel Jesus engages the religious leaders in Jerusalem in an escalating, white-hot debate. His voice rising, he says to them, *"If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Indignant, his opponents reply sharply, *"We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone"* (8: 31-33).

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In the heat of anger people say stupid things, and this is one of them.

The Jews had most certainly been enslaved, first to the Egyptians for 400 years, ending with the Exodus of 1446 B.C.; next to the Assyrians, from 722 -539 B.C. (the Northern Kingdom of Israel); and finally to the Babylonians, from 586-539 B.C. (the Southern Kingdom of Judah).

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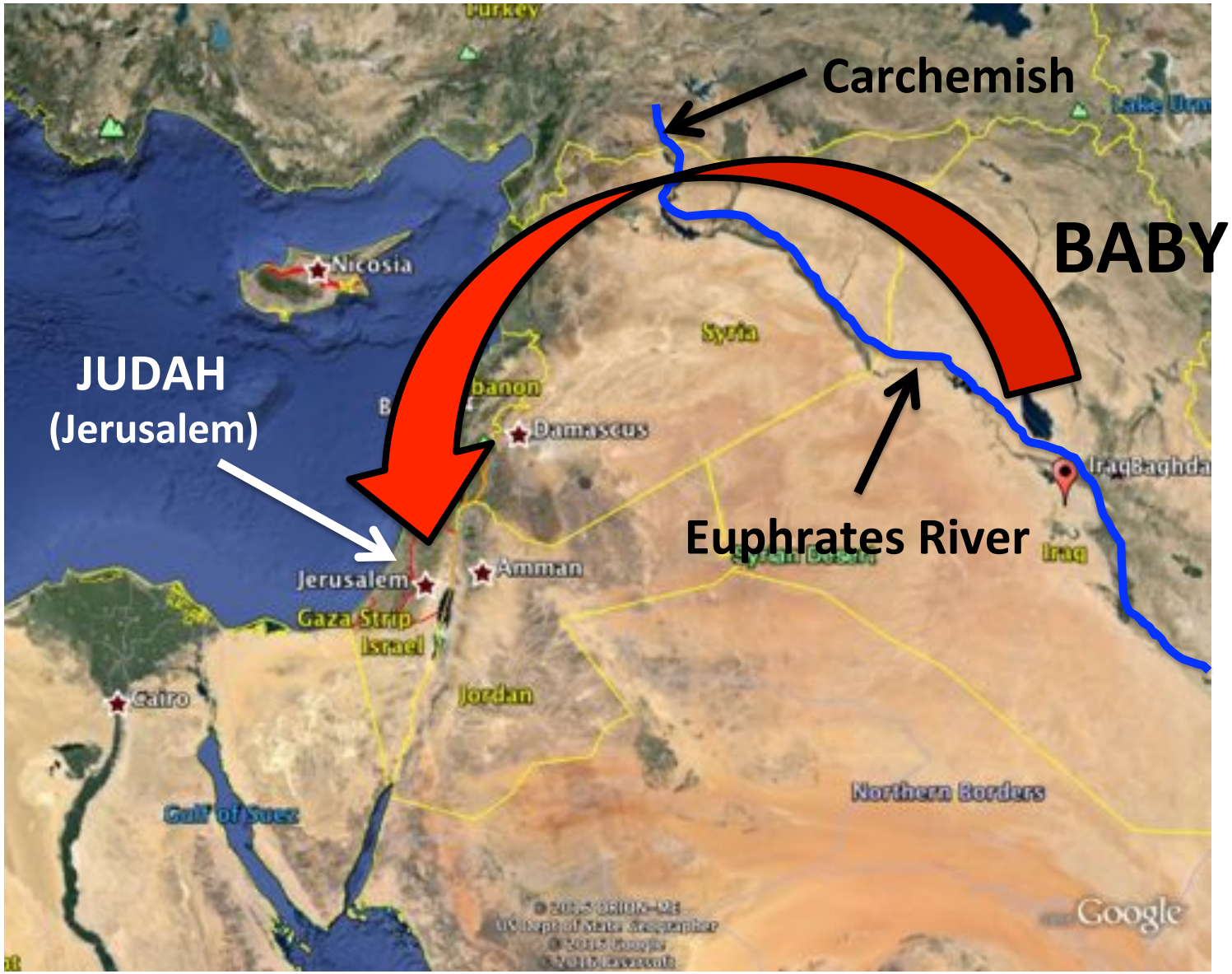
During the first 2,000 years of Hebrew history—from the time of Abraham (c. 2000 B.C.) until the birth of Christ—the greatest catastrophe to befall the Jews was the Babylonian captivity.

After defeating the Assyrian Empire in 609 B.C. at the Battle of Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon, attacked Judah and Jerusalem in 605 B.C., demanding surrender and tribute. Jehoiakim, king of Judah, paid up, and Judah became a vassal state of Babylon.

To ensure that tribute continued to be paid, Nebuchadnezzar took captive to Babylon some of the royal family, including the prophet Daniel.



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In 601 B.C. Jehoiakim refused to continue paying tribute to Babylon, so Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem again in 597 B.C., laying siege to the city, which quickly fell. Jehoiakim died and his successor Jeconiah, along with much of the royal court (including the prophet Ezekiel), was taken captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jeconiah's uncle, Zedekiah, as vassal king, and once again Judah paid tribute to Babylon.

In 588 B.C., however, chaffing under Babylonian rule, Zedekiah stupidly refused payment and Nebuchadnezzar attacked again, this time laying siege to Jerusalem for two full years. The prophet Jeremiah was in the city during the siege, and he writes his eyewitness account of the city's suffering in Lamentations.

On August 14, 586 B.C. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Here is what we read in Scripture:

"In the tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and his whole army advanced against Jerusalem, encamped around it, and built siege walls on every side. The siege of the city continued until the eleventh year of Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the month, when famine had gripped the city, and the people of the land had no more food, the city walls were breached . . . Nebuchadnezzar . . . burned the house of the Lord [Solomon's Temple], the house of the king, and all the houses of Jerusalem . . . tore down the walls that surrounded Jerusalem. . . and led into exile the last of [those] remaining in the city."

(2 Kings 25: 1-11)

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James Tissot. ***The Flight of the Prisoners*** **(gouache on board), c. 1896-1902. Jewish Museum, New York.**

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"Why did this happen?" you may ask. Scripture answers the question:

"Now Judah had been exiled to Babylon because of its treachery."

(1 Chronicles 9: 1)

To this day Jews remember and mourn the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple on the minor fast day of *Asara B'Tevet*, the tenth day of the Hebrew month Tevet (December/ January).

On October 29, 540 B.C. Cyrus the Great, king of Persia [modern-day Iran], mopped up his campaign against the Babylonia Empire and entered the city of Babylon, proclaiming himself "king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four corners of the world."

Within a year, Cyrus issued a series of reforms, written on a clay cylinder. Included under the reforms was a decree allowing *all* those taken captive by Assyria and Babylon to return to their homes and rebuild their cities temples and infrastructures—and Cyrus would foot the bill!

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In a brilliant move, Cyrus instituted a gigantic "Marshall Plan" to rebuild the Near East after decades of war.

And it worked.

Many Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the Temple. We read about it in Ezra and Nehemiah. The returning Jews completed the second temple in 516 B.C., and this temple stood (albeit greatly augmented by Herod the Great) until the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70.

In 1879, on an expedition sponsored by the British Museum, Assyro-British archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered the Cyrus Cylinder beneath ancient Babylon's main temple. It now resides in the British Museum in London.

Photograph by Mike Peel

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Judaism views the Exodus as God's great archetypical act of redemption, freeing Israel from 400 years of Egyptian slavery.

Thus, as God used Moses to redeem his people in 1446 B.C., so did he use Cyrus to redeem his people in 539 B.C. In Isaiah we read:

"Thus says the Lord to his <u>anointed</u> **[messiah]***, Cyrus,*
whose right hand I grasp,
subduing nations before him,
stripping kings of their strength,
opening doors before him,
leaving the gates unbarred:
I will go before you and level the mountains;
bronze doors I will shatter,
iron bars I will snap.
I will give you treasures of darkness,
riches hidden away,
that you may know I am the Lord,
the God of Israel, who calls you by name.
For the sake of Jacob, my servant,
of Israel my chosen one,
I have called you by name,
giving you a title,
though you do not know me.

(44: 1-4)

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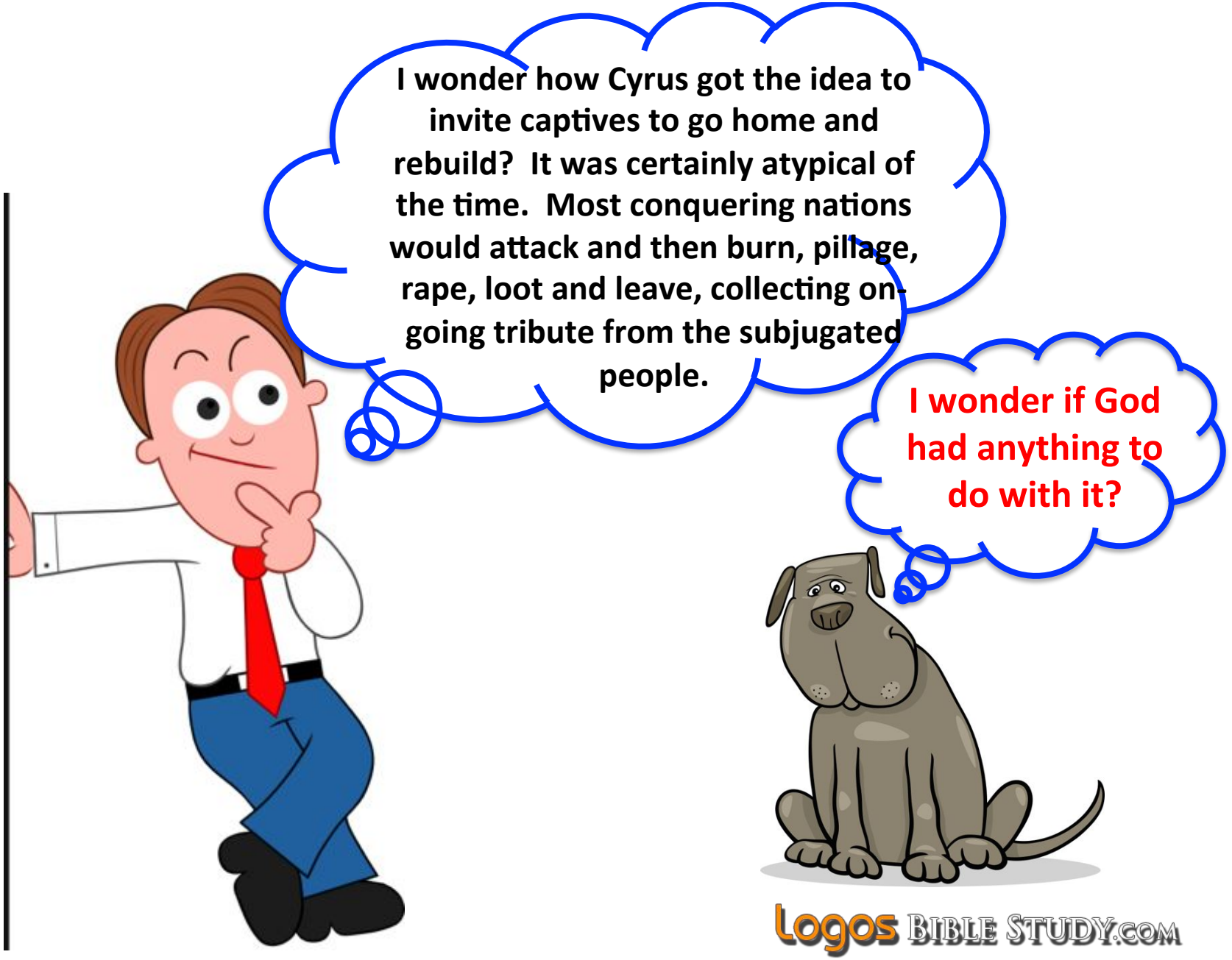
I wonder how Cyrus got the idea to invite captives to go home and rebuild? It was certainly atypical of the time. Most conquering nations would attack and then burn, pillage, rape, loot and leave, collecting on-going tribute from the subjugated people.
I wonder if God had anything to do with it?
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Our contemporary historian, Josephus (A.D. 37-100), mirrors 1st-century Jewish thinking on that possibility:

"In the first year of Cyrus's reign . . . God took pity on the captive state and misfortune of those unhappy men . . . for he stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and caused him to write throughout all Asia, 'Thus says King Cyrus. Since the Most High God has appointed me king of the habitable world, I am persuaded that he is the god whom the Israelite nation worships, for he foretold my name through the prophets **[Isaiah]** ***and that I should build his temple in Jerusalem in the land of Judaea.' These things Cyrus knew from reading the book of prophecy which Isaiah had left behind two hundred and ten years earlier."***

(*Antiquities* XI, i-ii, pp. 315-216.)

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Amazing! So, if we were living in the 2nd half of the 1st century we would certainly see the parallels between Babylon and Rome: how both oppressed God's people; how both destroyed the Temple; and how God redeemed his people from both through a Messiah. We would see the same story being re-enacted in our time!
Now I see shy Rome is called Babylon!
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David Roberts. ***The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70*** **(oil on canvas), 1850. Private Collection.**

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Now, let's turn back to our text and meet the "Whore of Babylon."

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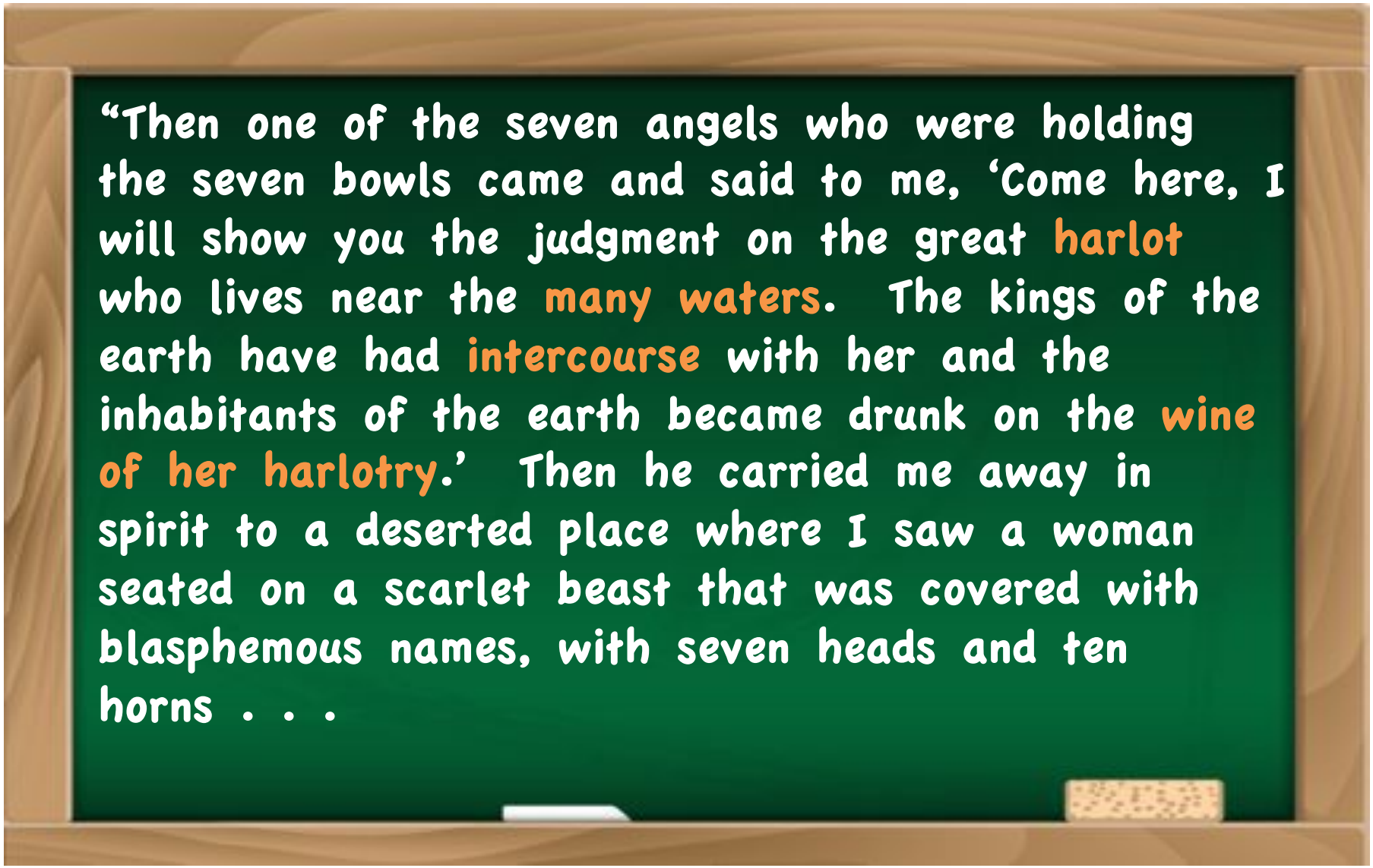

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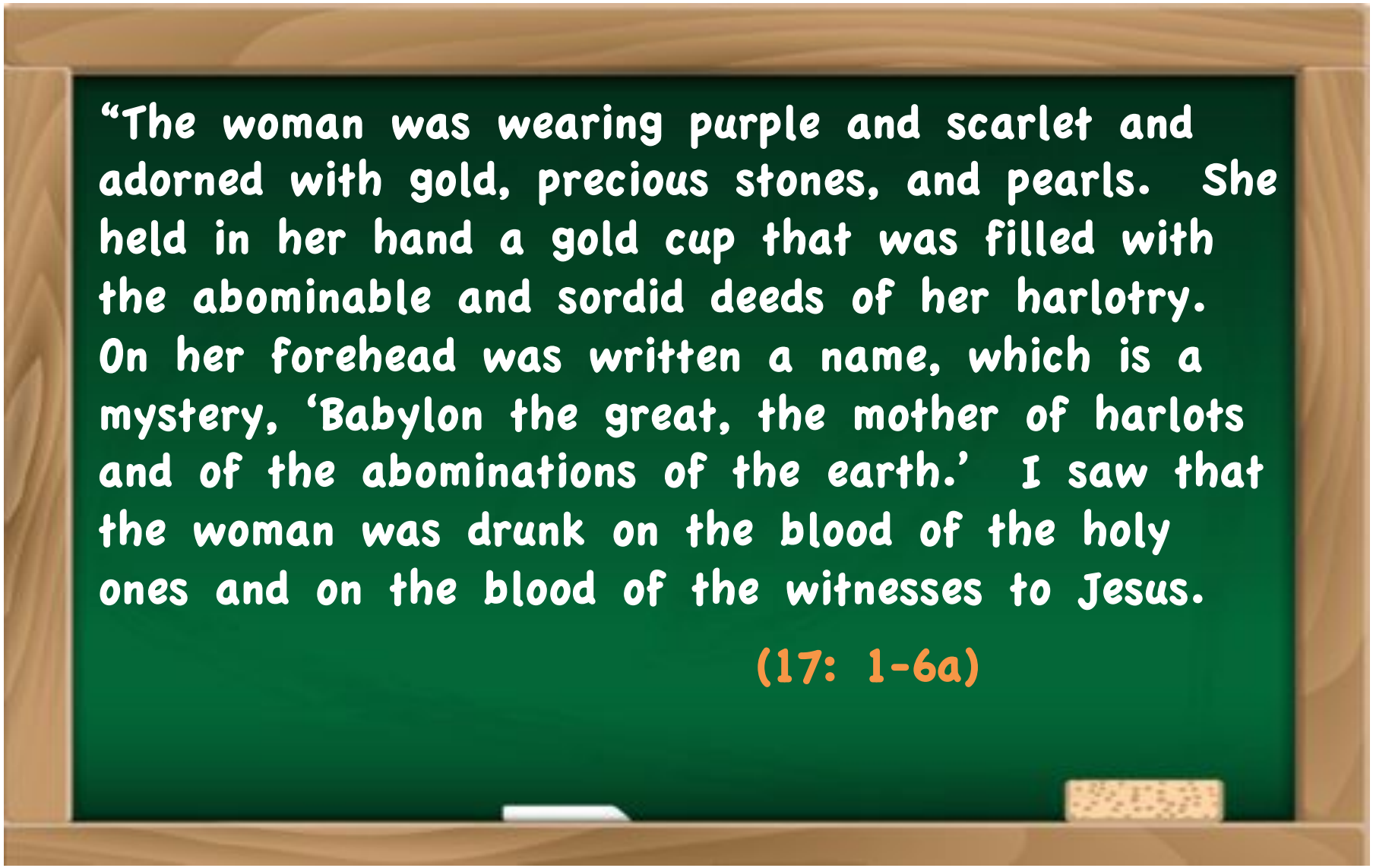

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"The Whore of Babylon," *Apocalypse with Patristic Commentary* (MS W.917, fol. 164v), c. 1800. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

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The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly use the image of a harlot [πόρνη, "por'-nae"] ("prostitute" or "whore") for a nation that sells itself for gain. Tyre, for example, was an enormously wealthy port city off the coast of modern-day Lebanon, famous for its merchants and trade. Here's what Scripture says about it:

"On that day, Tyre shall be forgotten for seventy years. At the end of seventy years, the song about the prostitute will be Tyre's song:

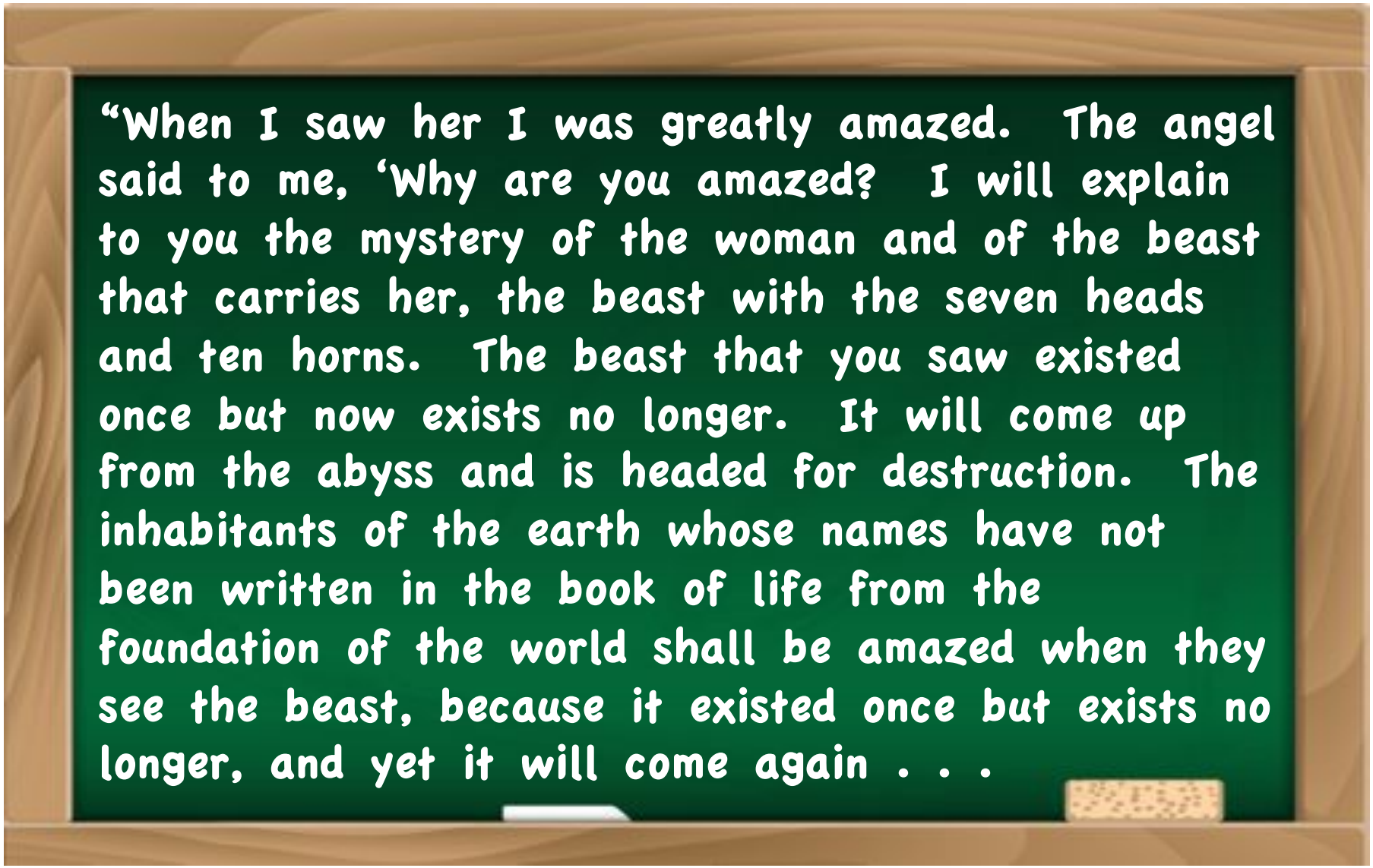
> ***Take a harp, go about the city, forgotten prostitute; pluck the strings skillfully, sing many songs, that you may be remembered.***

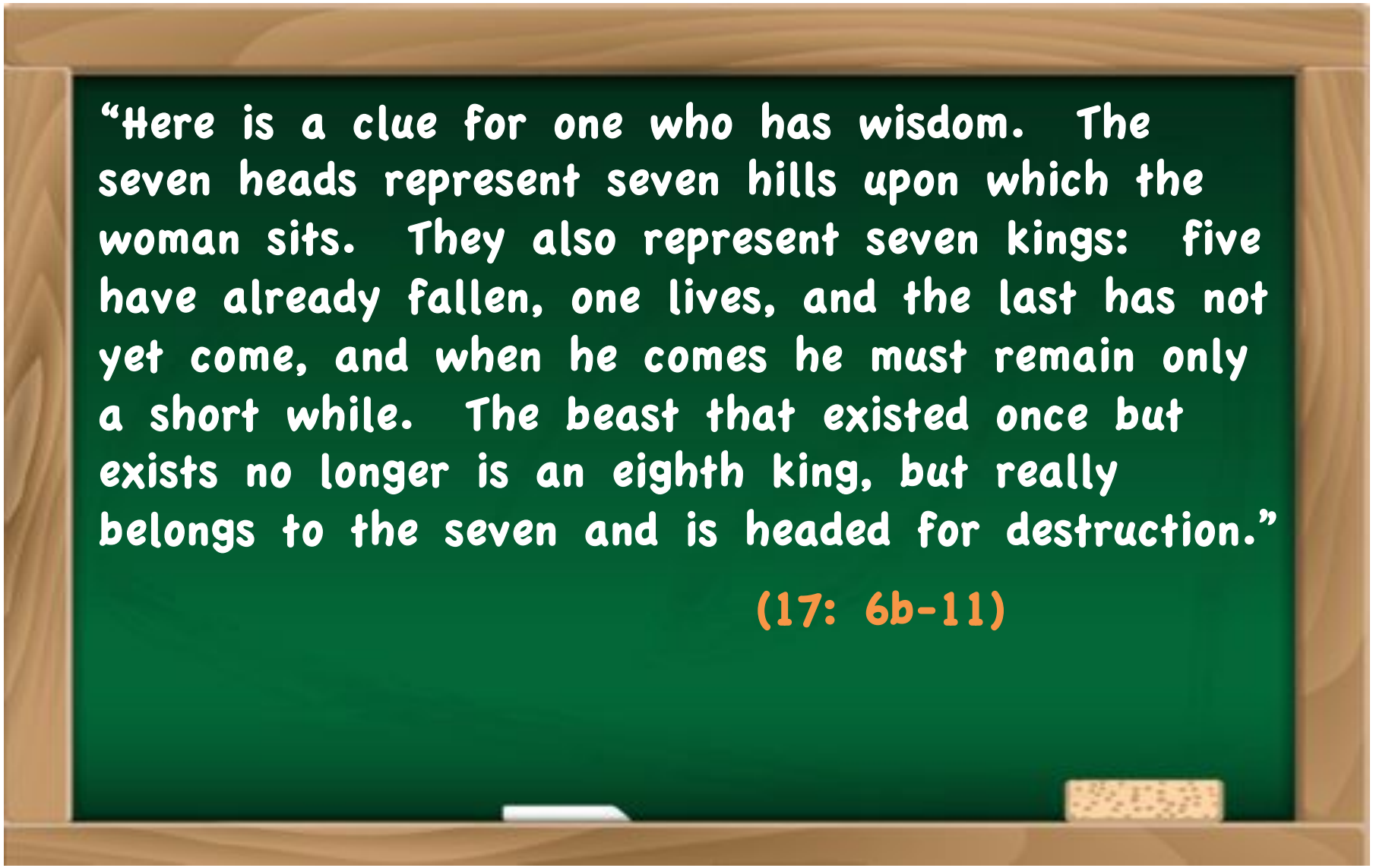
At the end of seventy years the Lord shall visit Tyre. She shall return to her hire and serve as prostitute with all the world's kingdoms on the face of the earth."

(Isaiah 23: 15-17)

- **The many waters suggests parallels between "Babylon," which sat alongside the Euphrates River with its vast network of irrigation canals and "Rome," which is the entire landmass surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.**
- **The kings of the earth have had intercourse with her [πορνεύω, "por-nyu'-o"], graphically illustrating the behavior of Rome's client kings, such as the 1st-century Herods in Israel, who knelt at the feet of their Roman overlords while collecting and delivering ever-greater taxes to Rome.**
- **Both the kings and the inhabitants of the earth became drunk on the wine of her harlotry; that is, they became addicted to the pleasures and luxuries provided by the woman clothed in "purple and scarlet."**

- **The woman was "seated on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names, with seven heads and ten horns". The woman represents the "inhabitants of the earth," those who do not belong to God, while the beast represents Rome itself, the city built on seven hills.**
  - **At the same time, this grotesque creature calls to mind the first beast that rose from the sea, the Antichrist, who also had seven heads, ten horns and was covered in blasphemous names (13: 1-10).**
  - **As the city of Rome is the nerve center of the Roman Empire and the emperor is its head, so is the beast the political nerve center of the world, and the dragon, Satan, is its head.**


"When I saw her I was greatly amazed. The angel said to me, 'Why are you amazed? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, the beast with the seven heads and ten horns. The beast that you saw existed once but now exists no longer. It will come up from the abyss and is headed for destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world shall be amazed when they see the beast, because it existed once but exists no longer, and yet it will come again . . .



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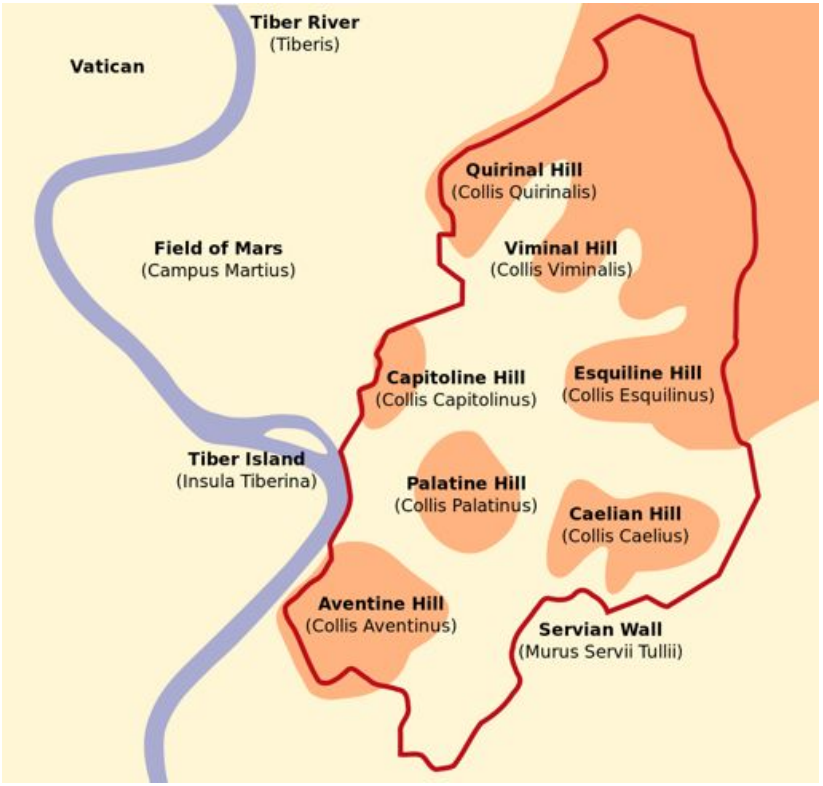
Aieeee! How do we figure this one out?

•**Let's start with the easy part: "The seven heads represent seven hills upon which the woman sits" (17: 9). Clearly, this is the city of Rome.**



Source: "Seven Hills of Rome," Wikipedia.

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•**Now, to the more cryptic references: "The beast that you saw existed once but now exists no longer" (17: 8). We identified the beast that the dragon called out of the water in 13: 1-10 as the Antichrist, the second person of Satan's infernal trinity, and the one who exercises political and economic power on behalf of the dragon. We also identified the "666" number of the beast as a genatria [jean-a-tree'-a] for Nero's name in Hebrew, *Nron Qsr* ["Neron Kaisar"].**

- **Nero reigned as Emperor, A.D. 54-68, and it was Nero who first systematically persecuted the Church in Rome; who martyred Peter and Paul; and who was Emperor at the start of the great Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-73, in which over 1 million Jews were killed and the Temple destroyed. To a Jew, Nero was Satan incarnate.**

- **Like the beast who had received a mortal wounded, but who had been healed, many believed that in the end times Nero would return in the person of the Antichrist.**

- **The seven heads also represent seven kings, five of whom "have already fallen, one lives, and the last has not yet come" (17: 10).**

Here they are:

1. **Nero (54-68, 14 years—suicide)**
2. **Galba (68-69, 8 months—assassinated)**
3. **Otho (69, 2 months—suicide)**
4. **Vitellius (69, 8 months—suicide)**
5. **Vaspasian (69-79, 10 years—natural death)**
6. **Titus (79-81, 2 years—poisoned?)**
7. **Domitian (81-96, 15 years—assassinated)**

Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vaspasian and Titus "have already fallen"; Domitian lives; and Nero will return.

Very nicely done, if I may say so!
I think you're just sucking up to the teacher.
Like you're not?
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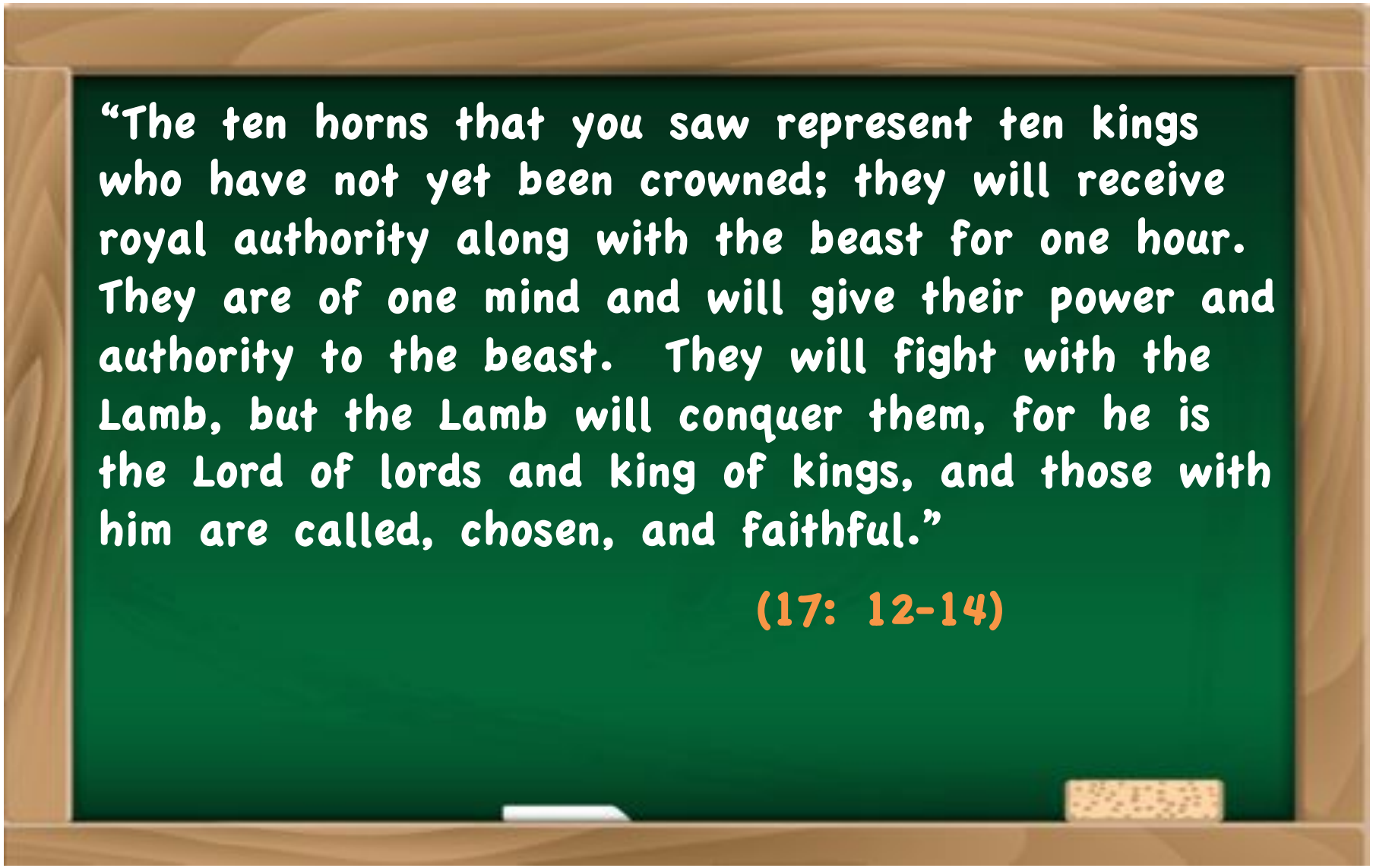
"The ten horns that you saw represent ten kings who have not yet been crowned; they will receive royal authority along with the beast for one hour. They are of one mind and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will fight with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and king of kings, and those with him are called, chosen, and faithful."
(17: 12-14)

- The "ten horns" represent "ten kings" who have "not yet been crowned." For that reason, we cannot identify who they are. They are either "client kings" (much as Herod the Great was in Judea, 30-4 B.C.), or they are influential political leaders of major Roman provinces.
    - In A.D. 68 the Roman Empire consisted of 36 provinces, 11 were public and were governed by a proconsul, while 25 were imperial and were governed by a senator of consular or praetorian rank.
- These "ten horns" will pledge their allegiance to the beast and will fight for him for "one hour" [μίαν ὥραν]; that is, for a short time.

The Roman Empire reached its greatest extent under the emperor Trajan, A.D. 98-117.

Source: "Roman province," Wikipedia.

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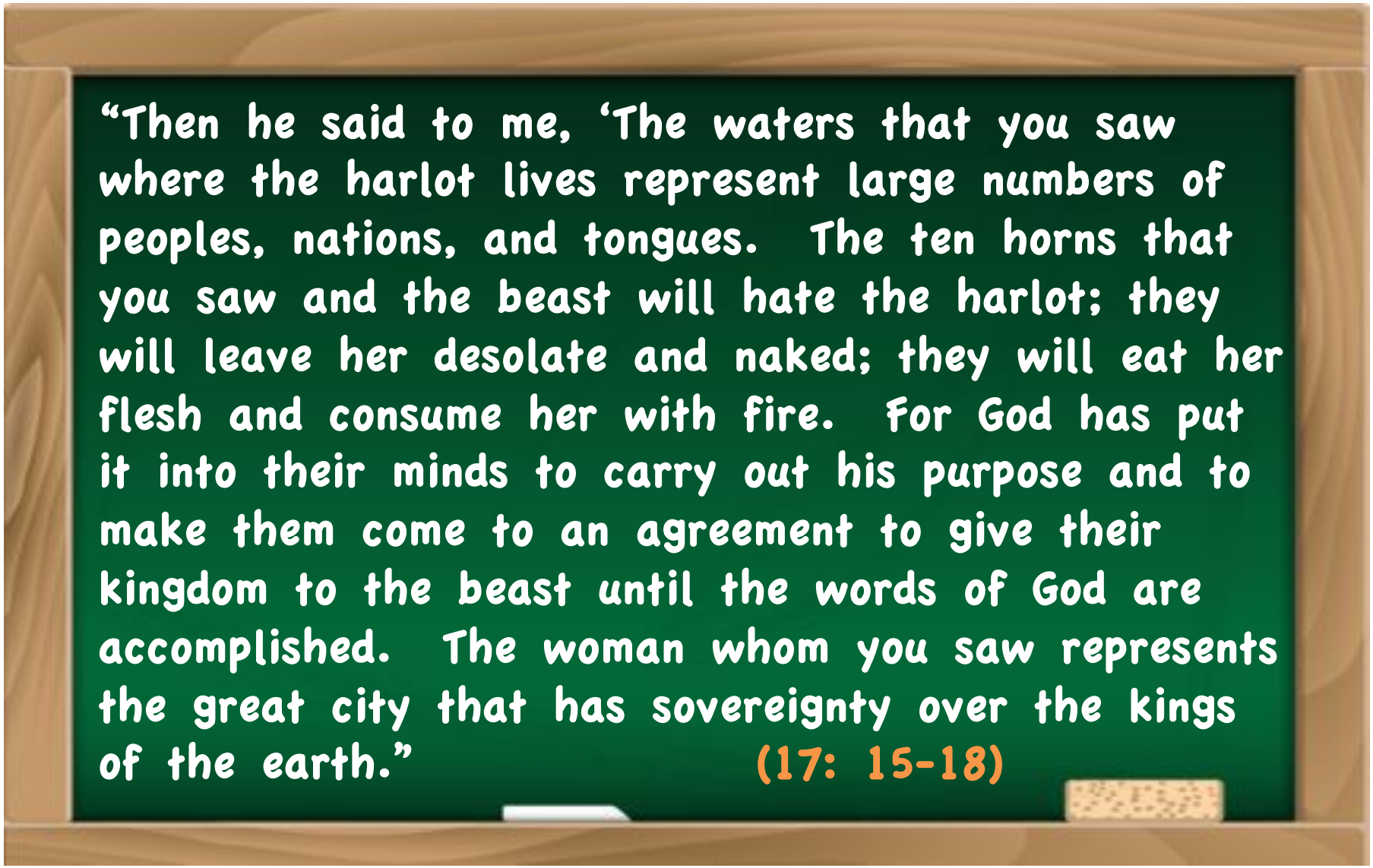
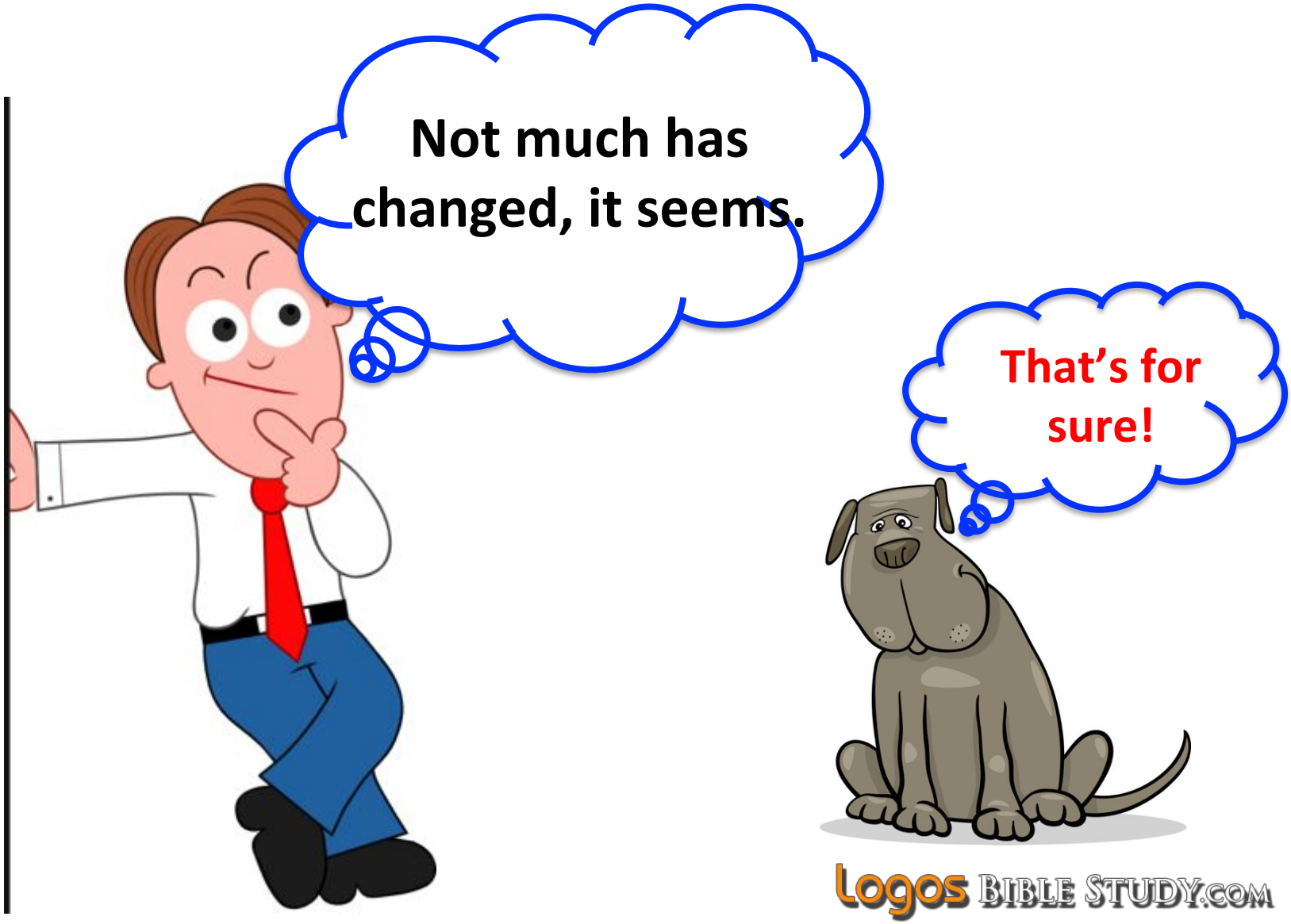

"Then he said to me, 'The waters that you saw where the harlot lives represent large numbers of peoples, nations, and tongues. The ten horns that you saw and the beast will hate the harlot; they will leave her desolate and naked; they will eat her flesh and consume her with fire. For God has put it into their minds to carry out his purpose and to make them come to an agreement to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are accomplished. The woman whom you saw represents the great city that has sovereignty over the kings of the earth." (17: 15-18)

Here we have a startling turn of events. The "waters" represent where the harlot lives (the land mass surrounding the Mediterranean Sea; that is, the Roman Empire), while the "harlot" represents the people who bear the mark of the beast, those living in arrogance, self-indulgence, luxury, decadence and delusion, a lifestyle enabled by the enormous wealth and corruption of the Empire itself.

As history careens toward the cliff, the beast and his allies suddenly turn on the people and devour them!

Outwardly, the political leaders had pandered to the population, cynically serving them; inwardly, however, the political leaders despised the people, using them to forward their own agenda, building their own massive wealth and inflating their own egos.


Not much has changed, it seems.
That's for sure!
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We shouldn't be surprised. Recall Beelzebub's words to the fallen angels at Pandemonium, the Satanic war council in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

"There is a place
(if ancient and prophetic fame in Heaven
Err not)—another World, the happy seat
Of some new race, called Man, about this time
To be created like to us, though less
In power and excellence, but favoured more
Of him who rules above . . .
Thither let us bend all our thoughts, to learn
What creatures there inhabit . . .
this place may lie exposed . . .
[Perhaps] ***some advantageous act may be achieved***
By sudden onset—either with Hell-fire
To waste his whole creation, or possess
All as our own, and drive, as we were driven,
The puny habitants; or, if not drive,
Seduce them to our party . . ."

(Book 2, 345-368)

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Satan and his crew hold humanity in utter contempt. Though they may flatter us as they seduce us, we must never forget their true intention.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper Collins, 2015), Screwtape, a demonic bureaucrat in the lower regions of hell, gives advice to his nephew Wormwood, concerning humanity. He says:

***"Of course I know that the Enemy* [God] *also wants to detach men from themselves, but in a different way. Remember always, that He really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them"* (p. 64).**

Now, a luminous angel steps center stage and announces a solemn, 3-part requiem on the fall of Babylon.

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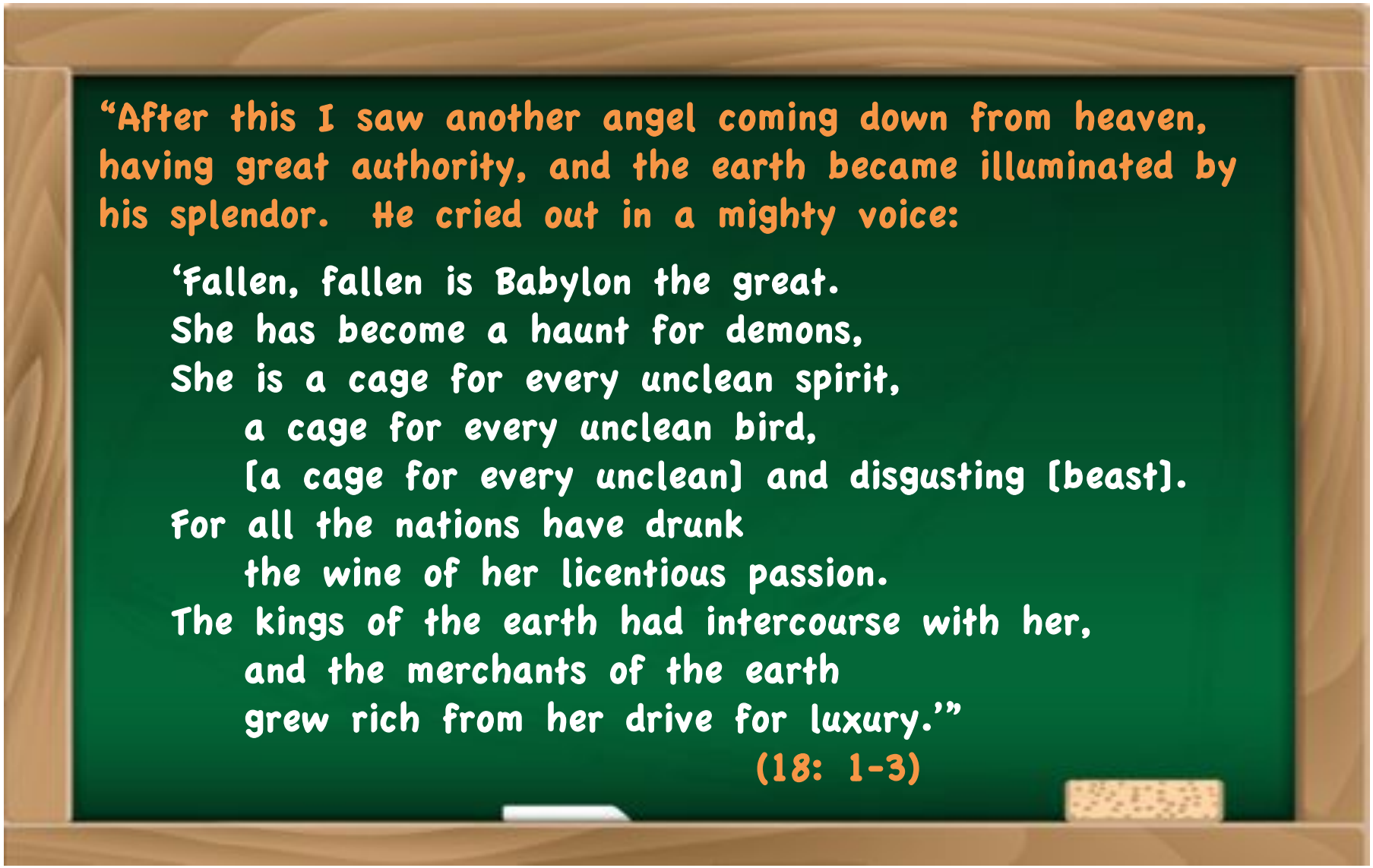
"After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth became illuminated by his splendor. He cried out in a mighty voice:
'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.
She has become a haunt for demons,
She is a cage for every unclean spirit,
a cage for every unclean bird,
[a cage for every unclean] and disgusting [beast].
For all the nations have drunk
the wine of her licentious passion.
The kings of the earth had intercourse with her,
and the merchants of the earth
grew rich from her drive for luxury.'"
(18: 1-3)

"Fall of Babylon," *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 24r), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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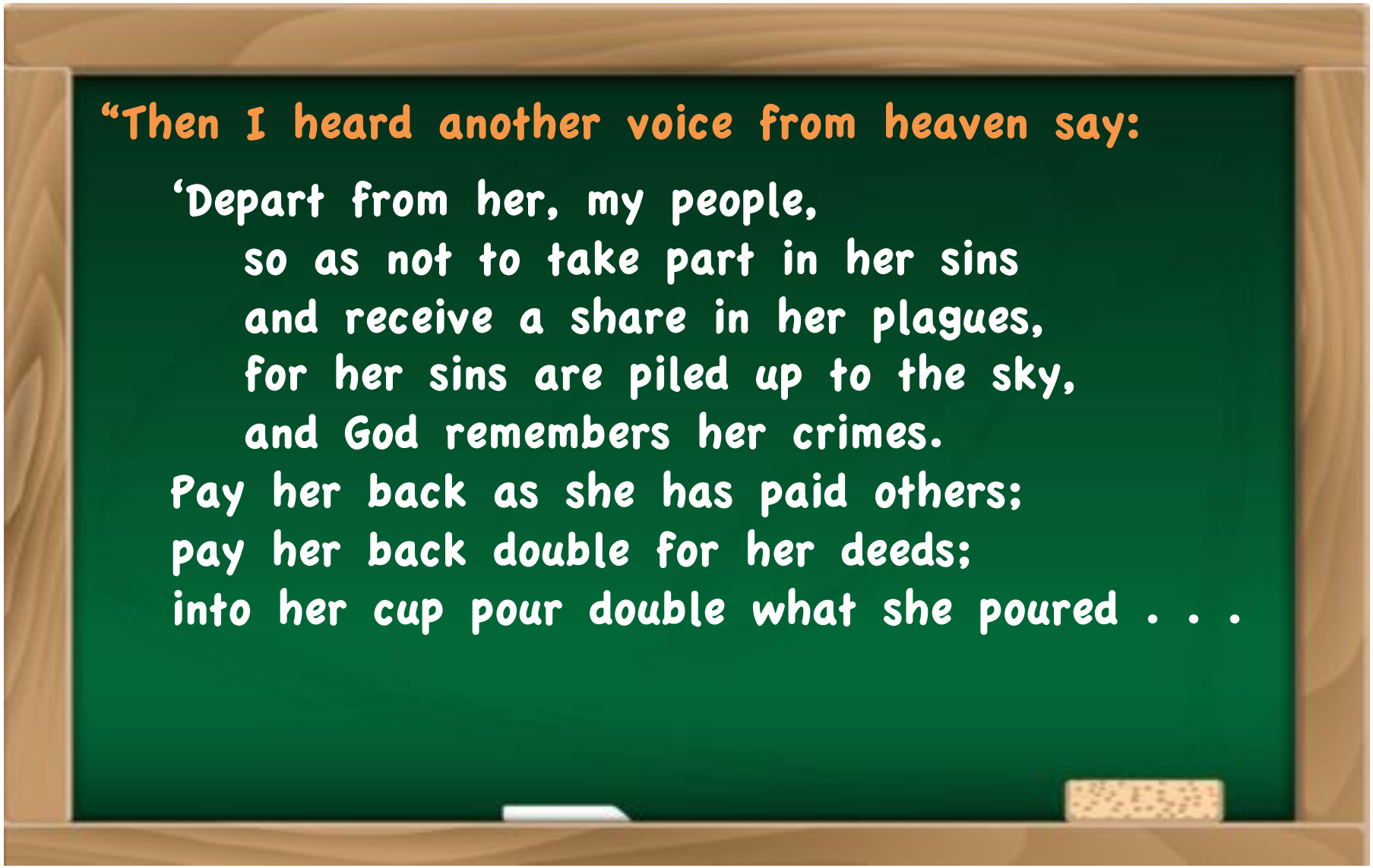
A second angel urges God's people to depart from the fallen city.



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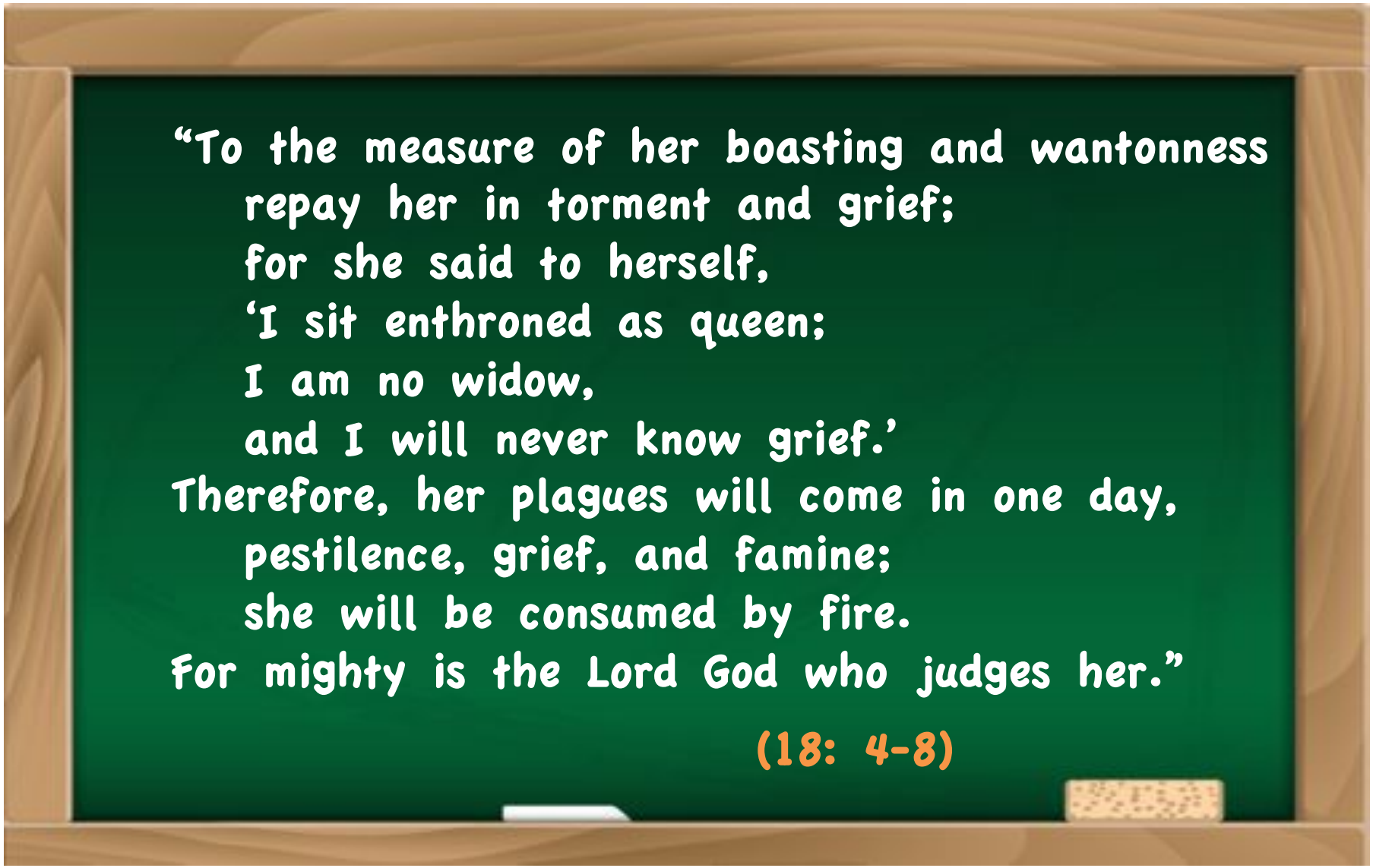
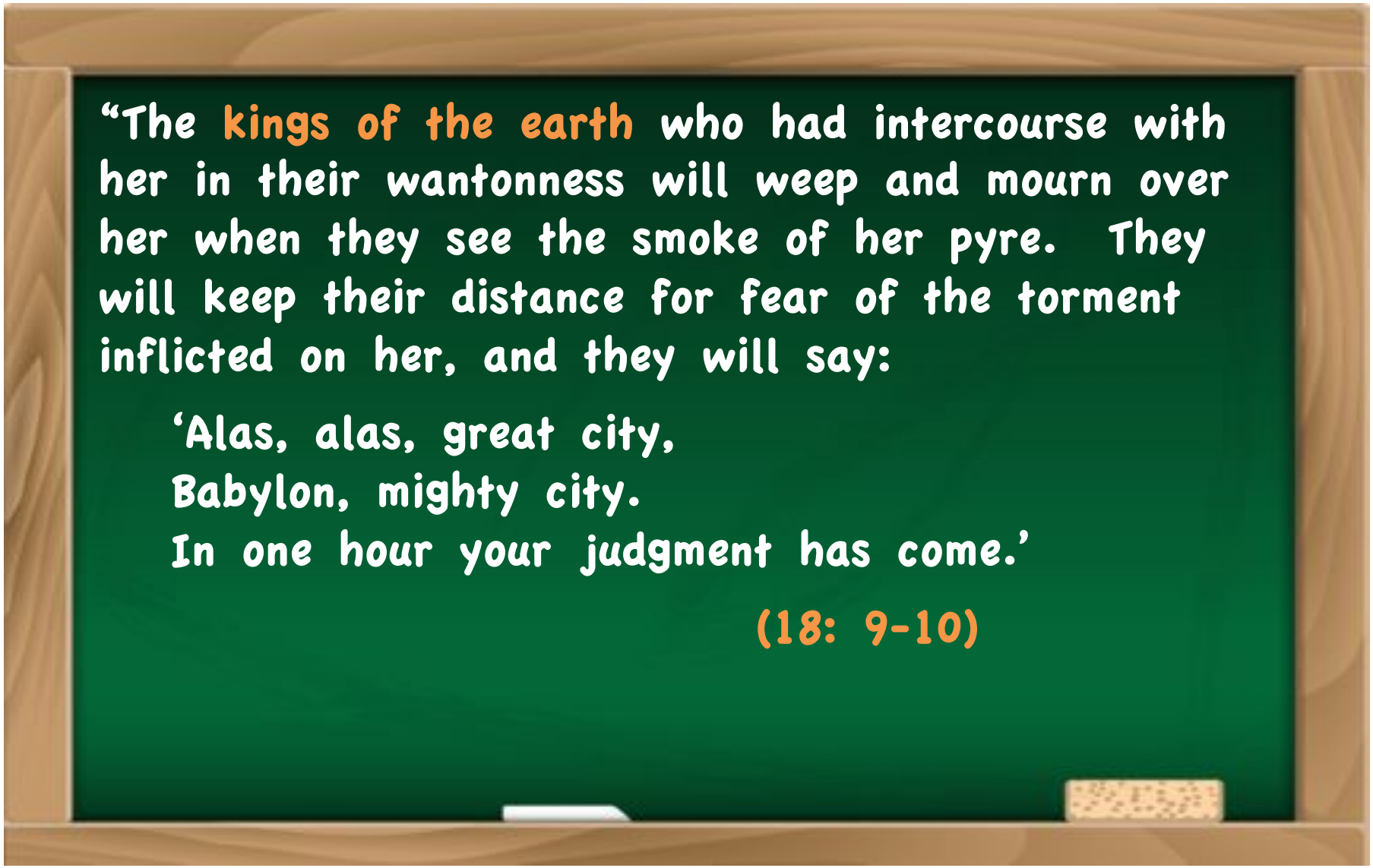
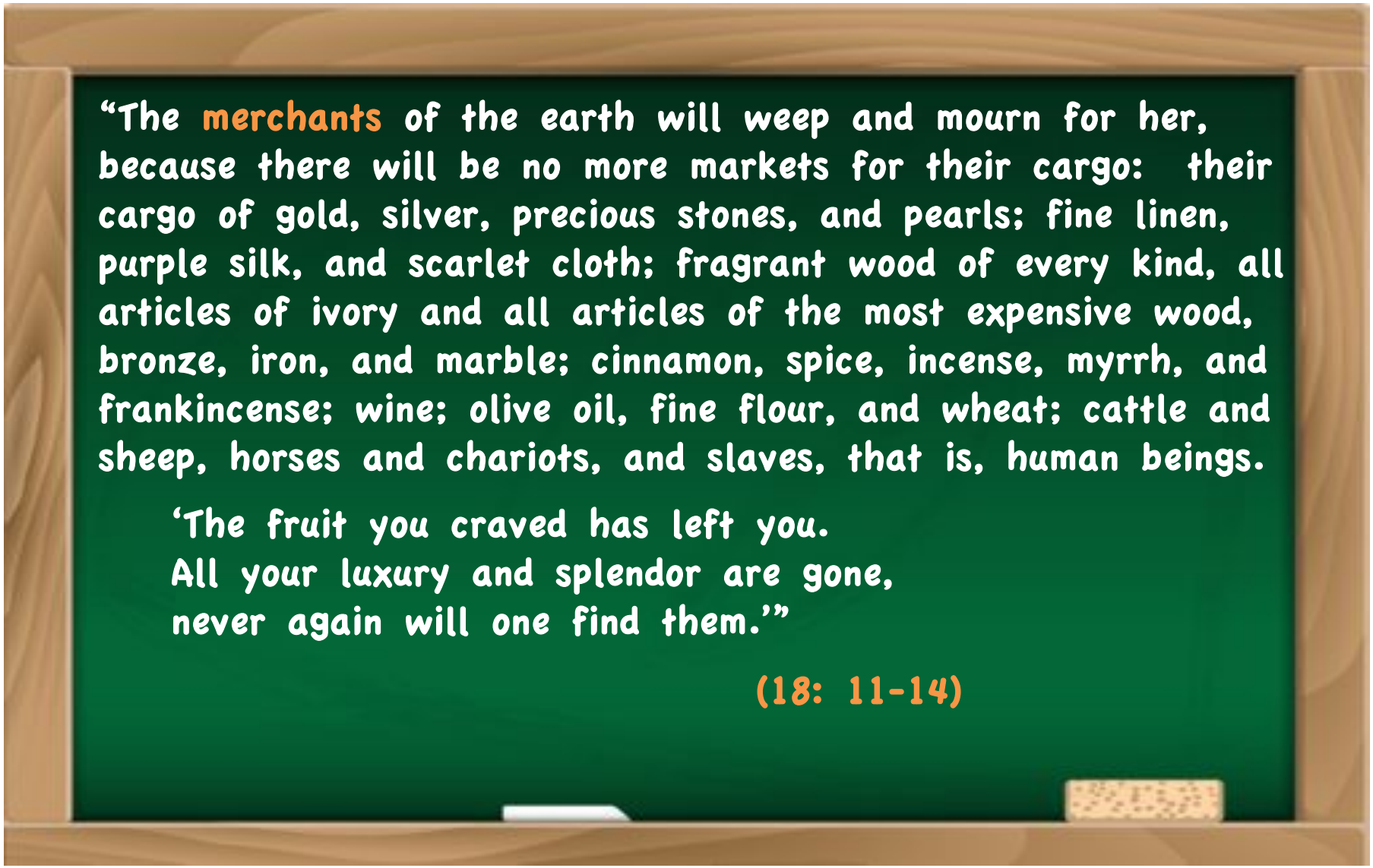

"To the measure of her boasting and wantonness
repay her in torment and grief;
for she said to herself,
'I sit enthroned as queen;
I am no widow,
and I will never know grief.'
Therefore, her plagues will come in one day,
pestilence, grief, and famine;
she will be consumed by fire.
For mighty is the Lord God who judges her."
(18: 4-8)

Then, as in a Greek chorus chanting a dirge, the kings, merchants and seafarers lament their loss, as Babylon collapses around them.


"The kings of the earth who had intercourse with her in their wantonness will weep and mourn over her when they see the smoke of her pyre. They will keep their distance for fear of the torment inflicted on her, and they will say:
'Alas, alas, great city,
Babylon, mighty city.
In one hour your judgment has come.'
(18: 9-10)


"The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn for her, because there will be no more markets for their cargo: their cargo of gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls; fine linen, purple silk, and scarlet cloth; fragrant wood of every kind, all articles of ivory and all articles of the most expensive wood, bronze, iron, and marble; cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, and frankincense; wine; olive oil, fine flour, and wheat; cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human beings.
'The fruit you craved has left you.
All your luxury and splendor are gone,
never again will one find them.'"
(18: 11-14)

"The merchants who deal in these goods, who grew rich from her, will keep their distance for fear of the torment inflicted on her. Weeping and mourning, they cry out:

'Alas, alas, great city,
wearing fine linen, purple and scarlet,
adorned [in] gold, precious stones, and pearls.
In one hour this great wealth has been ruined.'"

(18: 15-17a)

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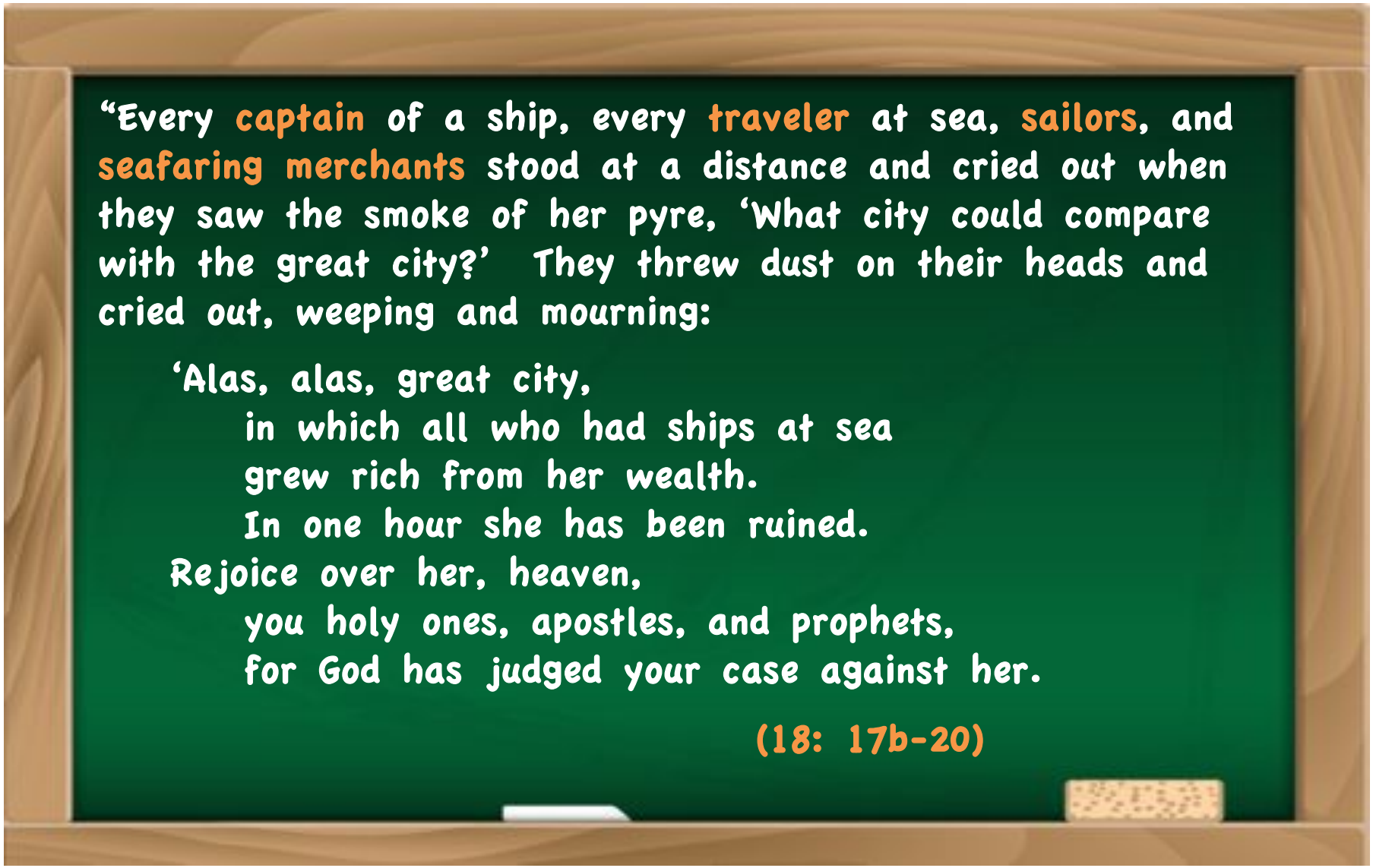
"Every captain of a ship, every traveler at sea, sailors, and seafaring merchants stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her pyre, 'What city could compare with the great city?' They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and mourning:
'Alas, alas, great city,
in which all who had ships at sea
grew rich from her wealth.
In one hour she has been ruined.
Rejoice over her, heaven,
you holy ones, apostles, and prophets,
for God has judged your case against her.
(18: 17b-20)

And then the third angel hurls a huge stone, like a millstone, into the sea.

"A mighty angel picked up a stone like a huge millstone and threw it into the sea and said:

With such force will Babylon the great city be thrown down
and will never be found again.
No melodies of harpists and musicians, flutists and trumpeters,
will ever be heard in you again.
No craftsmen in any trade will ever be found in you again.
No sound of the millstone will ever be heard in you again.
No light from a lamp will ever be seen in you again.
No voices of bride and groom will ever be heard in you again.
Because your merchants were the great ones of the world,
all nations were led astray by your magic potion;
in her was found the blood of the prophets and holy ones
and all who have been slain on the earth."

(18: 21-24)

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“An Angel Hurls a Millstone into the Sea ,” *Apocalypse*
(miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 31v), c. 1370-1390.
British Library, London.

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Placing Revelation in its proper historical and cultural context, we are correct to identify the Roman Empire in the 2nd half of the first century as the scarlet beast with seven heads and the whore who rides it as the people of the world, those marked with the number of the beast, 666.

Christ—the Lamb of God—and those washed in his blood (the Church), stand in sharp contrast to this world, which is *"under the power of the evil one"* (1 John 5: 19).

They are polar opposites.

But we should also remember that "Babylon" still permeates our world today.

When political, social and economic systems promote rampant materialism, rabid self-interest, and the illicit (but highly profitable) trade in drugs, pornography and human trafficking; when corporations use 3rd-world sweatshops to produce products for an insatiable consumer market; when greed trumps goodness, we participate in today's "Babylon."

We become little more than whores riding the back of the beast.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Who is the "Whore of Babylon"?
2. What is the 7-headed beast that she rides upon?
3. Who are the seven kings that correspond to the beast's seven heads?
4. Who benefits from the 7-headed beast?
5. Why does the "beast" turn on the "harlot" and devour her?

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