

Lesson 39

Verse 9 begins with the phrase, “And here is the mind which hath wisdom.” That simple statement is a warning sign that we are about to read something that is not that simple. It is a warning that we are about to read something that is going to require some very careful interpretation. Why do I say that? Because we have seen phrases like that used elsewhere in the Bible.

In Matthew 24:15, when Jesus referred back to Daniel, Jesus said, “whoso readeth, let him understand.” There Jesus talked about the “abomination of desolation” in Daniel, and, as we know from our study of that book, there are two different abominations of desolation in Daniel. I think Jesus was alerting his hearers that they needed to be extra careful in interpreting those prophecies to make sure they were looking at the right abomination of desolation.

And remember the symbol of 666 that we saw in Revelation 13:8? How did that verse begin? It began with the phrase, “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding.” Again, that symbol was one that required some extra attention to detail, and so it came with a warning sign.

I think we have another warning sign at the beginning of verse 9. We always need to be very careful when we study the Bible, but when we reach a verse with a warning sign, we need to be extra careful and cautious, and we need to slow down to make sure we don’t miss anything.

We know that the symbols we are seeing here in Chapter 17 are particularly important — why? First, because we have seen them so many times. This is our third time to see the seven heads and the ten horns. And second, we know these symbols are particularly important because an angel steps out of the vision to explain what they mean. God did not want there to be any doubt or any confusion as to their meaning. We are told what they mean by the inspired text.

So let’s take our time and look at verses 9, 10, and 11.

Verse 9: “The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth.”

Rome is not mentioned by name anywhere in the book of Revelation, but verse 9 comes about as close as possible to mentioning Rome by name without actually doing it!

Verse 9 would be like someone asking what state you live in, and then you responding, “I live in the Lone Star State.” True, you didn’t mention Texas by name, but everybody knows you are referring to Texas. That is precisely the situation with verse 9’s reference to the “seven mountains.” The “seven mountains” are to Rome what the “Lone Star State” is to Texas. They are both identifiers.

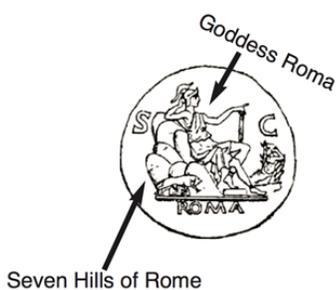
Rome has for millennia been known as the city that sits upon seven hills. That was true in the first century, and it remains true in the twenty-first century. Rome has throughout its history been known as the city that was built upon seven hills.

The identification in verse 9 of the seven mountains would have been immediately clear to any first century reader. The commentaries are virtually unanimous in their agreement on this point.

Mounce: “There is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built upon seven hills.”

Swete: “No reasonable doubt can be entertained as to the meaning of these words.”

Gentry: “Perhaps no point is more obvious in Revelation that this one: Rome is the one city in history that has been distinguished for and universally recognizable by its seven hills. ... Suetonius and Plutarch record for us that in the time of Domitian the festival of Septimontium (“the feast of the seven hilled city”) was held annually in December to celebrate the seven hills enclosing Rome. ... This point is well nigh indisputably certain. Indeed, *‘there is scarce a poet that speaks of Rome but observes it.’*”



Look at the coin shown to the left and on the handout available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com. That coin was minted during the reign of Vespasian, which (as will see when we get to verse 10) was the time this book was written. In fact, Vespasian’s face is shown on the front of the coin (which is not shown on the handout). The reverse of the coin (which has been redrawn on the handout to make the details easier to see) shows the Roman goddess Roma sitting upon the seven hills that surrounded the city of Rome.

And near the bottom of those seven hills, also below the sitting woman, we see a beast suckling the mythic Roman founders, Romulus and Remus.

A woman sitting on seven hills? A woman sitting on a beast? Where have we seen that before? Isn't that exactly what we saw at the beginning of Chapter 17? Isn't that the precise image we were shown?

Just think about this coin for a moment, and put yourself in the place of someone living in Asia Minor who is a member of one of the congregations who originally received this book.

- You are living in the Roman empire.
- Everyone you know lives in the Roman empire.
- You receive this book from John, who you know had been exiled to Patmos by Rome.
- You, too, are being persecuted by Roman authorities, and you fear every knock at your door.
- Nero died about a decade ago, but rumors abound that Nero did not really die at all, but that instead Nero is coming back to finish what he started, both in destroying Rome and in destroying the church.
- You have in your pocket the coin shown on the handout. And that's not all — you know (as does everyone else) that a very common image for Rome is the goddess Roma sitting on seven hills. You see that image all the time. If you want to see it now, you can just reach into your pocket and pull out that coin, which also shows that woman sitting atop a beast, which depicts the mythological founding of Rome.
- John's book arrives, and you anxiously await hearing it read aloud at the next worship service. When that day comes, you are hearing it read for the very first time, as is everyone else around you.
- When that reading gets to Chapter 17, you hear the reader speak of a blood thirsty harlot sitting atop a beast and sitting on seven mountains.

Put yourself in that person's place. **Who do you think that woman is?** Who do you think this book talking about? China? Russia? The Papacy? The European Economic Union? Jerusalem? No. No. No. No. No. There can be no doubt what you would think when you heard this description from Chapter 17 — this book is talking about Rome.

Back in Lesson 5 we looked at ten ways to completely miss the boat when it comes to interpreting this book. We looked at ten things we should do if we want to make sure we get this book absolutely wrong. Remember the first item on our list?

Make sure that our interpretation has no particular message for the initial readers of the book who were suffering persecution and praying to God for deliverance. Ideally, our view of this book should create panic rather than provide comfort.

Here is where we really put that warning into operation. I have to wonder how can anyone read this description in Chapter 17, and consider that description in the context of its initial audience, and then conclude that anything other than Rome is in view here?

How would someone with this coin in his pocket understand the blood thirsty harlot sitting on seven mountains in Chapter 17? If anyone ever tells you this book is about some other city (such as Jerusalem, for example), they need to explain to you how a first century reader living in Rome and with that Roman coin in his pocket would have understood this image in Revelation 17 to mean anything other than Rome.

If our interpretation of this book would not have made any sense to its first century audience, then our view is wrong. If our view of this book would not have brought comfort the suffering first century church, then our view is wrong. You can take that to the bank!

And just to completely remove every shred of doubt, we have verse 18 at the end of this chapter: “And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.”

Who else other than Rome could that possibly be? Was there any sense in which the city of Jerusalem reigned over the kings of the earth? None at all. When this book was written Jerusalem was rubble, and prior to its destruction Jerusalem was not reigning over anything but was instead itself being reigned over by Rome. **The great city here is Rome.**

Verse 10: “And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.”

If anyone ever asks you *when* the book of Revelation was written (or, more precisely, when this vision was received by John), you should direct them right here to verse 10 in Chapter 17. This verse describes seven kings, and it tells us

that **“one is.”** What that means is that of these seven kings one of them was presently ruling when the vision was received. **If we can identify that king, then we will know, at least approximately, when the book was written.**

So who are these seven kings? Well, if one of them was presently reigning, then we know that we are looking for first century Roman kings.

Oh, but someone might say, Rome didn't have kings — Rome had emperors. Really? What did the Jews say in John 19:15 when Pilate asked them if they wanted him to crucify their king? They responded, **“We have *no king but Caesar.*”** Yes, Rome had kings. And yes, that is what they were called by their first century subjects — they were called kings because that is what they were.

So the seven kings are seven Roman emperors — but which seven Roman emperors?

First, should we be looking for a **literal** seven emperors, or should we view this number seven **figuratively**? To which I answer, **yes and yes!**

In the angel's explanation, the seven mountains were a literal seven mountains, so let's start by looking for a **literal** seven kings. But I think what we will find after we have identified those seven kings is that the number seven in that list of seven kings will have a very profound **symbolic** significance, and especially as it pertains to the **eighth** king that will follow.

So our task then is to see if we can locate seven emperors of Rome that make sense given the clues in verses 10-11. So what are those clues? What are we looking for? Look at verses 10-11.

- We must find five kings who have fallen.
- We must find one king (the sixth king) who is.
- We must find another king (the seventh king) who is yet to come but who will remain only a little while.
- We must then find an eighth king who is of the seven and who goes into perdition.

Who are those eight kings? Please look at the handout available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com. There you will see a list of the twelve Caesars from the famous book of that name written by the ancient historian Suetonius. You can see that those twelve caesars are divided into four groups.

The **first group** contains the most famous Caesar of all, Julius Caesar. He is so famous that his family name became a synonym for ruler, both in the first cen-

ture and in modern times. The modern designations of Kaiser and Czar both come from the name Caesar.

But Julius Caesar was not a king. He wanted to be a king, and that desire was what got him killed, but he was not a king. Julius Caesar led a republic rather than an empire. We'll say more about him later.

The **second group** is the Julio-Claudian dynasty, which began with the first emperor of Rome, Augustus, and ended with the death of Nero in AD 68.

The **third group** contains the three civil war kings who reigned and died within the single year AD 69. That year has been called the year of four emperors, and just that description alone tells you how much turmoil was occurring in the Roman empire at that time. Can you imagine the turmoil in our own country if we have four presidents in a single year? That is what was happening in Rome about a decade before this book was written.

The **fourth group** is the Flavian dynasty, which consisted of Vespasian and his two sons, Titus and Domitian.

So in that list of twelve Caesars we have eleven emperors, with three of those eleven hardly qualifying as emperors.

The two dynasties in that list (there's that number two again!) give us eight emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero in the first dynasty, and Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian in the second dynasty. (That makes **eight** kings. Maybe we're on to something here!)

So how do we go from twelve Caesars to eight kings? To begin, we have two big decisions to make: First, where do we start on the list? And second, what do we do with the three civil war kings?

Where do we start? We really have only two options — we either start with Julius Caesar or we start with Augustus. And what do we do with the three civil war kings? Again, we really have only two options — we either include them or we ignore them.

For the mathematicians among us, that strategy gives us four possibilities. We start with either Julius Caesar or Augustus, and then we count out eight kings, either including or ignoring the three civil war kings. Those four possibilities are shown on the handout as Options A, B, C, and D (each of which is a list of eight Caesars).

- Option A starts with *Julius Caesar* and *includes* the three civil war kings.

- Option B starts with *Julius Caesar* and *excludes* the three civil war kings.
- Option C starts with *Augustus* and *includes* the three civil war kings.
- Option D starts with *Augustus* and *excludes* the three civil war kings.

Some argue for additional options that would arise if we separate the eighth king from the others in time to permit intervening kings between the seventh king and the eighth king. But why then would we be told that the reign of the seventh king would last only a short time? That detail suggests that the eighth king follows immediately after the seventh king.

So which of the four options is the right choice?

Right from the start I think we can rule out Option B. Why? Because Option B places **Vespasian** in the role of the seventh king who was to reign only a short time, and Vespasian reigned for eleven years. In Roman emperor terms, eleven years is not a short time.

What about the other three options? Can we exclude any of them on that same basis? No. **Galba** (the seventh king in Option A) reigned seven months, **Otho** (the seventh king in Option C) reigned ninety-five days, and **Titus** (the seventh king in Option D) reigned twenty-six months. Those kings all reigned a short time, so we can't rule out any of the other options on that basis.

But Options A and C have at least two other problems.

First, recall that the sixth king is the king "who is" reigning in verse 10. With Option A, the sixth king would be **Nero**, and with Option C, the sixth king would be **Galba**. What that means is that Options A and C would push the date of this book back to the reign of Nero or shortly thereafter, which in my opinion is too early. We talked about that issue in our introductory lessons.

Second, Options A and C provide poor candidates for the eighth king, who goes into perdition. With Option A, the eighth king would be **Otho**, and with Option C, the eighth king would be **Vitellius**. Neither of those two emperors fits the descriptions of the eighth king. In fact, neither of those two kings had time to do much of anything. Otho committed suicide following his three month reign, and Vitellius reigned only eight months before being beheaded and having his head paraded through the streets of Rome.

Another problem with Option A is that it starts with **Julius Caesar** as the first emperor. Rome was a republic under Julius Caesar, not an empire.

Yes, Julius Caesar was a powerful leader, but he was not a king. The Roman republic originally entrusted the government to two consuls so that the citizens of Rome would be protected against the tyrannical rule of a single man. But it was soon felt that circumstances might arise in which it was important for the safety of the state that the government should be vested in the hands of a single person, who should possess absolute power for a short time, and from whose decisions there could be no appeal to any other body. That person was called a dictator, and Julius Caesar held that office for five terms, eventually being declared “Dictator in Perpetuity.” (For a modern analogy, think Putin.) Now, there may be a fine line between a Roman emperor and a Roman dictator in perpetuity, but there is a line. Julius Caesar was not a king.

And if we include Julius Caesar on the list of Roman emperors, then on what basis do we include **only** Julius Caesar? Why not also include Crassus and Pompey? They ruled with Julius Caesar in the First Triumvirate. And why not include Lepidus and Marc Antony, who ruled with Augustus in the Second Triumvirate? And why not include Sulla, whose own dictatorship in 82 BC set the precedent for Julius Caesar’s dictatorship and the eventual end of the Republic under Augustus?

In short, if we open the door for Julius Caesar, it will be hard to close the door for many others. And yes, it is true that some ancient historians include Julius Caesar on lists along with Augustus and his followers, but that points more to the fame of Julius Caesar than to his office. And, yes, it is true that Suetonius included Julius Caesar on his famous list of twelve Caesars, but no one is arguing that Julius Caesar was not a Caesar! What we are saying is that Julius Caesar was not a king and that the first Caesar who was a king was Augustus. And historians say the same thing.

But is that the only reason to start with Augustus? No. I think there is an even better reason to use Augustus as the starting point. The New Testament starts with Augustus on the throne.

Luke 2:1 — And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

Augustus was the emperor who was around to welcome the King of kings into this world, and whether or not Augustus saw that star in the sky, his empire would never be the same again. So, in addition to being the **historical** starting point, Augustus is the **natural** starting point for a student of Scripture. Between Augustus and Domitian we have the entire first century New Testament

period. So it should not surprise us at all if these prophecies are focused on Augustus, Domitian, and the kings in between.

So where does that leave us? By the process of elimination we are left with Option D.

Does Option D fit the evidence? Yes, Option D fits the evidence very well. In fact, Option D fits the evidence so well that we could likely have ruled out the other options on that basis alone.

But Option D completely ignores the three civil war kings: Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. What is the basis for doing that? There are at least two bases for ignoring those three kings — one basis from secular history, and a second basis from the the book of Daniel.

Let's look first at the basis from secular history for ignoring the three civil war kings — the three civil war kings were hardly kings at all. In fact, as one commentary explains: "the provincials never recognized them as having been emperors. From the provincial standpoint Vespasian succeeded Nero." And remember — this book was initially addressed to the provincials living in Asia Minor. If you asked them which emperor came after Nero, they would likely have answered Vespasian, and for all practical purpose they were right.

In addition to that basis, the book of Daniel gives us another basis for ignoring the three civil war kings.

***Daniel 7:7-8** — After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots: and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things.*

***Daniel 7:23-25** — Thus he said, The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces. And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten*

kings that shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time.

What an amazing and wonderful historical prophecy! Remember — Daniel was written **six centuries** before the events we are studying here in Chapter 17. And yet right there in Daniel 7 we read this prophecy: “I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another little horn, before whom there were **three of the first horns plucked up by the roots.**” And we read: “And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, **and he shall subdue three kings.**”

We know that Daniel 7 is talking about first century Rome. Rome was the fourth beast in Daniel 7:7 that followed the first beast (Babylon), the second beast (Medo-Persia), and the third beast (Greece). And Daniel 7 (just like Revelation 17) is telling us about the kings of Rome in the first century. In Daniel 7, there are ten kings, followed by an eleventh, called a “little horn” in Daniel 7:8. And what does Daniel tell us about three of those eleven kings — Daniel tells us they are “plucked up by the roots” — they are uprooted! They are subdued!

Daniel was written around 539 BC. The year of four kings occurred in AD 69. That’s a difference of over six centuries! As surprising as a year with four kings must have been to the Romans, the inspired prophet Daniel had written about it over six hundred years earlier — and Daniel had told us **when** it would happen! The three uprooted kings in Daniel 7 are none other than Galba, Otho, and Vitellius.

By why are they uprooted in Daniel 7? Why are they ignored in Revelation 17? Why not just include them and have eleven kings rather than eight kings? Let’s hold those questions until we get to verse 11.

So where are we in verse 10?

Who are the five kings who have fallen? They are the first five Rome emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. These are the same five emperors who span the time from the birth of Christ to the death of Paul.

Those five emperors were all dead by the time this book was written — they had fallen.

Who is the king who is? The king who was reigning at the time of this vision was Vespasian, who reigned from AD 69 to 79. The book of Revelation was written during his reign, and likely late in his reign. As we discussed in the introduction, the sad states of some of the congregations in Revelation 2-3 suggests a later rather than an earlier date for the book. So perhaps the book was written close to AD 79, near the end of Vespasian's reign.

Who is the king who is yet to come but who will remain only a little while? That king is Titus, Vespasian's eldest son who reigned for twenty-six months. As we discussed in the introduction, Titus was most likely murdered by his younger brother, Domitian. No one (other than Domitian!) would have guessed that Titus would reign only a short time. He was only 39 when he became emperor, and the people all expected him to reign for a very long time. But God knew otherwise.

And so who then is the eighth king in the next verse who goes to perdition? None other than Domitian, Vespasian's younger son, who began where Nero left in persecuting the church.

As I said, Option D is a very good fit! Let's next take a closer look at Domitian.

Verse 11: "And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition."

Evil number eight — Domitian! If we are on the right track here, and I think we are, then the eighth king in verse 11 is Domitian, Vespasian's younger son and Titus' brother.

A moment ago we asked some questions about the three uprooted kings: Why are they uprooted in Daniel 7? Why are they ignored in Revelation 17? Why not just include them and have eleven kings rather than eight kings? I think we can now answer those questions.

Those three kings are uprooted and ignored because God wanted Domitian to be counted as number **eight**. That's why. The number eight is the symbolic number of renewal and resurrection — the eighth day starts a new week. Domitian was the one who **renewed** Nero's attack on the church. And Domitian was the one who some falsely believed was the **resurrected** Nero come back to life.

Yes, there are seven **literal** kings at issue here, but that number seven was not chosen at random — that number seven was chosen so that Domitian would be number eight. The **literal** seven was chosen for a **symbolic** reason.

Listen to what Milligan had to say about the number eight:

The number six itself awakened a feeling of dread in the breast of the Jew who felt the significance of numbers. It fell below seven just as eight went beyond it. [The number eight] denoted more than the simple possession of the Divine. As in the case of circumcision on the eighth day, of the great day of the feast on the eighth day, or of the resurrection of our Lord on the first day of the week, following the previous seven days, it expressed a new beginning in active power.

The Year of Jubilee, when everyone got the chance to begin all over again, followed seven sevens of years (Leviticus 25). The leper who had been excluded from the congregation was given a new beginning on the eighth day (Leviticus 14:10). Male children were circumcised on the eighth day.

And there's another reason why God wanted Domitian to be represented by the number eight — because Domitian was a **false eight!** And maybe that's yet another reason why the three kings are ignored — to show that Domitian's depiction by the number eight was **contrived**. Domitian was not a true eight, he was a false contrived eight.

Why does that matter? Because it once again stresses the contrast between what is true and what is false. **Jesus is the true eight!** If eight is the number for renewal and resurrection, then no one is more of an eight than Jesus! In early Christian literature, Jesus was sometimes referred to as 888. **Jesus is the perfect eight!**

John 11:25 — I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

Domitian could never make that statement or make that promise. Domitian was not God. But Jesus is God, and Jesus could and did make that statement and that promise. **Christ or Caesar?** That central theme is on display here when it comes to the number eight!

We have already looked at the link between the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation, and we looked very closely at that link when we studied Daniel verse by verse a few years ago.

We just saw a fascinating link between the two books when it comes to the three civil war kings. But there is perhaps no more fascinating link between Daniel and Revelation than that provided by the Roman emperor Domitian. John wrote about Domitian a few years before he came to power. Daniel wrote about Domitian six centuries before he came to power!

Daniel 7:8 — *I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another **little horn**, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots: and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things.*

Daniel 7:19-22 — *And of the ten horns that were in his head, and of **the other which came up**, and before whom three fell; even of that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spake very great things, whose look was more stout than his fellows. I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them; Until the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom.*

Daniel 7:24-26 — *And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and **another shall rise after them**; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time. But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end.*

Paul also told us about Domitian in Second Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 — *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there*

*come a falling away first, and **that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition**; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.*

Do those descriptions fit with what we know from history about the Emperor Domitian?

Was Domitian a braggart? Listen to what Suetonius had to say about him in his book, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*:

From his youth he was far from being of an affable disposition, but was on the contrary presumptuous and unbridled both in act and word.

Did Domitian claim to be deity? That is what Daniel 7:25 is saying when it describes Domitian as someone who would think to change the times. (In Daniel 2:21 we read that God changes the times.) Did Domitian put himself in the place of God? Listen to Suetonius:

With no less arrogance he began as follows in issuing a circular letter in the name of his procurators, 'Our Master and our God bids that this be done.' And so the custom arose henceforth of addressing him in no other way even in writing or in conversation.

But how was Domitian "different from the former ones" as Daniel 7:24 says? William Barclay wrote:

But with the coming of Domitian there came a complete change. Domitian was a devil. He was the worst of all things — a cold blooded persecutor. With the exception of the mad Caligula, he was the first Emperor to take his divinity seriously, and to demand Caesar worship.

Domitian was the first to make it a policy of the empire that all who refused to worship him be persecuted. Also, Domitian began an empire policy of persecution against Christians that lasted for years after he died.

But did Domitian "subdue" the three civil war kings as Daniel 7:24 says he would do? Yes, through his family and his father Vespasian, who became em-

peror of Rome after the three civil war kings died in AD 69. And Domitian and Titus, Vespasian's sons, also played a role in those events.

Domitian's dynasty took over after Nero's dynasty ended. And the two great persecutors of the church, Nero and Domitian, each marked the end of their respective dynasties. They did not pass their kingdoms on to their children, but rather their dynasties died when they died.