The Harlot of Revelation

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The whole of Revelation chapter 18 is devoted to the fall of "Babylon" (18:2, 10, 21), which is also called "the great harlot" (Rev 17:1; 19:2, ASV), and "the great city" (Rev 18:10, 16, 18-19, 21, EHV).
John helpfully identifies this city as Jerusalem.
He does so in Revelation 11:8 (EHV):

> *Their dead bodies will lie on the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.*

The book of Revelation is contrasting two women who are two cities.
An unfaithful woman (city) is judged, and a new, faithful bride takes her place.
Standing in stark contrast with the NEW Jerusalem, we are to understand the Harlot as OLD Jerusalem who has broken the marriage covenant with the Lord, her husband. The Lord is divorcing his Old Covenant people and taking to himself a new people who (in Christ) are holy and faithful.
Interestingly, the Harlot's punishment by fire — mentioned four times (Rev 17:16; 18:8-9, 18) — was the punishment prescribed in the Mosaic Law for a priest's daughter who acted as a harlot (Lev 21:9).

Why was the Harlot judged?
Because she killed and persecuted God's people (Revelation 18:24):
"And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

We have here a clear echo of Jesus' indictment of Jerusalem in Matthew 23:35-36.
See also Revelation 16:6; 17:6; 19:2.

Revelation was written and circulated to the Asian churches far earlier than is commonly supposed.
There is no basis whatsoever for the late date (ca. 95 AD) authorship of the book other than a somewhat ambiguous statement made by Irenaeus (who, it should be noted, often got things horribly wrong).
There is in fact good reason to believe that Revelation was written and circulated just prior to the onset of Nero's brutal persecution, which began in Rome in November of 64.
Revelation served to prepare first-century believers for the ordeal they were about to face.
They were the ones who were promised blessing for heeding its message (Rev 1:3; 22:7).

There is also good reason to believe that the seven-fold judgments of Revelation (the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls) are intended to echo the judgments threatened in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 — the curses for **covenant unfaithfulness**. Note in this regard:
(a) the seven-fold judgments threatened in Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24, 28.
(b) the four-fold judgments of sword, famine, plague, and wild animals in Leviticus 26:22, 25-26; Ezekiel 5:17; 14:21; Revelation 6:8.

The notion of spiritual adultery is prominent in the Old Testament:
Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord and to his covenant is likened to a wife who plays the harlot.
See Deuteronomy 31:16; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 2:20; 3:1-14, 20; 13:27; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea 1, 2, and 3; 1 Chronicles 5:25.
Jesus twice called his contemporaries "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; cf. Mark 8:38).
Judgment for covenant unfaithfulness is certainly behind the warnings found in Malachi 4, Matthew 3:7-12; Luke 13:1-9; Acts 2:19-21, 40; Hebrews 10:25-31; James 5:1-9; and 2 Peter 3.

We should view Revelation as a prophecy of the Jewish War and its culmination in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.
And this makes perfect sense, for Revelation is John's extended version of the Olivet Discourse.
In that Discourse Jesus foretold his coming in judgment against Jerusalem via the Roman army.
All the events foretold therein were to transpire in the first century (Mt 24:34; Mk 13:30; Lk 21:32).

Note too that in Luke 21:22 Jesus declares concerning the fall of Jerusalem:
"for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written."

Jesus here clearly indicates that the judgment of AD 70 would represent the definitive fulfillment of all Old Testament Vengeance and Day-of-the-Lord prophecies.

Jerusalem in Revelation is called "Sodom", "Egypt", and "Babylon", for she is both wicked and oppressive.
By persecuting God's people, she had become his (and their) enemy.
Some of the judgments meted out in Revelation are reminiscent of Egyptian plagues:
Boils (16:1-2; cf. Ex 9:8-12); Waters turning to blood (16:3-6; cf. Ex 7:14-25); Darkness (16:10-11; cf. Ex 10:21-29); Hail (16:21; cf. Ex 9:13-35).[1]
Some of the judgments in Revelation 18 echo Jeremiah's prophecies against Babylon in Jeremiah 50 – 51.
The Lord there had decreed **vengeance** on Babylon for its wickedness (Jer 50:15, 28).
So too, the judgment of the Harlot was God's vengeance for the spilled blood of his people.
Through the Roman army God enacted vengeance on Jerusalem — "to fulfill all that is written." (Luke 21:22).
See also Hebrews 10:30, which cites from Deuteronomy 32:35-36.

Revelation follows the pattern found in the Old Testament prophets:
A key theme in the prophets is **the transformation of Jerusalem** — via judgment and final restoration — from a wicked city to a faithful one.
For example, in Isaiah 1 Jerusalem is called **Sodom** (1:10) and **a harlot** (1:21). God then promises to judge and purge the city of evildoers (1:24-25) so that she is again "the city of righteousness, **the faithful city**" (1:26).

[1] The fifth bowl (darkness) is poured out upon the throne of the Beast (Rev 16:10). Rome and Italy and other parts of the Empire are probably intended here. In other words, while Revelation's judgments are primarily directed against Jerusalem, other first-century nations come under judgement as well. These, after all, aid the Harlot in her persecution of the saints.

Then in Isaiah 2:1-4 we see transformed Jerusalem attracting the attention of the whole world:
The nations come to Jerusalem to enquire of God. The law and word of God goes out from Zion, with the result that the whole world is transformed. Shalom everywhere!
Isaiah here is surely anticipating the messianic kingdom — the gospel/kingdom/church age in which we now live.
The New Jerusalem (the Church, God's people) serves as a light and ministers gospel healing to the nations (Rev 21:24; 22:2).

In the final week of his ministry, Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders that the kingdom would be taken from them and given to others (Mt 21:43). Revelation shows the fulfillment of this.
The Jews believed they were God's chosen people, but this would soon no longer be the case.
To the church in Philadelphia Jesus declared (Revelation 3:9, EHV):

> *"Look, I will make those who are from the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not but are lying — look, I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them realize that I have loved you."*

Revelation shows the divorce of Israel — her expulsion from God's covenant.
God is taking to himself a new people, who are holy and righteous in Christ.
And this is consistent with New Testament teaching elsewhere:

- Paul in Ephesians 5:25ff. depicts the Christian Church as Christ's holy wife (cf. Rev 21:2, 9).
- Paul in Galatians 4:24-31 contrasts earthly Jerusalem with the heavenly city.
  Unbelieving Jews enslaved under the Mosaic Law belong to the earthly city (4:25).
  They were soon to be disinherited (4:30).
  Believers under the New Covenant are citizens of the heavenly city (4:26).
- For Paul the true "Israel of God" comprises believing Jews and Gentiles (Gal 6:16).
  The true children of Abraham are those who are spiritually circumcised and who emulate Abraham's faith and obedience (Rom 2:28-29; 4:11-12; Php 3:3; Col 2:11).
- The author of Hebrews, writing to believing Jews, notes how they had come to the heavenly city (12:22).
  The Old Covenant was now obsolete (8:13). The earthly kingdom was about to be shaken and removed; the new spiritual kingdom of Christ would remain forever (12:27-28).
  Therefore his readers must not abandon their Christian profession and revert to the rituals of Judaism.
- Peter applies to the Church what was formerly said of Israel (1Pet 2:9-10; cf. Ex 19:6; Hos 2:23).
- 2 Peter 3 anticipates God's fiery judgment on Jerusalem — fulfilled in AD 70.
  The "elements" (3:10, 12, KJV) that were about to melt probably refer to Jerusalem and its temple.
  For it was in these entities that the Jewish "scoffers" of 3:3-4 were placing their hope.
  In contrast, Christians were anticipating the imminent new world order that would be characterized by ever-increasing "righteousness" (3:13).

Recommended reading:
The Temple Was Opened and the Ark of the Testimony was Visible!
Author: Don K. Preston.
https://donkpreston.com/the-temple-was-opened-and-the-ark-of-the-testimony-was-visible/.