

## SESSION 10

## REVELATION 16:17–18:24

*Babylon: The Final Bowl Judgment*

One of the most challenging problems of interpretation in the Book of Revelation is the identification of "Babylon the Great" in chapters 17 and 18. In this session, we will attempt to survey some of the approaches that have been taken by various commentators and to come to some reasonable conclusions.

**I. VARIOUS APPROACHES TO REVELATION 17–18****A. The Preterist Approach**

Those of the preterist school understand Babylon as a *code name* for either ancient Rome (known for its persecution of Christians), or for first-century Jerusalem. Those taking the latter position would see Babylon's destruction as being fulfilled in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The *Jerusalem view* is favored by "reconstructionists" (Dominion Theology) such as Kenneth Gentry and Gary DeMar, but also by some conservative amillennialists such as R. C. Sproul.<sup>1</sup> The "Rome view" has sought support from the statement in Rev 17:9, "the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits" (but this is a doubtful allusion to Rome as the city of seven hills—see comments below on Rev 17:9-11). The statement in Rev 17:18 ("the great city which reigns over the kings of the earth") could easily be understood as Rome. Finally, there does seem to be some support that "Babylon" was a code name for Rome in other literature (2 Baruch 11:1; *Sib. Oracles* 5.143, 158; Hippolytus, *Christ and Antichrist* 36; and possibly 1 Peter 5:13). Aune takes the preterist (Rome) position: "The ten horns (the nations allied with Rome) and beast (a Roman emperor, presumably Nero) will turn on the city of Rome and destroy it. This prediction may reflect the rumor that Nero would return from the east with Parthian allies to conquer Rome."<sup>2</sup>

**B. The Reformers (Historicist Approach)**

The Reformers generally saw the beast as the papacy and consequently interpreted Rev 17 in terms of ecclesiastical religion focused in the Roman Catholic Church (= the Harlot). The call in Rev 18:4 ("come out of her, My people") gave justification to the Reformation. The fall of Babylon supposedly looked at the future overthrow of the papal system of religion and government.

**C. Symbolical Approaches**

Numerous attempts have been made to understand "Babylon" in some sort of symbolical way, still a common view today. The lack of agreement, however, reflects the deficiency to this approach. The following commentators are representative of this approach:

**1. George Ladd** (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 1972)

He understands Babylon as the symbol of human civilization with all its pomp and circumstance organized in opposition to God (221). The Harlot is then the final manifestation of the total history of godless nations (222). The "seven mountains" are not a reference to Rome, but seven empires with whom the woman has formed

---

<sup>1</sup> This position was also defended by a ThM graduate of Dallas Seminary. See D. Ragan Ewing, "The Identification Of Babylon The Harlot In The Book Of Revelation," ThM thesis, Dallas Seminary, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, 2:957.

an adulteress connection (227).

2. **Alan Johnson** (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., 2006)

Babylon has multiple equivalents and is better “understood as the archetypal head of all entrenched worldly resistance to God” (736). It represents the total culture of the world apart from God (736). Johnson rejects the “seven mountains” as a reference to Rome, but takes them as a symbol for the fullness of blasphemy and evil (742). For him, the Harlot reflects the common characteristics of many harlot-city societies with their ungodly ways and attitudes. He states, “Amazingly, all the harlot-city societies mentioned in Scripture have certain common characteristics also reflected in John’s description of the great Babylon, in which he merges the descriptions of ancient Babylon, Tyre, and Jerusalem into one great composite” (738).

3. **Robert Mounce** (*NICNT*, 1977)

Mounce attempts to take Babylon as a reference both to ancient Rome as well as symbolically to future opposition to the church. First, Babylon is an allusion to Rome as the center of satanic power and oppression against the fledgling church (304, 306). But later (310) he claims that it is that great system of godlessness which leads men away from the worship of God and to their own destruction. Hence, the Harlot is Rome, but it stands for a dominant world system based on seduction for personal gain (307), and at the close of history as the final and intensified expression of worldly power (308). Mounce understands the “seven mountains” as a reference to Rome, the city built on seven hills (314).

**D. Futurist Approach — Literal**

Several commentators have taken the reference to Babylon as a literal city. Other aspects of the *total picture* may indeed be symbolical (e.g., the seven heads and ten horns), but it at least involves a literal city. The admonition in Rev 18:4 (“Come out of her, my people”) hardly seems applicable if Babylon were merely a “religious system.” It is doubtful in the Tribulation that true believers would be part of such a religious system.

1. Some dispensationalists understand this city to be Babylon itself, to be rebuilt on the Euphrates River during the Tribulation period (so John Walvoord, Robert Thomas, Charles Dyer, and Kenneth Allen). Even as a literal city, however, Babylon may represent more. Thomas (2:207) notes, “A reference to the literal city does not exclude further implications regarding political and religious systems connected with the city.” Keep this hermeneutic in mind: the presence of symbols in the passage does not warrant the conclusion that everything must be understood symbolically!

Walvoord sees two entities in view: Babylon of ch 17 is a religious system (destroyed at the midpoint of the last seven years), but Babylon of ch 18 is literal rebuilt Babylon (destroyed at the end of the Tribulation).

2. An alternative view is to see “Babylon” as a reference to a literal city, but not one to be rebuilt on the site of ancient Babylon. Rather “Babylon” stands as a *code name* for apostate Jerusalem (see discussion to follow).

**E. Preterist – Futurist Approach** (dual fulfillment, with Jerusalem as the “harlot”)

More recently C. Marvin Pate has argued (*Four Views on the Book of Revelation*) that “Babylon” has a dual fulfillment. He claims that there is an initial and partial fulfillment with ancient Jerusalem that was destroyed in AD 70, but that there will also be a future fulfillment in the Tribulation preceding the Second Coming. Likewise, he sees the Beast of Rev 13 as having a dual fulfillment. The Beast is first the imperial cult of Rome (in John’s day), but is also a future antichrist in the Tribulation. Pate’s argument is based on

the "already–not yet" hermeneutic.

## II. THE UNITY OF CHAPTERS 17 AND 18

Before evaluating the various approaches that have been suggested, it is important to first show the unity of these two chapters. As the following details reveal, these two chapters must be interpreted together. However we understand the Harlot in Rev 17, our view must be consistent with how she is viewed in Rev 18.

### References to "the kings of the earth"

- 17:2 . . . with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality
- 17:18 the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth
- 18:3 and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality
- 18:9 And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality . . .

### References to "Babylon the great" or "the great city"

- 16:19 And Babylon the great was remembered before God
- 17:5 And upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery, Babylon The Great
- 17:18 And the woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth
- 18:2 Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
- 18:10 Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city!
- 18:16 Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen . . .
- 18:18 What city is like the great city?
- 18:19 Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich . . .
- 18:21 Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence

### References to "immorality"

- 17:2 with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality
- 17:2 those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality
- 17:4 having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality
- 18:3 the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality
- 18:3 and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality
- 18:9 And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality

### References to persecution

- 17:6 And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.
- 18:24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth
- 19:2 . . . He has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her

### References to fire, burning or smoke

- 17:16 the ten horns ... and the beast ... will hate the harlot ... and will burn her up with fire
- 18:8 she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong
- 18:9 the kings of the earth ... will weep ... when they see the smoke of her burning
- 18:18 . . . crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning
- 19:3 Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever.

### References to receiving God's wrath, judgment or destruction

- 16:19 Babylon the great . . . to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath
- 17:1 I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters
- 18:4 Come out of her [Babylon] ... that you may not receive of her plagues
- 18:6 Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double
- 18:7 to the same degree give her torment and mourning
- 18:8 in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine
- 18:8 for the Lord God who judges her is strong
- 18:10 For in one hour your judgment has come.
- 18:19 in one hour she has been laid waste
- 18:20 Rejoice . . . because God has pronounced judgment for you against her.

19:2 He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality

### Conclusion Regarding Unity

The preceding evidence suggests that Babylon in chapter 17 and Babylon in chapter 18 are one and the same. Different aspects of the city (and her influence) may be stressed, but the same basic city-system is in view in each. The idea of interpreting them differently or as separate judgments, as Dr. Walvoord has suggested, faces the difficulty of the obvious unity reflected in the details. He wrote,

A comparison of chapters 17 and 18 reveals that these are different events. The woman in chapter 17 was associated with the political power but was not the political power itself, and her destruction apparently brought no mourning from the earth. By contrast the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18 brings loud lamentation from the earth's political and economic powers. Instead of being destroyed and consumed by the 10 kings, here the destruction seems to come from an earthquake, and it is probable that this is an enlarged explanation of what was described in 16:19-21.<sup>3</sup>

## III. EVALUATION OF APPROACHES

### A. The Preterist Position

The preterist position has numerous problems. If one takes the view that Babylon represents ancient Jerusalem (and her destruction in AD 70), then obviously the Book of Revelation would have been written before these events (since it predicts the destruction). [Some scholars (e.g., Ewing above) have attempted to argue for an early date of the book]. But the best evidence indicates the Book was written toward the end of the 1st century, long after the destruction of Jerusalem. Furthermore, the beast and the false prophet are personally destroyed by Christ according to Rev 19. Most commentators would see chapter 19 as the personal return of Christ at the Second Coming, but the preterist view necessitates seeing Rev 19 as Christ's coming in judgment (but not the Second Coming)—obviously Christ did not personally and visibly return in either AD 70 (when Jerusalem was destroyed) or in AD 476 (when Rome was destroyed). Further evidence against the Rome view: (1) she was probably never the great city of commerce as described in ch 18, and (2) Rome's destruction did not come this way (burning and famine? – Rev 18:8).

### B. The Historicist Position

This position has virtually been abandoned today, as commentators have realized that the Reformers were merely "reading in" their own historical situation (namely, their struggles with the Catholic church).

### C. The Futurist (Symbolic) Approach

Quite a number of modern commentators have taken this approach, though they vary in their suggestions for the meaning of the symbolism. They have the common element, however, of rejecting the notion of a literal city. But this is the very problem behind the symbolic approach: the text clearly says that Babylon is "the great city" (Rev 17:18; cf. 18:18), and the details in Rev 18 seem to have a literal city in view (emphasis on the burning; association with merchants and trading). Surely there are many symbolic details in Rev 17–18, but a literal city does seem to be involved.

### D. Preterist–Futurist Approach (dual fulfillment, with Jerusalem as the "harlot")

To say that Babylon in Rev 17–18 represents ancient Jerusalem (if only a partial fulfillment) presumes, as did the preterist approach, that the book would have been written before AD 70—contrary to the evidence. Furthermore, Rev 6:17 ("the great day of their wrath has come") suggests that all the details from chapter six onward pertain to "the day

---

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, 972.

of the Lord." The Apostle Paul in 2 Thess 2:1-12, however, is quick to point out to the Thessalonians that "the day of the Lord" had not come at the time he wrote that epistle. Pate's approach would seem to necessitate a partial fulfilment of the "day of the Lord" in the first century, though the Apostle Paul is careful to keep this unique period distinct from any first-century trials and tribulations.

## E. Futurist – Literal Approach

Those who take this general approach see the "harlot" as being more than just a literal city. This would agree that this city is the focal point and propagator of a religious system, which Satan sought to impose upon the world.

### 1. The Possibility of Babylon (Rebuilt on the Euphrates)

One popular opinion among some dispensationalists is that Babylon literally means that very same city to be rebuilt on its ancient site.<sup>4</sup>

#### a. Support for the Babylon Interpretation

In Rev 17:18, the "harlot" is clearly interpreted as being "the great city," and in Rev 18:10 this city is clearly said to be Babylon: "Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon" (cf. 18:21). As Dyer has demonstrated, the most compelling evidence for the interpretation of literal Babylon is the numerous parallels between what is said about Babylon in Rev 17–18 and what was previously said about ancient Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51 (see Supplement B to this section). There seems to be no doubt that the author of Revelation is clearly making reference to statements about Babylon in Jeremiah.

#### b. Problem(s) for the Babylon Interpretation

(1) Although there are clear allusions to Babylon in Jer 50–51, one could also argue that there are a number of allusions in Rev 17–18 to the Tyre Oracles of Ezekiel:

- (a) The statement in Rev 18:21 ("will not be found any longer") is similar to Ezek 26:21 ("you will be no more").
- (b) The word that is used in Rev 18:19 for the "harlot" having been "laid waste" (Gk ἐρημόω — only 5x in the NT) is also used of Tyre in Ezek 26:19 ("I shall make you a desolate city"). Note the phrase "make her desolate" in Rev 17:16 (same word!).
- (c) Both passages mention a silencing of song and harps (Ezek 26:13; Rev 18:22).
- (d) Both passages emphasize the sea, ships, and merchandise (note Ezek 27:9).
- (e) Both passages call attention to the reaction of sea merchants, especially weeping, lamenting, mourning, and wailing (Ezek 26:16-18; Rev 18:15-19).
- (f) Both passages record a listing of wares and merchandise (Ezek 27:10-25; Rev 18:11-14).
- (g) In both, the "kings of the earth" are enriched (Ezek 27:33; Rev 18:9).
- (h) In both, an "arrogant attitude" is rebuked (Ezek 27:3; 28:2; Rev 18:7).

If there are also deliberate allusions to the Tyre oracles here, this could suggest that the author's intention in making allusions to Jer 50–51 was

<sup>4</sup> In support of a literal rebuilt Babylon, see Kenneth W. Allen, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon," *BibSac* 133 (Jan-Mar 1976): 19-27; and Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18; Part I," *BibSac* 144:575 (Jul-Sep 1987): 305-316; "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18; Part II," *BibSac* 144:576 (Oct-Dec 1987): 433-449; and *The Rise of Babylon; Sign of the End Times* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1991).

not to equate the harlot of Rev 17–18 with literal Babylon, any more than his allusions to the Tyre oracles were meant to equate her with Tyre.

- (2) Dyer's case for literal Babylon rests heavily on his contention that the prophecy of Babylon's destruction in Jer 50–51 has never been *literally* fulfilled. Thus, he expects Babylon to be rebuilt, so that it can be more *literally* destroyed. This assumption, however, has been called into question more recently by Homer Heater, who has built a good case that Jer 50–51 has employed *stereotypical destruction language* that was not intended to be so literally understood.<sup>5</sup> He argues, "The language of destruction belongs to a genre found in treaties that speaks generally and hyperbolically of devastating defeat and destruction without requiring detailed fulfilment."<sup>6</sup> If Heater is right, then Babylon has been judged and destroyed, and does not need to be destroyed again. Furthermore, Jer 25:12 seems to indicate that this "everlasting desolation" of Babylon was intended to be a punishment to be inflicted when "seventy years are completed" (i.e., in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC)—not at the time of the Second Coming of Christ.

## 2. The Possibility of Apostate Jerusalem (in the Great Tribulation)

A more likely interpretation is that "Babylon the great" is really a *code name* for Jerusalem. This would imply that the Antichrist (the Beast) and the ten kings will have a very close relationship to literal (apostate) Jerusalem during the Tribulation. Since Rev 17:18 says "the woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth," this might imply that Jerusalem will serve as the capital for the Antichrist during the Tribulation.

### a. Support for the Jerusalem Interpretation

- (1) The city is frequently called "the great city" (17:18) or Babylon the great in these chapters. In Rev 11:8, the same words are used to describe Jerusalem: "the great city . . . where also their Lord was crucified."
- (2) The metaphor of "harlot" would be most appropriate for Jerusalem, as this was an *established label* for Israel and/or Jerusalem in the OT (Isa 1:21; 57:8; Jer 2:2,20; 3:1,6; Ezek 16:15,26,28,29; 16:35-41; 23:1-21, 30; Micah 1:7; and Hos 4:12). She was called a "harlot", because of her spiritual unfaithfulness to God and her idolatrous ways.
- (3) She is not just guilty of shedding the blood of saints (17:6), but also the blood of prophets and apostles (18:20,24). Recall Matt 23:29-35.
- (4) The idea of *repaying her double* (Rev 18:5-6) may be an allusion to Jer 16:17-18 and 17:18.
- (5) The words "outside the city" in Rev 14:20 are usually taken in reference to Jerusalem, yet the only near antecedent is "Babylon the great" mentioned in 14:8.
- (6) Rev 17:5 indicates that the city's name of *Babylon the Great* is a "mystery," which implies that the actual name is somewhat different. If so, this would accord with the non-literal names given Jerusalem in Rev 11:8: "the great city which mystically (πνευματικῶς) is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified."

### b. Concerns Regarding the Jerusalem Interpretation

Some of these observations, though helpful, do not actually prove the case.

<sup>5</sup> Homer Heater, Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?", *JETS* 41:1 (Mar 1998): 23-43. Notice should be made of Jer 25:9, which even declared that Jerusalem itself would be utterly destroyed and an "everlasting desolation."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

For instance, though Israel is often described as a "harlot" in the OT, that metaphor was also used of other nations (e.g., Tyre in Isa 23:15-18, and Nineveh of Assyria in Nah 3:4). [However, it is true that it is used far more commonly of Israel and Jerusalem than any other]. A greater problem for the Jerusalem interpretation, however, is the *destruction references*. Rev 18:19 says, "in one hour she has been laid waste." According to Rev 17:16, the beast and ten kings will "burn her up with fire" (cf. 18:8-9). Rev 18:21 even says that the city "will not be found any longer." Finally, Rev 19:3 states, "her smoke rises up forever and ever" (similarity to 14:9-11 and the judgment on those who worshiped the beast). Furthermore, the response of "Hallelujah!" in Rev 19:3 reflects the joy over her destruction.

Passages like Zech 14:1-11 indicate that the Lord Jesus is going to personally return to defend and save Jerusalem (cf. Zech 12:8; Joel 2:32), especially after her inhabitants "look (*in faith*) to the One whom they have pierced" (Zech 12:10). Nevertheless, the destruction language found in Rev 17–18 is not completely incompatible with passages like Zech 12–14. There is no doubt from a reading of Zech 12:2 and 14:2 that Jerusalem is placed under a great siege and brought to the brink of destruction. So, even though the Lord returns to rescue the surviving remnant in the final analysis, that does not preclude the city suffering attack and near destruction before He does.

### Conclusions

Whatever Babylon represents, it must be significant, because over two full chapters are devoted to her role and destruction. It is very hard to escape the fact that a literal city is involved. Of greater importance, perhaps, is the contrast that "Babylon" makes to the New Jerusalem. There are some parallels between Babylon and the New Jerusalem that suggest that Babylon is something of a *counterpart* to the New Jerusalem. First, we notice how each is introduced with the words "Come here, I shall show you" (17:1 & 21:9). Second, they are both described in feminine terms. Babylon is the harlot (17:1), whereas the New Jerusalem is the bride of the Lamb (21:9). Third, both the harlot and the bride are called a "city" (17:18; 21:10). Fourth, in both cases John is shown these "cities" following the introductory statement "carried me away in the Spirit" (17:3; 21:10). Fifth, emphasis is given to the clothing of each. Babylon is dressed in worldly luxury (17:4; 18:11-12, 16), whereas the bride is adorned with fine linen, the righteous acts of the saints (17:7-8). Sixth, he goes "into a wilderness" (17:3) to see the harlot, but upon a great and high mountain (21:10) to see the bride. Seventh, the harlot is actively involved with committing acts of immorality and abominations (17:2,4), but in regard to the bride/New Jerusalem it is said, "nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it" (21:27). Eighth, the harlot persecutes and kills the saints (17:6; 18:24), but into the New Jerusalem only the saints can enter, i.e., those "whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27). All this highlights the fact that Babylon is to the Antichrist (at least initially) what the New Jerusalem is to Christ. Babylon is the focus and epitome of the Beast's empire, a counterfeit of the New Jerusalem. Yet from God's perspective, she is a harlot.

If "Babylon" of Rev 17–18 is a reference to apostate Jerusalem during the period of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week, this would certainly help explain other biblical data. Although space does not permit a full explanation here, it seems that the Antichrist actually presents himself as messiah to the Jewish people. Hence, he is a false messiah. [This would explain Jesus' warnings about a false messiah in such passages as Matt 24:4-5, 11, 23-24. This would also shed light on Jesus' comment in John 5:43, "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him".<sup>7</sup>]

---

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 5.25.4) identified the figure in Jn 5:43 as the Antichrist, whom he believed (as did many of the early church fathers) would be of Jewish descent.

According to Dan 9:27, he will “make strong (the) covenant with the many (Jewish people) for one week (of seven years).”<sup>8</sup> Some have thought this to be a reference to a *peace agreement* that Antichrist will make with Israel, but there is nothing in the context about a peace agreement. The word “covenant” (Heb בְּרִית) normally means “the Mosaic covenant, the Law,” though it can (more rarely) refer to other covenants or agreements. What favors the interpretation that it should be understood as “the Mosaic covenant, the Law” in Dan 9:27 is the fact that the same sentence goes on to say that he will put a halt to sacrifice and grain offering in the middle of the “week” (i.e., after 3 ½ years). Sacrifices, of course, go hand in hand with the Mosaic Law. The point of Dan 9:27, then, would be that he “makes strong” the ancient Mosaic covenant of the Law, i.e., he enforces or rejuvenates it. If he were parading himself as their messiah, this would be perfectly understandable (it would appear he was reinvigorating the ancient Jewish faith). The reality, however, is that he is only doing this (as part of Satan’s scheme) to lure them into his destructive trap in which he will attempt to destroy the covenant nation in the final analysis, and thereby nullify the promises of God.

In the middle of the “week,” he begins to turn against them. He puts a halt to the sacrificial system, and he enters the (rebuilt) Jewish temple in Jerusalem to proclaim himself a divine being (2 Thess 2:4). [If he is going to be worshiped, this is a logical step]. This *may* coincide with the erection of the image to the beast (Rev 13:14-15) in the temple itself. This, then, would be the “abomination of desolation” mentioned by Jesus in Matt 24:15-16 that marks the onset of the Great Tribulation (the final 3 ½ years): “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains.” Those Jews in Jerusalem who heed these words would of course be ones who believe in the true Messiah, the Lord Jesus. They flee Jerusalem at that time, an event that fulfils Rev 12:6, “Then the woman (of the Jewish line) fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.”

With the *believing Jews* (faithful to Christ) having departed from Jerusalem, that leaves the remaining Jews (most of whom are probably in unbelief) at the mercy of the Antichrist. By this point, he has made his move to gain the allegiance of the whole world, whom he wants to worship him (Rev 13:4). He also has the military might to back up his power play, not to mention Satan’s deceptive powers at work. “And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast” (13:3). Those who belong to the Lamb of God, however, will not be duped and will refuse to honor him . . . many of whom will pay for this with their blood. Once the “ten horns” give their authority to the Antichrist (Rev 17:12-14), they will conspire against the “woman” (apostate Jerusalem) to destroy her (Rev 17:16-17). This leads to the siege of Judah and Jerusalem depicted in Zech 12–14.

#### IV. THE 7<sup>TH</sup> BOWL JUDGMENT (Rev 16:17-21)

The 7<sup>th</sup> bowl judgment involves the destruction of “Babylon” (note 16:19!). Because of the important role that Babylon plays for the Antichrist’s rule, her significance and destruction are elaborated in chapters 17 and 18. Rev 19:1-10, with the praise for her destruction, forms the finale to this whole section.

As the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl is released, we hear the words “It is done” (Gk γέγονεν). This marks the culmination of all the judgments (recall 10:7 and 15:1). The event is attended by a “great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth.” There had been

---

<sup>8</sup> Some translations have “make a strong (or firm) covenant,” as though the covenant itself is a strong or firm one. Yet the Hebrew text has *וַיַּגְבִּיר בְּרִית*. There is no adjective in the text, but rather the causative verb (make strong) indicates what he does in regard to the covenant. To make it strong would mean that he imposes it upon the people or enforces it, not necessarily against their will but perhaps with their support.



previous earthquakes during this period (cf. 6:12; 11:13), but this one is the most severe. Note how each 7<sup>th</sup> judgment is attended by an earthquake and cosmic disturbances (8:5 with the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, and 11:19 with the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet).

Does the "great city" in 16:19 refer to Babylon or to Jerusalem? Babylon is called "the great city" in 17:18 (cf. 14:8). However, if Babylon is meant as the great city that was split into three parts, then Babylon is referred to twice in this verse. Walvoord (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 969) takes the "great city" as Babylon. This has the advantage of the near context in which Babylon is highlighted. Thomas, on the other hand, holds that the "great city" is Jerusalem (though he takes Babylon in Ch 17–18 to be Babylon on the Euphrates).<sup>9</sup> The Jerusalem interpretation is the likely one, yet in contrast to Thomas, the focus on her extends on throughout Rev 17–18. Note that most of the judgments in the bowl cycle are aimed at the Beast, his kingdom, and those who are associated with him.

The reference to "Babylon the great" in 16:19, then, clearly refers to the subject of chapters 17 and 18—Babylon the great Harlot . . . apostate Jerusalem. Her demise had been anticipated in Rev 14:8, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality."

## V. BABYLON: HER RELATIONSHIP TO THE BEAST AND THE TEN HORNS (Rev 17:1-18)

### A. Introduction to the Harlot and the Beast (17:1-6)

Rev 17:2 calls attention to her immorality (note the references to immorality and harlotry in 17:2,4,5,15,16; 18:3,9; 19:2). This metaphor reflects the religious role that characterizes the city. Thomas (2:282) notes,

It is indicative of her spiritual harlotry and representative of an ecclesiastical or religious facet that is a counterfeit of the real. In prophetic language, prostitution, fornication, or adultery is equivalent to idolatry or religious apostasy (Isa. 23:15-17; Jer. 2:20-31; 13:27; Ezek. 16:17-19; Hos. 2:5; Nah. 3:4).

Thus, while being a city, the term Harlot is used to depict symbolically the religious influence she exercises over both the kings and earth-dwellers. Just as Babylon has historically had a role as a focal point of all that was evil, occultic and false in religion, so once again at the final events she plays that role. Thomas thus concludes (2:282-83),

. . . this woman of Rev. 17:1 is the epitome of spiritual fornication or idolatry. . . . So this woman represents all false religion of all time, including those who apostatize from the revealed religion of Christianity.

There is no reason to view her as being a symbol of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the city of Rome is probably not in view (see above), an association with Roman Catholicism really finds little support. The broader context of Revelation suggests a religious system that centers around the Beast and involves people in worship of both the dragon and the Beast.

We note in 17:1 that she sits on "many waters" (defined in 17:15 as the many nations and peoples), but in 17:3 she sits "on a scarlet beast." The first probably depicts her spiritual *influence* on the many peoples of the world (note 17:2). The latter reflects the fact that she is *supported by* the Beast, that is, the Antichrist. He has been behind her, helping her

---

<sup>9</sup> In favor of the Jerusalem interpretation, Thomas points out: (1) Rev 11:8 has clearly identified Jerusalem as "the great city"; (2) it seems to be distinct from "the cities of the nations" in the next phrase; (3) similar topographical changes are expected of Jerusalem in Zech 14:4 in conjunction with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming; and (4) there was an earthquake earlier at Jerusalem (11:13)—a partial one, but this is more devastating as it divides the city into three parts.

to achieve such stature among the cities of the world. Thus, the woman is both a literal city and a false religion that gives spiritual cohesion to the Beast's kingdom. Her clothing (17:4) reflects her greed for luxury, splendor and worldly materialism.

According to 17:5, she has a name on her forehead which is "a mystery, BABYLON THE GREAT" (μυστήριον, βαβυλὼν ἡ μεγάλη). Some scholars appeal to this statement in support of a non-literal understanding of Babylon (i.e., as a city). However, the word "mystery" in the Greek is a noun, not an adjective. Furthermore, Rev 18:2 clarifies that the woman's name is not "Mystery Babylon" but simply "Babylon the great." Finally, Rev 17:7 reflects that the "mystery" aspect applies to both the woman and the Beast. From this we can conclude that the term "mystery" is appositional to the word "Babylon." Hence, it is not *mystery Babylon*. Rather, the woman has a name written, which is a mystery (the NASB has wisely placed a comma between "mystery" and "BABYLON," as well as placing "mystery" in lower caps to clarify that this is not part of the name). This suggests that part of the mystery is the name itself—i.e., Babylon is a literal city but not the same as the ancient city of Babylon—in parallel manner to Jerusalem being called "Sodom" and "Egypt" in Rev 11:8.

The mystery may also have something to do with the role that Babylon historically played throughout the Bible (compare Gen 10:9-10; 11:1-9). As the "mother of harlots," she is the source of everything opposed to God. This finds support from the following verse (17:6) which calls attention to the "blood of the saints." The Harlot has no toleration for Christians, the people of God! For a Satan's universal religious system to work, there will obviously have to be cooperation at all levels. But true Christianity will be the one hindrance to such a system, and hence martyrdom will be the price many will pay for refusing to cooperate.

## **B. Explanations of the Beast (17:7-14)**

The Beast is the same as was introduced in chapter 13 (note that 17:7 reminds us of the seven heads and ten horns). The Beast, then, is the Antichrist (and the kingdom that will be given him). Yet he is no ordinary king, because Satanic power is being manifested through him. That he "carries" the woman suggests that it is he, the Antichrist, that promotes and establishes the *Harlot city*.

### **1. "was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss" (Rev 17:8)**

The wording of this description seems to be a play on what is said of the Lord in Rev 1:4. But what does this mean for the Beast. Some have seen this as the serpent's binding mentioned in Rev 20:1-3 (assuming that Rev 20 is a recapitulation of prior history rather than a chronological sequel to Rev 19). Hence, "is not" would refer to His present binding. The problem with this suggestion is that Rev 17:8 refers to the Beast, not Satan.

A second possibility (favored by Robert Thomas) is that this relates to the wound from which he was healed (cf. 13:14). In favor of this suggestion is the following statement in Rev 17:8 that "those who dwell on the earth will wonder." Nevertheless, there are some problems with this view. First, the third stage ("about to come") is further qualified by the words "about to come up out of the abyss." Why would his recovery from a fatal wound lead to him coming up out of the abyss? His emergence from the abyss probably does not pertain to his post-wound state, but rather his origin to begin with (i.e., in the Tribulation). Note Rev 11:7 – "And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them." Second, the qualification "is not" may look at his status in John's day (i.e., the Beast "was not" when John wrote). If the descriptive in Rev 17:10 that one of the seven kings "is" refers to John's day, then the "is not"

of 17:8 refers to John's day as well.

A third possibility is to understand this statement in light of the total biblical revelation about the Antichrist. Studies about the Antichrist in the Book of Daniel showed that Antiochus Epiphanes IV was used as a type of the end-time Antichrist. Hence, the phrase could mean:

- 1) he "was" - that is, the Beast was typified by Antiochus, and the Beast's character was enacted through him in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Possibly the same demon that will control the Antichrist was dwelling in Antiochus.
- 2) he "is not" - that is, he was not on the stage of history at the time John wrote in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.
- 3) he "is about to come up out of the abyss" - During the Tribulation, the Antichrist will emerge from the abyss (possessed by a demon from the abyss).

The weakness for this third possibility is the response of the earth-dwellers in Rev 17:8b: they "wonder" when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come." The word translated "wonder" (Gk θαυμάζω) is the same as was used in Rev 13:3 ("amazed") when the people saw that his fatal wound was healed. [On the other hand, "wonder" (Gk θαυμάζω) is used in Rev 17:6-7 at John's perplexion concerning the woman drunk with the blood of the saints. Hence, the amazement does not necessarily have to be over the wound itself]. Perhaps we should leave this an open question for now.

## 2. The Seven Heads (17:9-11)

As pointed out earlier in chapter 13, this trait of "seven heads" was not revealed in Daniel (only the 10 heads were). Since the text says that the "seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits," some have taken this to be a reference to Rome (the city of seven hills). This is quite unlikely, as the Beast in this chapter is personally destroyed by Jesus Christ at the Second Coming (Rev 19). Furthermore, the text does not simply say that the seven heads are seven mountains. We need to see v 9 along with v 10. The seven heads are both seven mountains and seven kings. Since the Beast is clearly associated with the figure revealed in Daniel 7, the *dual nature* of the beasts in that chapter should influence our understanding here. In Dan 7, each beast represented both the king and the kingdom with which he was associated (compare Dan 7:17,23). Hence, the term "mountain" in Rev 17:9 is probably a symbol of a kingdom. This interpretation is not only consistent with Dan 7, but mountain is often a symbol of a kingdom or empire in the OT (Pss 30:7; 68:15-16; Isa 2:2; 41:15; Jer 51:25; Dan 2:35; Hab 3:6,10; Zech 4:7). Thus, each head represents a kingdom and the king associated with that kingdom.

Which kings/kingdoms would this be? These are certainly not Roman emperors of John's day (since more than seven emperors had ruled by the time he wrote). Nor can the "seven" be taken as a symbol (as Alan Johnson and Mounce have both tried to suggest).<sup>10</sup> The division into five, one, and one argues against this possibility.

More likely, the seven kingdoms are ones that have dominated the world scene

---

<sup>10</sup> For Johnson, the seven heads symbolize fullness of blasphemy and evil (742). Mounce thinks the seven heads stand for the power of the Roman Empire as a historic whole, regardless of the exact number of emperors (315-16). For Mounce, the 5-1-1 scheme is meant to show nearness of the end. Aune (2:948) takes the view that the kings are Roman emperors of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but not specifically seven (for him, the number seven is an apocalyptic symbol). Yet, rather inconsistently, he takes the "one is" and "one to come" as literal.

throughout human history, and have played a particular role in subjecting Israel to Gentile rule (as both the dream of Dan 2 and the four beasts of Dan 7 depicted). The following is a possible explanation as to their identity:

- a. "five have fallen"
  - 1) Egypt (Ezek 29–30)
  - 2) Assyria (Nah 3:1-19)
  - 3) Babylon (Isa 21:9; Jer 50–51)
  - 4) Persia (Dan 10:13; 11:2)
  - 5) Greece (and Antiochus — Dan 11:3-4)
- b. "one is"
 

This would refer to Rome that was in power in John's day.
- c. "the other has not yet come"
 

This probably represents the kingdom that emerges out of the Roman Empire during the Tribulation period in the form of a ten-nation confederacy (cf. Dan 7:23-24).

Yet, the text goes on to mention an eighth king, and the Beast is the eighth. The *NASB* mentions that he "is *one* of the seven," and the *NIV* says that "He belongs to the seven." The Greek phrase ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐστίν, however, should probably be translated "and is out of the seven." So, the kingdom of the Beast emerges *out of* the seventh one.<sup>11</sup> The following verses (Rev 17:12-14) explain this.

3. The Ten Horns Submit (Rev 17:12-14)
 

This trait (ten horns) has already been made clear in Dan 7:23-24. The ten horns represent a ten-nation confederacy (ten kings) that emerges from the Roman Empire. During the period of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week, this confederacy of kings becomes the dominant political force in the world. As such, it is the 7<sup>th</sup> "head." But this is short-lived. According to Dan 7:24, the Antichrist subdues three of the ten. This suggests the use of military force to gain power over the confederacy of the ten horns. The Antichrist then takes charge of the empire that had been headed by the ten kings and (probably) extends its power and influence further. With the defeat of the three kings, the others probably recognize their limitations against the Antichrist, and capitulate to him (the text of Rev 17:12-13 seems to suggest that these ten kings continue to function, but under the leadership of the Antichrist). Once the Antichrist takes over their kingdom, the new form (with the Antichrist at the supreme head) is then an 8<sup>th</sup> kingdom.

### C. Explanations of the Harlot (Rev 17:15-18)

In 17:1, we were told that the Harlot sits on many waters, and in 17:15, the "waters" are shown to be a symbol for the peoples (cf. Ps 18:4,16; 124:4; Isa 8:7; Jer 47:2). Hence, this "harlot" controls the lives of the peoples of the world, both through her religious influence (17:2-6) as well as through her economic influence (ch. 18).

Strangely, the Beast and 10 kings turn against her (17:16). If "Babylon" is apostate Jerusalem as suggested above, then this is a move seeking her destruction.

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas's explanation differs from mine, and he seems to want to link the Beast as 8<sup>th</sup> to his "resurrection" from the fatal wound. He states, "So as one of the seven, the beast is a kingdom, but as an eighth, he is the king of that kingdom who sustains the wound and ascends from the abyss after his wound. . . . When this occurs, he is king over an eighth kingdom because his reign following his ascent from the abyss will be far more dynamic and dominant than before" (2:299).

Ultimately, however, the Lord is behind all these change of events ("For God has put it in their hearts"—17:17), though they are probably unaware of it.

According to Rev 17:16, the Beast and 10 Kings unite together to burn ~~up~~ the city with fire (the reference to the smoke of her burning in Rev 18:9 confirms that this is literal, not just a symbol). The city of "Babylon," at one time the capital and launching pad for the Antichrist's reign over the world, was also characterized by wealth and materialistic greed. This aspect of her character is emphasized in chapter 18.

The reference to making her "desolate and naked" (17:16) probably looks at the plundering of her wealth, now that the Antichrist and the ten horns have turned against her. Yet in Rev 18:8, we are told that "The Lord God who judges her is strong." How can both be true? Apparently, Babylon's destruction is carried out by the Beast and 10 kings (with their satanic motive in view), but ultimately this comes about as the righteous judgment of God against her. Cf. Dan 12:7 which speaks of the final 3 ½ years to "finish shattering the power of the holy people."

When all is taken into account, God does fulfill his promises to ancient Israel, that is, with those who come out of apostate Jerusalem and become worshipers of the true Messiah . . . the Lamb of God. For those who do not, but remain a part of apostate Jerusalem (which had at one time embraced the Antichrist . . . the false messiah), they will face God's judgment and exclusion from the kingdom. With them the words of Jesus in the parable of the ten virgins are fulfilled (Matt 25:10-13):

<sup>10</sup> "And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> "Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' <sup>12</sup> "But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' <sup>13</sup> "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.