

Revelation 17-18 • The Dual Nature of Babylon

Introduction

One of the most pervasive themes throughout Scripture is that of Babylon. The original, literal Babylon foreshadowed spiritual versions repeated throughout history until a final fulfillment in the Last Days as part of the book of Revelation. In the Last Days Babylon is the last, great world system before the return of Christ and has two major components: in chapter 17 the emphasis is on the religious aspect of the system while in chapter 18 the commercial aspect is stressed. Religious Babylon will be overtaken by the Beast while commercial Babylon will be destroyed by God. Perhaps one of the most important things to keep in mind about Babylon is that it is a system so perverse and corrupt that it cannot be saved...

*We applied healing to Babylon, but she was not healed;
Forsake her and let us each go to his own country,
For her judgment has reached to heaven
And towers up to the very skies.
Jeremiah 51:9*

When something takes on the nature and character of Babylon it cannot be reformed or saved from within, but inevitably leads to the wrath of God's final judgment.

¹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality."

[Read 17:1-2]

Q: Who are the four prominent women in Revelation?

1. Jezebel, symbolizing apostasy creeping into the church (Rev. 2:20)
2. Israel (Rev. 12:1)
3. Christ's bride, the Church (Rev. 19:7)
4. The harlot, the final apostate world-system found here in chapter 17.

Q: What is the final disposition of Babylon? What ultimately happens to her?

A: According to Rev. 16:17-21 she is judged to destruction by the wrath of God as part of the pouring out of the seventh bowl.

Point: John is invited as a kind of sidebar to the effect of the seven bowls of judgment to see "the great harlot", the apostate world-system in terms of both its effects and why it got what it deserved.

Q: What is the primary sin associated with Babylon?

A: "Immorality". In Biblical terms, literal sexual immorality is always equated with being given over to idolatry, to be drawn away from a spiritually faithful relationship with God to an adulterous one with other gods or substitutes.

Point: The biblical metaphor "drunk with wine" always refers to spiritual seduction, something that describes the complete opposite of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of

[Read 17:3-18]

Observation: The symbols used in this passage appear to be accompanied by explanations of exactly what they are. If we accept the plain interpretation of God's Word, it's far less likely we will experience trouble understanding what is going on and what is truly meant.

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her immorality,⁵ and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”

⁶And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. When I saw her, I wondered greatly.

⁷And the angel said to me, “Why do you wonder? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns.

⁸“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come. ⁹Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits,¹⁰ and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. ¹¹The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction. ¹²The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. ¹³These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.”

¹⁵And he said to me, “The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.

¹⁶And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. ¹⁷For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. ¹⁸The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.”

Q: What is the meaning of the symbol of the woman?

A: In v.18 it's made very clear that she is a city and that in John's day, as well as the Last Days to come, she reigns over the kings of the earth who make alliances with and subject themselves to her. Furthermore, the seven heads of v.3 are identified as seven mountains in v.9. The city which fits this description in both cases is Rome. Christians of John's time recognized that the mystery religions of Babylon, the very spiritual character which makes Babylon the force of spiritual adultery that it is, had migrated from the literal Babylon to literal Rome.

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark.

1 Peter 5:13

Q: What is the meaning of the symbol of the beast?

A: This is the same Beast introduced in chapter 13, the Antichrist. In v.8 it's indicated that this world ruler will “*come up out of the abyss*”. This could refer to a physical rising from the dead, but most certainly refers to someone whose spiritual origin is hell. He is further identified with Satan because, like other descriptions of Satan, he has seven heads and ten horns, referring to kingdoms controlled and given over to Satan. In other words, the Beast resembles the kingdom of Antichrist as well as his own, literal person.

Q: What is the meaning of the seven heads?

A: We've already noted they represent seven mountains (v.9) and seven kingdoms. (v.10) The five kingdoms which had fallen were Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece; the kingdom “*that is*” would be Rome in John's day; the one yet to come – the seventh – will be the kingdom of the Beast. If we compare the heads to seven specific kings, then the five fallen Roman rulers were Julius Caesar, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero; the “*one that is*” during John's day would be Domitian; the one yet to come would be the Beast, the king of the revived Roman Empire.

Q: What is the meaning of the ten horns?

A: These are ten more kings as explained in v.12 and parallel the ten toes of Daniel's image in Dan. 2:36-45, what we have come to call the revived Roman Empire. In John's day the kings had not yet received their power. It's important to note that they willingly give support to the Beast in the battle against Christ and the saints and that, with the help of the Beast, turn on and destroy the great harlot – the final revived Roman Empire.

Q: What is the meaning of the waters?

A: According to v.15 they represent the peoples of the world. Great waters or the sea is a recurring symbol used throughout Scripture to describe the Gentile nations of the world. The fact that the harlot is seated in this manner is an indication of the extent of her vast influence over the whole world politically, economically, and most of all religiously.

Overall Application

It's important to note that even today there is only one "city" which is recognized as equal in power to nations and to whom nearly every nation on earth sends ambassadors and negotiates with: the Vatican in Rome.

The name "Babylon" takes us back to Gen. 10:1-11 and 11:1-9 where the first organized rebellion against God took place. "Babel" means "confusion" and so stands for the apostate religion born out of it. All anti-Christian sects, even those calling themselves "Christian", who have at one time or another killed God's servants are a shadow of the final Babylon to come.

In the Last Days a one-world church will be formed which is so spiritually corrupt it is here seen for what it truly is: a harlot. With the help of the Beast it will become a great, centralized power. In today's vernacular, this is called "Ecumenism", the movement afoot by both the Catholic church and a great many denominations and religions to merge under a single authority.

The Beast will get support from the ten kings to first help establish the harlot, and later to destroy her. Most likely the rising to power of the one-world system is something that occurs in the first half of the Tribulation and its destruction something that happens in the second half. Satan will get rid of her because she represents worship of God if even in an apostate way, and a time will come when he desires exclusive worship of himself alone. (Ever notice that the mark of the beast is not just buying and selling but the willing worship of the Beast?)

- *The apostate church is called a "harlot"; the true church is pictured as a pure bride.*
- *The harlot is in the wilderness; the bride is in heaven.*
- *The harlot is adorned by Satan (17:4); the bride is adorned by Christ. (19:8)*
- *The harlot is stained by the blood of the martyrs; the bride is redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.*

Rev. 17:17 is very important to note because just as God used nations such as the literal Babylon to execute His will and judgment, so everything that is coming about in Revelation is "put in their hearts to execute His purpose...until the words of God will be fulfilled."

¹After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. ²And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird. ³For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality."

[Read 18:1-3]

Observation: *Whereas chapter 17 focuses on Babylon the religious system, this chapter focuses on Babylon the economic system.*

Q: Why do you supposed "fallen" is repeated twice?

A: It most likely reflects the dual judgment, first coming upon religious Babylon and then economic Babylon.

Q: What is the final result of making others to drink "of the wine of passion of her immorality"?

A: It's complete spiritual corruption and depravity to the point where she's "become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit".

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Q: What is significant about identifying Babylon as “a prison of every unclean, hateful bird”?

A: The list of “unclean” birds in the Old Testament is comprised mostly of carrion eaters – birds such as vultures which prey upon carcasses and are therefore a danger to human consumption. It’s a spiritual reference that Babylon’s spiritual condition is perpetual – it was corrupt in life, corrupt in the course of its destruction, and perpetually corrupt even in its death, a haven for spiritual vultures.

Q: What is key in this passage to understanding why so many allowed themselves to be deceived?

A: According to v.3 it’s because the deceived have “*become rich by the wealth of her sensuality*”. Spiritual greed goes hand-in-hand with material greed. Religious Babylon cannot be separated from economic Babylon.

Application: *The first voice heard is the voice of judgment.*

[Read 18:4-8]

Q: Why does God want His people to come out of Babylon?

1. The city will be destroyed and He wants them saved.
2. The city is satanic and He does not want them defiled.

Application: *What are all the similarities here to Sodom and Gomorrah?*

Q: What has been God’s repeated call to His people throughout the Bible, whether they were in Egypt or any other spiritually bad place?

A: “*Come out*”. Salvation always means separation from the world exclusively unto the Lord.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

*“I will dwell in them and walk among them;
And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
2 Corinthians 6:14-16*

Application: *The second voice heard is the voice of separation.*

[Read 18:9-19]

Q: Who are the two groups lamenting the fall of Babylon?

A: The kings of the earth (v.9-10) and the merchants of the earth (v.11-19).

Q: What do they both have in common with Babylon?

A: They both “*committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her*”. (v.9)

Point: *They rejected the One True God by pursuing other idols, in particular the idol of money. They sold their souls for wealth.*

⁴I heard another voice from heaven, saying, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; ⁵for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her. ⁷To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, ‘I SIT AS A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, AND WILL NEVER SEE MOURNING.’ ⁸For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.

⁹“And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, ¹⁰standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.’

¹¹“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more- ¹²cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every kind of citron wood and

every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble,¹³ and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep, and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives.¹⁴ The fruit you long for has gone from you, and all things that were luxurious and splendid have passed away from you and men will no longer find them.

¹⁵“The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning,¹⁶ saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls;¹⁷ for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!’

“And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea, stood at a distance,¹⁸ and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What city is like the great city?’¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!’

²⁰“Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her.”

²¹Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer.²² And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer; and no craftsman of any craft will be found in you any longer; and the sound of a mill will not be heard in you any longer;²³ and the light of a lamp will not shine in you any longer; and the voice of the bridegroom and bride will not be heard in you any longer; for your merchants were the great men of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your sorcery.²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth.”

Q: Does Babylon’s judgment come about gradually?

A: No, according to v.8 it comes about “*in one day*” and in v.10 and 19 “*in one hour*”.

Q: Why would catastrophic financial loss be so devastating to these groups?

A: Because they came to trust in wealth rather than God. It’s as much a spiritual disaster as it is economic. What they had come to depend upon to care for them, protect them, and satisfy them has ultimately failed them.

Application: *The third voice hears is the voice of mourning.*

[Read 18:20-24]

Q: What do we know about the viewpoint of “those who dwell on the earth” as opposed to God’s people?

A: They never have the same viewpoint of what is happening.

Point: *When Satan was cast out of heaven, heaven rejoiced but the earth mourned. (Rev. 12:10-12) Now that Babylon has been destroyed, heaven rejoices but the earth laments.*

Q: What is the main reason for heaven’s rejoicing?

A: God has avenged the blood of the martyrs. The prayer of the souls under the altar (Rev. 6:9-11) has been answered.

Point: *The Babylonian system and all its shadowy forerunners have been satanic from the very beginning and responsible for killing God’s faithful. If you want to know what it will be like when the Catholic church rises to power through Babylon in the End Times, all you have to do is look at what it did during its 1,300 years of prominence when it killed more Christians than anyone else in history.*

Application: *The fourth voice heard is the voice of rejoicing.*

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Overall Application

Conclude by reading Jeremiah 51 and noting all the parallels to Revelation 17-18.