

my expository notes

## REVELATION 17-18 THE DESTRUCTION OF BABYLON

In the middle of the 11th century a noblewoman scandalized England by riding nude on her horse through the village market place of Coventry, allegedly to reduce the taxation of her subjects (see Ency. Brit. article). Lady Godiva lives on today in varied ways from delicious chocolate candy to thousands of people who do not understand the purpose and importance of clothes in public. She will ride in the future as well, though in Rev. 17 and 18 she is gaudily clothed, her horse becomes the Antichrist beast and his kingdom, and little Coventry becomes Babylon, the Vanity-Fair marketplace of the world on the brink of its destruction. If your please, she will be Satan's witch in the Halloween of Tribulation riding Antichrist's broom.

The entire scene in Revelation 17-18 revolves around the relationship of an adulterous woman to a scarlet beast which she is riding in 17:3:

To understand these very difficult and complex chapters, which describe the rise and fall of future Babylon we must begin with the context. The context immediately preceding is the seventh bowl which states, "And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of His fierce wrath" (16:19). The word for "remember" here has a basic reflexive sense of "reminding oneself," so that God is reminded, as it were, of His Old Testament prophetic promises to ultimately destroy Babylon. The similar expression in 18:5, "God has remembered her iniquities," has the basic sense of "keeping something in mind" or "being mindful of something," so that God has remembered each of Babylon's mountain of sins (see allusion to OT tower) and will doubly judge precisely both the whole (sin) and each part (sins).

When we begin the 17th chapter, we read

It is most important to observe here that the beast and his empire are technically not Babylon (only the harlot), so it would be incorrect to call him a "political-commercial" Babylon (see 17:5)

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in 17:1-2,

"And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls (seemingly, the seventh angel who had just poured out Babylon's bowl). . . ."

The context immediately following is a heavenly celebration of the "great harlot's" fall, who was corrupting the earth with her immorality and martyring God's bondservants: (cf. 19:1-2)

The reason that the context is important is because chh. 17-18 have usually been divided into two entities (ecclesiastical or religious Babylon in ch. 17 and commercial Babylon in ch. 18) and two time periods (beginning and middle of Tribulation in ch. 17 and end of the Tribulation in ch. 18). But it seems preferable to see here the fall of one system or entity, the great harlot system of Babylon (16:19, 17:1, 18:2, 19:1-2) at the end of the Tribulation Period (16:17-21). Thus, chapter 17 explains the mystery (17:5,7), and chapter 18 expounds the judgment. The consistent emphasis in both chapters of several concepts will confirm this as the plain meaning of the text: her immorality (17:2, 4-5; 18:3,7,9; 19:2), her wealth (17:4, 18:3,16,17, 19), her persecution (17:6, 18:24, 19:2), and her strength as a great city (16:9; 17:5, 18; 18:2,10,16,18-19,21).

Having established the context as the fall of Babylon at the end of the Tribulation Period, we must now determine who Babylon and her beast are. Two steps are necessary in identifying Babylon: an examination of the scriptural concept and then a coordination of that concept with our context. The first mention of Babylon in Scripture is Gen. 10:9-10 which concerns its founder Nimrod, "a mighty hunter before the Lord." This seemingly harmless description involves the combination of Nimrod meaning "let us revolt" with "mighty hunter," which refers to a tyrant or despot



who "hunted" men in order to tyrannize and enslave them (see Leupold, Genesis, I, 366-67). He was a proverbially (10:9b) self-sufficient, egocentric man, who in rebellion asserted himself against God for personal power.

The establishment of his city (Babel) is described in ch. 11:1-9. Its famous tower of Babel was a reflection of its founder, for it pictures man as a united society and culture without God seeking self-sufficient greatness. It pictures "man stepping out of the simplicity of obedience to God" (Von Rad, Theology, I, 160, 163); creature abandoning Creator in a climactic, sinful bid for independent gain and greatness. At this point in Scripture we leave mankind as such and the historical field of vision is abruptly narrowed to the seed of Abraham. Mankind has been scattered in diverse tongues and nations since Babel until our generation. With our generation once again we see a Babel-like reunion of the world, without God and self-sufficiently seeking its own solutions to sin. The United Nations has agencies covering every area of life except the ecclesiastical: atomic energy, labor, food, education, health, finance, aviation, postal service, telecommunication, meteorology, maritime operations, taxation, trade, and child care (World Almanac 1974, 623-24).

In the ecclesiastical field precisely the same drift to globalism is taking place in a parallel and even overlapping way as in the new Church World Bank, a high-risk, low-yield investment bank in the World Council whose monies would be used for the "social redemption" of the poor and under-developed (Dall. Morn. News, Aug. 3, 1974). The uniting of the "spiritual" and "secular" may be seen in frequent remarks like, "Perhaps the larger

share of dissent, however, is developing over the concern of many clergymen -especially younger ones- with political and social issues they see as deeply related to spiritual and moral teachings of the churches" (USN & WR, "Worldwide Turmoil," Dec. 11, 1972, p. 40). Traditional Christian doctrines such as the Trinity (see work of Jung Young Lee) and salvation by grace through faith alone (see Beyerhaus) are being recast with eastern terminology and concepts, so that no belief will be offensive to anyone. The occult has united west and east especially on campuses (see Kent, Christian Observer, "New Mystics Subvert Christianity," Oct. 23, 1974, p. 6), and the pentecostal movement has been a bridge of experience across doctrinal chasms which were practically unbridgeable in former generations. Roman Catholicism has been decentralized and internationalized under Paul VI, who is now considered to wield "enormous moral power in support of peace and social justice" (USN & WR, Oct. 7, 1974, p. 68). Above all, there is the WCC with its many agencies and programs. In 1961 at New Delhi it determined to change "every aspect of the biblical Gospel into an interworldly element" with the aim of a revolutionized new world society (see Beyerhaus, p. 11). This is a striking return to the spirit of Babel. Even more startling was the 8th World Miss. Conference in Bangkok in 1973, which explicitly determined to force organized Christianity into the WCC vision of a universalized church and a united mankind (Beyerhaus, p. 31). Its goal is "to become the center for integrating all religions and ideologies" and a primary method of accomplishing this is to weld religious and secular agencies into monopolies, thereby excluding all non-ecumenical activities (Beyerhaus, p. 33). This sacred-secular coalition certainly accords with the vast, worldly, Antichrist system as a future reincarnation of Babel, embracing and control-

ling "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" (17:15).

Briefly surveying the remainder of the Old Testament, Babylon appears as the infiltrator (2 Ki. 17:24), coveter (2 Ki. 20:12-21, Isa. 36), and supreme plunderer of God's people, possessions, and land (2 Ki. 24:13 ff., 2 Chron. 36:7, *passim*). Like Nimrod and Antichrist's empires she was mighty (Ezek. 32:11-12), oppressive, and ruthless (Ezek. 30:11). Like all empires she sponsored occultic manipulation of God for her own selfish gain and purposes (see Dan. 2).

Usually, in the Apostle John's writings we would associate what has been said about Babylon's self-sufficient independence from God and personal greed with the world system (see Morris, John, pp.126-27). It appears as the perverted, Satan-inspired opponent of God in Christ, rejecting Him and His people in determination to live for itself (Jn. 1:10, 12:31, 14:17,30, 16:11, 17:25). Seeking a personal mastery of creation it seeks its own security in spite of the transitoriness of life and the certainty of death (Bultmann, Theology of NT, II, p. 27). In I Jn. 2:15-17 it appears as the "lust of the flesh and eyes and the pride of life" in opposition to the Father and His will. But when John describes the future in vision he pictures "Babylon the great" as an idolatrous woman on a beast in Rev. 17:3-6:

The outstanding characteristics of Babylon here are her enticing wealth (clothing and jewelry in 17:4 and 18:16-17), her perverting idolatries (the gold cup of 17:4, 18:6, and Jere. 51:7), and her bloodthirsty persecutions (the martyrs of 17:6, 18:24, and 19:2). Seven times she is called a city, and the fact that her pawns watch her from a distance as she burns (18:10,15,17) supports the clear

indication that a literal, geographical city is in view. But she is more than a city, for she controls nations (17:15) and reigns over kings (17:18). Thus, she is also a system, a city with world-dominating influence. The Babel-like empires have always sponsored the Babylon system principles. Her name is a "mystery", which seems to associate her with the great Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar, whose dream in Dan. 2 (referred to 4 times as a "mystery" in 2:18-30). Mystery here seems to refer to God's revelation (2:28-29) undiscerned by pagan (2:27) which traces the chain of world empires perpetuating Babylon's spirit and system of rebellion and hostility toward God on earth. The fact that the harlot is nine times called "the great" indicates that she is the final, culminating expression of Babel, the world system of sinful man allied with Satan in full flower.

But who is the enticing harlot? What future city does she symbolize? Most people give one of two answers to these questions with tongue in cheek. The older view is that the harlot is Rome (see commentaries and Tasker on I Pet (64-66), Kelley, " (pp. 218-20), and Selwyn, " (pp. 243, 303-5)). It is pointed out here that the early church connected Babylon and Rome (I Pet. 5:13 and early church literature), that the woman sits on seven mountains in 17:9 which is the proverbial city of seven hills, and that the future eighth beast in 17:11 is one of the seven, which would most naturally be revived Rome in view of the western European confederacy, etc.

Several of the more recent commentators reject this view for a literal, rebuilt Babylon (see Ladd, SLJ, etc.). The early church could connect Babylon and Rome quite properly, because Rome was one of the godless,

wealthy, persecuting empires. But this does not mean that future Babylon needs to be Rome any more than Babylon, Persia, or Greece which preceded. And the seven hills are not literal mountains but rather seven kings as 17:10 tells us according to well-known biblical symbolism (mountain=kingdom or empire as Psa. 30:7, Jer. 51:25 (which our chapter follows closely), and Dan. 2:35). These interpreters say that the Old Testament seems to predict that Babylon will be rebuilt (e.g., Zech. 5:11). The answer to this is that Isaiah 13:19 predicts that the past destruction of Babylon is as permanent as Sodom and Gomorrah, so that Babylon as such could not be rebuilt.

Since no clear solution nor consensus to the problem exists, I would like to suggest an alternative. I believe that it would be consistent with the context and with Revelation to view the harlot as Jerusalem herself. There are many reasons for this. First, harlotry and abomination refer to idolatry. Harlotry refers to spiritual immorality or departure from God in all of one's life; not just a church apostasy (which is surely a part but a total Babel-like, Satanic departure from God for self. The image arises from fertility rites of pagan, occult religion which sponsored religious prostitution (Walvoord, 247; Caird, 212). The mother (17:5) was the matronly sponsor who blasphemously glorified herself (18:7) rather than God and seductively in Babel-like disregard of God set herself up as the "queen of heaven" (18:7 with Isa. 47:5-7, Jer. 7:18, 44:17-25); the source of salvation, happiness, and prosperity. It has been noted that "the various cults all make fine-sounding appeals for 'peace', 'brotherhood of man', 'happiness', and 'salvation,'" (Kent, p. 6) but as deceptive harlots they are unable to deliver what only God can bestow. Harlotry is a frequent OT image for this idolatrous living, but we notice

that always Israel or Jerusalem is the harlot, departing independently (like Babel) from her faithful husband (God). Isa. 1:21, Ezek. 16 and 23, and Hosea are outstanding passages connecting Jerusalem with harlotry and abomination. As J.B. Smith noted, "The word (the root זנ), 'to be or play the harlot': זנ referring to the literal immoral person within the cult rather than the cult itself as in Gen. 38:21-22, Deut. 23:17, Hos. 4:14 only) is always used in connection with unfaithfulness on the part of God's people, and is never applied to the nations who knew not God" (p. 240).

The abominations of the future seem to point to the Antichrist cult spread over his empire (Rev. 13:14), the center of which is the abomination of desolation, which clearly is at the holy place in Jerusalem (Dan. 12:11, Matt. 24:15, and Rev. 13:14). Persecution is associated with this in Matthew (24:16-21), and it seems that the flight from Jerusalem there is paralleled in 18:4, where "my people" would be synonymous with the Jewish believers in Matthew.

Second, Rev. 11:8 not only describes Jerusalem's future greatness in unbelief (n.b. "the great city") but also proves that Jerusalem is symbolically described in Revelation. Would it not be appropriate, consistent, and ironical for future Jerusalem to be described as immoral (Sodom and Babylon) and oppressive (Egypt and Babylon). This would accord with Babylon's connotation in history and Jerusalem's condition under Antichrist.

Third, Bible students have noted a carefully developed antithesis between the great Babylon (Rev. 17-18; see "and he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness" in 17:3) and the new Jerusalem ("and he carried me



away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain" in 21:10). We suggest that this is really a contrast between old Jerusalem in the epitome of unbelief (the successor to the Babylon system) under Antichrist and new Jerusalem in the epitome of belief under Christ (see Isa. 1:21 ff.).

Fourth, we know that Jerusalem is at least one of the future centers of Antichrist's activity (if not the center: Dan. 11:35-12; Matt. 24:15-25; Rev. 11:1-13, 13:14-15). Thus, it would be appropriate for Jerusalem to ride to her apogee in unbelief on Antichrist's God-bestowed authority (Rev. 17:1,3).

Finally, other factors would make Jerusalem a likely choice. The kings of the earth come to this area rather than Rome or a rebuilt Babylon (Rev. 18:12-16), and Christ will return to Jerusalem (Zech. 14). Jerusalem is the geographical focus of the end of the age and the center of the world. And Jerusalem is the likely candidate for the future false religious center, since it is sacred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (see Jeremias, Jerusalem, 3-140, "This survey has already shown that it was the political and, above all, religious significance of the Holy City which made its trades flourish", p. 28 with Rev. 18:11 ff., see esp. pp. 27, 51-54, 73, 87-95).

We note that John viewed the woman from the wilderness (17:3), and believers will be exhorted to separate from her (18:4). It seems that "her signs and wonders" (Matt. 24:24) are so enticing that an objective view of her is impossible from within (even causing wonder and astonishment from without (17:6) so that capitulation to her will be a grave danger even for the elect (Matt. 24:24, Rev. 18:4). Chapter 18 revealed that her idolatry, which so entices men, is not so much the occult (though that is certainly a

part of the Babylonian tradition) as materialism. She promises personal gain, power, and self-sufficiency apart from God like Nimrod's dynasty by Satan's influence (see Isa. 14:12-16). Her subjects are not priests and priestesses here, but kings, merchants, and shipmasters (Rev. 18:9,11,17), who in tears and lamentation (18:9,15,18) see their dreams of selfish power and gain go up in flames. She is Mammon (see Caird, 223-32), the antithetical master to Christ, whose servants oblivious to God love money (I Tim. 6:10, 2 Tim. 3:1-4) and engorge themselves with the food, clothing, and luxurious pleasures that it brings (Matt. 6:25-32, 2 Tim. 3:1-4, Rev. 18:11-14). These harlots are present in the church today, befriending the world and in an ungodly and unbrotherly way (see I Jn. 3:13-22) seeking to manipulate God and His people for personal gain (James 4:1-4). In the future they will not hesitate even to traffic in human life (Rev. 18:13b) as Nimrod did long ago followed by his oppressive empires.

What then must we do? We must seek Him and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33) first for His glory (versus 9:20, 16:9,11), knowing by faith (Heb. 11:6) that He knows our needs (Matt. 6:32) and will provide for them (Matt. 6:33). Then we will be grateful, knowing that God's provisions are not intrinsically evil and are evil only as they are inspired by selfish and greedy motives. This is the right way and the opposite way from the Babylon tradition. It is dependence upon God in belief rather than idolatrous, self-centered independence from Him in unbelief. This type of life will be punished "double an eye for an eye and double a tooth for a tooth" (Rev. 18:4-7).

We have not said much about the beast. The reason is that he is clearly the Anti-christ, about whom we have already said so

much especially from 11:7 and 13:1-10. He is the same blasphemer of Christ (cf. 1:8) as the one who "was, is not, and is about to come" (17:8, 11). He appears in the line of Babel-like empires, of which five have fallen (Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Greece) one is (Rome), and one is to come (Antichrist in Jerusalem) who is also an eighth (the False Prophet, 13:12) and whose tenure and domain are shorter and mightier than all that have preceded. The ten-nation, western confederation which Antichrist will lead is set forth in 17:12-14. This confederation, encompassing North, South, and West will be the primary force fighting and losing to Christ at the end of the age.

The most difficult verses are 17:16-18:

The mutually advantageous arrangement of 17:3 is now pictured in disarray with the beast and his western alliance turning on the harlot and destroying her. Normally, this is interpreted as Antichrist's overthrow of "ecclesiastical Babylon" in the middle of the Tribulation (Matt. 24:15). However, since we have established that the judgment here is upon Babylon in all of her ecclesiastical, political, and social error, and since this discussion arises in context from the seventh bowl at the end of the age, it seems best to account for the turn of events within the context of the bowl judgments. In the context of the bowl judgments malignant sores aggravated by scorching heat and chilling cold afflict Antichrist's followers (16:1-10). Those who had been promised selfish gain in wealth and position were now writhing in pain (16:10). What good are money and position for incurable suffering? Nothing, as thousands of the wealthy can testify today! All else failing, under demonic influence they turn in hostility to blame Antichrist and his occult system (16:14). If this

malignant judgment was prefigured by the boil judgment of Egypt (Ex. 9:10-11) as seems probable (note the use of *ἐλκος*), then Antichrist and his forces (occultic and political) are afflicted as well, and it seems that they too turn on the system which has deceived them and brought them wealth but with unrelievable torment. Thus, God allows the frustrated confederation to judge and burn wicked Jerusalem, when her seductive system is exposed and her real fruits are not eternal blessing (cf. 18:7b) but a rebellious empire and painful, personal judgment from God. They are now seen in a state of bitter and disillusioned mourning (18:9,11,19), the opposite of what she had promised (18:7b).

Thus, the Babel-like city-system is violently self-destroyed at the end of the Tribulation as thoroughly and ultimately as an unrecoverable scroll (Jere. 51:63-64) or a millstone (18:22) at the bottom of a sea. Caird has noted, "The savaging of the whore by the monster and its horns is John's most vivid symbol for the self-destroying power of evil" (p. 221). Babylon of old was silenced by the barrier of language, but Babylon to come will be silenced by obliteration. Her culture, industry, and wealth will give way at the coming of the Lord to eternal praises of His name and kingdom by those whom she despised most (18:24). What a glorious hope for the ages to know that unbelief of Jerusalem and her children will coterminate with the Babylon spirit and system of the world, and that they will end forever in lieu of the New Jerusalem and the new earth at the coming of the Lord.