

The Identity of Babylon

Revelation 17 – 18

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In perhaps one of the most enigmatic books of Scripture, the apostle John writes in great detail the things revealed to him by God and gives the reader a glimpse into the glories of heaven, the power of God working out through the pages of history and the ultimate triumph of Christ over sin and death in the final days. In the midst of this, the writer introduces his audience to a cast of characters including the elders,<sup>1</sup> the four living creatures,<sup>2</sup> the 144,000 sealed ones,<sup>3</sup> the multitude,<sup>4</sup> the two witnesses<sup>5</sup>, the woman<sup>6</sup>, the dragon<sup>7</sup>, the child<sup>8</sup>, the archangel<sup>9</sup> and the two beasts.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have debated over some of these personalities for centuries, speculating about their nature and significance. For some of them, John elucidates their identity in plain language, while for others he gives the reader precious few clues to guide in interpretation. However, the new character that comes onto the scene in chapters 17 and 18 has generated no fewer than a half dozen widely-held conjectures as to her identity.

Babylon is first alluded to in Revelation 14:8, when an angel pronounces judgment saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality." However, this is by far not the first reference to the ancient city whose prominence is chronicled through the pages of the Bible, as well as in numerous historical texts. Ruins along the Euphrates River about 60 miles south of modern Baghdad mark the current location of the city that played a significant role in the history of the nation of Israel as the destination of the Jewish captives taken by Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 4:6

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 7:4-8

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 7:9-10

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 11:3

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 12:1-2

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 12:3-4

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 12:5-6

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 12:7-8

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 13

<sup>11</sup> II Kings 24:10-16

Even though the vast majority of the more than 250 Scriptural references to Babylon clearly indicate a literal geographic location, many students seek to assign some other identity when John concludes her story in Revelation. Some have posited that Babylon is a code word that stands for some other physical city, such as Rome or Jerusalem, while others suggest it is a symbolic reference to some political or religious system of the past, present or future. However, it is this student's assertion that John is prophesying that the world's center of power will one day return to the literal rebuilt city of Babylon.

The interpretation of these passages rests heavily on the hermeneutical method employed. If one approaches the text as mere allegory (such as the idealist), then it would follow that the imagery of the harlot could refer to any world system or ideology from which we are to flee. Thus, idealists hear the command to leave Babylon in Revelation 18:4 echoed in Paul's admonition to "flee immorality"<sup>12</sup> as much as in the prophets' warnings to "Escape, you who are living with the daughter of Babylon,"<sup>13</sup> and to "Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans!"<sup>14</sup> The recurring harlotry imagery may lead some to speculate that "she" is some false religious system on account of passages that link infidelity to rebellion. However, John makes it obvious that his imagery specifically refers to a city when he says, "The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth."<sup>15</sup> This use of personification is consistent with the portrayal of the rebellion of Tyre<sup>16</sup> and Ninevah.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, a mere allegorical view of Babylon falls short of the demands of a consistently literal, normal, grammatical, historical, contextual interpretation of Scripture.

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<sup>12</sup> I Corinthians 6:18

<sup>13</sup> Zechariah 2:7

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 48:20

<sup>15</sup> Revelation 17:18

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 23:16-17

<sup>17</sup> Nahum 3:4

Another approach to understanding the harlot named Babylon is to view her as symbolically referring to another city. Preterist proponents of this view would identify her as Jerusalem, pointing to the destruction of the city in the first century as the basis for John's 'narrative'. However, John seems to stress the prophetic nature of his writing rather than the apocalyptic. Furthermore, the vivid description he gives of the fall of Babylon matches that of the prophetic accounts of Isaiah 13-14 and Jeremiah 50-51 much more closely than the historic records of Jerusalem's fall. The prophet Isaiah equates the destruction of Babylon with the day of the Lord,<sup>18</sup> linking it with cosmic disturbances<sup>19</sup> and universal judgment,<sup>20</sup> indicating Israel's restoration would immediately follow<sup>21</sup> along with worldwide rest and peace.<sup>22</sup> All of these prophetic elements are contained within John's Revelation. Jeremiah's account also has a number of striking parallels to Revelation 17-18. Both passages describe Babylon as holding a golden cup,<sup>23</sup> dwelling on many waters,<sup>24</sup> and coming to sudden,<sup>25</sup> deserved,<sup>26</sup> and final<sup>27</sup> destruction by fire,<sup>28</sup> with God's people fleeing<sup>29</sup> and heaven rejoicing.<sup>30</sup> It would be difficult to argue that these details line up with the historical facts of the defeat of Babylon in 539 BC or the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, thus make this particular symbolic view untenable. Rather, it seems more likely that all three passages demand a future fulfillment of prophecies including the rise and fall of a literal city of Babylon during the last days.

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<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 13:6-9

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 13:10-13

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 13:11-12

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 14:1-4

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 14:5-8

<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 51:7; Revelation 17:3-4; 18:6

<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 51:13; Revelation 17:1

<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah 51:8; Revelation 18:8

<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah 51:63-64; Revelation 18:21

<sup>27</sup> Jeremiah 50:39; Revelation 18:21

<sup>28</sup> Jeremiah 51:30; Revelation 17:16; 18:8

<sup>29</sup> Jeremiah 51:6, 45; Revelation 18:4

<sup>30</sup> Jeremiah 51:48; Revelation 18:20

Some Historicist adherents of a symbolic view would hold up either the political city of Rome or the ecclesiastical papacy of Rome and look to either the decline of the Roman Empire or the fall of Roman Catholicism as the fulfillment of the prophecy. Here again, the details provided do not align with the reality of historical record. While one can find some similarities in both, there exists a confounding lack of evidence to validate this interpretation of Scripture. In addition, there is also the daunting question as to why John would have chosen to codify his comments about Rome. The notion that his reference to the “seven mountains”<sup>31</sup> supposedly concealed the fact that he was speaking of Rome has little support and forces the reader into an inconsistent hermeneutic. A more likely explanation is that her sitting on the beast with seven heads (interpreted by John as both mountains and kings<sup>32</sup>) probably refers to control rather than location, much like the reference to her sitting on “many waters”<sup>33</sup> (which does not, incidentally, characterize Rome) is interpreted later in the passage as having control over “peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.”<sup>34</sup> Further, most interpreters agree that the other geographic places and cities mentioned in Revelation refer to literal locations, such as Patmos,<sup>35</sup> the Euphrates,<sup>36</sup> Armageddon,<sup>37</sup> and Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> When John wishes to express that he is using the name of a city symbolically, he makes it explicit, such as “the great city which mystically [*lit. spiritually*] is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, a symbolic or coded identity of Babylon is outside the standard of a consistently literal, normal, grammatical, historical, contextual interpretation of Scripture.

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<sup>31</sup> Revelation 17:9

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 17:9-10

<sup>33</sup> Revelation 17:1

<sup>34</sup> Revelation 17:15

<sup>35</sup> Revelation 1:9

<sup>36</sup> Revelation 9:14; 16:12

<sup>37</sup> Revelation 16:16

<sup>38</sup> Revelation 21:2,10

<sup>39</sup> Revelation 11:8

Alternatively, a Futurist approach to interpreting the harlot of Revelation yields a view that is in complete harmony with the Golden Rule of Interpretation, which states, “When the plain sense of scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.” While John does use symbolic language in his description of the character and events of the harlot named Babylon, he does not employ any formula which leads the reader to understand anything other than a literal physical city which will sway many with her immorality,<sup>40</sup> exert extensive political and economic control on the earth,<sup>41</sup> and bring about a great persecution to followers of Jesus.<sup>42</sup> The account that follows details in plain language Babylon’s ultimate demise and the reaction of those who witness it. Critics of this perspective may point to the fact that Babylon has already been destroyed as evidence that the harlot of John’s prophecy could not refer to the same city. However, similarities between Zechariah’s vision of the ephah<sup>43</sup> and John’s vision of the harlot give the interpreter confidence in the literal future rise and fall of Babylon. Even though he began to prophesy *after* the initial fall of the Babylonian empire,<sup>44</sup> Zechariah sees a woman named “Wickedness” taken to Shinar, *i.e.* Babylon,<sup>45</sup> indicating that evil will reign once more in that region of the world. It is this student’s opinion that employing the hermeneutic method of a consistently literal, normal, grammatical, historical, contextual interpretation of Scripture will lead the reader to an understanding that the harlot named Babylon described in Revelation 17-18 represents a future, physical, rebuilt city where the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and the apostle John will be fulfilled during the last days.

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<sup>40</sup> Revelation 17:2

<sup>41</sup> Revelation 17:4, 9-10, 15

<sup>42</sup> Revelation 17:6

<sup>43</sup> Zechariah 5:5-11

<sup>44</sup> Zechariah 1:1

<sup>45</sup> Daniel 1:2

## REFERENCES

(All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by Lockman Foundation.)

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