

Revelation Chapters 17 and 18

Mystery Babylon

The fall of Babylon has already been declared in Revelation 14 v 8 and 16 v 19; in these two chapters, Babylon's demise is carefully detailed. 'Babylon' is mentioned 287 times in the Scriptures, more than any other city except Jerusalem:

- Babylon was a literal city on the Euphrates River. Genesis 11 v 1 to 9 shows that after the flood Babylon was the centre of a civilization in rebellion against God. Later Babylon was the capital of the empire that cruelly conquered Judah.
- In summary, 'Babylon' is associated with organized idolatry, blasphemy and the persecution of God's people.
- But the concept of 'Babylon' is greater than as described here in Revelation 17 and 18. Babylon was present in John's day (as the City of Rome), and it is present in our day and throughout history as the 'world system'. Under the future rule of the Antichrist, 'Babylon' (in both its religious and commercial aspects) will hold sway over the earth as never before.

The fall of religious Babylon (Revelation 17)

- John is shown a vision of a woman (v 3 to 5) – notice the beast on which she sits, the woman's clothing and jewellery, the cup that she holds, and the name written on her forehead. What could each feature of the vision symbolise? Why do you think John " marvelled greatly" (v 6)?
- The main message of this chapter is the certain doom of Babylon. How will this come about? What does this tell us about God's judgment?

"Seated on many waters" (v 1) – the angel explains (v 15): "The waters that you saw... are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" – Babylon has a universal, international character.

"The dwellers on earth have become drunk" (v 2) – in a sense Karl Marx was right when he said, 'Religion is the opium of the people', as they become intoxicated by false and empty religion. Throughout the Bible the idea of 'sexual immorality' has strong associations with idolatry.

The scarlet beast with "seven heads and ten horns" (v 3) is the same as the beast in Revelation 13 v 1, symbolic of the Antichrist.

The "golden cup" (v 4) is also referred to in Jeremiah 51 v 7.

"The seven heads are seven mountains" (v 9) – many quickly associate these seven mountains with the City of Rome, but in the Bible mountains are symbolic of governments (Daniel 2 v 35), and Rome was built on seven 'hills', not 'mountains'.

The seven mountains represent the seven kings and kingdoms described in verse 10, "five of whom have fallen" referring to the five world empires before John's time: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Medo-Persia and Greece; "one is" referring to the world empire of John's day, i.e. Rome; "the other has not yet come" referring to the future revival of the Roman Empire.

This seventh 'kingdom' will quickly be taken over by an eighth (v 11), possibly 'Assyrian' (Isaiah 10 v 5, 6; Micah 5 v 5, 6), from the eastern arm of the former Roman Empire, becoming the Dictatorship of the Antichrist.

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“They and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire” (v 16, 17) – this betrayal probably takes place at the mid-point of the ‘great tribulation’ period, when apostate religion discovers the true murderous nature of the beast.

Ultimately, the Antichrist will not tolerate any worship except of himself, as Paul explains in 2 Thessalonians 2 v 3, 4: “the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God”...

The fall of commercial Babylon (Revelation 18)

Listen to the voices of the angels, announcing the fall of Babylon (v 2 to 8):

- How do they describe the suddenness and completeness of God’s judgment? What warning is given in verse 4, and to whom?

Now listen to the voices of earth-dwellers, lamenting the fall of Babylon:

- What three groups of people are speaking (v 9, 11, 17b)? What features do these ‘laments’ have in common? Why do they all “stand far off”?

“Her sins are heaped high as heaven” (v 5) – in an ironical way, does this remind you of the Tower of Babel? See Genesis 11 v 4.

“I am no widow” (v 7) – this is a strange boast! Some think Babylon is deliberately contrasting herself with Israel, who is described as a ‘widow’ and ‘divorced’ (see Leviticus 22 v 13; Lamentations 1 v 1).

Note that the items listed in v 11 to 13 are luxuries, rather than necessities. The mourning is rooted in self-interest: “since no one buys their cargo anymore” (v 11).

“And slaves, that is, human souls” (v 13) – the profits of commercial Babylon have come through cruelly using others; this idea has many applications, such as today’s widespread human trafficking.

“All nations were deceived by your sorcery” (v 23) – ‘sorcery’ translates the Greek word *φαρμακεία* (*pharmakeia*), which literally means ‘the use or administering of drugs’. We could say that the lure of commercial Babylon is like a drug addiction, fed by deceptive advertising.

And verse 24 gives the ultimate reason for commercial Babylon’s judgment: she has killed the “prophets and saints”, being responsible for “all who have been slain on earth”...