

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The dominant figure of Chapters 17 and 18 is Babylon. Babylon bears the name of a city but appears as a lascivious woman mounted on a mythical beast. These mixed images cannot be taken literally, so this section is one of the few in Revelation that is undeniably figurative. The chapters tell of Babylon's downfall, which likely takes place during the previous judgments but toward the end of the tribulation.

What are we to make of this mystery?

Possible meanings are:

- The historical city of Babylon in Mesopotamia. It had shrunk to an insignificant village by the time of John's writing so is unlikely to be the primary meaning.
- The tower of Babel from Genesis 11, its geographical and spiritual predecessor.
- The city of Rome in all its power and wealth. This allusion could not be lost on John's readers.
- The Roman Catholic church.
- A great religious system with global influence, absorbing elements from all of the above and a particular object of God's wrath.

The last interpretation should hold our chief interest as it teaches us what God most detests in false religion.

Two verses give the key:

... one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute" (Rev. 17:1)

... one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9)

The connection and contrast are unmistakeable. But if the bride is the faithful and purified church, what is the prostitute? It must be a sort of imitation anti-church, composed of those who worship the beast (v. 8). Reminiscent of the

Chapter 17

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unfaithful wife of Hosea, it is the last stage of the apostate church that has turned from God and mixed itself with every false belief of the world.

Ancient Israel committed adultery with idols. But this system called Babylon commits sexual immorality with "the kings of the earth." She rides on the beast from Chapter 13, the head of a revived Roman empire. She has become the consort and ally of the political power of the world and the actual, if not acknowledged, enemy of Christ.

But the woman has deluded herself. As she sits astride the beast or on the many waters, she imagines that she is driving events and controlling the nations. But look what happens in v. 16. The beast and his vassal kings, apparently having no further use for the woman, turn on her with consuming hatred and devour her. To complete the indignity, she is mourned in Chapter 18 primarily for the loss of business that accompanies her death. She has traded faithfulness for the illusion of influence.

What a solemn warning for those who would turn the church into a human devised enterprise like the tower of Babel or bring it into unholy union with the powers of the world.

Notes on Chapter 17

17:1 “*seated on many waters*” means the system represented by the woman is spread over the earth (see v. 17).

17:2 The wine produced by the ungodly relations between the woman and the kings of the earth may symbolize the many intoxicating but false ideas and attitudes resulting from the alliance between the apostate church and the world.

17:3 The description of the beast is identical to the beast from the sea in Chapter 13, where we identified it as the head of a revived Roman empire.

17:4 Glitter and wealth adorn the woman but she holds abominations in her hand.

17:5 A mystery is something not previously revealed. Perhaps the mystery here is the true character of the woman, not readily apparent when she first appears.

17:6 There are no genuine believers remaining in this organization. They are in fact the subject of its persecution.

17:8 The Roman empire depicted by the beast once existed, fell to barbarians, and will reappear under the guidance of Satan for a brief time before its utter destruction.

17:9 Writers from ancient times have called Rome a city on seven hills. The city of Rome is undoubtedly one meaning of the figurative Babylon.

17:10-12 The meaning of these verses may not be apparent until they are fulfilled. The sequence may run something like this: A new system of government will have seven leaders. They will be followed by an eighth in the same line of succession, the beast, who will form an alliance with ten other leaders who are subordinate to him.

17:13 “*These are of one mind ...*” The builders of the tower of Babel were also of one mind: To challenge God and reach heaven by human effort. It seems likely that if men on the earth ever again assemble with such unity of thought and purpose, it will be to oppose God and not to honor Him.

17:14 The gathering of the armies of the kings is described in Rev. 16:16. Their defeat takes place in Chapter 19. Chapters 17 and 18 do not follow the other judgments of the tribulation but trace one thread of them, that having to do with the apostate church. The other chapters, 6 through 16, deal more generally with all mankind.

17:16 The beast and its ten horns, or kings, turn upon the prostitute and destroy her. We are reminded of the earlier alliance between the beast and the nation of Israel, which he suddenly shattered when he set up the abomination in the temple. Clearly the beast, symbolizing the power of the world system, is a treacherous ally.

Chapter 18 more fully describes the destruction of Babylon and its consequences.

17:17 God turns His enemies to His purposes.