

BABYLON IS FALLEN

Revelation 17-18



Intro: it is tempting to read the book of Revelation as a book of history, thinking that the chapters are sequential with A leading to B which leads to C, etc. However, that's not how the visions of Revelation are arranged. Rather, what occurs in a few chapters is further explained a few chapters later. That's exactly what transpires in Revelation 17-18.

Recall that in chapter 13 we were introduced to two beasts which were allied with Satan. Satan and these two beasts gathered their forces for battle at Armageddon (16.13-16), but their defeat was alluded to as we see Christ's judgment brought on Babylon (16.17-21). What we see in chapters 17-18 is more information about that battle and the fall of Babylon.

Before looking at these chapters we would do well to consider Jeremiah 51, a passage with much bearing on our text. Recall that Jeremiah prophesied during the final days of Judah and witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians. God was using this nation to punish the iniquity and unfaithfulness of His people, but He also had judgement in store for the Babylonians. That is the focus of Jeremiah 51, a message written in ~ 594 B.C. (see Jer 51.59), some 60 years before the Medes and Persians overran the city. God's people could know that their Lord would ultimately redeem them from their oppressors, a message that the Lord's people needed reaffirmed to them in John's day. So, we see several parallels between Jeremiah 51 and Revelation 17-18:

- Babylon had intoxicated the nations with her wine (Jer 51.7; Rev. 17.2)
- Babylon's fall is declared long before it actually occurred (Jer 51.8; Rev. 18.2)
- The world mourns over Babylon's fall (Jer 51.8; Rev. 18.9-19)
- Babylon's sins have piled up to heaven (Jer 51.9; Rev. 18.5)
- Babylon is punished for what the harm she has inflicted on God's people (Jer 51.34-36; Rev 17.6; 18.24)
- God's people are beckoned to come out of Babylon (Jer 51.45; Rev. 18.4)
- Babylon's sure destruction is likened to a heavy stone being cast into the sea (Jer 51.61-64; Rev 18.21)

Babylon, the oppressor of God's people will fall. But when John penned Revelation the ancient city of Babylon was in no way a world power or a persecutor of God's people. So, who's destruction is being signified in these chapters?

Identifying Babylon

1. The options: remembering that Revelation was written in signs (1.1) means that we are not explicitly told the meaning of each image. Thus, various identifications have been given for Babylon. The most common interpretations given are:
 - a. Jerusalem: popular view among commentators favoring an early date for Revelation and believe that the main thrust of the letter is God's judgment on the Jewish nation and religion.
 - b. Papal Rome: view popularized by the Reformers (i.e. Luther, Calvin, etc.). They viewed the letter as being God's judgment on the Pope and Catholic church.
 - c. Imperial Rome: this is the interpretation I believe fits the context of the letter. I reject interpreting this as Papal Rome because that would have no bearing on John's recipients, nor could it be said that it would "soon take place" (1.1-3). While many arguments are put in favor of Jerusalem, I do not believe it fits the context. Babylon is described as ruling over many "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" and "over the kings of the earth" (17.15,18). That could not be said of Jerusalem, but it does fit Rome.
2. What this passage says about Babylon (Rome):
 - a. She is described as a great harlot because the kings of the earth have acted immorally with her (17.1-2)
 - b. She is closely allied with the beast, and thus a tool of Satan (17.3, we'll say more of this later).
 - c. She has an outward appearance of elegance and beauty, but is rotten within (17.4-5).
 - d. She has persecuted God's people (17.6)
 - e. She rules over the kings of the earth (17.15,20) and gives them authority (17.12-13). These same kings hate her and will turn against her (17.16-17).
 - f. She wages war against the Lord (17.14).
3. The relationship between the harlot and the beast.
 - a. John sees the harlot sitting on the beast in the wilderness (17.3). When this beast is compared to the first beast in chapter 13 we can only conclude that the beasts are the same. The harlot sitting on the beast indicates a close relationship. We have already identified the harlot (Babylon) as Rome. But what about the beast?
 - b. As we said in chapter 13, the beast represents the world empire that Satan used in John's day to persecute God's people. At that time, the empire was Rome, but that was not the only empire Satan had used for his purposes. Previously he had used Egypt, Babylon, Greece, etc. The current

manifestation of the beast was Rome, but the image includes any world power Satan would use.

- c. This helps make sense of several aspects of the image:
 - i. The beast is described as "was, and is not, and is about to come up..." Satan had used empires before, but those empires declined and disappeared. But now another empire was being used by Satan.
 - ii. The beast has 7 heads described as 7 kings, but the beast is an eighth yet one of the 7 (17.9-11). Many have tried to identify these "kings" as specific Caesar's, but in keeping with the imagery of the letter, it seems best to see 7 as symbolic. "The best solution is to adhere to the symbolic character of the book. Repeatedly John has used seven as the symbol for completeness or perfection, and ten for the fullness of power... The seven kings, therefore, were a symbolic number, representing all kings or kingdoms, past present, and future that would oppose the kingdom of God," (Hailey).
- d. Satan was using Rome and the Empire to persecute God's people. The nations of the world were in league with them as they went to battle with the Lamb. What would happen?

Babylon is Fallen

1. "These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them". With those succinct words, the Lord's victory is assured! Chapter 18 reveals more regarding Rome's defeat.
 - a. She would be left desolate (18.1-3)
 - b. She would be repaid in full for all of her evil (18.4-8)
2. The world would mourn her destruction (18.9-19)
 - a. "Here we find certain ones mourning over the fall of Rome. Ray Summers says Rome was built upon two things: Territorial conquest and trade expansion. The groups involved in these matters profited with Rome and went down with her. V. 9 mentions the Kings of the earth, and then v. 11, the merchants of the earth." (Ken Green)
 - b. We noted in 17.16 that the kings of the earth hated her, but they would sorrow over their loss of power and wealth.
3. But the saints would have cause for rejoicing (18.20-24)
 - a. God was rendering judgment for them (vs. 20)
 - b. This judgment would be total, destroying all semblance of normal life (18.21-24)
 - c. "A person cannot be on the losing side if he is on the Lord's side." (Ken Green)
4. The call for God's people to "come out" (18.4)

- a. "The words are based on Jeremiah's warning to the exiles in Babylon to escape that city when the destruction came (Jer. 51.6)... He is speaking to those Christians who had been seduced by Rome (see 2Tim 4.10; 2Cor. 6.17,18). Some were becoming weak. You'll recall in the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2,3) several of those churches had drifted. Ephesus had left her first love. Laodicea was lukewarm. Pergamos and Thyatira were condoning false doctrine. Sardis was a dead church with a big name. There was an unmistakable need for the admonition to some of those members of the church to 'come out...'" (Ken Green)
- b. Christians may be tempted by the deceitful lusts of this world, but once they see that this world is doomed to be judged, they should willingly come out so as to be saved.