

Revelation Ch. 17: Babylon The Great

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April 2008

We now focus on a detailed description of what has been pictured only briefly, the judgment of Babylon The Great, the city of Jerusalem (11:13-19; 14:8, 14-20; 16:19-21). Her desolation would come through the beast, the Roman Empire, as the empire united for the great day of God Almighty (16:14; 17:16, 17).

Verses 1-2

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.”

Since it is the primary focus of the book, it makes sense to describe in detail the judgment of this great harlot, who was an evil influence to those around her (11:18; 14:8; 18:3; Matt. 23:15, 23; Mk. 7:6-9; cf. Jer. 51:7). The many waters refer to many peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (17:15), focusing on Jerusalem as the center of Judaism (cf. 2 Chr. 6:6; Josephus, Wars 5.5.1; 6.10.1). Jerusalem was a faithful city turned harlot (17:5; cf. Isa. 1:21; Matt. 23).

See the introductory notes and Babylon The Great handout for a detailed description of this city and why it matches best with Jerusalem.

Verse 3

So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

Since the actual judgment of the harlot is being pictured, perhaps John was carried to the wilderness to symbolize his protection in these events (12:6, 14). Though the beast made war with the church (13:7), the Christians would not suffer as a part of this judgment (7:1-3; 18:4).

The woman is the great city (17:18), the city of Jerusalem (cf. 11:2, 8). She is figuratively riding the beast with seven heads and ten horns, the Roman Empire (13:1ff.), described here as colored scarlet in reference to its nature and source of authority (13:2; cf. 12:3). The heads and horns of the beast are identified as kings (17:9-13). Titus, giving a speech to the Jews after destroying the temple, described the relationship between the Jews and Rome as follows:

It can therefore be nothing certainly but the kindness of us Romans which hath excited you against us; who, in the first place, have given you this land to possess; and, in the next place, have set over you kings of your own nation; and, in the third place, have preserved the laws of your forefathers to you, and have withal permitted you to live, either by yourselves, or among others, as it should please you: and, what is our chief favor of all we have given you leave to gather up that tribute which is paid to God with such other gifts that are dedicated to him; nor have we called those that carried these donations to account, nor prohibited them; till at length you became richer than we ourselves, even when you were our enemies; and you made preparations for war against us with our own money; nay, after all, when you were in the enjoyment of all these advantages, you turned your too great plenty against those that gave it you, and, like

merciless serpents, have thrown out your poison against those that treated you kindly.
(Josephus, Wars 6.6.2)

In His preface to *Wars of the Jews*, Josephus states that “it had so come to pass, that our city Jerusalem had arrived at a higher degree of felicity than any other city under the Roman government.” Certainly, Rome had carried Jerusalem to her present glory.

Verse 4

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.

The previous description by Titus also fits this picture well. Ezekiel describes nearly the exact same picture in discussing Jerusalem's harlotry (Ezek. 16:11-15), as does Jeremiah (Jer. 4:30). God had taken care of her, but she grew to trust in her own beauty rather than Him. The golden cup of literal Babylon now belongs to the spiritual Babylon (cf. Jer. 51:7), and she would drink of the wrath of God (16:5, 6, 19; cf. Matt. 23:32).

hath not its great antiquity, nor its vast riches, nor the diffusion of its nation over all the habitable earth, nor the greatness of the veneration paid to it on a religious account, been sufficient to preserve it from being destroyed. (Josephus, Wars 6.10.1)

Verse 5

And on her forehead a name was written: Mystery, Babylon the Great, The Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth.

The servants of God have His name on their foreheads (7:3; 14:1), and the servants of the beast had his name or mark on theirs (13:16). Babylon the Great had a whore's forehead, showing loyalty to anyone but the Lord (cf. Jer. 3:1-3). The mystery is the identity of Babylon the Great, in which John marveled (17:6). Her identity would be made more clear by the descriptions that follow (cf. 17:7ff.).

The common idea that Babylon the Great represents Rome does not fit this picture as well as Jerusalem. Jerusalem had been around for much longer than Rome (Gen. 14:18, c. 2000 BC or earlier vs. 753 BC for Rome), and had a track record that fits the picture perfectly.

Jerusalem was the chosen city of God (2 Chr. 6:6), yet described as a faithful city that turned into a harlot (cf. Isa. 1:21). Figuratively, she was God's own wife (Jer. 31:32), yet committed spiritual adultery by her own lusts and desires (Ezek. 16; Hos. 1:2; cf. Matt. 3:7; 15:3-9; Mk. 7:5-9), and ultimately rejected His Son (Matt. 21:37-40; Heb. 10:29-31). She is described as the mother of harlots, contrasted with heavenly Jerusalem as the mother of the righteous (Gal. 4:26; cf. Rev. 12:1).

Verse 6

I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

The saints likely refer to Old Testament saints, distinguished from martyrs of Jesus (cf. 6:9-11; 16:5, 6). The Jews had been the persecutors of God's faithful servants for many years (cf. Acts 7:51-60; 8:1, 3; 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21, 23, 29; 12:1-4; 22:4, 5; 26:9-11; Heb. 11:33-40). The blood of all the righteous would be required of this generation of wicked Jews (Matt. 23:32-35; 27:25; Lk. 11:50; Rev. 18:20, 24).

Verses 7-8

But the angel said to me, “Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

Like Daniel, John is given more information regarding his vision (Dan. 7:15, 16; 8:15-19;).

What does it mean that the beast, the Roman Empire (13:1ff.), *was and is not*? It cannot mean that the Empire was not ruling, for the power of Rome lasted well into the 5th century. Notice the chronology, the beast *was*, and *is not*, and *will ascend* out of the bottomless pit. We have already seen the latter part pictured, when the beast caused the Law and Prophets to vanish away by destroying the temple in Jerusalem (11:7; cf. Heb. 8:13). This is what it means for the beast to “go to perdition,” he went to cause utter destruction.

Given that we know when the latter description of the beast took place, and that the beast *was*, meaning it was in power, we need to look backward in time to a period when the beast had lost or had seemingly lost its power (since the beast *yet is*). We have seen this already also, in a symbolic reference to the many uprisings and civil wars within the empire around the death of Nero (16:10, 11). It was also at the time when the beast seemingly *was not*, that General Vespasian left his post in Judea as he was about to besiege Jerusalem, in order to secure the throne (Josephus, Wars 4.9-11). Once the empire was secured, he sent Titus to finish Jerusalem (16:13, 14; Wars 4.11.5). In this sense, during these first century events, it could have been said that the beast *is not, yet is*.

Those who worship the beast (cf. 13:8) would marvel at the empire's ability to re-stabilize (cf. 13:3). The mention of the names in the Book of Life (Phi. 4:3; Rev. 3:5) written from the foundation of the world refers to God's eternal purpose (13:8; Eph. 1:4). Christians would not marvel at this because they knew what was to happen (Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21).

Verse 9

Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits.

Just as when interpreting the number of the beast (13:18), this interpretation takes wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. Since mountains often represent governments (6:14; 8:8; cf. Jer. 51:25), and here also symbolized kings (17:10), these refer to the complete authority of the Roman government.

It is worth noting that Rome was well known for its seven hills, which causes many to interpret the woman that sits upon them, Babylon, as the city of Rome, though that does not follow from the rest of the descriptions. Some have pointed out in this regard that different Greek words are used for mountains and hills, and so this is probably not an attempt to depict geography (cf. Lk. 3:5; 23:30).

Though they are a part of the beast, the fact that the woman sits on the mountains is consistent with the idea of Jerusalem being carried by the Roman government (17:3).

Verse 10

There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he

comes, he must continue a short time.

The seven heads are seven mountains and also seven kings, an obvious reference to Roman rule and government (see above). Though the number seven is a symbol of completeness, it here appears to be more specific and speaking of actual kings or rulers. The kings of the Roman Empire were the Caesars, five of which are depicted as fallen (dead), one presently ruling, and another yet to come. The first twelve emperors of Rome were:

- 1) Julius (45 – 44 BC)
- 2) Augustus (31 BC – 14 AD)
- 3) Tiberius (14 – 37 AD)
- 4) Gaius (Caligula) (37 – 41 AD)
- 5) Claudius (41 – 54 AD)
- 6) Nero (54 – 68 AD)
- 7) Galba (68 – 69 AD)
- 8) Otho (69 AD)
- 9) Vitellius (69 AD)
- 10) Vespasian (69 – 79 AD)
- 11) Titus (79 – 81 AD)
- 12) Domitian (81 – 96 AD)

Five emperors are depicted as fallen, and the sixth is currently ruling, which would have been Nero. As can be seen, the time and character of Nero fits the context perfectly (see notes on Ch. 13 and 16). The king that is yet to come could be Galba, who ruled for a short time, only seven months. Some discount Galba, Otho, and Vitellius as true emperors, and make Vespasian the seventh (Ogden, p. 13), though he ruled for ten years. If the seventh does in fact refer to Vespasian, then perhaps the short time he must continue refers to the remainder of the war (cf. 13:5).

While some would argue that Julius was never officially given the title of emperor, and that the list should begin with Augustus, the fact that all Roman rulers bore the name Caesar shows his belonging at the top. Though there are some good arguments for this (Copeland, p. 5), the first century view has Julius as the first emperor of Rome (Josephus, Antiquities 18.2.2). Others hold these kings to be seven kingdoms, of which Rome is the sixth, though this is not consistent with other passages, in which Rome is always described as a fourth kingdom (Daniel 2; 7; Rev. 13).

Verse 11

The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.

The beast, the Roman Empire, as personified in an eighth king, would bring utter destruction upon Jerusalem (17:7). Based on this description, this person must be a future emperor who took part in the fall of Jerusalem, which fits only two men: Vespasian, who led the army prior to taking the throne in 69 AD, and Titus, who was commissioned to besiege Jerusalem, and ultimately became emperor after his father.

If Galba, Otho, and Vitellius are discounted, then it may be that Vespasian is the seventh and Titus the eighth. If they remain, then they are the tenth and eleventh, respectively. Since the mention of *an* eighth king (NASB) does not demand a successive ruler after the seventh, Titus can still fit the description either way. In fact, the picture more exactly fits Titus since it was he who gathered the

armies for the great day of God Almighty (16:14-16). If Vespasian is viewed as the seventh, it is noteworthy that Titus describes himself as emperor along with his father (Wars 6.6.2), hence the phrase “is also the eighth, and is of the seven.”

Verses 12-13

The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast.

While the ten horns represent the complete power of the beast (13:1), they also represent ten kings united with the beast (17:16, 17). They are the subjugate, tributary kings of the empire, whose peoples comprised the Roman army (16:14). The one hour represents the time of judgment on Jerusalem (14:7; 18:10, 17, 19).

Verse 14

These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.”

This projects beyond the first century. These subjugate kings will lead their nations against Christianity in the centuries ahead (cf. 13:7-17). Though they make war, the cause of Christ will overcome (cf. 19:11-21), as evidenced by the fact that the Roman Empire and its tributary kings no longer exist, but Christianity does (cf. Matt. 16:18). Christians are called by the gospel, chosen by God, and live faithfully to Him (Matt. 22:14; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:4; 2 Thes. 2:14; Heb. 11:6; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 2:10).

Verse 15

Then he said to me, “The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.

Spiritually, Jerusalem reigned over the Jews scattered throughout the world (17:2, 18; cf. Ps. 68:29; Acts 2:5).

Verses 16-17

And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

This is a picture of the Roman army united to burn Jerusalem and make it desolate (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 22:1-7; Matt. 23:37; Lk. 19:41-44; Josephus, Wars 7.1.1; cf. Ezek. 16:37-41). The people of the world hated the Jews just as they did Christians, and detested the special treatment the Jews received (17:3; cf. 1 Thes. 2:15; Josephus, Wars 5.1.6; Against Apion 2.6). Though they did not realize it, this was to fulfill God's purpose (Lk. 21:22; cf. Isa. 10:5-7).

Verse 18

And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.”

Babylon the Great is the great city where our Lord was crucified, the city of Jerusalem (11:8). As the center of Judaism, she reigned over the kings of the earth (17:1-4, 15; Ps. 68:29; cf. Acts 2:5; Josephus, Wars 5.5.1; 6.10.1).

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