

INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 18

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1 THE THEME

THE PUNISHMENT OF BABYLON REPRESENTS THE DESTRUCTION OF THE GODLESS WORLD

2 THE STRUCTURE

a. The unity between Revelation chapter 17 and 18

The prostitute Babylon (chapter 17) and the city Babylon (chapter 18) are one and the same reality.

Revelation 17:1 announces the punishment of the great prostitute, Babylon, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute”.

Revelation 18:1-24 describes the execution of this punishment.

Revelation 17:7-18 is an interim passage that explains the ‘mystery’ that exists between the prostitute and the beast she rides.

Babylon is first pictured as a prostitute and then as a city (17:18).

In Revelation 18:1-7 Babylon is pictured as a woman: the prostitute (17:1,18; cf. 19:2) with whom people commit spiritual adultery (18:3) and a queen or widow (18:7).

In Revelation 18:8-24 Babylon is pictured as a city (17:5,9,18; 18:10,16,18,19,21).

b. The description of the fall of Babylon

- The proclamation of the fall of Babylon the Great (18:1-3).
- The call to come out of Babylon (18:4-5)
- The command to punish Babylon (18:6-7).
- The description of the extent and dreadfulness of Babylon’s destruction in three lamentations (18:8-19).
- The exhortation to rejoice at Babylon’s fall (18:20).
- The irrevocable finality of Babylon’s violent fall (18:21-24).

3 THE CONTENTS

The purpose of the vision in Revelation chapter 17 and 18 is to reveal to John and to all Christians throughout history the final end of one of the powers working within world history, namely, the antichristian world and its seductions.

a. The identity of the great prostitute or Babylon the great

The great prostitute or Babylon the great represents Satan’s *antichristian world and its seductions*, especially in industry and commerce, business and finance, education and justice, luxuries and pleasures, art, sports and

certainly also in every kind of worldly religion. In short, it represents Satan's *antichristian culture* connected to the world empires throughout the period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming.

All the things mentioned in Revelation chapter 18 constitute *the kingdom of man or the kingdom of the world*. Hence, when Babylon perishes, the kingdom of man and everything on which man without God had pinned his hope and built his trust, perishes. This is true of every Babylon throughout history: the ancient Sodom and Gomorra, the ancient Nineveh, the ancient Babylon, the ancient Rome, and every city of the world throughout history. It will especially happen with respect to the final kingdom of the final antichrist at the close of history. Initially, governments, industry and commerce are enamoured by Babylon, but in the end she always proves to be a great disappointment!

b. The final judgement of Babylon

The final judgement of the world and its seductions at Christ's second coming is proclaimed, illustrated and lamented. The fall of Babylon is proclaimed as if it had already taken place. This is done in order to indicate the absolute certainty of her fall and to serve as a warning (18:1-3).

From the first century A.D. until now, the fall of Babylon has not yet become a complete reality. Therefore, God's people are called to come out of her in order not to share in her sins or to receive any of her plagues (18:4-5; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1).

God's instruments of punishing Babylon are commanded to recompense her completely. They are also told why (18:6-7).

Again, the fall of Babylon is described as if it had already taken place. The extent and dreadfulness of Babylon's destruction is described in three lamentations by the kings of the earth (18:9-10), the merchants of the earth (18:11-16) and the merchants of the sea (18:17-19). Compare the lament for Tyre in Ezekiel chapter 27.

All those in heaven and the righteous on earth are exhorted to rejoice at Babylon's fall (18:20).

Finally Babylon's irrevocable fall is pictured as an angel throwing a large boulder into the sea, so that it sinks and never will be found again (18:21-24).

c. The fall of Babylon is terrible, but not tragic

Life in this present world is manifestly unjust! The good people suffer, the unselfish people are exploited, the meek people are terrorised, and the poor are deprived. On the other hand, the evil people flourish, the selfish people make fortunes, the brutal people oppress the meek and the rich people cause the poor to get poorer. Tyrants die peacefully in their beds while saints are tortured to death. If, as we are assuming, there is a God who is all-powerful and good, how can he possibly allow the injustices in the world to continue? If he does nothing about all the injustice in the world, either now or after this life in order to redress such gross injustice and put down such rampant evil, then he is either not all-powerful and so cannot do it, or he is not good and so does not care!

However, the Bible teaches very clearly that God is all-powerful and good and that justice on a cosmic scale will be done. All the people who ever lived on earth will be present at this final future judgement! Babylon will fall! The prophets and apostles and saints will see that finally justice will be done: all evil people in history will be punished! Read Psalm 73:2-16.

Babylon symbolises the autonomy of man – man who deems himself self-sufficient and therefore independent from God and everyone else. Man had become his own 'god'. He listens and obeys only his own mind and voice.

Babylon symbolises the empire of the world with its seductive culture. She symbolises the empire of the world which labours under the delusion that she rules the world and controls the nations. Her deliberate purpose is to seduce people to spiritual immorality (the worship of any god besides the God of the Bible), to depravity in moral life (sexual immorality in all its despicable forms) and to corruption in business and commerce (dishonesty, bribery, extortion, tax evasion, etc.)(17:2). The main target of Babylon is to destroy Christians who bear the testimony of Christ (17:6).

The fall of Babylon is terrible for those who have chosen to identify themselves with her. They will receive the exact punishment they deserve (18:6; cf. Ecclesiastes 12:14; Romans 2:5-11). They often got away from

justice on earth, but they cannot and will not escape God's perfect and righteous justice! The fall of Babylon is terrible, but not tragic. It is fully deserved! Her final fall and the final defeat of Satan, the beast, the false prophet and the people bearing the mark of the beast brings their real nature of evil into the full light of God's just judgement. It brings a permanent end to the delusion that things on earth had not been what they really were in God's eyes.

d. The message of Revelation chapter 18

The message of Revelation chapter 18 is that the final judgement of Satan's antichristian world is certain, irrevocable, complete and final. The sinful world with its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its antichristian philosophies, religions and culture, together with its teeming multitudes that have forsaken God and have lived according to the lusts of the flesh and the desire of the eyes, will perish.

Revelation chapter 18 serves as a warning to the unrepentant to break with the sinful world and turn to Christ before it is too late! It also serves as an encouragement to believers in Christ that there will be a final judgement in which complete justice for all previous injustices on earth will be done!

4 THE BACKGROUND

a. Babylon

The old Babylonian Empire.

In very early history there was a great flood that destroyed the inhabitants of the world except Noah and his family (Genesis chapter 6-8). Nimrod descended from Cush, who descended from Ham, the son of Noah. Nimrod was a great warrior and hunter and the first centres of his kingdom were Erech (the capital of the Sumerians), Akkad (the capital of the Akkadians) and Babylon (the capital of the northern cities), all in the land of Shinar (Babylon)(Genesis 10:6-20). The people built a tower and called it 'Babel', which means 'the gateway of god'. From there God scattered all the nations of the world with their different languages (Genesis 11:1-9). The name 'Babel' sounds like the Hebrew word 'confusion'¹ of languages.

By 2500 B.C. the Akkadians lived in northern Babylonia with Akkad as capital and their language was Semitic (like Assyrian, Amorite, Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew) and the Sumerians lived in southern Babylonia with Erech as capital and their language was non-Semitic.

The Chaldeans (cf. Job 1:17)(about 2000 B.C.) were nomads from the border of Arabia and north of this. Around 1000 B.C. the Chaldeans settled in southern Babylon.

The Amorites lived in the hill country of Canaan (Numbers 13:29). They are mentioned in the Babylonian inscriptions and were defeated by the king of Akkad (2500 B.C.). They continued to attack Babylon and finally founded the Amorite dynasty in Babylon (2075 B.C.) that lasted three centuries. Around 1400 B.C. the Amorite kingdom stretched from the Lebanon Mountains, the Syrian Desert to the border of Babylon.

The Elamites lived East of Babylon, along the lower Tigris and the coast of the Persian or Arabian Gulf. The dynasty of Larsa was the great opponent of Hammurabi, who only conquered Larsa in the thirtieth year of his reign. The Assyrian Assurbanipal (668-626 B.C. made an end to the kingdom of Elam (640 B.C.).

The kings of the dynasty of Ur (2296-2185 B.C.) used the title 'king of Sumer and Akkad'. The patriarchs descended from Shem (Genesis 11:10-26) and came from Ur of the Chaldeans. Abraham (2167 - 1992 B.C.) was 75 years old when he went from Haran to Canaan (2092 B.C.)(Genesis 12:4). The second king Dungi of this dynasty conquered neighbouring Elam with difficulty, destroying their cities again and again. He was worshipped as a god during his lifetime. But Elam sought revenge and finally conquered Ur. The invasions by the Amorites caused Akkadian to become the language of Babylonia (around 2000 B.C.).

The northern cities united to make the ancient city of Babel their capital. The Amorite Sumu-abum founded the first dynasty of Babylon (2075 B.C.) and for three centuries this Amorite dynasty brought Babylon to great prosperity. The sixth king of Babylon was Hammurabi (1955-1912 B.C.). He is probably the king called Amraphel, whose raiding party Abraham defeated (Genesis 14:1,9). Hammurabi finally conquered the Elamites and united all of Sumer and Akkad under Babylon in 1925 B.C. He also conquered Assur and

¹ Hebrew: 'balal' means to confuse

Nineveh in the north, wrote famous laws that have the form of the laws in Exodus 21-23, cared for temples and died in 1912 B.C. The Hittites invaded Babylon and made an end of the Amorite dynasty in Babylon (1760 B.C.). The Caspians (northern Elamites) invaded and ruled as the third dynasty in Babylon (1752-1176 B.C. or 1746-1170 B.C.). The Assyrians often oppressed the Babylonians between 1400-1100 B.C. and around 900 B.C. ruled over the Babylonian and Chaldean kings.

Ancient Babylon's greatest glory.

Under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.) the Chaldean-Babylonian Empire reached its greatest glory. They subjected Assyria and took Judah into exile (605-538 B.C.).

The historian Herodotus gives a description of the ancient city of Babylon. Babylon was an exact square of 27 kilometres each side and more than 100 kilometres around. The brick wall was 26.5 metres broad (6 chariots could drive abreast on top of the wall), 106 metres high and on the wall there were 250 towers. Outside the wall surrounding the city was a moat filled with water from the Euphrates. Inside the city there were 25 avenues, each 45 metres wide, running NS and EW, thus making 676 large squares (26 squares on each side). There were gates at the ends of all avenues (100 gates in total), which were closed during the night. The city was divided into 2 equal parts by the Euphrates. The banks were walled up and pierced with brazen gates. There were steps leading down to the river. A bridge crossed the river with a palace at each end. The palace had sumptuous banqueting halls and was connected by a subterranean passageway. The tower of Bel was near one palace, consisting of 8 times 22.86 metres high towers on top of each other (thus about 200 metres high)! The hanging gardens were 122 metres square and stood on pillars.

Ancient Babylon's decline.

Babylon was captured in 539 B.C. by the Medo-Persian king Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4). In 516 B.C. Babylon revolted against Darius Hystaspis but was taken after 20 months siege. In 478 B.C. Xerxes plundered the great temple of Bel. In 331 B.C. Alexander was welcomed into the city. In 293 B.C. Babylon suffered much from the building of Seleucia, the capital of the Seleucids on the coast near Antioch! In A.D. 25 Strabo writes that Babylon was greatly deserted. The cities Seleucia (built by Greeks), Ctesiphon (built by Parthians), Al Maiden (built by Persians) and Kufa (built by Caliphs) as well as Hillah were constructed with the bricks of Babylon. Even today houses in Baghdad have Babylonian stamped bricks in them.

Babylon as type of godlessness in the Old Testament.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied between 740-680 B.C. Isaiah chapter 13 is a prophecy against Babylon, which at that time was just a small subject province in the Assyrian Empire. God's prophecy said that Babylon would become a great army that would bring kingdoms in turmoil, punish nations for their evil, be ruthless and arrogant, devastate Palestine and become the jewel of the nations. It also prophesied that Babylon would eventually be conquered by the Medes (13:17) and become a deserted place.

Isaiah chapters 46 and 47 also prophesied the fall of Babylon. Its idols would be carried away on the backs of animals. God had used Babylon to punish his people Israel. But Babylon treated them without mercy. Babylon was very proud and believed she would continue for ever, but she would be destroyed on one single day. Her magic spells and sorceries and her astrologers and stargazers would not be able to save her.

The prophet Habakkuk probably prophesied during the reign of Jehoiakim before Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion into Judah, that is, he prophesied between 608-605 B.C. The rich and powerful in Judah were still exploiting and oppressing the poor. Habakkuk's first question was, "Why does the Lord allow the wicked in Judah to oppress the righteous?" (1:2-4). The Lord answered, "The Chaldeans, that is, the Babylonians, will come as a punishment for the wicked in Judea" (1:5-11). Then Habakkuk advanced an objection, "Why does the Lord allow the people of Judah to be punished by the Chaldeans, who are more wicked than the Judeans?" (1:12-17). The Lord answered, "The Chaldeans will also be punished. As a matter of fact, all the wicked will be punished (2:4-20). But the righteous will live by his faith (2:4)." It is the duty and glory of the righteous to trust, even when he is not able to figure out the justice of the Lord's actions. In this humble trust and quiet confidence the righteous will live (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11).

b. Unclean birds and animals (18:2)

Isaiah chapter 13 speaks of unclean birds like the owl and unclean animals like the jackal and hyena that would inhabit ancient Babylon after its destruction.