

Revelation 17:1 – 18:24

^{17:1} Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, 'Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.' ³ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, ⁵ and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, 'BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.' ⁶ And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. When I saw her, I wondered greatly. ⁷ And the angel said to me, 'Why do you wonder? 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. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come. ⁹ Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits, ¹⁰ and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. ¹¹ The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction. ¹² The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. ¹³ These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴ These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.' ¹⁵ And he said to me, 'The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. ¹⁶ And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. ¹⁸ The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.'

^{18:1} After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. ² And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird. ³ For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality.' ⁴ I heard another voice from heaven, saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; ⁵ for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶ Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her. ⁷ To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, 'I SIT AS A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning.' ⁸ For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong. ⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, ¹⁰ standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.' ¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more-- ¹² cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every kind of citron wood and every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble, ¹³ and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep, and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives. ¹⁴ The fruit you long for has gone from you, and all things that were luxurious and splendid have passed away from you and men will no longer find them. ¹⁵ The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, ¹⁶ saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls; ¹⁷ for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!' And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea, stood at a distance, ¹⁸ and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, 'What city is like the great city?' ¹⁹ 'And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!' ²⁰ Rejoice

over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her.’²¹ Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer.’²² And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer; and no craftsman of any craft will be found in you any longer; and the sound of a mill will not be heard in you any longer;²³ and the light of a lamp will not shine in you any longer; and the voice of the bridegroom and bride will not be heard in you any longer; for your merchants were the great men of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your sorcery.²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- *The Book of Revelation*: This book is written to a group of mostly persecuted people: Christians persecuted by the Roman Empire. There are some ways that the imagery of Rome (‘seven hills’) is woven into the text. However, the images are also anchored in the Old Testament. So the Roman Empire seems to be an expression of an archetype: the Empire (whichever one it is) which persecutes the people of God.
- *The Sea*: Jewish theological imagery associated the sea with chaos and instability. The sea is an image of chaos from Genesis 1, out of which God raises the land, and people to inhabit the land. The prophet Daniel used the sea as a motif for the Gentiles, out of which beastly empires came forth, compared with Israel which lived on the land and was represented by a human (‘son of man’ in Dan.7:1 – 14).
- *The City*: Starting with Enoch the city of Cain (Gen.4:16 – 26) and Babel the city of Nimrod (Gen.11:1 – 9), the city was seen as a symbol of human sin. Even Jerusalem had a double identity as the city of God’s presence but also the city of human sin (e.g. Isa.1:21 – 31; Ezk.16:1 – 59; Jesus in Mt.23:37 – 39; Lk.13:33 – 35). John is drawing on language from the Hebrew prophets which condemned Babylon, such as:

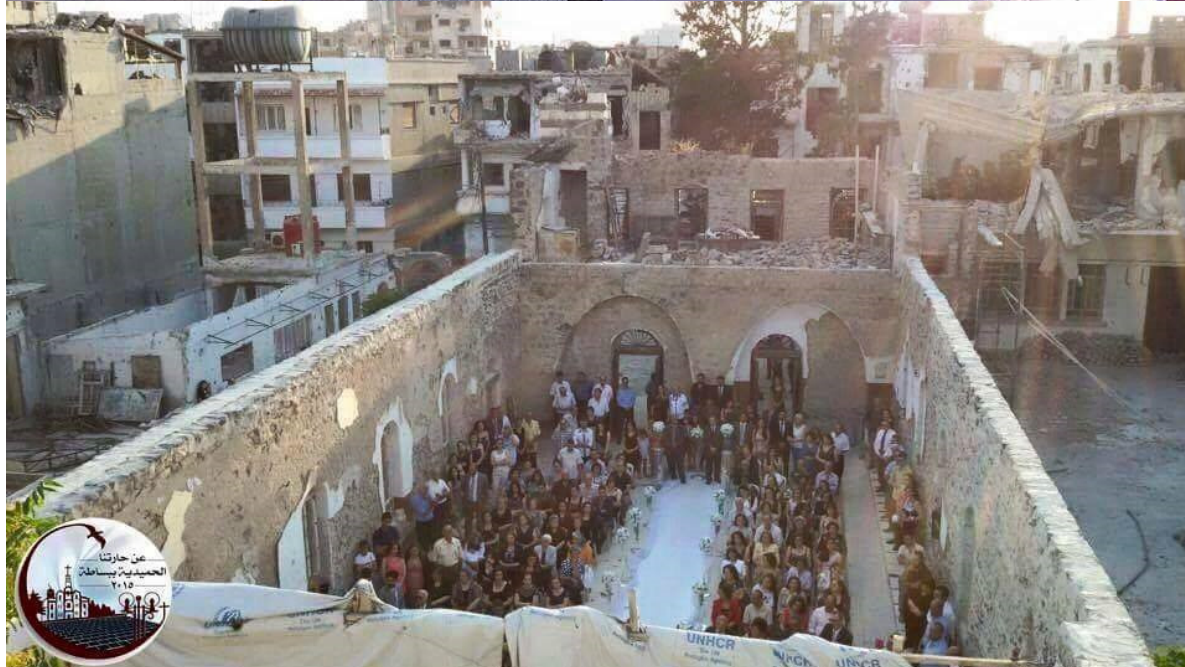
¹ Come down and sit in the dust,
O virgin daughter of Babylon;
Sit on the ground without a throne,
O daughter of the Chaldeans!

⁸ Now, then, hear this, you sensual one, who dwells securely,
Who says in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.
I will not sit as a widow, nor know loss of children.’

⁹ But these two things will come on you suddenly in one day: loss of children and widowhood.
They will come on you in full measure in spite of your many sorceries,
In spite of the great power of your spells. (Isa.47; cf. Isa.13 – 14; 48:20 – 22; Jer.50 – 51; Zech.5)

Questions

1. Let's start big picture. What feelings do the images evoke?
2. Do you think the author is striving for a certain emotional reaction?
3. Who is the woman? Babylon, the city and civilization
4. And what is Babylon?
 - a. It represents all the 'cities' that came before it in Scripture, like Babel in Genesis 11, the expression of human sin and resistance to God.
 - b. Why is it expressed this way? Because in Scripture, people get together and collectively rebel against God. There has been tension and outright conflict between those who built the cities and the people who were trying to follow God.
 - c. Illus: A Facebook friend of mine posted pictures of a Syrian Christian wedding, which happened in the city of Hom in June 2015. The couple celebrated their wedding in the ruins of a church called St. George's, which is the ruins of the city. On a day to day level, this is the image of the church: celebrating Jesus and committing to obeying him despite the persecution from others around them, and the wars raging on around us. It's quite touching.



5. Why is the city or civilization of Babylon portrayed as a woman?
 - a. Alluring from a male point of view
 - b. Terrifying, too, because she is a cannibal who has drunk the blood of martyrs
 - c. What is 'the woman' in Scripture? She is intended to be a bride, ultimately to Jesus, but instead is a harlot. She commits adultery with the kings and political powers of the world.
 - d. Is she a person? No. She is an institution. This is a civilizational collapse.
6. Who destroys the woman?
 - a. The ten horns, who are kings or leaders (17:16). She was riding on the beast, thinking that it was safe. But in the end it turns on her. Perhaps the ten horns are ten kings who turn against the seven kings. Is this Civil War? Maybe.
 - b. What is it like for political leaders to devour the civilization or the people which look to them?
 - i. Marxist atheism: Stalin's purges; Mao's Cultural Revolution; Cambodia's Khmer Rouge; etc.
 - ii. Liberal democracy, which was racist: in the U.S., all the way until now with mass incarceration; see *The New Jim Crow* by Dr. Michelle Alexander
 - iii. Capitalism is more important to some people than actual human lives...
 - iv. What if our culture is wrong about the value of human life in the womb? Doesn't the Planned Parenthood 'reveal' tell us something?
 - c. What explains this dynamic? In ordinary language, maybe it's when political leaders decide to kill Christians. It's not too far away from deciding that no one has any human rights. So they devour their own people.
 - d. In this passage at least, it is not God or the angels that destroy the woman. The angel in 18:21 makes an analogy to a stone sinking in the sea. But the angel is not *causing* the fall of Babylon.
7. What emotional reactions do people have to the fall of Babylon?
 - a. The merchants weep because their wealth is destroyed. Notice that there are 'slaves and human lives' in 18:13. Is this like:
 - i. Child sex trafficking. It used to be almost gone around the world until the Internet brought it roaring back.
 - ii. Bonded labor, like in India
 - iii. Immigrants trapped in another country without papers. Like Filipino laborers in Saudi Arabia.
 - iv. There is more slavery now than ever before in history.
 - v. And that's ironic because Christians fought against slavery and abolished it in northern and northwestern Europe before 1400!¹ But Portugal, Spain, and then other European nations like Britain and France reintroduced slavery in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.
 - b. The angels and the people of God rejoice.
 - i. The language of retribution is quite strong in 18:4 – 8. "I heard another voice from heaven, saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; ⁵ for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶ Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her. ⁷ To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, 'I SIT as A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning.' ⁸ For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.'
 - ii. The language combines the plagues of Egypt and the judgments on Jerusalem. In Isaiah 40:1, Isaiah says that Jerusalem has received double for her sins. The proportion doubling probably signifies that the city falls, as opposed to being able to pay a certain amount and then keep on going. The city would have continued to kill martyrs and enslave people.
 - iii. Recall that this is an institution, not a person. And civilizational collapse is not the same as eternal punishment or people.
8. Is the Christian view of history and the future optimistic?

¹ See my research, *Slavery in the Bible, Slavery Today*: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-slavery-in-the-bible.pdf>

- a. Yes, in the sense that it is rooted in God's goodness finally triumphing over human sin.
- b. But it is a challenge to Enlightenment modernists and postmodernists and secular liberal progressives who have a narrative that human history is getting better and better and will continue to do so. They think that as we leave behind religion and ignorance, human history gets better. Christianity says that human history looks the same from a spiritual point of view, and ultimately will reach a point of collapse. It's not humanity but God who will bring in the utopia.
- c. Does the Christian view of history match with a politically conservative viewpoint? No. Not in the sense that the U.S. founding fathers were great and the Constitution is perfect and all we need to do is go back to it. Conservatives look to an early part of our nation's history and say that we need to go back there. But unless you go all the way to the garden and Adam and Eve, you're not going back far enough. There is no point of innocence and purity except there. And the only way to live is to look ahead to God's final victory. We can't go back there ourselves.
- d. Illus: J.R.R. Tolkien, in the words of Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, said, 'We fight the long defeat.' We do not give up, because we are signposts of God's coming victory. We are not ourselves bringing about that victory. But we point to it in a limited way. Even when our fight against slavery was undone. We still fight the long defeat.