

THE DESTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS BABYLON

Revelation 17

Revelation chapters 17 and 18 are an interlude in the sequence of Tribulation events. These chapters deal with the destruction of religious and economic Babylon.

Dr. Charles Ryrie explains why *Babylon* is the figure used to describe these forces in the last days.

Babylon has had a long and consistently dishonorable history. It had its beginnings around 3000 B.C. under Nimrod (Gen. 10:8–10). The tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9) was built to prevent people from scattering throughout the earth, in direct defiance of God's command to do so. Hammurabi made Babylon a religious power about 1600 B.C. by making Marduk god of the city of Babylon and head of a pantheon of 1,300 deities. Extra-biblical sources indicate that the wife of Nimrod became the head of the Babylonian mysteries, which consisted of religious rites that were part of the worship of idols in Babylon. Her name was Semiramis, and she supposedly gave birth to a son, Tammuz, who claimed to be a savior and the fulfillment of the promise given to Eve in Genesis 3:15.

This anti-God Babylonian religion is alluded to in Ezekiel 8:14...

Ezekiel 8:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ *Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz.*

Jeremiah 7:18...

Jeremiah 7:17–18 (ESV)

¹⁷ *Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸ The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven. And they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.*

and (Jeremiah) 44:17–19, 25

The queen of heaven in these passages is the goddess Ishtar, an Assyro-Babylonian deity. The fourth Babylonian month, July, was named Tammuz.

... The destruction of Babylon, which has already been referred to in the book (14:8; 16:19), is now described in detail in chapters 17 and 18. The emphasis in chapter 17 is on the religious and political aspects of Babylon and in chapter 18 on the commercial system. Babylon is both a city and a system, and that seems to be the way it is used in these chapters. This is much the same way Americans speak of Wall Street or Madison Avenue. They are actual streets, but they also stand for the financial or advertising enterprises. Babylon is used in a similar sense in these chapters, standing for a religious and political system in chapter 17 and a commercial empire in chapter 18.¹

As stated, Revelation 17 reveals the destruction of *Babylon* in its religious aspect.

The Invitation to View the Judgment of the Great Prostitute (17:1-2)

Revelation 17:1–2 (ESV)

¹ *Then 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 who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."*

Four times in this passage religious Babylon is referred to as a prostitute because she is unfaithful to the Lord (17:1, 5, 15–16; 19:2). She is "seated on many waters" meaning that her system will stretch around the world as explained in verse 15:

¹ Ryrie, Charles C. (1996-04-05). Revelation- Everyman's Bible Commentary (Everyman's Bible Commentaries) (Kindle Locations 1781-1786). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Revelation 17:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ *And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."*

When the true Church is removed from the earth by the Rapture event (1 Thess. 4:13-18) before the Tribulation begins, religion does not disappear from the earth. Actually, religion will flourish following the Rapture through the first half of the Tribulation until it is destroyed by the Antichrist. Religious Babylon will likely build on the remnants of the professing Christian church that existed before the Rapture. Professing Christians who will not be raptured will remain on the earth to form the base of this "church." Those who are genuinely born again after the Rapture and during the first half of the Tribulation will oppose this false church and be opposed by this false church. Through political alliances with government leaders, this false church will have power to impose its false doctrines and rituals upon the people of the earth. Historically we have seen this alliance between church and state in the alliance between the Roman Catholic Church and European states and the Greek Orthodox Church and the nations of the east.

The Vision of the Woman on the Beast (17:3-4)**Revelation 17:3-4 (ESV)**

³ *And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.* ⁴ *The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.*

John next sees that the prostitute is sitting on a scarlet beast. The Beast here is the same Beast described in Revelation 13:1:

Revelation 13:1 (ESV)

¹ *And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.*

This beast is the Antichrist. What is especially interesting is that the prostitute is *sitting* on the Antichrist indicating that she will have power over the Antichrist. Verse 16 tells us that the Antichrist will hate the prostitute; he will hate being under the control of the leaders of this "church". This state of affairs must be limited to the first half of the Tribulation before the Antichrist rises to world power, destroys the prostitute and declares himself god.

The prostitute is arrayed in splendor and expensive jewelry signifying the glory and wealth with which she will entice people. Even amid the awful judgments of the first half of the Tribulation this false "church" will possess great wealth and display in its churches, pageantry and worship services. Undoubtedly the masses will interpret such displays as proof that the false doctrines and empty rituals (abominations and impurities) of this church are true.

The Name of the Woman (17:5)**Revelation 17:5 (ESV)**

⁵ *And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."*

Verse 5 reveals the name of the woman sitting on the beast. Unfortunately, the ESV mistranslates the word *mystery*. Her full name is *Mystery, Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes and of Earth's Abominations*. This one-world super church is linked to ancient Babylon because it was in Babylon that idolatry and false religion was "born" (Gen. 11:1-9). This one-world religious system is also said to be mother of prostitutes plural and abominations plural. This may indicate that this one-world religious system is actually made up of a number of religious groups. Perhaps this "church" will incorporate various denominations and religious groups without necessarily amalgamating them. If this is the way the organization will be formed, then the various groups within it can keep their distinctive doctrines and practices and still unite in this family of prostitutes. This, essentially, is what the present day ecumenical movement is attempting to accomplish.

The Woman Drunk with the Blood of Martyrs (17:6)

Revelation 17:6 (ESV)

⁶ *And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly.*

This one-world religious system will persecute genuine believers in Jesus. Revelation 7 reveals that at the beginning of the Tribulation, 144,000 Messianic Jewish men will be sealed and sent on a worldwide evangelistic campaign that will result in myriads of conversions that world over. The fifth seal judgment reveals that many of these converts will be martyred in the first half of the Tribulation.

Revelation 6:9 (ESV)

⁹ *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.*

John sees the woman, the great prostitute, the one-world religious system of the first half of the Tribulation, drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. This answers the questions as to who will hurt and kill the Tribulation saints of the first half of the Tribulation.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum summarizes the identity of religious Babylon:

Babylon the Harlot represents the one-world religious system that rules over the religious affairs during the first half of the Tribulation. She rules over the nations of the world (the many waters), fully controlling the religious affairs, and has the reluctant support of the government. The headquarters of this one-world religion will be the rebuilt city of Babylon, the mother of idolatry, for it was here that idolatry and false religion began (Gen. 11:1–9).²

Verses 7-14 concentrate on the identity of the beast upon which the great prostitute sits. The beast is the Antichrist revealed in Revelation 13:1-10.

The Beast – the Antichrist (17:7-14)

Revelation 17:7–14 (ESV)

⁷ *But the angel said to me, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. ⁹ This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰ they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. ¹¹ As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. ¹² And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³ These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴ They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”*

In our previous study of Revelation 13:1-10, we explained all the symbols used here to describe the Antichrist. Verse 8 refers to his death and resurrection, a mimicry of the death and resurrection of the true Christ by which Satan will deceive many to follow the Antichrist (13:3-4, 12). The seven heads are seven mountains which are identified as seven kings. These seven kings represent seven kingdoms; relative to John in 96 A.D., five of these kingdoms were past, one was present (Roman Empire) and one is future (the Antichrist's regime). In this sense the Antichrist belongs to the seven successive kingdoms. The five prior kingdoms may refer to Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Medo-Persia and Greece. The sixth kingdom being Rome and the seventh the regime of the Antichrist. Another possibility are the five developmental stages of the Roman Empire: the Tarquin Kings, Censors, Dictators, Decemvirs and Triumvirate.. The sixth head being a four stage period leading to the seventh head, the Antichrist. This can be seen more easily on the chart provided.

² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah : a Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, Rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 235.

The ten horns represent ten kings who will rule *simultaneously* during the Tribulation. We learn from Daniel that the Antichrist will conquer three and the remaining seven will subjugate themselves to the Antichrist (Dan. 7:24). In this way the Antichrist becomes the eighth horn of the 10 *simultaneous* kings. These kings will unite with the Antichrist against the Lord Jesus in the Campaign of Armageddon and with him be defeated (Rev. 19:17-21).

This chapter ends with the destruction of the great prostitute.

The Destruction of the Great Prostitute (17:15-18)

Revelation 17:15–18 (ESV)

¹⁵ *And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. ¹⁶ And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷ for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸ And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”*

The one-world super church which will seek and operate by political alliances will, in the end, be destroyed by those political alliances. The Antichrist and the ten nation coalition he will control will turn on the “church” and “make her desolate”. The words “desolate,” “naked,” “devour,” and “burn” all show the completeness of her annihilation. In verse 17 we find an example of the interweaving of the purposes of God with the desires of people. The kings will voluntarily join forces to destroy the prostitute, but in so doing they will be fulfilling the purpose of God. It is God who will incline them to align themselves with the Antichrist until, literally, “the words of God are fulfilled or accomplished.”

Finally, in verse 18, the identification of the prostitute is linked to the great city mentioned in 16:19 and in verse 9 of this chapter. Some identify this city as Rome others as the rebuilt city of Babylon.

Summary

Religion will flourish during the first half of the Tribulation in the false religious system called Babylon, the great prostitute. This system may be centered in the rebuilt city of Babylon or perhaps in Rome. It will be ecumenical including numerous apostate religious groups. This one-world church will enjoy the support of the state and use the power of the state to push its agenda. For the first half of the Tribulation, the prostitute will reign unchallenged; but at the middle of the Tribulation, the Antichrist will see her as a challenge to his own power and program. With the coalition of ten nations under his control, he will destroy the one-world religious system and declare himself God, demanding to be worshiped.