



Revelation - Chapter Eighteen

VII Revelation 17:1-19:10 - Babylon the prostitute (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

Now, John sees the fall of Babylon the Great. In just one hour she was laid to waste. The reaction to her fall is that of weeping and mourning by the merchants of the earth because there would be no one to buy their goods anymore. Then a mighty angel picked up a large stone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more'.

VII.b Revelation 18:1-24 - The Fall of Babylon

As the ancient Greek chorus interpreted actions in a drama, so a succession of speakers explains the significance of the prostitute's desolation as she is deserted by the beast that once supported her and the kings who once adored her.

¹ After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendour.

² He called out with a mighty voice,

'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

It has become a dwelling-place of demons,

a haunt of every foul spirit,

a haunt of every foul bird,

a haunt of every foul and hateful beast.

³ For all the nations have drunk
of the wine of the wrath of her fornication,

and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her,

and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.'

Revelation 18:1-3

Another angel with great authority and splendour or glory reaffirms the verdict pronounced in 14:8: Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, echoing Isaiah 21:9. It is fitting that John views Babylon from a wilderness (17:3), for its fall will turn the great city into wilderness, inhabited by every foul spirit, bird, and hateful beast, full of defilement and danger: *<<But wild animals will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will live, and there goat-demons will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged>>* (Isaiah 13:21-22), and: *<<Herds shall lie down in it, every wild animal; the desert-owl and the screech-owl shall lodge on its capitals; the owl shall hoot at the window, the raven croak on the threshold; for its cedar-work will be laid bare. Is this the exultant city that lived secure, that said to itself, 'I am, and there is no one else'? What a desolation it has become, a lair for wild animals! Everyone who passes by it hisses and shakes the fist>>* (Zephaniah 2:14-15).

In John's day Rome was the new Babylon and had become a dwelling-place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, and a haunt of every foul bird. In a strange way, the grim announcement dramatises the point that the earth was illuminated by the angel's splendour. The message he brings is bad news for Babylon, but good news for the earth in general. The word repeatedly translated haunt, Greek *phylake*, also means prison, while the word foul is literally unclean, Greek *akathartos*.

Because all of these satanic elements are brought together in Babylon, its imminent destruction will free the world of their influence once and for all, completing the work that Jesus started during his earthly ministry: *<<The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour>>* (Luke 4:18-19), and its future end signalled by his death, resurrection and ascension: *<<For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison>>* (1 Peter 3:18-19).

For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication. Laments for the destruction of the city with its power and luxurious living will soon be heard from the earth's kings (vv.9-10), and its merchants (vv.11-17). This next section (vv.4-24) adds economic sins to the other kinds of sins specified in the rest of the book.

The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury. The emphasis here is on the economic power of the fallen city, which had been acquired purely for material gain. When this symbolism is applied to Rome some then extend it to the

imperialism of her empire and for some the adverse aspects of the power of the church that emerged from it. However, it speaks more against any regime that uses its power and influence to grow wealthy at the expense of others. This can be applied to many such empires of the past and probably of others yet to come.

⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
‘Come out of her, my people,
so that you do not take part in her sins,
and so that you do not share in her plagues;
⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities.
⁶ Render to her as she herself has rendered,
and repay her double for her deeds;
mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed.
⁷ As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously,
so give her a like measure of torment and grief.
Since in her heart she says,
“I rule as a queen;
I am no widow,
and I will never see grief”,
⁸ therefore her plagues will come in a single day –
pestilence and mourning and famine –
and she will be burned with fire;
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.’

Revelation 18:4-8

Another voice from heaven first warns the church against aligning itself with Babylon and then asserts the equity of God’s justice in repaying Babylon’s arrogance and cruelty. Because the voice speaks of ‘my people’ some believe the voice to be that of God, but since it goes on to speak of God in the third person then it seems more like the voice of an oracle speaking on behalf of God.

Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues is a warning similar to the one given to Lot to flee the coming destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah: <<*When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, ‘Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city*>> (Genesis 19:15). This is not just a call by John for the church to separate itself from the influence of Rome as some claim; it is much wider than that in its

scope. God's people in each period of history are called to separate themselves from the ways of the world or suffer the consequences. The prophets' appealed for the OT Israelites to come out of the cultures in which they sojourned as exiles: <<Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the Lord>> (Isaiah 52:11), and: <<Flee from the midst of Babylon, save your lives, each of you! Do not perish because of her guilt, for this is the time of the Lord's vengeance; he is repaying her what is due. Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and is shattered; wail for her! Bring balm for her wound; perhaps she may be healed. We tried to heal Babylon, but she could not be healed. Forsake her, and let each of us go to our own country; for her judgement has reached up to heaven and has been lifted up even to the skies>> (Jeremiah 51:6-9), are equally relevant to the NT church in the apostles' day and today: <<Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty'>> (2 Corinthians 6:14-18), and: <<Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge>> (1 Peter 2:11-12). Churches in Thyatira, Laodicea and elsewhere failed to keep their distance from Babylon's power-driven, pleasure-crazed value system.

For her sins are heaped high as heaven. They have become so great and enormous that the long-suffering of God must finally give way to his justice, unless repentance is sought: <<At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, and said, 'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens'>> (Ezra 9:5-6).

God has remembered her iniquities. Because those represented by Babylon fail to repent and be reconciled through the Cross, their sins remain; whereas those who do seek reconciliation have their sins eradicated: <<Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit>> (Psalm 32:1-2 NIV), and: <<There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus>> (Romans 8:1).

In perfect equity, God will repay Babylon double for her deeds: <<If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe>>

(Exodus 21:23-25). The double draught or portion: <<Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins>> (Isaiah 40:2), <<And I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations>> (Jeremiah 16:18), from her own cup is the just retribution that duplicates the violence she inflicted on the saints, whose blood she wantonly shed: <<he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants>> (Revelation 19:2b). The message is repeated in several ways with commands to the people to: render to her as she herself has rendered and give her a like measure of torment and grief. However, these commands are rhetorical and not to be taken literally, otherwise they would contradict the teachings of Jesus: <<But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you>> (Luke 6:27-28), and consequently that of the apostles too: <<Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them>> (Romans 12:14), and: <<Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing>> (1 Peter 3:9). How do Christians accomplish their victory? They do so through non-retaliation and leaving judgement to God. Because of Jesus' victory on the Cross, they too are victors even though they may appear to be victims.

Babylon's boast: I rule as a queen, I am no widow mimics her OT namesake and will be silenced in a single day: <<You said, 'I shall be mistress for ever', so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children' – both these things shall come upon you in a moment, in one day: the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments>> (Isaiah 47:7-9). Her delusion of affluent security also finds a chilling parallel in the blind self-reliance of the Laodicean church: <<For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked>> (Revelation 3:17). One thing that God appears to hate above all else is pretence, whether it is Christian or secular. God's judgement will fall on those who live a lie.

As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, she believed she would never see grief. But it is God alone who deserves glory and so mighty is the Lord God who judges that her plagues will come in a single day, pestilence and mourning and famine and she will be burned with fire.

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; ¹⁰ they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

‘Alas, alas, the great city,

Babylon, the mighty city!

For in one hour your judgement has come.’

Revelation 18:9-10

Laments from kings, merchants and mariners, who profited from Babylon’s power and prosperity, provide earthly commentary on the great city’s fall. When her fall comes, her lovers, i.e. those who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will stand far off, in fear and horror; but it will be too late to distance themselves from her fate and torment.

Kings will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning: <<Suddenly Babylon has fallen and is shattered; wail for her! Bring balm for her wound; perhaps she may be healed>> (Jeremiah 51:8). Babylon was the mighty city that God judged in one hour (v.17 and v.19), suddenly and swiftly, when his patience had reached its limit.

Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgement has come. This is the basic stanza that will be expanded upon by the next two interested parties: the merchants and the seafarers.

Introduction to Revelation 18:11-19

The merchants, who gained wealth from the great prostitute (v.15), issue a lengthy lament, since the great prostitute especially represents the lust for materialistic acquisition and luxury.

¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, ¹² cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, ¹³ cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human lives.

Revelation 18:11-13

The merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more. The merchants elaborate the basic stanza in keeping with their respective interests. There is nothing inherently wrong with fair trade; in fact it creates wealth that can then support an equitable society. Nor is there any biblical issue with personal wealth creation. It is the motivation behind it that causes the problems: *<<For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their*

eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains>> (1 Timothy 6:10).

The list of cargo for which no market will remain after Babylon's fall resembles the goods transported by the Phoenician merchants of ancient Tyre, which arrogantly boasted of its beauty (Ezekiel Chapter 27).

As Revelation's beast incorporates every expression of corrupt government, refer to the comments on Revelation 13:1-2, so its prostitute includes every corrupt economic system. Even human lives are reduced to cargo, traded as slaves to drive the engines of production and prosperity.

Slaves were an accepted part of Greco-Roman culture just as they had been throughout the OT period: <<Javan, Tubal, and Meshech traded with you; they exchanged human beings and vessels of bronze for your merchandise>> (Ezekiel 27:13), but the illicit trading in slavery went against God's law: <<This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching>> (1 Timothy 1:9-10). Paul wanted Christian slaves to be treated like equals: <<Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord>> (Philemon 15-16).

That they traded in human lives goes way beyond slavery which is a limitation of human freedom. The reference here shows that people's eternal souls too were enslaved by the worldly order of this Babylonian culture. It should not be forgotten that the British Empire was built on the slave trade and the land that would become the USA prospered from the labour of such people.

¹⁴ 'The fruit for which your soul longed
has gone from you,
and all your dainties and your splendour
are lost to you,
never to be found again!'

¹⁵ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

¹⁶ 'Alas, alas, the great city,
clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,
with jewels, and with pearls!

17 For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!’

And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,

‘What city was like the great city?’

19 And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out,

‘Alas, alas, the great city,

where all who had ships at sea

grew rich by her wealth!

For in one hour she has been laid waste.’

Revelation 18:14-19

The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you. Because they thought only of their own prosperity and cared little for others, whom they used as pawns in their self-seeking, they ended up losing everything never to be found again! Those who seek the fruit of the Spirit gain so much more: <<*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things*>> (Galatians 5:22-23).

Alas, alas, the great city starts the lament of the merchants and the seafarers just as it did for that of the kings (v.10).

The merchants’ dirge is the longest. They preface their formal lament with a long list of Rome’s imports. These include not only the fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth, the gold, silver, precious stones and pearls to be singled out in the lament proper, but much more, starting with those luxury items and moving on to other luxuries as well as necessities.

The merchants’ lament echoes that of the kings (v.10), but focuses on the prostitute’s costly apparel and accessories: fine linen, purple, scarlet, gold, jewels and pearls (17:4). They grieve that such wealth has been laid waste, i.e. <<*they will make her desolate*>> (17:16) in one hour. God quickly destroys all human wealth that is not used in obedience and devotion to him. Like all things in life, wealth is only temporal; it is the eternal life that will bring true wealth, as Jesus has taught: <<*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*>> (Matthew 6:19-21).

Finally, shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, those who grew rich by transporting the treasures of the world to feed Babylon’s voracious appetite for luxury, will add their lament to that of kings and merchants.

Their cry, 'What city was like the great city?' no longer ascribes incomparable excellence (13:4), but mourns incomparable destruction: <<*In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you, and lament over you: 'Who was ever destroyed like Tyre in the midst of the sea?'*>> (Ezekiel 27:32).

They threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned. This action, along with the tearing of clothing, was a common demonstration of grief in many cultures: <<*Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads*>> (Joshua 7:6), and: <<*The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground*>> (Lamentations 2:10).

²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgement for you against her.

Revelation 18:20

The voice from heaven ends as it began, with a direct appeal to God's people. When all in heaven, including its saints and apostles and prophets, are invited to rejoice in God's judgment of Babylon (12:12), and: <<*Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall shout for joy over Babylon; for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north, says the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 51:48), a transition is made from earthly lament to the heavenly celebration. The presupposition of all John's visions is that angels and humans together form one community dedicated to the worship of God. Apostles here are not the twelve who travelled with Jesus, but missionaries sent out either to evangelise or to minister to existing congregations spread over a wide area. The voice from heaven concludes by inviting all who belong to God on earth or in heaven to rejoice in their vindication.

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,

'With such violence Babylon the great city
will be thrown down,
and will be found no more;

²² and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flautists and trumpeters

will be heard in you no more;
and an artisan of any trade
will be found in you no more;
and the sound of the millstone
will be heard in you no more;

- 23 and the light of a lamp
will shine in you no more;
and the voice of bridegroom and bride
will be heard in you no more;
for your merchants were the magnates of the earth,
and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.
- 24 And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints,
and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.'

Revelation 18:21-24

Just as Jeremiah cast a stone and scroll into the Euphrates to show that ancient Babylon would *<<sink, to rise no more>>* (Jeremiah 51:63-64), so a mighty angel threw a great millstone into the sea to illustrate Babylon's fall, to be found no more: *<<I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though sought for, you will never be found again, says the Lord God>>* (Ezekiel 26:21). This is the third such angel in John's visions. The other two (5:2 and 10:1) explained the scrolls that started the judgements. This one symbolically indicates the actions of those judgements, the casting down of God's opponents.

The curse on Babylon in Jeremiah's day is echoed in the words of the mighty angel: With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more. The parallel is striking because Jeremiah had written of Babylon's judgment on a scroll, and a scroll was used to introduce all the judgments in the book of Revelation. Yet Jeremiah's stone was not like a millstone; it did not take a mighty angel to lift it, and it was thrown into the Euphrates, not the sea. Here the angel takes on the role of prophet and, like the ancient prophets of Israel, prophesies by actions as well as words. It is a new prophetic action, however, not just a reminder of Jeremiah and Seraiah in the time of the exile.

The judgement bears similarities to the words of Jesus: *<<If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea>>* (Mark 9:42). Neither Babylon nor Rome has done this exactly. She has deceived the rest of the world instead. However, to them she has done something far worse, for in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth. The prostitute in John's vision was guilty of many crimes and boundless self-indulgence, but what condemns her above all is that she *<<was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus>>* (17:6b). Because she offended the little ones who belong to Jesus, she is thrown into the sea, to sink like a stone and never to be seen again.

The pleasant sights and sounds of everyday life, music, labour, food preparation, lamplight, marital love, will be found and heard no more in Babylon: *<<And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land*

shall become a waste>> (Jeremiah 7:34), <<*And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp*>> (Jeremiah 25:10).

The angel speaks of these merchants explicitly, calling them your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and implicitly linking them to Rome's magic spell, Greek *pharmakeia*, by which all the nations were led astray.

Ordinary cultural activities and artefacts, although proper in themselves, become unsustainable when human civilisation, having defied the creator, receives his judgment. Babylon's sorcery (21:8) has deceived all nations, just as the false prophet's signs tricked earth dwellers, small and great, into worshiping the beast. This mention of sorcery recalls ancient prophetic denunciations of Babylon: <<*Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children' – both these things shall come upon you in a moment, in one day: the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments*>> (Isaiah 47:8-9), and Nineveh: <<*Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery*>> (Nahum 3:4), the latter linked explicitly to the deception of nations. Sorcery here, like drunkenness elsewhere, is simply an image for the notion that Babylon, Rome and other governments or global corporations have deceived and corrupted the nations of the world.

In Babylon's fall and the beast's impending defeat, God will at last avenge the blood of his martyrs, i.e. of prophets and of saints, and of all who have suffered undeserved violence on earth.

Here, as throughout the latter half of the book, John is answering the question of the psalmist: <<*Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?*>> (Psalm 2:1). The crimes of Babylon, depicting Rome, are first that she has deceived the nations that trade with her; and second, that she has killed Christian prophets and saints. These were also the twin crimes of the dragon (12:9-10 and 12:17), and the beast (13:3, 13:6-7 and 13:12-15), but to John the more serious of the two is the second. Babylon falls like a millstone into the sea because she has shed the blood of God's people: <<*Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar*>> (Matthew 23:34-35), and, almost as an afterthought, of all who have been killed on the earth. The effect of vv.21-24 is to reinforce the conclusion that God has judged her for the way she treated them.