

The Book of Revelation

Session 7: Babylon Falls (chpts 17-19)

Now that the great destructive events of God's fury caused by the pouring of the bowls is over, we move into a new section that illustrates the effects of God's fury. Back in chapter 14 we met Babylon the great, who according to John was predicted to fall. Recall that Babylon was the epitome of all evil; the nation through whom the Israelites were conquered and sent into exile. Therefore the prediction of the fall of Babylon should be an event that everyone has been waiting for. The challenge in interpreting the Whore of Babylon is to understand who Babylon represents. The obvious answer is Rome or the Romans. As we venture into the end of the great city of Babylon the language will get more obscure leading us to realize that Babylon represents any nation that opposed God's will. The next two chapters – 17 and 18 – will explain the great demise of the evil city of Babylon followed by chapter 19 with the final battle. All of these events were predicted in various ways by Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

Babylon the Great (chapter 17)

Everything in the rest of the Book of Revelation happens after the final revelation of God to the world indicated by the pouring of the seventh bowl. Thus, each of the angels that we encounter are those angels who had a part to play in these cataclysmic events. The phrase “come up here” indicates that John is about to receive another vision. Several times throughout the book he states in more explicit terms that he is receiving a vision. This time he is simply being shown what is, namely, the destruction of Babylon.

Who is the harlot?

To fully understand this question we must amass several images throughout the Book of Revelation. The first image is that of a harlot. Harlots represented defilement through the act of fornication or abusing themselves with many men. Throughout the Old Testament God compares the people of Israel to a harlot, the best example is the Book of the Prophet Hosea, who have defiled themselves with the worship of other gods. The same image applies here. The Harlot is the manifestation of the false worship of all the people of the world who have defiled themselves through the worship of the beast, its image, its name, or the other ideologies counter to God. The actual act of prostitution is not as vital to this image as prostitution through idolatry. The second characteristic of the harlot is “she lives near many waters.” As you recall from earlier, the place of many waters is the Euphrates, or the eastern most boundary of the Roman Empire. The river Euphrates represents the evil of the world and the constant threat of destruction from foreign powers. In addition to the threat from foreign powers, the image of “many waters” represents trade. This woman has seduced the nations of the world through encouraging trade and commerce. This increased trade and commerce caused by the harlot of the many waters has allowed the world to grow rich. Traders and merchants have enjoyed the luxury caused by the harlot or Babylon, depicted as becoming drunk. The next vision expands upon the image of the harlot as now sitting on the beast. This beast is the same beast that came out of the abyss in chapter 13. Instead of the beast depicted as “all-powerful,” the woman, the harlot, is now riding the beast as though she has full control of the beast; a radical shift of power and authority. The

beast and woman are clothed in the finest of clothing represented by the colors scarlet and purple. The dyes used to create the colors scarlet and purple were immensely expensive. Thus these colors and clothing indicate the immense wealth of the woman and beast and their kingly or royal status. Like the beast in chapter 13, the two are also covered with blasphemous names and the fullness of wisdom and power though the 7 heads and 10 horns as we have seen before. The final part of the vision is the cup she bears and drinks from. The cup represents the lewdness of her actions symbolized in drinking God's fury, an image we had in chapters 15 and 16. Not only does the cup contain the effects of her actions but also the blood of God's holy ones, showing the grotesqueness of her actions and the vileness of this woman.

The woman is hard to grasp. John tells us the woman is Babylon. Babylon as the great destroyer of the people of God is now depicted as a lustful woman grown rich off the traders and merchants leading to her drunkenness and desire to kill God's holy ones. From a historical perspective the harlot is Rome who has become exceedingly rich through conquest of the world and taxation of the people. Even 1st century Roman authors comment and criticize the luxury of the Romans as excessive and destructive. Therefore John's words are not new or surprising to his first century audience. Biblically the harlot is meant to create a contrast of images. The woman who birthed in the Messiah in chapter 12 sharply contrasts the harlot of chapter 17. The woman is depicted as holy and fully compliant with God's will bringing his will and the salvation of God's holy ones into the world. The harlot has intentionally destroyed God's holy ones and made herself into her own god by seducing the people of the world. Both are women and both are polar opposites. We should also understand the harlot to be any nation or ideology whose main goal is to destroy God's holy people or to seduce the world away from God.

The drama

The rest of the chapter leads up to the most important destructive event of the Book of Revelation: the final destruction of the seducer of the people, the beasts of the abyss, the overthrow of all worldly leaders, and the end of the world. This all begins with the beast. The phrase "the one you saw existed once but now exists no longer and yet will come again" is confusing. Some scholars interpret this to be about Nero. Romans held that Nero, who died around 68 AD, would return and reestablish Rome. Therefore they were awaiting his return. This phrase indicates that the beast has arisen but his time is over. Thus, John is predicting the demise and final demise of the beast. The rest of this passage is very confusing and most scholars are unsure on its interpretation and intended meaning. The seven hills are easy: Rome was situated on seven hills and the goddess Roma was always depicted with seven hills. Hence the passage seems to be about Rome. Yet the seven or ten kings have no historical reference. Many kings came and went but none of them match this description. We could state that the seven/ eight, kings were the Roman emperors who lived during the time of the 1st century and Nero would live twice. We could also interpret this allegorically to mean seven ages of the world leading to the eighth. Lets evaluate these. We have no reference to any of the kings so everything is a shot in the dark. If we interpret this passage in terms of Roman emperors, then we are stuck with the 10 who reigned in the first century. All of which are dead and yet the empire continued which can seem like John was wrong. If we interpret the kings to be ruling nations, then we have Rome as

the 6th nation, the seventh being the Byzantine Empire, and the eighth Christendom. None of these seem to be the best explanation for the events.

Regardless of how we interpret these kings a few things are consistent. The kings are earthly rulers who reign in an earthly kingdom. They reign for their short lives spans and then they all died. Nothing withstands the test of time. All of these earthly kings comply with the beast by giving their power and authority to the beast showing their obstinacy against God's will and desire to destroy God's holy ones. The time of "one hour" is meant to show the shortness of their rule in the grand scheme of God's eternity; they are useless as rulers.

The beginning of the battle

The full battle between God and the powers of the world doesn't happen until chapter 19. Yet, throughout the book, and especially here, the beginnings of the battle and the precursors leading up to the battle are already evident. The Lamb is going to conquer them. The meek, helpless, little Lamb is taking on the mighty beasts and kings of the world and will conquer them. We add a new descriptor "called, chose, faithful." These words describe God's holy ones. They are called meaning that God invited them to himself and brought them to Heaven, not something they chose on their own. As the word church implies – "called out" – these people were "chosen" or indicated by God. Lastly, faithful describes their desire for God, their rejection of the evil of the world, and their victory over sin and death.

The End of Babylon

Most people who have been reading up to this point would expect the final demise of Babylon to be through a battle with God. In a sharp twist, Babylon is destroyed without a battle ensuing. The beast turns on the harlot and kills her. Jesus predicts this event: "If Satan is divided, he cannot stand" and "a house divided against itself cannot stand." The evil of the world turns on itself, as God knew it would, and becomes its own destruction. The beast didn't like the glory the harlot took from him so he ended it. Her destruction is complete: naked, flesh eaten, and desolate. Her demise shows the vileness of the world.

Fall of Babylon (chapter 18)

The bulk of this chapter is a new song about the destruction of Babylon and its significance. Several parts are notable.

The first stanza: New imagery is added to describe the destructive force of Babylon. She is described as the "haunt of demons" and "cage of every unclean spirit." Thus not only is she evil but the very defilement which would desecrate a temple or leave the people defiled. Her actions have led to the evil and uncleanness of the world both through evil spirits and unclean actions.

The second stanza: the command to depart is a direct quote from Jeremiah. As Jeremiah preached to the people in Jerusalem following its conquest by the Babylonians, he tells them to depart from the wickedness of Babylon and become God's people again. That same command is issued here. But we must recognize the force of his words. Our first reaction is to interpret the command as to leave Babylon. But where would you go? Babylon controls the whole world.

Instead of depart as leaving, we must understand this command as to separate from her ways. We must reject the ways of Babylon and return to the ways of God otherwise we will be part of the great destruction. The next part explains her punishment: double for her crimes. This repayment was prophesied by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. But what does double mean? If she killed God's holy ones, could God kill her twice? The point of the passage is to indicate God's justice and his vengeance on the great destroyer. Clearly he cannot avenge her by doubling her punishment in the purely juridical sense of an eye for an eye and a life for a life. Instead what God intended for a punishment should be doubled to wipe out the crimes and the evil of the world. The final part of this stanza shows the great reversal: from enthroned queen without grief to overthrown and destroyed by immense suffering.

Enter the merchants

Recall that until this moment Babylon was associated with her merchants and traders who made her wealthy but also became wealthy themselves. The kings and merchants of the world are the only ones who weep over the destruction of Babylon because now their wealth and luxury are gone. John describes the type of trade that has ceased because of Babylon's destruction. Notice that all of these items are articles of luxury, nothing of necessity. Similar to other places in the Book of Revelation God always brings down the rich and haughty and provides for the poor and oppressed. Here he only destroys the overly wealthy while protecting everyone else.

Stanzas 3-5

The next two stanzas, 3 and 4, repeat the distress and sadness of the merchants echoing the vast reduction in trade. One line sticks out compared to the others: "in one hour this great wealth has been ruined." The suddenness of the destruction speaks to God's action. Like in Sodom and Gomorrah, God destroys completely and quickly. In a matter of an hour the people went from wealth and luxury to nothing. The people are fearful of her punishment and are scared to approach her. Instead they watch her hour of pain from a distance. She only mattered to the people because they grew wealthy from her; Babylon was not important enough to care for. Following from the words the people addressed to the beast and was once addressed to God, the people lament by saying that she was great and powerful beyond comparison echoing their infatuation with her.

The final event is the angel destroying the city. The throwing of a huge millstone reflects the finality of her end. When a person throws a stone into a lake or river, the stone cannot be recovered since it has fallen into the depth to which it cannot return. The same image applies to her. The great millstone plunges into the depth of the sea and thus the great city come to an end to which it cannot be revived. The next lines speak of the absolute destruction: nothing will be remembered about the city of Babylon for nothing will remain. The final lines are more interesting. Her "magic potions" is the word "pharmacy" in Greek. Namely her magic or seductive powers of healing or wealth are gone and the blood of the prophets can be found inside her as though she drank their blood. Very vivid imagery.

The Victory of God (chapter 19)

God is victorious over the idolatrous city and has justly punished her and brought her evil to an end as proclaimed in the first song. The word Alleluia means “praised be God.” The whole of Heaven is praising God in his mighty works and because of his works of justice. Now we return to the image from chapter 4 of the elders and living creatures worshipping God as though we have never left that moment. But the image grows. Like the expanding images of chapters 4 and 5 the great multitudes of people are also there now wrapped in the worship of God and the Lamb.

New image: the wedding

Nowhere in this book have we had an inkling towards nuptial or wedding imagery. Paul speaks about Christ and the Church in the Letter to the Ephesians and Jesus speaks cryptically about it in the Gospels but this image is new to the Book of Revelation. Why here? God, through the Old Testament, compared Israel to his wife. The Israelites also knew that God would eventually take Israel for his wife and bring about the fulfillment of this relationship. Here the image is fulfilled in Christ, the Lamb. This is now the third woman of revelation: the church. Washed in the Blood of the Lamb and purified from the stain of the world, she is now ready for her wedding day and the fulfillment of the prophecies of old. The one new image is the brightness of her wedding garments. The descriptors of clean and white are common throughout this book as indicating holiness, priestliness, or connection with the Lamb’s actions. The brightness indicates connection with God: God has made her holy or shines through her. The final action of all things is a wedding feast. Those who are called, those who were chosen, and those who endured to the end now share in the full joy of Heaven which is the marriage banquet.

John’s action

For most of this book John has chosen rightly with his actions. Now, he makes a poor choice to teach us the truth of this book: he worships the angel. If he would have bowed before the beast, the beast would have accepted his act of worship. Angels do not. They are not God and therefore are not due worship and the angel makes this point explicit to John. Angels are on the same level of importance as human beings. In Heaven all are on the same plane with the exception of God who is above all. Therefore John’s action of worshipping the angel clarifies the dignity of humans and angels and centers all worship on God and God alone.

The White Rider

In chapter 6 we encountered a white rider as one of the four horsemen. This is not the same rider. This rider is named “faithful and true.” The only one who could be named faithful and true is the Lamb or God. The image then contrasts to the white horsemen showing that God is now going on conquest to conquer the world and expand his kingdom. The color white shows victory and power, the fiery eyes indicate wisdom and the ability to see things rightly, and the many diadems (not numbered) shows his immense kingly authority. The unknown name tells us that his name is so mysterious or complex that we would not understand it. The phrase “Word of God” is a characteristic phrase of Johannine writings to speak of Jesus. The phrase “Word of God” is used only three times in this book and is in direct reference to Jesus, God’s voice to the world. The final battle has begun.

The final battle

After all the destructive events, the fury of God being poured, and the fall of Babylon, now God acts. His first action is to wage a war against the evil of the world and the people who remained faithful to their idols. Notice the image of the armies: clean white linen and a white horse contrasts the darkness and the deep colors of the world. He strikes the world with the sharp sword of his mouth reminding us of the image from chapter 2 to the Church of Pergamum: His very words are like piercing swords that destroy nations. The prophesy from chapter 12 is fulfilled about ruling with an iron rod and from chapter 14 about the wicked going into the winepress of God's fury. Unlike the emperors of Rome who bore the title "king of kings and lord of lords," this king is named with it by the power and authority given to him by the Most High.

The battle commences in the opposite order that the beasts occurred in chapter 12 and 13. First the angel on the sun oversees the battle. The image of standing on the sun gives the impression that the angel can see all that events as they take place at once, he has a high vantage point. This angel then calls to the vultures and eagles, the carrion birds. Once the kings are destroyed, there will be plenty of food for them showing the utter destruction and the desecration allowed to those who have defied God. The battle is swift and complete. The beasts were thrown into the fiery pool with sulfur, the common biblical image of Hell. More than simply an image of Hell, this is the final death that Revelation spoke of in several places. Here the fire of God's love and fury burns them for eternity. The rest of those who followed the beast are slaughtered. The battle ends with the birds consuming their flesh and desecrating their bodies. The dead of those who rebelled against God are not buried but laid out before the earth like the 2 prophets from chapter 11. Thus ends the world, the reign of the beasts, and death and sin.