

Charts: Handout

PREFACE

Our last session gave us important context for what is fast approaching in the Revelation. What we will be seeing prophesied in two weeks, Session 47—both in the Revelation and in Zechariah—will be far easier to understand after our study of Daniel 11 last week. [If you have not read or listened to Session 44, I implore you to obtain the notes and/or listen to the audio—including the two charts we distributed \(which are included in the PDF notes\). Without that important information you will be at a real disadvantage going forward.](#) I cannot take the time here to recapitulate all that. You will need to do that on your own—if you wish to understand the flow of the end-time narrative.

Last week we interrupted the narrative of the seven bowls of wrath in the Revelation—and this week and next we are going to do it again. Anywhere we stick this next parenthetical vision it will be an interruption, and I prefer to address it now, so that once we turn to Armageddon and Christ's return, we can stay on that track. And it is important that we address Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen of Revelation, which portray "Babylon the Great" and her fall, because this is a detailed portrait of the world system—both religious and political—under Antichrist and the false prophet during the Tribulation. So yes, this session and next (Sessions 45 and 46) will interrupt the flow, but we know already that the Revelation was not written—or, better, revealed to John—in chronological order. [Turn with me to Revelation Chapter Sixteen.](#)

Were we to return to this text and narrative, we would next begin with v12, the pouring out of the sixth bowl. What follows immediately is a brief pseudo-parenthetical vision in vv13-16, that nonetheless fits into the narrative for the run-up to Armageddon. Then, in vv17-21, the seventh bowl of wrath is poured out, followed by two chapters all about "Babylon the Great"; these two chapters, along with the first six verses of Chapter Nineteen, are a true parenthetical vision, portraying the situation mostly *earlier* than the seventh bowl, some time during the Great Tribulation, and perhaps even covering the most of the seven-year Tribulation, but also right up to the last moment before Christ returns (thus there is some overlap with the last two bowls). So we will deal with this parenthetical vision *now*, rather than later.

OVERVIEW

Chapter Seventeen is predominantly about the *religious* system under the beast and the false prophet, and Chapter Eighteen is predominantly about the *political* or *commercial* system. Put another way, “Chapter Seventeen reveals the spiritual nature of Antichrist’s kingdom; Chapter Eighteen follows with its material aspects” (MacArthur). Both are presented under the names “Babylon the Great,” the “great harlot,” even “the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” This “Babylon” is revealed to John in the figure of a woman. Interestingly, the vision is presented to John in the beginning by no less than one of the seven angels pouring out the bowls of wrath. These chapters are all about the doom and downfall of Babylon, but in the process is included details about how the religious and political systems will operate during the Tribulation.

Beyond the need for us to study this because it is a component of the Last Things, one important reason for us to take the time for it is that in these chapters is revealed not just something future for this earth, but something happening *right now*. Let me be clear: I am not at all suggesting that this prophesy is being fulfilled in our midst, in our time. No, I am not suggesting that, but *declaring* that the same abominable practices, evil philosophies—the very same demonic ideas and practices of which we read here are a part of *our* system today. Whether this means that we are in the days leading to the Rapture and Tribulation, or that society will cycle through a time of righteousness after this, only God knows. That isn’t my point. My point is this: These chapters offer us a picture of a system locked into the worst level of demonic depravity; as such it paints a pretty accurate picture of our world today.

Finally, in these chapters Babylon is presented as a woman, as a queen, and as a city. Scripture, as well as history, shows that Babylon—beginning with the tower of Babel in Genesis 11—has always been an important center of false religion. Satan inaugurated false religion in the first days of this earth, and here we see him doing the same in its closing days. “This final world religion, depicted as a harlot, is the theme of this vision, which records the exposure of the harlot, the explanation of the harlot, and the extermination of the harlot” (MacArthur).

“Babylon” here is, at root, a metaphor for evil. The woman is described (or titled) in v5 as a “mystery” (*mysterion*). It does not refer to a geographical region, not ancient Babylon and not necessarily a rebuilt Babylon, but “a secret reality to be revealed in the end times. *This Babylon is the symbol of all worldly resistance to God*” (MacArthur).

“BABYLON” IS SHOWN TO JOHN

Happily, the Spirit of God in writing these chapters has interpreted its mysteries for us. For the most part we do not need to guess at what these visions mean.

Read Revelation 17:1-6.

What do we learn about this woman in the first six verses?

- She is portrayed as a harlot. We should not confuse this “harlotry” with the manner in which God refers to the adultery, the unfaithfulness of Israel’s idolatry in the OT. For these nations and their rulers are not Jews, neither are they the redeemed; these are never pictured as God’s or the Messiah’s “wife.”
- She “sits on many waters.” This is explained in v15. “And he said to me, “The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.” In other words, her scope and influence is world-wide.
- As with human prostitutes, where the man may think he is using the woman, in truth, she is changing him. This harlot “services” the “kings of the earth,” but in turn they are corrupted—“made drunk with the wine of her immorality”—*corrupted* by her, and eventually *ruled* by her. *She* is the one in ultimate control. The people will be “passionately intoxicated with Antichrist’s illicit false world religion” (MacArthur).
- She sits on a scarlet beast, which by its description in v3 and later, is clearly Antichrist—or more accurately, the beast is not *just* Antichrist, but represents, as Walvoord puts it, “a revelation of the revived Roman Empire in its period of worldwide dominion.” That is, Antichrist is the head of that confederation. We can deduce from the vision that the beast supports the harlot—yet, she is the one riding (controlling) *him*. The sometimes tortured intricacies of their relationship—the political dictator with the world-wide religion—is described in v16: “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.” In this we see the apostasy and the dictator, in the beginning, working side-by-side, but later, perhaps at the midpoint of the Tribulation, Antichrist will make *himself* the object of the world’s worship, thus subsuming the two into “one in the beast’s universal and comprehensive rule” (MacArthur). The description of the beast is telling: he is vile, “full of blasphemous names,” which, at the same time, reveals the depths of depravity of the apostate church being in such intimate alliance with him. Once the true church is removed at the Rapture, this hideous abomination will be the world-wide church taking its place. The seven heads represent seven successive kingdoms or governments; the ten horns represent the coalition under the beast.

- The harlot’s apparel is telling as well. “The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls...” (v4). We might say today that these are *power* adornments; the colors speak of royalty, nobility, and wealth, as does the abundance of expensive jewelry. This false religion has immense power and wealth. In place of a royal orb, she holds in her hand (as if proud of it) “a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality.” Verse 2 told us what she does with this cup: “...those who dwell on the earth [i.e., unbelievers] were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.” The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this. **Read Jeremiah 51:6-7.**

Sidebar: Permit me to insert a word here about the Catholic church. We must carefully and intelligently understand the meaning behind this vision of a woman and what she represents by her names “harlot” and “Babylon.” Many—perhaps even a majority—over the centuries have claimed flat-out that “Babylon” and this abominable harlot represent the Catholic church with its corrupt papacy. This passage is one they reference to back up their position, claiming that the garb of this woman stands for the grandiose and richly adorned robes of the papacy. As I have stated repeatedly, we do not subscribe to an historical interpretation of these visions, nor does the apostasy of the end times represent any apostasy in the Catholic church. Is there error and apostasy there? Yes—just as apostasy can be found in some protestant churches. But is this vision of an end-times false religion a picture of an end-times Catholic church? No. John Walvoord says it well: “The only form of a world church recognized in the Bible is this apostate world church destined to come into power after the true church has been raptured.” Just as I pointed out that we can see today in our culture examples of what we read here, that does not mean that we are already dwelling in the fulfillment of this prophecy. Sin and rebellion against the true God have been dwelling on this earth since Eden.

- This woman has a rather verbose identification on her forehead: “a mystery, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” Who or whatever she is, we can take from this that she is rather proud of what she is. Some say the word “mystery” is part of the title, while others say the word is a descriptive adjective, not part of the name or title. It’s a small point. It just means that this is a secret that will be revealed.

As to the name “Babylon,”

Walvoord: ...Babylon in Scripture is the name for a great system of religious error. Babylon is actually a counterfeit or pseudo religion which plagued Israel in the Old Testament as well as the church in the New Testament, and which, subsequent to apostolic days, has had a tremendous influence in moving the church from biblical simplicity to apostate confusion. In keeping with the satanic principle of offering a poor substitute for God’s perfect plan, Babylon is the source of counterfeit religion sometimes in the form of pseudo Christianity, sometimes in the form of pagan religion. (*See the handout for this session—last page of these notes—for more detailed information.*)

Joseph Seiss brings out an important point about v5, which speaks to the identity of this woman in John’s vision. To those who would try to make this all about Rome or the Catholic church or the papacy itself, Seiss raises his hand in protest and says, “No, no, look again at v5!”

Note again what v5 says about the name on her forehead; her name is “a mystery, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”

As Walvoord points out, it is a “mystery”—not, here, a literal, inhabited city. Seiss agrees, but comes at it by emphasizing what the text in v5 is saying, that this woman *is the mother of [all] harlots and mother of [all] the abominations of the earth!* Were we to place her on a timeline, she would predate by millennia Rome and the papacy; she pre-dates all harlotry and all the abominations of this fallen earth. She is the one who gave birth to it all! Thus she is *all* false religion, *all* apostasy, *all* depravity and rebellion against a holy God, as exemplified by a Babylon that had its birth in the tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Seiss: The Woman is not an empire any more than the Church of Christ is an empire. She rides upon empires, kings, and powers of the world, and inspires, leads, and controls them; but she herself is not one of them, and is above all of them, so that they court her, and are bewitched and governed by her—governed, not with the reins of empire, but with the lure of her fornication. This Woman is longer-lived than any one empire. (*Again, see the handout.*)

- Finally, in v2 it is the unbelievers who are “made drunk with the wine of her immorality.” Here, in v6, the *woman* is “drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.” False religion has always been a murderer. Christ Jesus, true God, offers *life*—life eternal; false religion in all forms offers only false salvation, false hope, and an eternity of misery and living *death*. Those fooled by Babylon’s apostasy are made drunk by her enticements; meanwhile she herself is made pleasantly drunk from the deaths of all those who rejected her suit in favor of the true Messiah.

Remember what we read in 13:15: “And it was given to [the false prophet] to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed.”

Although the text expresses great astonishment, I still read the end of v6 —“When I saw her, I wondered greatly”—as profound understatement. Frankly, I believe that any one of us would faint dead-away seeing that vision before us. And the angel assures him, *Don’t worry, John, I’ll explain it all.*

THE VISION EXPLAINED

Read Revelation 17:8.

v8

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction.”

The remainder of Chapter Seventeen consists of the angel’s explanation of this bizarre sight. It is cued up by John’s wonderment in v6: “When I saw her, I wondered greatly.” Note: “When I saw *her*...” Yet the angel describes everything else *but* the woman for the next eleven verses. Only in the last verse (v18) does he get to the woman, and then in a rather off-handed manner (*oh, yeah, by the way...*): “The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.”

- *The beast that you saw*: Antichrist, the beast from the sea
- *was*: he was alive, people knew of him
- *and is not*: he faked his death so that he could be “resurrected” and be worshiped as “god”
- *and is about to come up out of the abyss*: which could be referencing his public re-emergence after his “death,” or be a reference to 13:1, where he is seen “coming up out of the sea,” or a reference to 11:7, where he is “the beast that comes up out of the abyss.”

As we discussed in Session twenty-seven (*the Two Witnesses*), in the OT a correlation is expressed, metaphorically, between the sea and the realm of satanic activity, as for example in Isaiah 27:1.

In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent,
With His fierce and great and mighty sword,
Even Leviathan the twisted serpent;
And He will kill the dragon who lives in the sea.

As MacArthur points out, “The abyss is the prison for certain demons. Though he is a man, the beast is energized by the demonic presence and power coming from the abyss.”

vv9-13

These verses expand on what we already know, that the seven heads represent seven earlier successive kingdoms or governments; the ten horns represent the coalition under the beast.

v14

Here is a compacted version of Armageddon. All these just described—the coalition under Antichrist—all will go to war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will win. Why? Because He is “Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.” (Sorry to spoil the ending for you, but God wins.)

v16

A study of the future history of the end times can be, and is usually, fascinating. But at times it can also be frustrating, for we wish the Spirit of God would have dispensed with all the mystic, opaque language and just given us a detailed, plain-English, minute-by-minute account that could be easily understood. Verse 16 presents just such an occasion.

“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.”

We have already seen, from other passages, how Antichrist will initially be most agreeable with religion. At the beginning of the Tribulation period he will make an agreement with the Jews to permit them to worship as they see fit in a rebuilt Jerusalem temple. But then, somewhere around the middle of the Tribulation he will renege on that agreement and begin his active persecution of Israel.

This text tells us that he will do much the same with “the harlot” called in these two chapters, “Babylon.” This is not Judaism, but a continuing—and greatly expanded—system of false religion and gross apostasy; during the first half of the Tribulation this will be “the church”—and it will be a travesty.

This verse describes, in the same obtuse prophetic imagery that opened the chapter, that the beast and his ten-nation coalition—that is, the lieutenant rulers reigning under the pleasure and rule of Antichrist—will suddenly destroy this perverse religion. It has served them well by being the carrot that attracted the masses to the beast, organizing them, subjugating them. But it is now time to dispense with it. Why? Does he want to replace it with a true religion? No, he wants to replace it with himself. From here on out he, the beast, will be the object of veneration and worship—and no one else. From here on out, *he* will be “God.”

v17

But we must never forget that there is One causing all this to happen. Satan? Yes, to a point. But over and above all else there is holy God calling the shots.

“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.

What better way to rid the earth of the hideous “great harlot” than to have Antichrist himself do all the dirty work. It is *His* purpose to have the coalition unite under what they see as *their* purpose—to wit, to unite as one under the rule of the beast without any distracting religious affections than to him alone. *The beast* will be will be their god, *he* will be their church, *he* will be their all-in-all! That is, “until the words of God [[the true God](#)] will be fulfilled.”

v18

Verse 18 serves as a suitable segue into *Chapter Eighteen*.

“The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.”

In this session, aside from a brief mention at the top, I have purposely restricted our focus to Babylon as standing for the pervasive system of immorality and apostasy that has infected mankind since the beginning of its time on earth. She is and always has been, as the words on her forehead proudly proclaim, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” She is the insidious monster infecting our churches, even today, with false religion, false promises, false hope—all bringing only death to those who listen to her siren song.

I have kept us focused on that aspect of “Babylon” so as to make it easier for us to grasp what can be a mysterious, mystical, and slippery concept.

Now, in our next session, we will turn the page to Chapter Eighteen, and Babylon as something more concrete, more tangible—still immoral, still perverse, still hateful to a holy God, but now instead of religion she will represent commerce, trade, politics. As such, most scholars agree that Babylon in Chapter Eighteen *does* speak of a literal city, or, at least, location. Just where, well, on that few *do* agree.

We have placed the prophecy of Chapter Seventeen somewhere around the mid-Tribulation point; we will place Chapter Eighteen somewhere closer to the very end of the Tribulation.

[Stay tuned.](#)

THE TRIBULATION

“Babylon”

Why is the harlot in Revelation 17 referred to as “Babylon”? What is the significance of this term in God’s word?

Of primary importance in the study of Babylon is its relation to religion as unfolded in Revelation 17. In addition to materials given in the Bible itself, ancient accounts indicate that the wife of Nimrod, who founded the city of Babylon, became the head of the so-called Babylonian mysteries which consisted of secret religious rites which were developed as a part of the worship of idols in Babylon. She was known by the name of Semiramis and was a high priestess of the idol worship. According to extra-biblical records which have been preserved, Semiramis gave birth to a son who she claimed was conceived miraculously. This son, given the name of Tammuz, was considered a savior of his people and was, in effect, a false messiah, purported to be the fulfillment of the promise given to Eve. The legend of the mother and child was incorporated into the religious rites and is repeated in various pagan religions. Idols picturing the mother as the queen of heaven with the babe in her arms are found throughout the ancient world, and countless religious rites were introduced supposedly promising cleansing from sin. Though the rites which were observed in the Babylonian false religion differed greatly in various localities, there usually was a priestly order which furthered the worship of the mother and child, practiced the sprinkling of holy water, and established an order of virgins dedicated to religious prostitution. Tammuz, the son, was said to have been killed by a wild beast and afterward brought back to life, obviously a satanic anticipation of the resurrection of Christ.

In the Scriptures themselves, though many of these facts are not mentioned, there are a number of allusions to the conflict of the true faith with this pseudo religion. Ezekiel protests against the ceremony of weeping for Tammuz in Ezekiel 8:14. Jeremiah mentions the heathen

practices of making cakes for the queen of heaven (Jer. 7:18) and offering incense to the queen of heaven (Jer. 44:17-19, 25). The worship of Baal, characteristic of pagan religion in Canaan, was another form of this same mystery religion originating in Babylon. Baal is considered identical to Tammuz. The doctrines of the mystery religions of Babylon seem to have permeated the ancient world, giving rise to countless mystery religions, each with its cult and individual beliefs offering a counterfeit religion and a counterfeit god in opposition to the true God revealed in the Scriptures. Babylon as an evil woman is portrayed in the prophecy of Zechariah 5:1-11 where the woman of verse 7 is described as personifying wickedness in verse 8.

The Babylonian cult eventually made its way to other cities including Pergamos, the site of one of the seven churches of Asia. The chief priests of the Babylonian cult wore crowns in the form of the head of a fish, in recognition of Dagon the fish god, with the title “Keeper of the Bridge,” that is, the “bridge” between man and Satan, imprinted on the crowns. The Roman equivalent of the title, Pontifex Maximus, was used by the Caesars and later Roman emperors, and was also adopted as the title for the bishop of Rome. In the early centuries of the church in Rome, incredible confusion arose; and attempts were made to combine some of the features of the mystery religion of Babylon with the Christian faith, a confusion which has continued down to the present day. In this chapter in Revelation, the last stage of counterfeit religion is revealed as it will be in existence in the period before the return of the Lord to earth.

(John Walvoord, in “The Destruction Of Ecclesiastical Babylon,” from his series, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.)

