

# THE DOWNFALL OF RELIGIOUS BABYLON IN REVELATION 17

## INTRODUCTION

- Revelation 17-18 describe the downfall of Antichrist’s final world empire
- These chapters do not fall within the chronology of Revelation...the chronology continues with the return of Christ in Revelation 19
- These two chapters digress from the timeline of events to look at what is being judged, namely the world system led by Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophet
- John has already alluded to Babylon’s destruction (14:8; 16:19); now he gives the details about its destruction
  
- In chapter 17, John describes the destruction of Babylon in its religious character (i.e. its spiritual nature)
- In chapter 18, he describes the destruction of Babylon in its commercial character (i.e. its material nature)
- “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.”<sup>1</sup>
  
- False religion has always played a major role in the fallen world; as such, it will also play a major role in the end times
- During the Tribulation, all of the world’s false religions will come together into one great and final false world religion under Antichrist, a system that will be aided by the false prophet and hordes of demons
- During that devastating time, people will desperately seek answers by turning to religion
  
- In order to understand Babylon’s future false religion, it is necessary to understand her role in false religions of the past:
  - As a city, Babylon began around 3000 BC under Nimrod (Gen 10:8-10), Noah’s great grandson and one who foreshadowed the final Antichrist
  - Under his leadership (Gen 10:10), the people built the tower of Babel, a monument to themselves in direct violation of God’s command to fill the earth (Gen 9:1, 7). “But this act of rebellion against God also had religious implications. Brick towers, like the one they built (known as ziggurats) were



<sup>1</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Revelation*, 138.

later used in false religions. Ziggurats had on their tops the sign of the zodiac, which was used by pagan priests to chart the stars. Through their observations of the stars, the priests supposedly gained spiritual insights and knowledge of the future.”<sup>2</sup>

- Hammurabi furthered Babylon’s false religion by making Marduk god of the city and head of its 1300 deities
  - The queen of heaven in Jeremiah 44:15-19 (whom the Israelites worshipped) is the goddess Ishtar, a Babylonian deity; God promised judgment on those who worshipped her (Jer 44:20-27)
  - Ezekiel also referred to the worship of Ishtar and Tammuz, Babylonian gods, in Ezekiel 8:14
  - The height of Babylon’s glory came under Nebuchadnezzar
- Babylon has always been a center of false religion; its name is associated in Scripture with religious error and counterfeit religion
  - its influence will occur again in the end times
  - It is possible that Babylon in Revelation 17 refers to the actual city in modern-day Iraq
  - Or it could be a reference to Rome (cf. 1 Peter 5:13) which might be the capital of the Babylonian system described in Rev 17-18
  - The “harlot” of this chapter symbolizes the final world religion under Antichrist
  - This stands in contrast to the true church of Christ being represented as the “bride of Christ” (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7; 21:9)

## EXPLANATION OF THE RELIGIOUS BABYLON

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### The Description of Babylon (vv. 1-7)

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**Revelation 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

- The fact that one of the seven angels spoke to John connects the harlot’s judgment with the seven bowl judgments mentioned in chapter 16
- The “harlot” is not an actual prostitute; rather, she is a metaphor for false religion, spiritual defection, and idolatry
- Four times in this chapter, this false religious system is described as a “harlot” (vv. 1, 5, 15-16)
- She is the epitome of unfaithfulness to the Lord
- The concept of spiritual adultery is often used in the OT of describing the apostasy of Israel

**Ezekiel 16:15-17** ~ But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing. 16 You took some of your clothes, made for yourself high places of various colors and played the harlot on them, which should never come about nor happen. 17 You also took your beautiful jewels made of My gold and of My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images that you might play the harlot with them.

**Ezekiel 16:23-43**

**Hosea**

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22*, 158.

- She is described as one “who sits on many waters,” a statement which the angel explains to John in v. 15 ~ 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, this system will extend to many people and will stretch around the world
- The entire world will engage in the false worship of the Babylonian system rather than worshipping the true and living God
- “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 to form the base of this ‘church.’ Tribulation saints, of course, will oppose this false church.”<sup>3</sup>

**Revelation 17:2** ~ 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.”

- So influential will this system be that the “kings of the earth” will participate in it
- Those in the greatest positions of power and influence (i.e. the world’s leaders) will become a part of the religious system which she symbolizes
- They will commit “acts of immorality” and cause others to participate in “the wine of her immorality”
- This is not a reference to literal wine and sexual sin, but to the intoxicating draw of a false system of religion
- Just like false teachers are almost always guilty of drunkenness and immorality, so too will the world’s leaders and unbelievers be guilty of spiritual adultery and be enamored by the apostate church
- “False religion is always the worst enemy of true religion, and the moral wickedness involved in the union of the church with the world imposes a stupefying drunkenness as far as spiritual things are concerned. The hardest to win to Christ and the most difficult to instruct in spiritual truth are those who have previously embraced false religion with its outward show of a worship of God.”<sup>4</sup>

**Revelation 17:3** ~ 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.

- The “woman” here is the harlot of v. 1
- The description of the “beast” identifies him as Antichrist (cf. Rev 13:1, 4; 14:9; 16:10)
  - Scarlet = color of blood (he will be murderous)
  - Blasphemous names = he will take for himself names that belong only to God
  - 7 heads and 10 horns = the alliances he will have
- The fact that she is sitting on the beast signifies that he is supporting her; in other words, the false religious system that will characterize the Tribulation age is powered by the political power of the beast
- “The initial unifying and controlling factor of Antichrist’s kingdom will be religion. With the heavens and the earth being ravaged by God’s judgments, and the world’s political, economic, and military might crumbling, people will turn in desperation to the supernatural. The beast and the woman will coexist for a while. But eventually “the beast...will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire” (v. 16). It will be at that point that the false prophet will make the whole world worship Antichrist (13:11-14), and everything will be one in the beast’s universal and comprehensive rule...Far from being separated, church and state will be united as never before in human history.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 139.

<sup>4</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 244.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22*, 163.

**Revelation 17:4-5** ~ 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.”

- V. 4a describes the allure this false religious system will have:
  - “purple and scarlet” = what prostitutes wear to attract attention
  - “adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls” = she is attractive and has become wealthy
- This false system will entice people with a false comfort
- “While purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones, and pearls can all represent beauty and glory in relation to the true faith, here they reveal a false religion that prostitutes the truth.”<sup>6</sup>
- That system will only lead to “abominations and unclean things” as a result of idolatry
- It will deceive the people of the world into fully engaging in spiritual adultery
- Like prostitutes who want to steal everything from their victims, this false religious system will make people drunk, like ancient Babylon did

**Jeremiah 51:7** ~ Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the LORD, Intoxicating all the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine; Therefore the nations are going mad.

- She has a name on her forehead which is a “mystery” (i.e. a previously unrevealed truth)
- This means that the true identity of spiritual Babylon has not yet been revealed
- Thus, the Babylon referred to here cannot be simply the actual city on the Euphrates in modern-day Iraq (although it likely includes that)
- This “mystery Babylon” refers to a previously undisclosed Babylon, a reality to be revealed in the end times (the worldwide false religion)
- This system will be the “mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth”
- Babylon will be the source of all the false and blasphemous worship in the Tribulation
- “The mother harlot has a family of harlots. In other words, many groups will join together under the one harlot in a kind of federated church. She 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 doctrinal and polity distinctives and still unite in this harlot family relationship.”<sup>7</sup>

**Revelation 17:6** ~ 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.

- Under this murderous, false religious system, true believers will be persecuted and killed
- False religion has resulted in the death of many people
- “The history of the church has demonstrated that apostate Christianity is relentless in its persecution of those who hold to truth faith in Jesus Christ. While the world becomes drunk with lust for her, the harlot becomes drunk with the blood of God’s people.”<sup>8</sup>

- One of the greatest examples of this was the post-Reformation “burning at the stake” of 300 Protestant ministers under Bloody Mary for “heresy” as described in *Light From Old Times* and Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*

<sup>6</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1985). [Revelation](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 970). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 140.

<sup>8</sup> MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22*, 166.

**Revelation 17:7** ~ 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.

- The angel promises to explain this “mystery” to John
- Although John understood that the woman represented a false religious system and that the beast was the Antichrist, he was puzzled about the connection between them
- In the following section, the angel provides John a lengthy description of the beast, details John needed to have in order to understand the connection between the woman and the beast

### **The Meaning of the Description of Babylon (vv. 8-15)**

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**Revelation 17:8** ~ 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

- The angel reviews the detailed description of the beast given in Rev 13:1-10
- The fact that the beast “was, and is not, and is about to come up” is a reference to Antichrist’s faked death and resurrection (cf. 13:3, 12)
- The false prophet will use that deception to deceive the world into worshiping Antichrist (13:14)
- Thus, at the midpoint of the Tribulation, Antichrist will be the undisputed ruler of the world
- That he comes “up out of the abyss” (the home of Satan [Rev 11:7] and the place demons come from [Rev 9:1-2, 11]) shows that his power is Satanic in origin (Rev 13:4)
- Thus, Satan and the man he controls are closely identified
- However, he is about to “go to destruction”...a reference to eternal damnation in the lake of fire
- Yet, the world (“those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life”) will marvel when they see Antichrist’s power and his apparent resurrection
- “The supernatural survival and revival of both the world ruler and his empire will impress the world as being supernatural and will lead to worship of the beast and Satan.”<sup>9</sup>

**Revelation 17:9-11** ~ 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.

- This section has been the subject of many different interpretations, hence the statement “here is the mind which has wisdom”
- This shows that spiritual wisdom is required to understand what is stated here
- “seven heads are seven mountains”
- Some have taken this to refer to the seven hills Rome was built on, thus signifying that Rome will be the capital of the coming world empire
- And they identify the woman as the Roman Catholic Church
- But the text is clear that literal mountains are not in view: v. 10 ~ and they are seven kings

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<sup>9</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1985). [Revelation](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 971). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

- If the mountains represent kings, then they cannot be literal mountains...they thus refer not to a literal Rome but to kingdoms and rulers
- “mountains” are often used in Scripture to symbolize a kingdom, empire, or ruling authority

**Psalm 30:7** ~ O LORD, by Your favor You have made my mountain to stand strong; You hid Your face, I was dismayed.

**Daniel 2:35** ~ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

- The “seven mountains” represent seven successive world empires and their rulers
- They are seven great world powers which stretch from the beginning of history to the end of it
- “five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come” - by the time of John’s writing, five world empires had already fallen: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece...though not world empires, each of those was the greatest kingdom of its own time and each of them embodied the spirit of political and religious Babel
- One existed at the time of John’s writing: Rome
- And one was yet future: Antichrist’s final world empire
- “when he comes, he must remain a little while” – as opposed to the other kingdoms that continued for a long time, the final worldwide empire of Antichrist will last only “a little while” (3 ½ years – Rev 13:5)
- By the way, it is these same kingdoms that Daniel saw as well, but only 4 of them since he only looked forward from his time (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome); whereas, this account looks backward and forward (i.e. the kingdom that was first in Daniel is third here)
- These “mountains” are that “on which the woman sits” (v. 9)
- The beast “is himself also an eighth” (v. 11)
- Thus, Antichrist’s kingdom is both the seventh and eighth kingdom (“and is one of the seven”)
- The revived Roman empire is the seventh and Antichrist himself is the eighth
- So, what is described in vv. 8-11 is the final form of the Gentile world power which is in alliance with apostate religion
- “By these seven great powers then, filling up the whole interval of this world’s history, this great Harlot is said to be carried. On these she rides, according to the vision. It is not upon one alone, nor upon any particular number of them, but upon all of them, the whole seven-headed Beast, that she sits. These seven powers, each and all, support the Woman as their joy and pride; and she accepts and uses them, and sways their administrations, and rides in glory by means of them. They are her devotees, lovers, and most humble servants; and she is their patronizing and most noble lady, with a mutuality of favours and inter-communion belong to her designation...it is a matter of fact, that as surely as Rome in John’s day, and Greece, Persia, Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt, before Rome, existed and bore sway on earth as regal mountains, so surely and conspicuously were they each and all ridden by this great Harlot. They were each and all the lovers, supporters, and defenders of organized falsehood in religion, the patrons of idolatry, and foster friends of all manner of spiritual harlotry. Nimrod, the hunger of the sons of men and author of despotic government, established his idolatrous inventions as the crown and glory of his empire, and intertwined the worship of idols with the standards of his power. It was the same with Egypt, whose colossal remains, unfading

paintings, and mummy scrolls confirm the Scripture portraiture of her disgusting devotions, and tell how the priests of these abominations were honoured by the throne, of which they were the chief advisers. It was so with Assyria, as the recent exhumations of Nineveh abundantly attest. It was so with the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar, as Daniel, who lived amid it all, has written. It was so with Persia, as her various records all declare. It was so with Greece, as her own most cherished poets sung, her mightiest orators proclaimed, and all her venerated artists and historians have set forth. It was so with Rome, as all her widespread monuments still show, and all the Christian testimonies, with her own, render clear and manifest as the sun. And it will be so with the last, which is yet to come, as declared in the apocalyptic foreshadowings, and in all the prophecies in the Book of God upon the subject. It requires but a glance at history to see that spiritual harlotry has ever been the particular pet and delight of all the Beast-powers of time. If ever the worship and requirements of the true God won their respect and patronage, they soon corrupted it to their own selfish and ambitious ends, or never were easy until freed from the felt restraint.”<sup>10</sup>

**Revelation 17:12-15** ~ 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.

- “the ten horns...are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom” (v. 12) – refers to Antichrist’s future empire
- While the seven kings represent chronologically successive kingdom, the 10 horns represent the confederacy of 10 kings who will be contemporaneous with each other under the reign of Antichrist
- They “receive authority as kings...for one hour” (v. 12) – a figure of speech emphasizing that their rule will be short
- They will “give their power and authority to the beast” (v. 13) – they will be totally devoted to Antichrist
- Their aim is to “wage war against the Lamb” (v. 14) – they will seek to destroy Christ
- But “the Lamb will overcome them” (v. 14) – Christ will utterly destroy them at his Second Coming, an event detailed in chapter 19

### **The Destruction of Babylon (vv. 16-18)**

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**Revelation 17:16-18** ~ 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.

- A remarkable event will occur, probably at the mid-point of the Tribulation: “the ten horns...and the beast...will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire” (v. 16 )
- Most likely, for the first half of Tribulation, the beast and the harlot will work together promoting the apostate religious system
- But Antichrist’s support of the false religious system will not last
- He will no longer have need of the false religious system to help him gain control of the world

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Seiss, quoted in Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 253-254.

- He will discard that system because he will want the world to worship him alone, the ultimate expression of false religion
- He will tolerate only one world religion...the worship of himself...and will set himself up as the unquestioned leader of both the political and religious system
- Likely, at the mid-point of the Tribulation, when the false prophet establishes and causes an idol to speak in support of the worship of Antichrist (Rev 13:14-15), all false religions will be united in following and worshipping Antichrist
- “The world church movement, which characterizes the first half of the seven years leading up to the Second Coming, is thus brought to an abrupt end. It will be replaced by the final form of world religion which will be the worship of the world ruler, Satan’s substitute for Christ.”<sup>11</sup>
- This will all be ordained by God to accomplish His sovereign purpose
- He will put it in the hearts of Antichrist’s followers to do all of this so that He can destroy it in one great act of divine judgment at the return of Christ
- “The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth” (v. 18)
- The “great city” is not pagan political Rome
- It is likely a reference to Babylon’s influence as a religious center for false, apostate religion
- It is also likely a reference to the actual literal future city of Babylon
- The description of Babylon’s destruction in chapter 18 (vv. 10, 18, 21) also suggests an actual city
- Thus, it is likely that a rebuilt city of Babylon will be closely identified with Antichrist’s world empire, perhaps its capital city

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<sup>11</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1985). [Revelation](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 972). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.