

# Revelation Mathewson Lecture 22 Rev 17 18 Second Part Fixed

Now, I hope to demonstrate and I would side with those who argue that most likely Babylon here is sort of a code for Rome, for the city of Rome. And again, this fits the context of Revelation very well. If John is addressing seven churches living within the context of the Greco-Roman Empire and under the pressure of, under the thumbprint of Roman imperial rule, then it would make sense for the first readers to read this and think in terms of Babylon, or think in terms of Rome as Babylon.

That is, Babylon as a symbol of an idolatrous, godless, oppressive people who persecutes the people of God, a city that sets itself up over God and absolutizes its power and usurps God's authority, irrigates and claims authority that belongs only to God himself. That, in that Rome is characterized that way, which is how John characterizes it, Babylon then becomes a perfect fit for Rome. We see evidence of this already.

It appears at least by this time in the first century, Babylon could be used as sort of a code for Rome. And for example, at the very end of 1 Peter, the letter written by Peter, 1 Peter and chapter 5 and verse 14, at the very end of the letter, actually verse 13, 1 Peter 5, 13, she who is in Babylon chosen together with you sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. And most people recognize, or most people would, I think, agree that 1 Peter was written to Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire, but within the wake of Roman rule.

So 1 Peter 5, 13, I think provides compelling evidence that at least Peter's using Babylon, at least some Christians or many Christians would have understood Babylon as sort of a code for the city of Rome. And so I think John is following suit here, although he's not using Babylon solely because it was a common designation for Rome in the first century. He uses it because of its Old Testament background and because he finds now in Rome, the ultimate expression of what Babylon embodied during that time in the Old Testament.

Now he finds that resurfacing and re-emerging in an even greater way in the city of Rome. So I find it difficult to think that John's readers would not have read this and thought that John was describing the judgment on Rome itself, on Rome and its empire. Furthermore, later on in chapter 17, especially in verse 9, part of John's vision is, in the beginning section, as we'll see, he sees a woman riding on a beast and the beast has seven heads.

And notice how he identifies the seven heads later on. In verse 9, he says, this calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.

That notion of seven hills probably reflects a common understanding historically in some literature of Rome sitting on seven hills or Rome's association with seven hills. In fact, there are a number of coins and if you have access to David Aune's commentary, his third volume on chapters 17 through 22, he actually has a picture of a coin where you have Rome portrayed as a goddess, a woman seated on seven hills. So once more, this description of it in seven hills, along with the fact that Babylon was a common designation for Rome among Christians, seems to suggest to me that John intends for Babylon here to be identified with the first century city of Rome and that indeed his readers would have made that connection.

And John himself drops clues in the text, such as portraying the woman as sitting on seven hills, to suggest that that's the identification we should make. So now John is going to develop in more detail the description of the dominant empire under which Christians found themselves in the first century. Not only the city of Rome, but its empire and all the provinces that it ruled over.

Verses 1 and 2 probably function of chapter 17, probably function as the setting for the entire vision. That is chapter 17, 1 and 2 function as the setting or intro for 17 and 18 as well, where verses 1 and 2 introduce us. The angel tells John, I'm going to show you the punishment of the harlot, the prostitute Babylon, which we've suggested signifies the city of Rome.

And then chapters 17 and 18 will describe that. We said chapter 17 will primarily demonstrate why it is that Babylon, Rome, is guilty and why it will be subject to judgment. And then chapter 18 will describe its judgment.

The other difference between the two chapters is chapter 17 is largely visual. It's largely a vision that John has of this woman riding this beast and then an interpretation of that vision. Chapter 18 does not contain nearly as much visionary material.

It's primarily auditory. Most of chapter 18 is a construction of laments or speeches or sayings that function to describe or to interpret the downfall of Babylon. So again, chapter 17 is more vision and its interpretation.

Chapter 18 is more auditory in the form of laments and speeches and things like that. Before we look at the text, at least a few details, let me read it. And starting in chapter 17 verse 1, this introduces us to the kind of, this is the climax of the book, beginning then with the judgment of Babylon, Rome.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, come, I will show to you the punishment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters. With her, the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries. Then the angel carried me away into the desert, in the spirit, into the desert.

And there I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with the blasphemous names and had seven heads and 10 horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand filled with the abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.

This title was written on her forehead, mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and the abominations of the earth. I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

And then the angel said to me, why are you so astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and the beast that she rides, which has the seven heads and 10 horns. The beast which you saw once was, now is not, and will come up out of the abyss and go into his

destruction. The inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world, will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings.

Five of them have fallen. One is, and the other has yet to come. But when he does come, he must reign for a little while.

Then the beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven, and he is going to his destruction. The 10 horns you saw are 10 kings who have not received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast.

They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the lamb, but the lamb will overcome them because he is the Lord of lords and king of kings. And with him will be his called, chosen, and faithful followers.

Then the angel said to me, the waters you saw where the prostitute sits are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. The beast and the 10 horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked.

They will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast the power to rule until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." So verses 1 and 2 then sort of set the tone for, and I think are an introduction to the entire vision.

That is, even chapter 17 has to do with the destruction of Babylon or is setting you up for the ultimate downfall and destruction of Babylon, which happens in 17, 18. And again, we should include 19, at least the first five or six verses as the response, the clear response to the judgment upon Babylon. Just to point out again that most likely John is, as I've argued before, although I hold to the fact that John actually had a vision and saw a vision, he interprets that vision by linking it, by describing it through Old Testament texts that resemble and further describe and fit exactly what he saw.

And we'll see one of the most important texts that John draws upon over and over again for his description of the downfall and judgment of Babylon is Jeremiah chapter 50 and especially Jeremiah chapter 51. And so, for example, when he describes Babylon as sitting on many waters. In Jeremiah chapter 51, for example, and verse 13, I'll back up and read verse 12, lift up your banner against the walls of Babylon.

So clearly he's describing the destruction of Babylon. Reinforce the guard station and the watchmen, prepare an ambush. The Lord will carry out his purpose, his decree against the people of Babylon and addressing Babylon, verse 13, you who live by many waters and are rich in treasure.

Now notice how John describes Babylon, Rome, here in chapter 17, as the great prostitute who sits on many waters. And then later on, he will describe her as decked out in treasure in

verses three and four, especially verse four. She's glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls.

So John is clearly drawing upon old Testament depictions of Babylon, historical Babylon, and its judgment now to describe another Babylon like city and its judgment as well. The fact that she is called a prostitute in verse two, right away, John is told, come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, already indicates the nature of Babylon, Rome, or the nature of the city. And by calling her a prostitute, this anticipates one of the crimes that John is going to accuse Babylon of later on in chapter 17.

And that is that she has caused the nations to commit adultery with her. So Rome is going to be pictured as a prostitute and other nations and other peoples are those that she will seduce into committing adultery with her. In the Old Testament, we often find this language of prostitution or adultery, particularly depicting the Old Testament nation of Israel, where Israel is portrayed throughout the Old Testament.

Israel is portrayed as the wife or the bride of Yahweh. And for Israel to go after idols, for Israel to break the covenant relationship to God, then is seen as spiritual adultery. And so when the nation of Israel goes after other idols, goes after foreign gods, when they break the covenant, then that is often portrayed as they are adulterous, they play the role of a prostitute, they have broken through adultery, they have strayed from their covenant relationship with God, and they have gone after idols, they've been unfaithful to their covenant.

But it's interesting, at least in two texts, we find the language of a prostitute or committing adultery in relationship to pagan foreign nations, not just the nation of Israel. For example, in Isaiah chapter 23, in the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 23 and verses 15 through 17 is one important text. Isaiah chapter 23 and verses 15 through 17.

At that time, Tyre, and this is a lament over Tyre and anticipation of the judgment upon Tyre. At that time, Tyre will be forgotten for 70 years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these 70 years, it will happen to Tyre as to the song of the prostitute.

Take up the harp, walk to the city, oh prostitute, forgotten. Play the harp well and sing many a song so that you will be remembered. At the end of the 70 years, the Lord will deal with Tyre, she will return to her hire as a prostitute, and she will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.

The other text that I won't take time to read now, but the other text is Nahum. Actually, I have it right here, Nahum chapter 3. In Nahum chapter 3 and verse 4, I did have it, Nahum chapter 3 and verse 4, all because of the wanton lust of a harlot alluring the mistress of sorceries who enslaved nations by her prostitution. So in both of these texts, you have not the nation of Israel, but foreign nations compared to a prostitute who seduce and entice or enslave other nations to commit adultery with her, to participate in her prostitution.

So with this background of pagan nations that could be characterized as prostitutes and cause others to commit adultery and fornication by participating in their idolatrous practices, these texts have become a model for, I think, provide a fitting background for what's going on in Babylon Rome. The author is drawing on these texts to describe Rome as

a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery with her. So the emphasis here is not on Israel committing adultery, but it's on Rome as a prostitute causing other nations to commit adultery with her in reflecting texts like Nahum chapter 3 and also the Isaiah 23 text.

The other thing significant about the Nahum and the Isaiah text that fits so well here is in both Nahum and Isaiah, the nature of the prostitute city's activity in causing others to commit adultery is economic. That is primarily getting other nations to commit adultery, not so much by worshiping their gods, although that probably would have been included, but primarily through participating in their ill-gotten gain and luxury. And so, in chapter 17 of Revelation, and we're going to see this even more clearly in chapter 18, one of the crimes of Rome is that she is a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery by basically living off or making a living off her wealth and off her excessive luxury.

That is the crime leveled against the foreign cities in Nahum and Isaiah, and that is the crime now that is leveled against the city of Babylon, Rome. She has caused other nations to commit adultery by entrapping them in her economic system by which they gain wealth and luxury, and probably that would have been associated with idolatrous practices as well, although the primary point is the luxurious lifestyle that they have entered into by colluding with and by participating in the economic system of Rome. And they've made a living and gained wealth and luxury because of that.

The fact that Rome is also called a prostitute not only has Old Testament background, but certainly is fitting because it suggests seduction and control by calling Rome a prostitute. Not only does she seduce nations through her economic practices, but she also then exercises control over them by, again, getting other nations to participate in her idolatrous practices, but especially her economic practices to gain wealth. And so the nations are depicted as relying on Rome for their wealth and for their security, and Revelation 18 will make this even more clear and spell out in detail how that happened, how that took place.

But again, John is primarily dependent on Old Testament text and Jeremiah chapter 51 for the language of the judgment of Babylon, but it's important to understand that John will draw on other Old Testament texts that also condemn or pronounce judgment on other godless cities, such as Nineveh and particularly Tyre, so that his picture is sort of a composite one, though Jeremiah 50 and 51 play a dominant role in that it describes in detail specifically the judgment of Babylon, which is the exact term used to refer to Rome here. At the same time, John will draw on other godless, idolatrous, luxurious cities that portray a lust for luxury and wealth, and in doing so set themselves up as God and irrigate divine authority. John will use other cities to portray Babylon Rome as well, so he'll draw in other Old Testament texts such as Isaiah and the portrayal of the downfall of Tyre.

We'll see too that one of the reasons he uses other texts is because Jeremiah 50 through 51 largely does not say much about Babylon's wealth, but Tyre, we've seen part of the reason John critiques Rome is because of its wealth, its excessive luxury, and trapping other nations to participate in that in their economic system and economic practices, and seducing them to be involved in that and basically accumulate wealth in association with Rome. The only place John finds that then is in other cities such as Tyre, and so the oracles against Tyre in the Old Testament also play a role in condemning the wealth and the commercial activity of

Rome, which Jeremiah doesn't explicitly do in relationship to Babylon. So what we're going to see then is a composite picture from Old Testament text, starting with the Babylon judgment in Jeremiah, but including other texts as well.

Now, in the rest of the section, starting with verse 3, we are introduced to the vision proper, that is, in verses 3, and it consists of two parts. Chapter 17 verse 3 to the very end of the chapter is going to consist of two parts. Verses 3 through 6 are a description of the vision that John had, the vision of the prostitute Babylon, and also verse 6 ending with John's response to that vision, and then starting with verse 7 to the end of the chapter, we will find an interpretation of that vision by the angel, and perhaps you picked that up when we read the text.

In other apocalypses, in other Jewish apocalypses, we often find this feature where an angel will take a seer on a kind of a tour and show him different places or a vision, and then sometimes the angel will interpret that vision. It's interesting that you find that rarely in John's apocalypse. The only place you find it to any extent is here.

We saw briefly back in chapter 1 verse 20, where the seven lampstands and the seven stars were interpreted for John. We saw this briefly back in chapter 7, where John asked, who are these people dressed in white robes, and the angel said these are the ones that have come out of the great tribulation, and now here is the place where in most detail, this is the only place in any detail, that we find an angelic being interpreting a vision for John. However, what is intriguing is the angel's interpretation doesn't help us out all that much.

It probably would have helped out John and the first readers quite a bit, but for us, it really has not resulted in much more clarity. In fact, the interpretation is almost as problematic to understand as the vision itself, and so we need to spend a little bit of time talking about a possible, I certainly wouldn't want to be dogmatic and say this is the way we have to read it, but a possible understanding of the vision, but also the interpretation of the vision given to John by the angel. But first of all, the description of the vision.

When the angel had one of the seven bulls come to John and told him he would show him the vision of the destruction of the prostitute, the first thing that the angel does in verse 3 is show him a vision of the prostitute itself, and we said one of the functions of this section, all of chapter 17, is to set the scene for chapter 18, that is to demonstrate why it is the prostitute deserved judgment, why it is prostitute Babylon was deserving of God's judgment. So, the angel then takes John on sort of a visionary tour, not really a tour. Other apocalypses often take a seer to different locations.

John doesn't get that, but he is taken to one location here, he will be taken to another location in chapter 21 when he is taken to a high mountain to see the bride in Jerusalem, but here he is taken to the desert which becomes the setting for his vision. This probably, this mention of the desert is once more dependent on the Old Testament, and John may have in mind Isaiah chapter 21 and verse 10 as the background for this backdrop of John's vision in the desert, and in chapter 21, Isaiah chapter 21 verse 10. Again, I'm not seeing that, I'm going to have to look at that again.

21, I have 21.10, but that's not, I'll look and see if I can find that, but the main point is the background of a desert, though elsewhere John has used the desert with connotations of

protection and preservation. For example, back in chapter 12 verse 14, the desert was the place to which the woman was taken, where she was preserved and nourished and protected for a period of time, but here desert clearly has negative connotations. That is, the desert is a place of evil, it's a place inhabited by wild animals and demonic beings, so that the desert clearly carries negative connotations in this context.

So, when John's taken to the desert, it's not for a place of testing, it's not to show preservation or protection, it's meant to indicate that this vision has foreboding connotations. It's meant to say something about Babylon. It will end up, in chapter 18, it will end up being the haunt of demons, it will end up being the dwelling place of all kinds of unclean animals.

So already, the desert suggests connotations of judgment that will get spelled out in more detail in chapter 18. And now, the vision centers around two figures, two dominant figures. One is a beast and the other is a woman who rides on the beast.

Now, the beast we've already been introduced to, in fact, the description of the beast makes it clear that it is the beast that you have already encountered in chapter 11, but especially in chapter 13. The beast is described as dressed in scarlet, having blasphemous names on it, which we read in chapter 13 in the first beast, and also seven heads and ten horns, resembling the first beast back in chapter 13. The woman, however, is described as characterized by great wealth.

She's dressed in purple and scarlet, gold and precious stones, indicating, I think at least here, twofold, not only the wealth and luxury that belongs to Rome, but probably meant to portray the dress of a prostitute here, simply affirming the fact that Rome now is pictured as a prostitute, as John was introduced to her back in chapter 1. He's about to see the prostitute. Now, here she is decked out in her garb, consisting of and reflecting her extreme wealth and excessive luxury by which she will seduce the nations in her economic practices. These two are the elements, these elements that John mentions, the woman riding the beast, the beast and his seven heads and ten horns.

These are the elements that will get explained in more detail in the interpretation of the vision, starting in verse 7. Now, one additional feature of the vision in verse 6 is she is also responsible for the persecution of the saints. That is, she is drunk with the blood of the saints. She's responsible for putting the people of God to death.

Now, two further interesting features of the vision to draw your attention to, and before I do that, just to back up, by the way, these verses have already introduced us to, even before the interpretation, have already introduced us to the primary crimes of Babylon Rome. That is, they've introduced us to the two or three main reasons why Babylon will be judged. One of them is simply because she has seduced nations.

She has caused nations to commit adultery with her. She has caused nations to, through their economic association and entrapment, she has caused them to commit adultery by their becoming rich and wealthy off of Babylon Rome. Second, she herself is portrayed as arrogant and extremely rich and wealthy and with excessive luxury.

Now, we just saw in verse 6, she is also responsible for violence that is violently putting to death the people of God, who are described as those who bore the testimony of Jesus, which is a common theme throughout Revelation for the church, what the church is supposed to do, and a common reason why we find persecution of God's people. Because of their faithful witness and testimony. But two other features of this vision that I think are important.

First of all, it appears now that the beast and the woman are separate. And maybe we shouldn't make too much of this, but it's interesting that the woman rides on the beast, suggesting perhaps that the woman controls the beast, or perhaps that the beast authority underlies, and the beast is the true motivating factor for the woman. The woman identified as Rome, as Babylon Rome, now the beast is the true power behind it.

That could be the picture as well. And I think, although there have been different suggestions, some have said the beast is more the sort of the power and the military power behind it, and maybe the woman is more the economic and religious part of Rome. I wonder if another way to look at it is that perhaps this suggests that the beast, although elsewhere in Revelation the beast has been identified with Rome, such as chapter 13 and chapter 11 as well, now I wonder if John is not telling us that, well, the beast can be identified with Rome.

Now John wants to say, but Rome, the beast is far more than Rome. The beast is the same beast from the past that we saw in Old Testament texts, this same beastly figure that underlies the same monster that underlies other empires, such as Egypt and other godless foreign empires, now supports Rome as well, now has manifest itself in Rome. So I wonder if this is simply not another way of suggesting that the beast is far more than just Rome.

That is, it extends into the past and also could extend into the future. But for John's purposes, he sees the beast that comes with a long history of the beast representing idolatry and a satanically inspired nation that oppresses God's people, that arrogates God's authority. Now that same beastly figure is surfacing again and manifesting itself in Rome, indicated by the beast supporting the woman.

So I'm not certain that that's the case, but that would, I think, be a valid explanation and seems to make good sense that, yeah, the beast is Rome elsewhere. But John now wants to be more clear that the beast is more than Rome, that now he's portraying the true power and source of authority behind the prostitute Babylon, a city of Rome. Second is, in this vision, the author is also making clear, I think, that it's the attractive and seductive nature of Rome that allows it to cover up its evil and nature.

And that is what enables it to seduce other nations. So they, the other nations, then are described as intoxicated with the adulteries of Rome. That is, due to the attractive and seductive nature of Rome, now the nations are blind to the true nature of Babylon, Rome.

Rome covers up its evil, hideous nature. It's a violent nature. Again, we may see a little bit of kind of an unraveling of typical Roman myth, such as Roma Eterna, Eternal Rome, or Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome.

And what John wants to demonstrate now is, in true apocalyptic fashion, Rome is not all it's cracked up to be. Rome is not all it appears. Behind its alluring, attractive, seductive nature lies a hideous beast, lies a violent, oppressive, idolatrous empire.

And also, I wonder too, if this imagery of, at least in chapter 17, as a preparation for chapter 18, the seductive, attractive nature of Rome covers up also the fact that it is going to be judged. And so this is what causes nations to be involved in it, and this is what causes the nation to be seduced. Now, in other words, it's as if John is saying, this is how sin works.

And I think when we look at this text and relationship today, this is a perfect picture of how sin works. Sometimes people say, sin is awful and horrible and you don't want to do it, and certainly that's true. But the point is, sin does not come across as awful and horrible.

Sin hides its consequences. Sin hides its hideous nature as a violation of God's character, and it hides its dreadful and deadly consequences of judgment behind a facade of attraction and allurements. Sin comes to us as attractive and alluring, hiding its consequences, hiding its hideous nature.

And that's how sin works. And that's how John sees Babylon, Rome working here. It hides its hideous nature as an oppressive, godless, idolatrous beast that is intent on destroying and causing harm, and it hides its consequences, that is, the fact that it's going into judgment.

And that's how the nations are seduced. That's also how God's people are seduced to participate in Babylon. Two other features of this text.

First of all, the fact that she is described as a woman dressed in expensive linen, but also dressed in gold and precious stones. This is another part of the description of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21 and 22, where the bride is all prepared and dressed, and she's decked out in gold and precious stones, as the rest of the New Jerusalem vision describes in more detail. So this is part, not only portraying her as a seductive harlot and prostitute, not only portraying her as wearing the luxury and wealth of Rome by which she will seduce other nations, but now also in direct contrast to the wedding garb and the gold and precious stones of chapter 21.

The prostitute Babylon is now portrayed also in a similar light to further bring out the contrast between the two. One further issue is, note in chapter 17 verse 5, on her forehead she has something written, which is Babylon the great, mother of all prostitutes. This may also be the image of a having a band or something on her forehead.

This, I think, is simply once more meant to reveal her true nature, her true character. That is, she is a seductive, idolatrous prostitute who now comes, and furthermore, she's the mother of all prostitutes, and also of all the abominations of the earth. By calling her a mother, that may suggest once more her control over all things, but also the fact that she gets others as her offspring.

She gets others to participate in her prostitution and to also participate in her idolatrous practices and in her abominations. So, up until this point, Rome has been portrayed as a prostitute who seduces others, who seduces and entices the other nations to commit adultery with her by being involved in not just or even so much her idolatrous practices,

although that is involved, but by being involved in her economic system that is built on a lust for wealth and built on excessive luxury. But furthermore, she is also portrayed as one who is guilty of violence, guilty of the blood of the saints.

And so, now we've seen Babylon in her true colors, Rome. And what John is going to do now is interpret this vision. So, the vision has portrayed Babylon in its true colors, and she is now ripe for judgment.

And now John has told us why it is that Babylon is guilty of judgment. And so, starting with verse seven now, John will begin to interpret this vision in more detail for his readers. This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation.

This is session number 22 on Revelation chapter 17 through 18.5, An Introduction to Babylon.