

Revelation 17:1–18:5: An Introduction to Babylon

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Abstract

In this lecture on Revelation 17:1–18:5, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the introduction and symbolic characterization of Babylon, demonstrating that chapters 17 and 18 form the climactic presentation of divine judgment in the book of Revelation. Mathewson argues that Babylon functions primarily as a code for first-century imperial Rome, drawing heavily on Old Testament prophetic imagery from Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Nahum to critique Rome's arrogant idolatry, economic seduction, and violent persecution of believers. The vision contrasts the corrupt prostitute of Babylon with the pure bride of the New Jerusalem, presenting a moral imperative for Christians to reject compromise and maintain faithful endurance. Ultimately, John unmasks Rome's alluring economic facade to expose its beastly, satanic nature that is destined for ultimate divine destruction.

Outline

I. Recap and Context: The Seventh Bowl and the Climax of Judgment (Rev 16:17–17:2)

- A. The seventh bowl signals final end-time judgment through Exodus-like theophanic language (lightning, thunder, unprecedented earthquake).
- B. Bowl seven introduces God "remembering" Babylon and giving her the cup of wrath.
- C. Chapters 17–18 unpack the specifics of bowl seven and expand on earlier anticipations in Revelation 14:8 and 16:19.
- D. Inclusion of Revelation 19:1–5 as the saints' triumphant response to Babylon's fall.
- E. Structural placement: Chapters 17–22 form the climax and goal of the entire book rather than an appendix.

II. The Literary Framework: Two Contrasting Women and Cities

- A. The prostitute Babylon (Rev 17–18) paired directly against the bride New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9–22:5).
- B. Parallel structural markers at the beginning and ending of both visions:
 1. Both introduced by one of the seven angels holding the seven last bowls carrying John in the Spirit.
 2. Both conclude with an instruction to write and John's mistaken attempt to worship the angel (rebuked with "Worship God").

C. The theological movement: A call for believers to "come out of her" (Rev 18:4) and transition into the New Jerusalem by overcoming and maintaining faithful witness.

III. Symbolic Identification of Babylon as Imperial Rome

A. Old Testament roots of Babylon:

1. Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) as godless human pride.
2. Exilic Babylon (Daniel) as an arrogant, idolatrous, and oppressive empire.

B. Arguments for identifying Babylon with first-century Rome:

1. Context of seven first-century churches living under Roman imperial rule.
2. Early Christian usage of "Babylon" as code for Rome (1 Peter 5:13).
3. Symbolic clues: The seven heads identified as seven hills (Rev 17:9), matching Roman iconographic imagery (e.g., Roma seated on seven hills).

C. Composite prophetic background: John draws on Jeremiah 50–51 (Babylon), Isaiah 23 (Tyre), and Nahum 3 (Nineveh).

IV. The Crimes of Babylon/Rome: Seduction, Wealth, and Persecution

A. Economic and spiritual prostitution:

1. Foreign nations compared to prostitutes seducing other kingdoms (reflecting Tyre and Nineveh in Isaiah and Nahum).
2. Rome seduces the nations into committing spiritual adultery through her economic system, luxury, and ill-gotten wealth.

B. Arrogant luxury and deception:

1. Dressed in purple, scarlet, gold, and pearls—symbolizing excessive wealth and prostitution garb.
2. The allure and luxury function as a facade hiding Rome's hideous, beastly nature and impending judgment (how sin operates).

C. Violence against God's people:

1. Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints and witnesses of Jesus (Rev 17:6).
2. Persecution results directly from the church's faithful witness and refusal to compromise.

V. The Vision Proper: The Woman and the Beast (Rev 17:3–6)

A. The Setting: Taken in the Spirit to a desert, carrying foreboding connotations of evil, wild beasts, and impending judgment.

B. The Relationship between the Woman and the Beast:

1. The woman (Babylon/Rome) rides a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns.
2. The beast represents the underlying satanic, idolatrous power behind Rome—a historical continuation of beastly empires (Egypt, Babylon, etc.) resurfacing in Rome.

C. Inscription on her forehead: "Mystery, Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes and Abominations of the Earth," signifying her total control and influence in spreading corrupt practices.

VI. Angelic Interpretation and Moral Call (Rev 17:7–18:5)

- A.** The rare apocalyptic feature of an interpreting angel explaining the vision.
- B.** Purpose of the vision: Unmasking Roman imperial myths (Pax Romana, Roma Eterna) to reveal divine judgment.
- C.** The ultimate purpose: Encouragement for the seven churches to overcome, resist economic and idolatrous compromise, and inherit the New Jerusalem.