

Revelation 17:7–18:8: Interpreting the Beast and the Fall of Babylon

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson interprets Revelation 17:7–18:8, focusing on the mystery of the Beast and the catastrophic downfall of Babylon. He demonstrates how the Beast's description as 'was, is not, and is coming' functions as a dark demonic parody of God's eternal name, pointing to the Beast's ultimate defeat through Christ's resurrection and final judgment. Mathewson analyzes the symbolic seven heads and ten horns as representations of Rome's full sequence of emperors and allied world powers that foolishly make war against the Lamb. Exposing Rome as an exploitative economic powerhouse that seduced nations into spiritual adultery, Mathewson highlights the heavenly call for believers to spiritually separate from corrupt worldly systems to avoid sharing in their judgment.

Outline

I. Introduction and Contextual Background (Rev 17:7)

A. Old Testament Background in Isaiah 21:1

1. Connection of Babylon to a desert setting.
2. Imagery of Babylon as the 'mother of prostitutes' reproducing idolatry and seduction across nations.

B. John's Reaction to the Vision (Rev 17:6–7)

1. Astonishment, perplexity, fear, and potential awe at Babylon's deceptive splendor.
2. The angel's intervention to unveil the mystery of the Beast and the prostitute.

II. The Parody of the Beast (Rev 17:7–8, 11)

A. The Threefold Title: 'Was, Is Not, and Is Coming'

1. Direct demonic parody and contrast to God's eternal divine title ('was, is, and is to come' in Rev 1:8; 4:8).
2. Significance of 'Is Not': Refers to the Beast's fatal blow and defeat resulting from Christ's death and resurrection.
3. Significance of 'Is Coming': Unlike Christ's coming unto salvation, the Beast ascends from the abyss specifically to enter destruction.

B. Apocalyptic Background

1. Resonance with 1 and 2 Enoch regarding demonic beings imprisoned until final judgment.
2. Reflection of historical motifs (such as the Nero Redivivus myth), though John's primary focus remains theological contrast with God's sovereignty.

III. Interpretation of the Seven Heads (Rev 17:9–11)

A. Dual Symbolism of the Seven Heads

1. Seven Hills: Geographical identification with the city of Rome.
2. Seven Kings/Rulers: Representation of Roman emperors.

B. Chronological vs. Symbolic Interpretation of Rulers ('Five have fallen, one is, one is to come')

1. Limitations of literal historical counting from Julius Caesar or Augustus through Domitian.
2. Symbolic use of seven as the complete, full span of Roman imperial rule.
3. Theological purpose of the formula: Demonstrates that human evil is running its course and is limited in duration.

C. The Beast as an Eighth King (Rev 17:11)

1. Associated with the seven rulers yet functioning as a distinct eighth ruler.
2. Represents the final end-time manifestation of anti-divine power arriving at the climax of history.
3. Destined for ultimate destruction in Revelation 19, reassuring believers of God's victory.

IV. Interpretation of the Ten Horns and the End-Time Conflict (Rev 17:12–18)

A. The Ten Horns as Ten Kings/Kingdoms

1. Symbolic number ten indicating the full scope of world nations allied with the Beast and Rome.
2. Universal collusion of human political power against God's kingdom.

B. Conflict with the Lamb

1. Allusion to the end-time battle (parallel to Armageddon in Rev 16:14).
2. Swift and decisive victory by the Lamb occurring in 'one hour.'

C. The Waters as Multitudes (Rev 17:15)

1. Symbolizes Rome's wide-reaching authority and economic seduction over nations and languages.

D. Self-Destruction of Evil (Rev 17:16–17)

1. The Beast and ten kings turn against the prostitute Babylon, destroying her and burning her with fire.
2. Unveils the inherent self-destructive nature of sin, violence, and arrogant empire-building.

E. Pastoral Purpose for the Churches

1. Unmasks Rome's seductive wealth to reveal its demonic reality and upcoming doom.
2. Urges compromised or wealthy churches (e.g., Laodicea) to maintain faithful witness.

V. The Fall of Babylon and the Call to Separate (Rev 18:1–8)

A. Literary Nature and Structure of Revelation 18

1. Pastiche of Old Testament prophetic judgment oracles (Jeremiah 50–51, Isaiah 21 & 34, Ezekiel 27).
2. Auditory emphasis consisting of heavenly voices, taunts, and funeral laments rather than visual narrative action.
3. Non-chronological arrangement: Rev 18:1–3 assumes Babylon's fall, Rev 18:4–8 issues a prior warning, and Rev 18:9–20 depicts post-fall mourning.

B. The Angelic Announcement of Doom (Rev 18:1–3)

1. Glorious angel proclaims the total desolation of Babylon into a haunt for demons and unclean creatures.
2. Indictment of Rome for economic prostitution, excessive luxury, and corrupting global commerce.

C. The Heavenly Voice: 'Come Out of Her, My People' (Rev 18:4–5)

1. Call for ethical and spiritual separation rather than physical relocation.
2. Refusal to compromise with idolatrous commercial systems to avoid sharing in her plagues.
3. Echoes OT exodus motifs (Jer 50:8; Isa 48:20; 52:11), calling believers into a New Exodus toward God's new creation.

D. Principles of Divine Retributive Justice (Rev 18:6–8)

1. Recompense fitting the crime (lex talionis).
2. 'Double portion / Equivalent': Refers to full, exact, balancing repayment for her misdeeds.
3. Condemnation of hubris ('I sit as queen, I am no widow'), directly defying God's exclusive glory.
4. Suddenness of divine judgment overtaking her in a single day.

VI. The Mourning of Earthly Beneficiaries (Rev 18:9–20 Context)

A. Funeral Dirge Model in Ezekiel 27

1. Modeled after prophetic laments over Tyre, emphasizing economic critique and commercial collapse.

B. Three Groups of Earthly Mourners (Kings, Merchants, Sea Captains)

1. Mourning stems from self-interest and loss of wealth, luxury, and cargo rather than repentance for sin.

C. Vindication of God's People

1. Heaven, apostles, and prophets are called to rejoice because Babylon's collapse demonstrates God's righteous judgment and vindication of His saints.