

The Mystery of Babylon, Revelation 17
Kingdomtide: the Season After Pentecost (Proper 21) • Rev. Dr. Don L. Davis
Blessed Hope Missionary Fellowship • September 28, 2008

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).



The Power of Symbol: Ancient Babylon as Emblematic of Paganism and Idolatry

"Babylon—the source of so many heathen and pagan religions which have opposed the faith of Israel as well as the faith of the church—is here seen in its final judgment" (*BKC*, Rev. 17). "Babylon was known as the *fountainhead* of pagan religion, the *womb* of heathen idols." J. Vernon McGee, "The Prophet Daniel." *Thru the Bible Commentary Series*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983, pg.39).



I. Babylon, The Center of World Idolatry, Rev.17.1-18

A. General Introduction

1. Chapters 17 and 18 deal with Babylon the Great, with chapter 17 concentrating on the religious nature and its destruction by the 10 kings (v.16), while chapter 18 focuses on Babylon as a political power and seat of world government
2. Babylon as a city is mentioned nearly 300 times in Scripture, referred to historically as well as emblematic of organized religion opposing the true worship of God the Almighty
3. In the Apocalypse, both senses of world religious center and political seat of power are brought together, fusing these two major streams of biblical teaching into, I believe, a global symbolic representation of God's complete destruction of the world system and satanic program, both in terms of religion, and governmental injustice
4. The world is summarily under God's judgment
 - a. Love not the world or the things in the world, 1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17] And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.
 - b. Those who believe in Christ overcome the world, 1 John 5:4-5 For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. [5] Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
 - c. Do not be conformed to the beliefs and practices of this world, Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
 - d. To be the world's friend is to make the Lord your enemy, James 4:4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

B. The Great Prostitute on Many Waters, Rev. 17.1-2

Rev. 17:1-2 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, [2] with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."

1. One of the seven angels addresses John regarding a vision of a great prostitute, seated on many waters (multitudes of peoples, cf. v. 15 And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.")

2. The “kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality” with her, and “with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk,” allusions to worldwide participation in idolatrous activity (imagery of sexual immorality and drunkenness)
3. Imagery of idolatry and complicity as sexual perversion: Nineveh, Nahum 3:4-5 And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms. [5] Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame.
4. Note previous citations about Babylon’s lure and idolatry: cf. Rev. 14:8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

C. Babylon the great, Rev. 17.3-5

Rev. 17:3-5 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. [4] The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. [5] And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

1. John was carried away in the Spirit into a wilderness, where he beheld the vision of a woman on a beast, v. 3
2. The woman sat upon a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and the beast had 7 heads and 10 horns, v. 3b (an allusion to world government, perhaps key leaders of a yet-future empire similar to Rome’s power and influence)
3. Note the attire of the woman: “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality,” v. 4
 - a. Many independent, fundamentalist, and sectarian exegetes associate this adornment with “the trappings of ritualistic churches today” i.e., Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism, and might even include Methodism, Lutherans, and Episcopalians!
 - b. This vision has been used polemically against those groups which fail to meet the acid test of orthodoxy from various other groups!
4. Better explanation: the vision of the golden cup symbolically reveals the “prostitution” of all truth indicative of false religion in all of its forms and structures, it was “full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality,” v. 4
5. Note the name on her forehead: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations", v, 5 (NASB, NIV, and ESV are examples of modern English translations that separates the term “mystery” from the title on the forehead. Rather, it *describes* it.)

D. Excursus: Babylon the great as emblematic of false religion

1. It has a close connection to Babel (the tower, Gen. 10-11, “Babel” meaning “confusion), later the name was applied to Babylon the city
2. Nimrod founded Babylon and built Nineveh, two notorious cities with anti-God histories and practices (cf. Gen. 10.8-12)
3. Babylon unusually old, 3,000 years before Christ (e.g., Hammurabi [1728-1686 B.C.E.], Nebuchadnezzar [around 600 B.C.E.]
4. Long, repulsive list of idolatries practiced historically within Babylon, with some scholars having linked Babylon with the worship of Baal religion, which in the Bible is condemned with false religion everywhere (e.g., Jer. 7.18; 44.17-19, 25; Ezek. 18.4, etc.)
5. An example of connecting Roman Catholicism with Babylonian practice: “Crowns in the shape of a fish head were worn by the chief priests of the Babylonian cult to honor the fish god. The crowns bore the words “Keeper of the Bridge,” symbolic of the “bridge” between man and Satan. This handle was adopted by the Roman emperors, who used the Latin title Pontifex Maximus, which means “Major Keeper of the Bridge.” And the same title was later used by the

bishop of Rome. The pope today is often called the pontiff, which comes from pontifex. When the teachers of the Babylonian mystery religions later moved from Pergamum to Rome, they were influential in paganizing Christianity and were the source of many so-called religious rites which have crept into ritualistic churches. Babylon then is the symbol of apostasy and blasphemous substitution of idol-worship for the worship of God in Christ. In this passage Babylon comes to its final judgment.” BKC, Rev. 17.3-5.

6. A principle of caution: *Anecdotal allusion and incidental associations is not the same as sound biblical exegesis and identification in prophecy!*

E. John’s marvel and the angel’s explanation of the mystery, Rev. 17.6-8

Rev. 17:6-8 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly. [7] But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. [8] The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

1. Note what intoxicates the woman: the “blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus,” an all-out attack on followers of Christ by this religious system, v. 6
2. John’s marvel is questioned by the angel, who gives an explanation of the mystery, v. 7a
3. The beast arises from the bottomless pit, the Abyss (11:7) the abode of demons (cf. 9.1-2, 11).
 - a. The domain and the power of the beast is satanic (cf. 13:4)
 - b. Destruction is the destiny for the beast, even those its power, given directly by Satan and his “anointed” will dominate for a while
4. An allusion to the “resurrection” of the world ruler and his empire, and its powerful influence on the world populations who will falsely worship the beast and Satan. (Cf. Rev. 13:3-4 (ESV) One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. [4] And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?")
5. People will be scorched by the fierce heat, but rather than repent and ask God for mercy, they will curse God’s name, the very One who had power over these plagues, v. 9a
6. A summary judgment on regenerate human nature: “they did not repent and give him glory,” v. 9b (i.e., the unregenerate Adamic nature is fundamentally skewed and godless; even in the face of the most horrifying judgments, it refuses to yield)

F. The Identity of the Seven Heads, Rev. 17.9-11

Rev. 17:9-11 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; [10] they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. [11] As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.

1. The call for a mind with wisdom: the truth that is presented here symbolically will provide genuine spiritual insight for those who are prepared to discern it! (Sincere biblical exegesis has rendered dozens of conflicting views on the meaning of the kings and rulers here!)
 - a. Wisdom is for the wise, discernment for the discerning, Hosea 14:9 Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.
 - b. To him or her who has, even more will be given, Matthew 13:11-12 And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. [12] For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will

- have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.
- c. Those who are of God hear the words of God, John 8:47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."
 2. The identity of the heads: "the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated", v. 9 (much debated and cast as the city of Rome, referred to as the "City of seven hills," originally included seven small mountains along the Tiber)
 3. The heads are also rulers, however: "they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while," v. 10, which some exegetes connect to the line of emperors who were contemporaneous with John (e.g., Domitian, who ordered the persecution that landed John on Patmos)
 4. Possible explanations: "As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction," with some associating the seventh as the Roman empire and the eighth as the coming, final world ruler.
 5. What is the signal insight: God is in control, and only he knows and can reveal the final disposition of all things!
 - a. God is sovereign, Daniel 2:20-22 Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. [21] He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; [22] he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.
 - b. To God alone belong the mysteries unknown to us, Deut. 29:29 The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.
 - c. God's ways are inscrutable, Romans 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [34] "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

G. The Identity of the Ten Horns, Rev. 17.12-14

Rev. 17:12-14 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. [13] These are of one mind and hand over their power and authority to the beast. [14] They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

1. The ten kings: rulers who receive their authority with the world ruler, the beast, v. 12
2. They are united and hand over their power and authority to the beast, v. 13
3. These kings presumptuously make war on the Lamb, who conquers them "for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful," v. 14
4. The Lamb conquers them
 - a. He will break them with a rod of iron, Psalm 2:8-9 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. [9] You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.
 - b. He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath, Psalm 110:5 The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
5. The Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings (used interchangeably as lead phrase)
 - a. The blessed and only Sovereign, 1 Tim. 6:15 which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords
 - b. A name written on his thigh, Rev. 19:16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.
6. Note the character and condition of those with the Lamb: they are called, chosen, and faithful
 - a. Destined for the throne, Psalm 149:5-9 Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. [6] Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged

swords in their hands, [7] to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, [8] to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, [9] to execute on them the judgment written! This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the Lord!

- b. We are more than conquerors through our Savior, Romans 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
- c. We share in a heavenly calling, Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession
- d. We are one with Christ, even in his final victory, Rev. 19:14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.

H. The Destruction of the Religious Babylon the Great, Rev. 17.15-18

Rev. 17:15-18 And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. [16] And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, [17] for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and l handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. [18] And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

- 1. The woman sits on peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages, v. 15: *this will be the worst kind of one-world false religious system fueled by deception and corruption!*
- 2. In the end the woman will be destroyed by the ten kings
 - a. The kings and the beast will "hate the prostitute," v. 16a
 - b. They together will "make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire," v. 16.b
- 3. At some point in time, the beast will shift all religious worship and recognition to himself, and all who refuse to given him worship will perish
 - a. The one who will do as he wills, Daniel 11:36 And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done.
 - b. Exalted above every so-called god, 2 Thess. 2:3-4 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, [4] who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.
 - c. The price of refusal will be death, Rev. 13:15 And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.
- 4. The overarching reason for this turn of events against the woman: "for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and// l handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled" v. 17
 - a. Not a detail slips the will and actions of our God: Case in point, the Crucifixion, Acts 4:27-28 For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.
 - b. By God's definite plan and foreknowledge, Acts 2:23 This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.
- 5. The identity of the woman: "the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth," v. 18. Babylon not only a religious symbol but perhaps a political and commercial center too?



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TOOLS

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Phony Imitations Won't Do!

The vision of the mystery of Babylon the great underscores that our God demands worshipers who worship him in spirit and in truth. The core of idolatry and false religion is deception, phoniness, untruth. God's judgment on the false religious systems and ideologies of the world only makes plain how critical it is for us to approach him through the one Mediator who can properly introduce us to our Father. The Lord Jesus Christ alone can clear a path for us to come to the Father and to escape the wrath to come. During this Season after Pentecost let us be mindful that all false religion and idolatry will be judged at the return of our Lord Jesus. Christ alone is the real thing; nothing else will do.

Kindgomtide: The Season After Pentecost: (Year A) (Proper 21)

The Mystery of Babylon, Revelation 17.
September 29 2008.

Rev. 17:14 They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

While false religious systems and ideologies of the world may tout their strange doctrines and false affirmations, the truth of Christ stands true and firm. When both political rulers and religious deceivers may rage against the truth of Christ, the testimony of God's word stands true: the Lord of lords and King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, will overcome all opposition, and those with him are called, chosen, and faithful. Let us fill our hearts with the hope of expectation during this Season after Pentecost, knowing that Christ will conquer all lies and deception at his coming.

Morning Collect: Eternal God our Father, let us never be intimidated by the appearance of satanic victory for ultimately only Your Son will triumph over all. Fill our hearts today with the assurance of Your grace. Amen.

Evening Collect: Lord Jesus, as the Lord and King who will conquer all, watch over Your own this night for we trust in You alone. To you be the victory, for Your sake alone, we pray. Amen.

Memory Verse: MTB Series 1: New Beginnings in Christ, Topic 1. OT Plan of Salvation, Messiah Will Die For Us. **Hebrews 2.9.** Hebrews 2:9 But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.