

“Babylon: The Great Prostitute (Chap. 17 & 18)”

INTRODUCTION

When the seventh angel poured out his bowl, a massive earthquake shattered “the great city” and collapsed the world’s other cities. John writes: “God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath” (16:19). Babylon’s fall was promised in 14:8 and glimpsed in 16:19, but not two whole chapters are devoted to it actually happening.

NOTES ON CHAPS. 17-18

1. The city is called the “**great prostitute**” because of being a place where adultery is allowed and encouraged. Throughout the Old Testament prophets, Israel and her neighbors are sometimes called prostitutes because of idolatry - the act of giving oneself to something other than one’s true Lord. “Abominable things” or “abominations” are Jewish terms for idols, or false gods. It is interesting to note the contrast drawn between the prostitute of chapter 17 and the woman of chapter 12.
2. Some say the city that’s really being talked about here is **Rome**, which was built on seven hills (17:9) and had several rivers (17:1). Rome was the capital of a powerful empire which controlled most of the Mediterranean world, Arabia, and Persia (17:15). It also, at times, persecuted the Christian church and put Christians who would not worship the emperor to death (17:6). Also, some interpreters believe the seven kings of 17:10 signify the seven emperors between Augustus and Domitian (perhaps the emperor at the time of the writing of Revelation).
3. The **Scarlet beast** is the same as the beast of the sea, or the Antichrist, described in 13:1-10. The seven heads and 10 horns suggest that the beast is a mighty empire or political force in the world. On the other hand, 17:11 identifies the beast as an 8th king, or an individual ruler.
4. Some translators suggest that the word “**Mystery**” in the title of the prostitute in 17:5 should read: “This is a mystery...” Roman prostitutes often had their names written on their headbands.
5. The thrice repeated phrase “**once was, now is not, and will come**” is a parody of the Lamb’s name in 1:4, 8; 2:8; 4:8: “who was, and is and is to come.” As is described in chap. 13, the beast will seem to be destroyed but will be miraculously (mysteriously) resurrected. This will impress the unbelieving world, but the beast will go to his destruction (19:20) while Christ reigns eternally.
6. Three groups lament the fall of Babylon in chap. 18: **kings, merchants and seamen**. It is worth noting the similarities this passage shares with Ezekiel 27 (over half the commodities listed are also listed in the Ezekiel passage).

QUESTIONS:

1. Why is idolatry describes as adultery, and worshipping other gods like going to a prostitute?

2. Do you find beautiful possessions, fine food, or clothes to be seductive temptations? Why is a beautiful, ornate city like Babylon the Great hard to resist? How can it be resisted?
3. Why do you think the beast who supported the prostitute later turns on her, hates her, and attacks and destroys her? What is the significance of this?
4. Alongside the Lamb in 17:14 in His victory over the beast and his followers are the Lamb's own followers. They are described as the "called, chosen, and faithful followers" of the Lord of lords and King of kings. What are the implications of being called and chosen? How can you act faithfully this week?
5. Why are kings, merchants, and seamen singled out to mourn the city's fall? What does this tell you about the city's nature and power base?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Compare the women of chapters 12 & 17. What similarities and contrasts do you find in these areas:
 - Their location
 - Who loves them
 - Their clothing
 - How they are sustained
 - Their offspring
 - Who hates them
2. Study the history and symbolism of Babylon in the Bible: the city's foundations in the Genesis story of Babel (10:8-12; 11:1-9); the prophets (Isaiah 13:1-14:23; 47:1-15; Jeremiah 20:1-6; 25:1-14; 50:1-51; 64). You can use a Bible concordance to find other references.