

Oakland International Fellowship Jesse McLaughlin

Revelation 17:1-19:10

Babylon the Great

The sixth scene in Revelation is closely linked to the fifth scene: the seven bowls of God’s wrath in chapters 15-16. The sixth scene is a recapitulation and further development of bowls six and seven. In chapter 17 John is guided by one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls. The focus here is on what John *hears* while past scenes have highlighted that which John *sees* unfolding.

## 1) The Woman & the Beast (Rev. 17)

1. Babylon the Great (14:8, 16:19)
   * Babylon is symbolized in scene six by a mysterious woman that causes John to marvel at the sight of her. Though she grabs one’s attention the vivid description of her drunkenness, sexual immorality and abominations repulses the reader/hearer at the same time.
   * The city of Babylon has a long and dark history in scripture. The founding of the city of Babel is notable (Gen. 10:8-10) as is the Tower built there (Gen. 11:1-9) with the purpose of the inhabitants being to “make a name for ourselves”. God uses the Babylonian empire as an instrument of judgement against Israel and other nations (Jer. 21:2-10; 25:8-11). The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC and took many of the people in captivity back to Babylon.
   * Babylon is contrasted with the new Jerusalem and shown in direct opposition to the saints. Scene six in Revelation creates a dramatic contrast between Babylon pictured as a prostitute the Jerusalem the Bride of the Lamb (19:7; 21:9).

“Babylon stands not for a specific power but more generally for world power in opposition to God – the empire where God’s people live in exile.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Beast
   * The beast tries to mimic God in order to deceive the world. First, the parody of Christ’s death and resurrection: “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit[[2]](#footnote-2).” Then the beast imitates the nature of God by appearing as the one who “once was, now is not, and will come.” Yet the destruction of the beast is ever in view (17:14). His power to deceive the world and abuse the saints will come to an end!
   * 7 heads – The angel identifies these heads as mountains (17:9) and kings (17:10). It has been suggested that this could represent Rome which was built on seven hills. However, the 7 heads are best thought of as complete or full strength. This reading would mean that it appears that the beast has all authority and power
   * 10 horns – The horns are also identified as kings “who have not yet received royal power” (17:12). There is a strong link between the seventh head that “has not yet come” (17:10) and the horns. The horns are most likely meant to be pictured upon the seventh head. These horns symbolize universal power given to the beast near the end of time but this power will be short lived, “they are to receive authority as kings for one hour” (17:12)[[3]](#footnote-3)
   * Similar to Babylon the beast should not be thought of as a single empire or power but as the cumulative of earthly political power throughout human history. Thus the beast does encompass the domination of Rome during the period in which John wrote but it would also have current day equivalents as well.
2. The Destruction of Babylon (vv. 16-17)
   * Though the scene was announced with “Come, I will show you the judgement of the great prostitute” we have only a brief glimpse of the destruction in verses 16 and 17. The merciless and graphic end of “the woman” comes by the hand of the beast that carried her into the scene at the beginning (17:3).
   * Throughout the description of the woman and the beast God remains in complete control. No matter how alluring Babylon appears or how powerful the beast may seem there is only one Lord of lords and King of kings! (17:14)We find his sovereign judgement carried out, “for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose…until the words of God are fulfilled.” (17:17)

## 2) Babylon’s Judgement Unveiled (Rev. 18)

1. Fall of Babylon announced (vv.1-3)

* A mighty angel heralds the destruction of symbolic Babylon in much the same way OT prophets announced the judgement of the historical city Babylon (Isa. 14, 15, 47, Jer. 50, 51). There are similar descriptions of Babylon’s luxury, intoxication and sexual immorality.
* “For all nations have drunk the wine” (18:3) Here sexual immorality is not literal but points to the willingness of the nations to worship the powers opposing God in exchange for economic security. [[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Lament for Babylon (vv. 4-19)

* “Another voice” in verse 4 could be God or God’s angelic representative. The lament begins with a command, “Come out of her [Babylon], my people, lest you take part in her sins.” (18:4) This command has OT precedent as well in Jer. 51:45, “Go out of the midst of her, my people!” and Isa. 52:11, “Depart, depart, go out from there.” If we join in the sin we will join in the judgement. God’s people are not to remove themselves from the world but faithfully endure suffering for Christ’s sake and refuse to compromise when it comes to sin (which is idolatry!). We are to be holy as God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7, 1 Pet. 1:15-16)
* The kings, merchants, seafaring men have taken part in the pride and luxury of Babylon the Great. Upon witnessing her judgement they weep, wail and mourn. “Alas! Alas! You great city you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgement has come.” (18:10)
* The swift coming of judgment is three times repeated “in a single hour” (18:10, 17, 19) Babylon is destroyed. The historical fall of Babylon came in a single night but the final judgement of symbolic Babylon will be quicker still!

1. Judgement on behalf of the saints (vv. 20-24)

* The second command given to God’s people (here the saints and apostles and prophets) is to rejoice over the smoldering heap that is Babylon. God has brought justice to bear upon Babylon for her sin and also vindicated his people because, “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.
  1. In this section the case against Babylon has three parts[[5]](#footnote-5):
     1. **Pride** – “your merchants were the great ones of the earth” (18:23). Babylon is the symbolic equivalent of Tyre in the OT. Tyre reveled in her economic power (Isa. 23:8) and claimed divinity (Ezek. 28:2).
     2. **Deception** – “all nations were deceived by your sorcery.” (18:23). Babylon leads people astray into immorality and idolatry.
     3. **Persecution of the saints** – “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints…” (18:24)

## 3) Heaven’s Response (Rev. 19:1-10)

1. Praise for God’s Judgement

* In this sixth scene we have a glimpse of how all of heaven responds to Babylon’s fall. God has acted according to his holiness and “judged the great prostitute” (19:2) The great multitude in heaven responds with a thunderous chorus of praise. “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgements are true and just.”
* The universal church throughout time (represented by the 24 elders) and the entire created order (represented by the four living creatures) declare, “Amen. Hallelujah!” (19:4) as a capstone to the deafening praises of the multitude. This is the seventh time the elders and creatures are mentioned together!

1. The Marriage of the Lamb
   * After the judgement of God is carried out in chapters 17 & 18 the Bride of the Lamb is finally ready for marriage. The Bride (the church) stands in stark contrast to the prostitute (the world) described in such detail in the preceding chapters.
   * Blessed are those who receive the invitation to salvation and new life from the one true and sovereign God!

### Discussion Questions:

### How strong is the pull of economic security in your life? What are you willing to compromise to remains “safe”?

### How can we appropriately “come out of Babylon” (Rev. 18:4) without isolating or leaving the world altogether? *(1 Peter 1:1, 2:11, 5:13)*

1. Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. “Babylon”. IVP. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All scripture references from English Standard Version (ESV) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beake G.K. with David H. Campbell. Revelation: a Shorter Commentary. Eerdmans. 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beale G.K. with David H. Campbell. Revelation: a Shorter Commentary. p. 383. Eerdmans. 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 396-397 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)