

Are You A Babylonian, Seduced By This World?

Revelation 17:1-18

Introduction: 1) Revelation has been called “a tale of two cities.” One is Babylon that represents this evil world and opposes the things of the one true God. Its character and destiny is described in detail in chs. 17-18. The other city is the New Jerusalem. Its glory and goodness is described in Revelation 21-22. At this point in the book we are again confronted with an inescapable question: which God will you worship? Which city will you love and live for? We all must answer this question. In a real sense, this is where Revelation has been taking us all along. As John Piper well says, “That’s the goal of everything the [angels have] been revealing. That’s what the whole book of Revelation is about. That’s the point of all God’s judgments, all God’s dealings with the world. All God’s plans for history from beginning to end have this one goal—WORSHIP GOD! Don’t worship the wealth of Babylon, don’t worship the power of Babylon, don’t worship the pleasures of Babylon, and don’t even worship the holy messenger who brings you the news that Babylon has fallen forever. WORSHIP GOD!”¹

2) Unfortunately humans are too easily allured and trapped by this world. We do not see it for what it really is and where it ultimately leads. What we need is to

¹John Piper, “Worship God!” DesiringGod.org, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/worship-god> (accessed March 17, 2014).

have it exposed. We need to have it uncovered and shown to be what it truly is. Babylon and all it represents will be destroyed. The New Jerusalem and all it represents will last forever. Why would any sane person choose Babylon over the New Jerusalem? This text answers that question.

I. This world is seductive, it will attract you

17:1-5

- Revelation 17-18 is an extension of the bowl judgments of chapter 16. John is told to come by one of the angels “who had the seven bowls” that he might see “the judgment of the great prostitute,” the great whore, “who is seated on many water.” (v. 1). We are told in verse 15 the waters are the peoples of the world.
- This harlot is said to lead the kings, the rulers of the world, into sexual immorality. The image is one of spiritual adultery and idolatry. Not only does she seduce the leaders of the world, but common people, “the dwellers of the earth,” are drunk with the wine of her sexual immorality (v.2). The lust for power, material stuff, sex, and pleasure has intoxicated the world! No one under the sun (see Ecclesiastes) has escaped her enticing allurements. The prostitute has captivated their hearts and taken over their lives. As 1 John 2:16 explains, “the desires of the flesh, and the desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions” have become our gods. The American Dream is ultimate! We have all become Babylonians!

- Once again John is “carried away in the Spirit (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) into a wilderness” to see a vision (v.3). He sees the great prostitute “sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names with seven heads and ten horns.” This is the beast, the Antichrist, of chapter 13. The woman is beautifully and seductively dressed “in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls” (v.4). She is quite attractive like any beautiful adulteress (Prov. 5:2; 6:20-25; 7:16-27). Yes, she is beautiful and attractive but she bites and brings death. In her hand she holds “a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality” (v.4). Johnson says, “The golden cup filled with wine alludes to Jeremiah’s description of Babylon’s world-wide influence in idolatry (Jer. 51:7). Her cup is filled with “abominable things”” (BSC, 155). The idols of heart and life are filled to the brim as she shares it with a senseless humanity which falls into a drunken stupor, no longer able to see real truth, beauty and goodness found only in God and His salvation through the Lamb.
- In verse five the identity of the harlot is revealed. Like the Roman prostitutes of the day, she has a headband that is a “mystery” about to be revealed: ““Babylon the Great”: mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” This is not literal Babylon on the Euphrates, a city of no real significance for centuries. It is better to see it as Rome in that day, but it is

more than Rome. This prostitute is “that great system of godlessness that leads people away from the worship of God and to their own destruction” (Mounce, 311). It is an ever-present presence, reality, and seductress that exists and entices in every age and every generation. It is a “this world perspective.” Seduced by the sirens and idols of the day, we run madly down a path of spiritual and eternal suicide. Proverbs 6:32-33 rings true for this mad, mad world, “He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away.”

II. The world is murderous, it takes innocent life 17:6

- Because Babylonianism is driven by self-interest, it is willing to sacrifice others to promote its own benefits and prosperity. We see this all across the globe with abortion, euthanasia, genocide, and infanticide. Life is increasingly discounted at both its beginning and end. Especially for those marginalized economically, ethnically, and socially.
- However in verse 6, it is revealed that the great prostitute has set her sights throughout history on the people of God and the followers of Jesus. Indeed this whore is “drunk with the blood of the saints, and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (18:24; cf. Isa. 49:26). In the New Testament alone the seeds of martyrdom were planted by John the

Baptist, Stephen, James and Antipas. From those seeds has flowed the blood of saints for 21 centuries. And the more blood this world drinks, the more it wants. Its intoxicating effects consumes it and drives it to want more and more and more. The 20th century was the bloodiest in Christian history. We should expect the 21st to be worse. Mounce again is helpful, “Although the Neronian massacre after the great fire of A.D. 64 may have been in the back of John’s mind, the drunken prostitute pictures the final days of persecution at the end of the age” (312). As we move toward the end of history, we can expect the blood of martyrs to flow like a river, even a flood, among the nations. It may be your calling and my calling. Are we willing to embrace it? Philippians 1:21 is a wonderful reminder that it is worth it to die for Christ!

III. This world is resilient, it keeps coming back 17:6-8

- The vision of the great prostitute amazed John (v. 6). The angel, however, said he would explain things to him concerning both the woman and the beast who carries her (v. 7). Does the fact that she rides him indicate both her control, for a time (!), and his support? It is certainly a very real possibility. Verse 8 is the beast’s parody on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the description of the Lamb (1:18; 2:8; see also 1:4, 8; 4:8). We see this in 13:3, 14 as well. And yet, there is embedded here a very

important truth that Christians of every age must understand. Throughout history antichrists (1 John 2:18) have risen from the abyss in the form of the beast for their reign of terror. They have a time, they die, and then amazingly they appear again only to be destroyed. The pattern repeats itself again and again and will continue until the Antichrist, the beast, brings the cycle to an end. The priorities and values of this world system make themselves felt and known in empires and men consumed with the idols of this world. The beast has been Egypt, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, The Ottomans, the Soviet Union, Communist China, and now the western world. It has been Antiochus Epiphanes, Nero, Domitian, Genghis Khan, Shaka Zulu, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Kim Il Sung, Saddam Hussein. Granted, all kingdoms and personalities were not equally evil and wicked. All, however, loved the prostitute more than they love God. And lest we think we are off the hook, remember verse 3: “the dwellers on earth,” regular ordinary people like you and me, have become drunk with the wine of her seduction. Generation after generation we give life and power to Babylon and the beast as we love the practices, values and ways of this world. Indeed John informs us that “the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundations of the world will marvel to see the beast because it was and is not and is to

come.” The beast and the things of this world sparkle in our eyes and grip our hearts. First John 2:17 sounds an important warning, “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” Babylonianism will not last. The American Dream is headed for destruction.

IV. This world is organized, it has a plan 17:9-10

- There is a divine rhyme and reason to the ebb and flow of history. Why? Because history is His story, the story of Messiah. The drama of redemption and restoration is unfolding according to God’s sovereign plan. John tells us we need wisdom to unravel the mystery of “Babylon the Great”, the “mother of prostitutes (a whore who gives birth to more whores) and of earth’s abomination” (v.5).
- There is no unanimity among Bible interpreters on these verses, as well as verses 11-12. Godly men and women understand the details differently. The fact that we need wisdom is an understatement! Now, most agree “the seven heads are seven mountains” is a reference to Rome in the 1st century context. The city was known as “the city on seven hills.” Seven would also communicate great power and authority, something that is true of every coming of the beast. Verse 10 adds another interpretive challenge: “the seven heads are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other

has not yet come, and when he does he must remain only a little while.”

Efforts to identify these 7 Kings with 7 Roman emperors have not worked. Viewing them as 7 secular empires similar to Daniel 2 and 7 is more promising in my judgment, though I hold my view with great tentativeness. In Israel’s history, 5 kings or kingdoms had fallen and passed off the scene: 1) Egypt, 2) Assyrian, 3) Babylon, 4) Medo-Persian and 5) Greece. The one who “is” would obviously be Rome. “The other that has not come” is the future kingdom of Antichrist. His kingdom will draw from the characteristics of the previous 6. Once again the number 7 would communicate completeness or perfection in power. The manifestation of this kingdom “will remain only a little while.” Yes, the beast as a man and kingdom will embody the brutality, greatness, splendor, strength, and wickedness of these great empires. But like all other worldly empires, it will have its day and come to an end. Brilliantly organized and with a plan for world domination, it will be impressive for a time, a very brief time, as it stands in pale comparison to the eternal and everlasting Kingdom of God. The world has a plan, but it is God’s plan that will endure and last forever.

V. This world is power, but its time is short 17:11-13

- Verses 11 and 12 extend the explanation of verses 9-10. The beast is said to belong to the 7 kings, particularly the 7th in my view, but he is also an 8th.

But as we are told in verse 8, the beast “goes to destruction” (v.11). Again, his kingdom will not last. It cannot deliver on its false promises. Perhaps it is at the midpoint of the Tribulation, following its apparent death and resurrection, that the beast achieves its lust for worldwide conquest and domination. MacArthur says, “The Antichrist’s kingdom is said to be both the seventh and eighth kingdoms because of his supposed demise and resurrection. He is the seventh before and the eighth king after his “resurrection...” (*Study Bible*, 2016). However, what all interpreters of Revelation can agree on is this: this king and his kingdom is going down. It will be destroyed. The beast will be beaten.

- Verse 12 adds an additional detail and explanation: the ten horns (v. 3, 7) are ten future kings yet to receive their “royal authority” (*ESV*). However, when they do, we are again informed it will be for a short duration, described as “one hour, together with the beast.” These ten kings, whoever they are, will serve alongside the beast. Verse 13 informs us they will actually be “of one mind and ...hand over their power and authority to the beast.” Later they will be of one mind in carrying out the will of God in the destruction of the prostitute.
- Isaiah 40:8 reminds us, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” This world system, Babyloniansim, will come

again and again to seduce, attack and destroy the people of God. It is influential and powerful. It is intimidating and prosperous. It is enticing and persuasive. It gives every appearance of the promise of victory, of the winning team. Get on board or get crushed. Join the team or be called a fool. Worship the beast, and whore with her prostitutes, or live a wasted life. “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die” is a satanic lie! Tomorrow, you will stand before the King of kings and Lord of lords and give an account for the life He gave you and the life you did waste. The world lasts only a little while (v.10), for one hour (v.12), and it is headed for destruction (v. 8, 11). This is not the winning team. It is headed for devastating defeat.

VI. This world is foolish, it opposes the Lord of lords and King of kings

17:14

- This world chooses the wrong opponent! It takes on the wrong adversary.

Verse 14 is an interjection that anticipates the 2nd Coming of Jesus described in 19:11-21 (see 19:16). It is also a simple summary of Armageddon (16:16) and the final battle. The beast and his kingdom, in a spiritual suicide mission, attack the Warrior Lamb, the Lamb who is also a Lion (ch. 5)! It is no contest! The Lamb will conquer them! Why? Because “He is Lord of Lords and King of kings.” The title is well known looking back to

Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 136:2-3; Daniel 2:47. It is a title reserved only for God. In the book of *1 Enoch 9:4* our God is called Lord of lords, God of gods, King of Kings, and God of the ages.” There is no God like our god, and this world has played the fool in opposing Him and His kingdom.

- We are told He brings with Him “those who are called and chosen and faithful.” This is the army of 19:14. I love the divine sovereignty/human responsibility balance. “Called and chosen” is God’s part. “Faithful” is our part. Thankfully, even our faith and faithfulness is kept by the power of God (Jude 24-25). Interestingly, we are not designated a role or assignment. I suspect it is because we are only spectators in the final conflict. Our Lord and King won the battle without our help in His First Coming. I believe it will be the same at His 2nd!

VII. The world is self-destructive, it will not last 17:15-18

The transitory nature of this world system, Babylon, has been alluded to several times in Chapter 17. Now the truth is driven home in graphic finality. When a man is finished with a whore, a prostitute, he does not marry her or take her home to mother. What you see in the movie “Pretty Women” is a dishonest myth. The prostitute has had massive influence that covers the earth as verse 15 makes clear. Then suddenly it’s over. She is finished. An abrupt turnabout will be made by the “ten horns” (v. 16). The language recalls the words of Ezekiel 23:11-35. They

will awaken from their drunken stupor with the woman, whose charm and seduction will have lost its lure. They have a new love in the Antichrist. Love for the woman will turn to “hate” from the ten kings and the beast. (v. 16.) They will strip her of all the wealth she has confiscated throughout the world. They will make her “desolate and naked” (v. 16). The beast and his kings will turn on her, evil will attack evil once more but with the greatest ferocity the world will ever see. They tear away her personal support, position, power, and prestige, and expose her moral corruption. They “shall devour her flesh” (v. 16) like dogs devoured the corpse of Jezebel (cf. 1 Kings 21:23, 2 Kings 9:30-37). They will “burn her up with fire.” In a moment she is old news never to be seen again. Her demise will be greatly lamented by those who have loved and whored with her as chapter 18 plainly teaches.

This hostile action, her destruction, will be initiated by God: “For God hath put in their hearts to fulfill his will” (v. 17); that is, to rid the world of “the world.” The kings believe that they are carrying out their own program for conquest, but actually they will accomplish God’s providential program. Having destroyed the woman, the Antichrist will unite the world’s religious, economic and political systems under his control. The 10 kings will agree to “give their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled” (v. 17). God’s prophetic program will reach its intended goal as He sovereignly allows the kingdoms of this

world to come under the beast's control until the end of the Tribulation. The angel concludes his revelation by identifying the woman simply as "that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth" (v. 18). The early church believed the verse was speaking of Rome.

- A great anti-God system will continue, both as power (economic and political) and cult (religion), united in one figure - Antichrist. The woman is the "great city" Babylon in its religious, political, economic and social significance. Again, "BABYLON THE GREAT" is not referring to the literal city of ancient Babylon. It is referring to a diabolical worldly system. Babylon cannot be confined to a city in the past or future, such as Rome or Babylon, Washington or London, Moscow or Beijing. It is a trans-historical system of satanic evil, an extension of ancient Babylon, forming an evil world system throughout history and during the Tribulation. After the destruction of the woman, all its power will reside in the Antichrist, who will manifest all of its satanic evils in its fullness. Evil devouring evil. God puts it in their heart. It is evitable.

Conclusion

- My friend C. J. Mahaney has well said, “Today, the greatest challenge facing [evangelical, Bible-believing] American [Christians] is not persecution from the world, but seduction by the world” (*Worldliness*).
- The Christian apologist C. S. Lewis would add, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who goes on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are too easily pleased” (*The Weight of Glory*, 25-26).
- Babylon offers mud pies in the slum. The New Jerusalem ruled by the King of kings and the Lord of lords offers a glorious holiday at a crystal sea that will last forever. Do not be too easily pleased. Do not be seduced by a world that can never deliver what is truly lasting and ultimately satisfying.

Appendix: Cast of Characters in Revelation 17

Phrase/Image	Scripture	Explanation
The great prostitute	17:1–8	The evil, satanically led, organized system that stands in constant opposition to God and His kingdom. It is the source of all false economies, governments and religions, drawing its inspiration from idolatry, pride, self-sufficiency, and a denial of God’s grace. She is Babylon the great.
Many waters	17:1, 15	Nations and people groups around the world under the influence of this false system.
The Beast	17:3, 8, 11–14	The Antichrist, ruler of the end-time worldwide empire and object of worship.
“Was, and is not, and is about to come up <u>out of the abyss</u> ”	17:8, 11	The Antichrist will imitate Christ’s death and resurrection in order to amaze the world and win its political and religious allegiance (13:3–4). This description contrasts with the divine Christ, “who is and who was and who is to come” from heaven to rule forever (1:8).
Seven Heads	17:3, 7, 9–10	Seven world empires that stood in opposition to God and His people—five that were in John’s past (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece), one that existed in John’s present (Rome), and one that will arise in the future (empire of the Antichrist). Certainty here is not absolute. Much debated.
“Seven Mountains”	17:9-10	Ancient Rome built on seven hills. It came to represent the city of man in contrast to the city of God.
The eighth king	17:11	The Antichrist, who is one of the preceding kings, is also an “eighth.” This may refer to two phases of his rule –before his marvelous “death and resurrection” (the “seventh” king) and after this astounding feat when Satan turns his local political career into a global empire (as the “eighth” king)
Ten Horns	17:3, 7, 12	Ten political powers that will unite to empower the Antichrist, turning all worldly authority over to him.
“Called and chosen and faithful”	17:14	When Christ returns as King of kings and Lord of lords to overcome the beast and the kings of the earth, He will be accompanied by “the called and chosen and faithful.” This same group is called the “armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean” (19:14). The New Testament commonly uses the terms “called,” “chosen,” and “faithful” to describe the Lord’s saints.

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 229