
The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18

Part 2 (of 2 parts)

Charles H. Dyer

Executive Vice-president and Associate Professor

Washington Bible College and Capital Bible Seminary, Lanham, Maryland

A study of the parallelism between Revelation 17 and 18 has led to the conclusion that only one Babylon is present in the two chapters.¹ However, the exact identity of that Babylon still needs to be determined. A more precise identification can be achieved by studying the interpretive keys within the chapters and by isolating and interpreting the Old Testament themes on which John was drawing in the chapters.

The Interpretive Keys within the Chapters

John's picture of a harlot astride a scarlet beast in chapter 17 could be entitled "Beauty on the Beast." The vision is described in the first 6 verses and then interpreted in the next 12 verses. Chapter 18 focuses on the response of individuals to Babylon's destruction. Within the two chapters are four interpretive keys that are crucial to the identity of Babylon.

¹ Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (July–September 1987): 305–16.

THE DESCRIPTION OF BABYLON AS A HARLOT

The first interpretive key is the descriptive identification of Babylon in 17:1 as "the great harlot who sits on many waters." The allusion to a harlot has caused many to identify Babylon as a false religious system.

The frequently recurring allusion to harlotry (17:1, 2, 4, 15, 16; 18:3, 7) is an echo of the Old Testament prophets, who used the term to describe the infidelity of man to God, especially in connection with idolatry. The first chapter of Isaiah denounced Jerusalem as "the faithful city become a harlot" (1:21). Jeremiah condemned Jerusalem in almost the same words: "under every green tree thou didst bow thyself, playing the harlot" (2:20), and the figure was applied later both to Israel and to Judah in this prophecy (Jer. 3). Ezekiel, in similar fashion, drew the portrait of the sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, representing Israel and Judah, who from the beginning of national existence in Egypt had been defiled with the idolatries and evils of the nations around them (Ezek. 23).²

Admittedly the figure of a harlot was used in the Old Testament to describe idolatry. However, Tenney overstates his case because the figure is also used in the Old Testament to show more than just religious apostasy, as Mounce notes.

Since the harlot of the Apocalypse is a pagan city (cf. 17:18), it is more likely that a passage like Nahum 3:4 or Isaiah 23:16, 17 supplies the immediate background. In the former, the harlot is Nineveh, who betrays nations with her harlotries and her charms (cf. Rev. 17:4). Isaiah pictures Tyre as a forgotten harlot. *In the context of Revelation 17 and 18 the image is not that of religious profligacy but of the prostitution of all that is right and noble for the questionable ends of power and luxury.*³

Babylon is identified as a harlot. However, the reference is not to her spiritual nature. Rather the focus is on the prostitution of her values for economic gain. It is also interesting to note that the figure of a harlot was never applied to a religious system *only*. It was always used to describe a city or nation (Jerusalem, Israel, Samaria, Nineveh, or Tyre).

THE EXPLANATION OF BABYLON AS A MYSTERY

The second interpretive key centers on the name written on the harlot's forehead. More specifically, it revolves around the ex-

² Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 83-84.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 307 (italics added).

planation of the word *μυστήριον* in 17:5. Babylon is described as a "mystery."

Two problems must be resolved before this interpretive key can be properly understood. The first is the determination of the grammatical relationship between the word *μυστήριον* and the title of the woman. According to Robertson *μυστήριον* could be taken "either in apposition with *ονομα* or as part of the inscription on her [i.e., the harlot's] forehead."⁴ So either John could be saying that the name on the woman is "Mystery Babylon the great" or he could be saying that the name, Babylon the great, which is written on the woman's forehead, is a mystery.

Of the two possibilities, the second offers the best explanation within the context. Whenever the woman is named elsewhere in the chapters she is simply called "Babylon" not "Mystery Babylon." Walvoord notes this when he writes, "The word *mystery* is a descriptive reference to the title, not a part of the title itself as implied by the capitalization in the Authorized Version. This can be seen by comparing the name given to the woman in 16:19 and 18:2."⁵

The second problem that must be resolved is the exact nature of the mystery. In what way is this Babylon a mystery? Many feel that the occurrence of *μυστήριον* means that Babylon is to be interpreted symbolically or figuratively. Robertson takes this view when he debates the grammatical usage of *μυστήριον*. He concludes, "In either case the meaning is the same, that the name Babylon is to be interpreted mystically or spiritually (cf. *πνευματικῶς* 11:8) for Rome."⁶

However, the idea of equating *μυστήριον* with something mystical or mysterious cannot be borne out in the New Testament usage of the word. As Vine notes: "In the N.T. it [*μυστήριον*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined

⁴ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 6:430.

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 246.

⁶ Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:430.

by His Spirit."⁷

Vine equates *μυστήριον* with an unrevealed secret. The word does not denote the quality or character of the truth; rather it focuses on the availability of that truth. Smalley explained the difference in this way:

But whereas "mystery" may mean, and in contemporary usage often does mean, a secret for which no answer can be found, this is not at all the connotation of the term *mysterion* in classical and biblical Greek. In the New Testament *mysterion* signifies a secret which is being, or even has been, revealed, which is also divine in scope, and needs to be made known by God to men through His Spirit. In this way the term comes very close to the New Testament word *apokalypsis*, "revelation." *Mysterion* is a temporary secret, which once revealed is known and understood—a secret no longer.⁸

Calling the harlot's name a mystery does not automatically mean a spiritual or mystical system of evil as opposed to a literal or physical city. Its designation as a mystery means that the vision being given to John had not been made known before. To understand the "mystery" in the context one must examine verses 7-18, for in these verses God reveals the meaning and significance of the vision. As the angel said to John, "I shall tell you the mystery (*μυστήριον*) of the woman" (17:7).

THE IDENTIFICATION OF BABYLON AS A CITY

There is no lack of opinion concerning the identification of the harlot called Babylon. However, most of the identifications do not begin with the divine interpretation of the vision given at the end of chapter 17. In 17:18 the angel interpreted the harlot to John: "And the woman whom you saw is *the great city*, which reigns over the kings of the earth." Whatever else is said about the harlot, she is first a city, not an ecclesiastical system.

This divine interpretive key in 17:18 identifies the Babylon of chapter 17 as a city. It is a city of worldwide importance, for it is said to reign over the other kings of the earth. It is true that the identification can go beyond the city to the system it controls. However, the interpretation given to John focused only on the identification of Babylon as a city.

⁷ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, s.v. "Mystery," 3:97.

⁸ *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Mystery," by S. S. Smalley, p. 856.

THE LOCATION OF BABYLON ON SEVEN HILLS

The beast on which the woman is sitting is described as having seven heads. When the angel interpreted this part of the vision to John he said, "Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while" (17:9-10). What are the seven hills on which the woman is sitting? The traditional understanding of the seven hills is that they refer to the city of Rome, known in John's day as the seven-hilled city.

The seven heads of the beast are first identified as seven mountains upon which the harlot is sitting. There is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built upon seven hills. Rome began as a network of seven hill settlements on the left bank of the Tiber, and was from the time of Servius Tullius (her sixth king) an *urbs septicolis*.⁹

This view that the seven hills refer to Rome has some serious flaws. The first flaw is the assumed relationship between the woman and the hills. The seven heads are associated with the beast, not the woman. There is a distinction between the woman and the beast; and it is the beast that has the seven heads. The angel said, "I shall tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads" (17:7). If the seven hills are Rome, then the most that can be determined is that the Antichrist's empire will be centered in the city of Rome. It does not identify the location of the harlot because she is not part of the beast.

Some might argue that the harlot is still to be associated with the city of seven hills because they are described in 17:9 as "seven mountains on which the woman sits." However, the harlot's sitting on the seven hills is a reference to her control, not her location. In 17:1 the woman is sitting on "many waters." These are interpreted in verse 15 as "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues." The purpose of this part of the vision is not to show Babylon's location or else the city would have to be parceled out throughout the world. Rather, the harlot sitting on the waters is a reference to her control over all the nations of the world. The

⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 313-14.

woman is also said to sit on the entire beast (17:3). This would go beyond just the seven heads to include the Antichrist and the kings allied with him. Again the reference is to her control, not her location. If the harlot's sitting clearly indicates control twice in the chapter, is it not inconsistent to give that same figure a different meaning when it occurs for a third time? It is far more consistent to view the harlot's sitting as indicative of her control over the seven mountains, rather than having it point to her physical location.

Even if the seven hills are taken as a reference to Rome, that identification cannot be used to associate the harlot with Rome. The woman and the seven heads are distinct; and as stated, the position of the woman indicates control, not location. However, there is evidence to believe that the seven hills could refer to something other than the city of Rome.

The identification of the seven hills as Rome is based on the assumption that John's prophecy was written exclusively for and understood by the people of John's day. This idea is open to question. Walvoord noted this problem.

One of the common assumptions of those who reject the futurist position is that the Apocalypse is the creation of John's thinking and was understandable by him in his generation. . . . The difficulty with this point of view is twofold: (1) Prophecy, as given in the Scripture, was not necessarily understandable by the writer or his generation, as illustrated in the case of Daniel (Dan. 12:4, 9). It is questionable whether the great prophets of the Old Testament always understood what they were writing (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12). (2) It is of the nature of prophecy that often it cannot be understood until the time of the generation which achieves fulfillment. The assumption, therefore, that the book of Revelation was understandable in the first generation or that it was intended to be understood by that generation is without real basis.¹⁰

To understand properly the symbolism of the seven mountains one must go beyond the Greco-Roman society in which John wrote to the Jewish heritage in which he was raised. John was a Jew, and the Book of Revelation must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament. As Jenkins has said, "The book of Revelation is the most thoroughly Jewish in its language and imagery of any New Testament book. This book speaks not the language of Paul, but of

¹⁰ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pp. 22-23.

the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel."¹¹

To understand the seven mountains one must go to the Old Testament to see how this symbol was used. The word "mountain" was often a symbolic reference to a kingdom or national power. The following are some examples of this usage of "mountain."

"Now it will come about that in the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it" (Isa. 2:2).

"Behold, I have made you [Israel] a new, sharp threshing sledge with double edges; you will thresh the mountains, and pulverize them, and will make the hills like chaff" (Isa. 41:15).

"Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, who destroy the whole earth,' declares the Lord, 'and I will stretch out My hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and I will make you a burnt out mountain'" (Jer. 51:25). (The Lord is here speaking to the nation of Babylon; see Jer. 50:1. These chapters are quoted extensively in Revelation 17-18.)

"But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. . . . And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:35, 44). (God identified the mountain as the everlasting kingdom He will set up.)

The figure of a mountain is used in the Old Testament to refer to a kingdom. However, there is yet another reason for identifying the seven mountains in Revelation 17 as a reference to seven kingdoms. This interpretation is to be preferred because it best explains the dual identification of the seven heads as *both* mountains and kings.

If the seven mountains are applied to Rome, then there is some difficulty in relating the seven kings to the vision. Most expositors must leave out three Roman emperors (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) to have the history of Rome fit John's chronology. However, this is not sound interpretation, for as Ladd points out, "Such a procedure is arbitrary, for Galba, Otho and Vitellius, unimportant as they may have been, were bona fide emperors and were recognized as such by ancient historians."¹²

¹¹ Ferrel Jenkins, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 22.

¹² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 229.

The divine interpretation associates each head with both a mountain and a king. This can best be explained by viewing the "mountain" as a figure of speech that refers to a kingdom and the king who was ruling it. This relationship is most clearly illustrated in Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. "You [Nebuchadnezzar] are the head of gold. And after you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you" (Dan. 2:38b-39). Daniel wrote that the head of gold was a *king*, but that the breast and arms of silver were another *kingdom*. Daniel was obviously viewing the kingdom of Babylon as personified in the king that stood before him. Thus he could switch from the king to the kingdom with no inconsistency. In light of this evidence it is best to say that this key refers to seven empires and their kings rather than to the city of Rome.

The four interpretive keys within the chapters provide vital information on the identity of Babylon. Babylon is first and foremost a literal city that will dominate the world. It will be characterized as a harlot that prostitutes her moral values for material luxury. The entire city is viewed as a mystery in that her future position, relationship to the Antichrist, and ultimate destruction had not been known before John's vision. Evidently she will obtain control over seven nations, the Antichrist's growing empire, and eventually the entire earth. These keys do not unlock some mystical system of religion that will infiltrate the world. Rather, they open the door of prophecy on a brick-and-mortar city intoxicated with power and luxury. The Babylon in these chapters is one that will exist geographically and politically.

The Relationship to Jeremiah 50–51

An examination of Revelation 17–18 shows that there is but one Babylon in view. That Babylon is a city which will extend its control throughout the world. However, the city itself still needs to be identified. Chapters 17 and 18 provide little insight by themselves into the identity of the city, but through a comparison with other scriptural passages a positive identification is possible.

The key to identifying the Babylon of Revelation 17–18 is to isolate and interpret the Old Testament themes John was drawing on in these chapters. John used several Old Testament passages within these chapters, including Isaiah 13–14; 46–47; and Ezekiel 26–28. However, the central Old Testament passage on which

Revelation 17-18 is constructed is Jeremiah 50-51. This is the passage to which John alluded most frequently.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE PASSAGES

John's use of Jeremiah 50-51 can be observed by listing the many parallels between the passages. These parallels fall into three categories: the description, the destruction, and the response. Each category will be presented in chart form. Following the chart will be a brief analysis of the significance of those parallels.

The Description

Compared to a golden cup	"Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord" (Jer. 51:7a).	"I saw a woman . . . having in her hand a gold cup" (Rev. 17:3-4; cf. 18:6).
Dwelling on many waters	"O you who dwell by (לַיָּם) many waters" (Jer. 51:13).	"I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters" (Rev. 17:1).
Involved with nations	"The nations have drunk of her wine; therefore the nations are going mad" Jer. 51:7b).	"Those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality" (Rev. 17:2).
Named the same	"The word which the Lord spoke concerning Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans" (Jer. 50:1).	"Babylon the great" (Rev. 17:5). "Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city" (Rev. 18:10).

The Babylon of Jeremiah 50-51 and the Babylon of Revelation 17-18 are described similarly. Both are described in terms of a golden cup that influences the nations that partake of its contents. Both are also said to dwell on many waters. Obviously John was employing the terminology used by Jeremiah. Jeremiah was prophesying the destruction of the literal city of Babylon, and John was prophesying the destruction of a city with the same name.

The Destruction

Destroyed suddenly	"Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken" (Jer. 51:8).	"For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence, and mourning and famine" (Rev. 18:8).
Destroyed by fire	"Their dwelling places are set on fire" (Jer. 51:30).	"And the ten horns . . . will burn her up with fire" (Rev. 17:16). "And she will be burned up with fire" (Rev. 18:8).
Never to be inhabited	"And it will never again be inhabited or dwelt in from generation to generation" (Jer. 50:39).	"Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence and will not be found any longer" (Rev. 18:21).
Punished according to deeds	"Repay her according to her work; according to all that she has done, so do to her" (Jer. 50:29).	"Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds" (Rev. 18:6).
Fall illustrated	"You will tie a stone to it and throw it into the middle of the Euphrates, and say, 'Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again'" (Jer. 51:63-64).	"And a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence and will not be found any longer'" (Rev. 18:21).

John and Jeremiah each described a city that is destroyed suddenly and completely. A city in full blossom is plucked up never to reappear. The destruction is meted out by God for past deeds and is pictured as a rock sinking in a body of water to rise no more.

The Response

God's people to flee	"Flee from the midst of Babylon, and each of you save his life" (Jer. 51:6). "Come forth from her midst, My people, and	"And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, 'Come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins and that you
----------------------	--	--

	each of you save yourselves from the fierce anger of the Lord" (Jer. 51:45).	may not receive her plagues" (Rev. 18:4).
Heaven to rejoice	"Then heaven and earth and all that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for the destroyers will come to her from the north,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 51:48).	"Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her" (Rev. 18:20).

Jeremiah and John recorded the same response to the destruction of their city. Those on earth are warned to flee from the destruction that has now been promised. In heaven there is a call to rejoice, for the destruction signals God's victory over a godless city.

The ultimate identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 depends on John's use of Jeremiah's prophecy. Was John describing the same event or simply using "biblical language" to describe a different event? This in turn hinges on one's understanding of when Jeremiah 50-51 was or will be fulfilled. If Jeremiah 50-51 has already been fulfilled, then John was using the imagery of a past destruction to describe a different destruction that is yet future. However, if the fulfillment of Jeremiah is still future, then it would appear that John's prophecy is also viewing that same destruction.

THE FULFILLMENT OF JEREMIAH 50-51

The fulfillment of Jeremiah 50-51 is a subject of considerable debate. It is beyond the scope of this article to present an in-depth study of the passage. However, several key prophecies need to be examined. Each prophecy will be listed and then all relevant material will be discussed under that section to see if the prophecy has been literally fulfilled.

Babylon to be destroyed suddenly: "Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken" (Jer. 51:8). Jeremiah's prophecy in chapters 50-51 focuses on the suddenness of Babylon's destruction. However, this was not the case when Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians. Rather than destroying Babylon, Cyrus helped rebuild portions of the city that were in a state of decay. In fact the city was made a provincial capital in the Persian Empire. The actual destruction of the city was a gradual process over several centuries.

Babylon to be destroyed completely: "For a nation has come up against her out of the north; it will make her land an object of horror, and there will be no inhabitant in it" (Jer. 50:3). "Because of the indignation of the Lord she will not be inhabited, but she will be completely desolate" (v. 13). "Come to her from the farthest border; open up her barns, pile her up like heaps and utterly destroy her, let nothing be left to her" (v. 26). "'And it will never again be inhabited or dwelt in from generation to generation. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah with its neighbors,' declares the Lord, 'no man will live there, nor will any son of man reside in it'" (vv. 39b-40). "So the land quakes and writhes, for the purposes of the Lord against Babylon stand, to make the land of Babylon a desolation without inhabitants" (51:29).

One of the dominant themes throughout these verses is the extent of the judgment God is promising to execute on Babylon. This judgment is to be complete and permanent. When Babylon falls, she shall be "completely desolate" and "will never again be inhabited." God is, in effect, vowing to blot the very existence of Babylon from the earth.

Obviously this did not take place when Babylon fell to Medo-Persia. She remained populated and productive for centuries after her initial fall. Not much information on the city during the Middle Ages can be found, but there is information that the city has been inhabited in the Modern Era, at least since the 1700s. Koldewey, a German archaeologist responsible for much of the work that has been done at Babylon, makes an interesting comment on the villages located at the ruins.

At the bend of the Euphrates, between Babil and Kasr lie *the ruins of the former village of Kweiresh, whose population migrated elsewhere a hundred years ago*. The walls of mud brick still overtop the heaps of debris.

*The modern village of Kweiresh lies close to the Kasr, to which we must now turn our attention. The most northerly house of Kweiresh is the headquarters of our expedition . . . called by the Arabs "Kasr abid."*¹³

Koldewey states first that a village definitely was in existence in his day within the ancient city of Babylon. He headquartered in this village as he excavated the nearby ruins.

¹³ Robert Koldewey, *The Excavations at Babylon*, trans. Agnes S. Johns (London: Macmillan & Co., 1914), p. 22 (italics added).

Koldewey also reports the existence of another village (with the same name) that had also existed within the city of Babylon a century earlier. Since he gives only an approximate date of abandonment, there is no way to determine how long that earlier city had existed in Babylon; but the permanence of the structures would suggest an extended history. Koldewey presents a detailed map of Babylon's ruins in which he shows the location of both the ancient village of Kweiresh as well as the modern village. Both are in the heart of what was once ancient Babylon.¹⁴

Koldewey has shown that Babylon was still inhabited at least at the time of his excavations, which took place in the early 1900s. However, what is the status of its occupation today? Several independent sources confirm the existence today of several villages *within* the walls of ancient Babylon. Included with *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* article on Babylon is a picture of an Arab village with the caption, "The older part of the present town within the city walls."¹⁵ Unfortunately the name of the village pictured did not accompany the photograph. However, the accuracy of the statement was verified to this writer by Mrs. L. Glynne Dairos, assistant secretary of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. In response to a question on the existence of any modern villages within the ancient city walls she wrote, "There are three modern settlements situated inside the walls of ancient Babylon. The government of Iraq does indeed plan to restore much of Babylon and has indeed made a start on certain buildings."¹⁶ Wiseman also notes that a partial restoration has already begun and that the modern village of Jumjummah is located at the same site.¹⁷

Jeremiah predicted that when the city of Babylon fell it would never be inhabited again. However, this has never been fulfilled literally. The city of Babylon has been occupied throughout history, and even today, as noted, three settlements

¹⁴ Ibid., fig. I.

¹⁵ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1975 ed., s.v. "Babylon, OT," by D. J. Wiseman, 1:445.

¹⁶ L. Glynne Dairos, Assistant Secretary of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, to Charles H. Dyer, 15 August 1978. Personal files of Charles H. Dyer, Lanham, Maryland.

¹⁷ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979 ed., s.v. "Babylon," by D. J. Wiseman, 1:390.

are within the ancient walls. The fact remains that Jeremiah's words, "She will not be inhabited, but she will be completely desolate" (50:13), are yet to be fulfilled.

Building materials never to be reused: "'And they will not take from you even a stone for a corner nor a stone for foundations, but you will be desolate forever,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 51:26).

Jeremiah predicted that when Babylon would be destroyed even her stones would remain unused forever. Babylon would be destroyed so completely that not even her building materials would ever reappear. This is the ultimate in total desolation.

The history of ancient Babylon does not correspond to Jeremiah's prophecy. The materials from which ancient Babylon had been built have, in fact, been used extensively in the building of many surrounding cities. Layard even noticed that bricks mined from Babylon were so popular that men spent their lives gathering those bricks to sell to others.

To this day there are men who have no other trade than that of gathering bricks from this vast heap and taking them for sale to the neighbouring towns and villages, and even to Baghdad. There is scarcely a house in Hillah which is not almost entirely built with them; and as the traveller passes through the narrow streets, he sees in the walls of every hovel a record of the glory and power of Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁸

This evidence appears to be at variance with Jeremiah's prediction. However, some have sought to eliminate the difficulty by making a distinction between "stones" and "bricks." While "bricks" may have been taken from Babylon, Jeremiah predicted that no "stones" would be taken. As Stoner writes, "Bricks and building materials of many kinds have been salvaged from the ruins for cities round about, but the rocks, which were imported to Babylon at great cost, have never been moved."¹⁹

At first this appears to be an effective argument. However, it makes a false distinction that is alien to the culture against which Jeremiah was prophesying. There were no stone quarries near Babylon, so nearly all the buildings were made of baked brick. In fact the Babylonians considered their brick as their

¹⁸ Austen H. Layard, *Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1875), pp. 431-32.

¹⁹ Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks: An Evaluation of Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 94.

building stone. This can be clearly seen in the building of the tower of Babel which took place in that area. In describing the construction Moses wrote, "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.' *And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar*" (Gen. 11:3).

Thus the Babylonians considered their bricks to be their building stone. Jeremiah's prophecy against the use of their building materials in later construction would have been ludicrous had he been referring only to a few pieces of imported stone. The main building component in the city was burnt brick, and Jeremiah's prophecy was to show that the city would be so desolate that even its building materials would lie in waste forever. It seems far more natural to understand Jeremiah's reference to "stones" to include "bricks." This is consistent with the Genesis narrative, with the purpose of the prophecy, and with the physical characteristics of the city itself.

Once again, Jeremiah's prophecy has not found literal fulfillment in the destruction of Babylon. Babylon's bricks have been used extensively in the building of several neighboring cities. If the prophecy is to be taken literally, it must await a future fulfillment.

Believers to flee the city: "Wander away from the midst of Babylon, and go forth from the land of the Chaldeans" (Jer. 50:8). "Flee from the midst of Babylon, and each of you save his life! Do not be destroyed in her punishment" (51:6). "Come forth from her midst, My people, and each of you save yourselves from the fierce anger of the Lord" (v. 45).

In the midst of his oracle of destruction, Jeremiah turns to God's people who are dwelling under the shadow of a doomed city. These believers are urged to flee from the city so that they will not be caught in the destruction that will accompany its demise. Jeremiah predicted a "bloodbath" at Babylon's fall. The scope of destruction would be such that God's people are commanded to flee to safety before the flood of judgment strikes.

Once again there is a problem in finding a historical fulfillment for this aspect of Jeremiah's prophecy. There is no record of Jews fleeing Babylon when it fell to Medo-Persia.

Again, mark carefully that when Cyrus took Babylon, neither Daniel, who that night prophesied to Belshazzar the end of his kingdom, nor the other Jews, fled from Babylon! As a matter of fact, Daniel was immediately elevated to the triumvirate of presidents under Darius

the Median, who received the kingdom at the hand of the conqueror, Cyrus.²⁰

Israel and Judah to be reunited: "'In those days and at that time,' declares the Lord, 'the sons of Israel will come, both they and the sons of Judah as well; they will go along weeping as they go, and it will be the Lord their God they will seek. They will ask for the way to Zion, turning their faces in its direction; they will come that they may join themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten'" (Jer. 50:4-5). "'In those days and at that time,' declares the Lord, 'search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I shall pardon those whom I leave as a remnant'" (v. 20). "You who have escaped the sword, Depart! Do not stay! Remember the Lord from afar, and let Jerusalem come to your mind" (51:50).

Jeremiah spoke of a cause-effect relationship between the destruction of Babylon and the reestablishment of a united Israel. After Babylon is destroyed, those Jews who escaped in response to God's words will remember their God and turn toward His holy city. At that time Israel and Judah will again be reunited and will enter into an everlasting covenant with their God. God in turn will provide national redemption for His people.

This prophecy has a grandeur and majesty that far transcends any events that took place after the fall of Babylon to the Medes. First, the Jews did not turn to the Lord after a remarkable escape from "the sword." There was little or no bloodshed in the Medo-Persian conquest, and the Jews did not flee the city at that time. Second, Israel and Judah did not reunite nationally as the refugees drifted back into the land. Third, there was not a day of national repentance and forgiveness for the remnant that returned. The postexilic record is full of man's failures and God's rebukes.

These verses in Jeremiah have an eschatological significance that can find fulfillment only in the ultimate restoration of Israel and Judah just before the beginning of the millennium. Only then will these two groups be reunited in covenant relationship with their God and experience national forgiveness of sins. This part of Jeremiah's prophecy associates the destruction of Babylon with an event that is yet to occur on God's prophetic calendar.

²⁰ Willam R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935), p. 267.

Since none of these prophecies have been fulfilled, it must be assumed that Jeremiah 50–51 contains a prediction of a still-future destruction of the literal city of Babylon. This destruction will occur suddenly and will totally destroy the city. After this destruction the city will never be inhabited but rather will lie in ruins forever. God's people will be called forth from the city before its destruction and will be reunited in an everlasting covenant with their God.

In summary it has been shown that Jeremiah 50–51 is describing a still-future destruction of the literal city of Babylon. Jeremiah's prophecy was directed against "Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans" (50:1), and several key elements of his prophecy have never been fulfilled literally. Also this article has shown that the prophecies of John and Jeremiah are closely related. John predicted the destruction of a city with the same name as the city in Jeremiah's prophecy, having the same physical characteristics as the city in Jeremiah's prophecy, and destroyed in the same manner as the city in Jeremiah's prophecy.

These parallels lead to the conclusion that John and Jeremiah were describing the future destruction of the same city. John so identified his prophecy with the unfulfilled prophecy of Jeremiah that the association is unmistakable. Therefore the identity of the Babylon in Revelation 17–18 is the future rebuilt city of Babylon on the Euphrates. It will once again be restored and will achieve a place of worldwide influence only to be destroyed by the Antichrist in his thirst for power.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.