
The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18

Part 1 (of 2 parts)

Charles H. Dyer

Executive Vice-President, Professor

Washington Bible College and Capital Bible Seminary, Lanham, Maryland

The world is rushing toward a catastrophic period of time referred to as the Tribulation. God has sovereignly chosen to reveal many details of that period through the inspired writings of His prophets. A correct interpretation of these details is essential for a proper understanding of God's program for the future.

One key factor in interpreting God's prophetic program is the identification of the eschatological Babylon described by John in Revelation 17–18. This section occupies a significant portion of the Book of Revelation, and it provides a graphic account of God's future judgment on evil. However, one faces many problems in attempting to identify the end-time system of evil that the section presents. This two-part series attempts to provide answers for these problems through an analysis of the chapters individually, synthetically, and prophetically.

The relationship between chapters 17 and 18 is crucial to a proper understanding of the Babylon referred to in both. Do Revelation 17 and 18 separately describe two distinct Babylons? Or are the two chapters a unit that presents but one Babylon?

The Distinctions

Any attempt to understand the relationship between Revelation 17 and 18 must take into account several distinctions that ap-

pear between the two chapters. Primarily because of these distinctions many expositors argue for the identification of two Babylons in the chapters. Four arguments against the unity of the two chapters have been advanced by various authors.

DIFFERENT SETTINGS

The first difficulty one must face is the different settings for each of the two chapters. The chapters tell of two visions introduced by different angels. Chapter 18 begins, "After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven." The problem centers on the expression "After these things." Allen feels that this is a strong argument for making a distinction between the Babylon of chapter 17 and that of 18.

This phrase is of great importance in Revelation 1:19 and 4:1. In the latter passage it signifies the end of the church age by the rapture of the church. The church is afterward portrayed as being in heaven, and is represented by the 24 elders. The phrase, "and after these things," is also important in Revelation 18:1, *which suggests that after the events described in Revelation 17 have run their course, the judgment of Babylon has still to occur.*¹

Does use of the phrase "after these things" (*μετὰ ταῦτα*) demand a gap between the chapters? Allen cited three examples of its occurrence (1:19; 4:1; 18:1), but the phrase occurs 10 times in the Book of Revelation. Six times it occurs with a word of perception, and four times it does not. Allen implied that its occurrence in 18:1 argues for the fulfillment of chapter 18 *after* the fulfillment of chapter 17. However, the mere presence of *μετὰ ταῦτα* does not demand that things must occur later chronologically. It can simply be indicating the time sequence in which the visions were revealed to John.

The temporal use (as opposed to the eschatological use) of *μετὰ ταῦτα* in the Book of Revelation is always indicated by John's inclusion of a verb of perception ("I saw," "I heard"). In doing this he indicated that the time sequence was in his observation of the visions and not necessarily in the unfolding of future events. When John wanted to indicate a gap of time in future events, he did not include a verb of perception. The 10 occurrences are as follows:

¹ Kenneth W. Allen, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (January–March 1976):25 (italics added).

Temporal Use

4:1a, "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven."

7:1, "After this (*μετὰ τοῦτο*) I saw four angels holding back the four winds of the earth."

7:9, "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count."

15:5, "And after these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened."

18:1, "After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven."

19:1, "After these things I heard, as it were a great multitude in heaven."

Eschatological Use

1:19, "Write therefore . . . the things which shall take place after these things."

4:1b, "I will show you what must take place after these things."

9:12, "The first woe is past; behold two woes are still coming after these things."

20:3, "So that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time."

The four references not associated with verbs of perception seem to indicate chronological distinctions between future events. However, those with verbs of perception only indicate the order in which the parts of the vision were viewed by John. Thus the mere presence of *μετὰ ταῦτα* in 18:1 does not indicate a chronological distinction between the chapters. It only shows that the events revealed to John by the second angel were shown *after* he had viewed the woman on the beast.

DIFFERENT DESTROYERS

A second alleged distinction between Revelation 17 and 18 is the apparent difference between the destroyers of Babylon. The Babylon of chapter 17 is destroyed by kings whereas the Babylon of chapter 18 is destroyed by fire.² The destruction of the harlot Babylon occurs in 17:16, which says, "And the ten horns [ten kings,

² Martin Otto Massinger, "Babylon in Biblical Prophecy" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1967), p. 165

v. 12] which you saw, and the beast, *these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate.*" The destruction of the commercial Babylon occurs in 18:8, which says, "For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and *she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.*"

Allen agrees with this basic contrast. However, he adds another item. The destruction is a contrast not only between the 10 kings and fire, but also between a destruction by man and a destruction by God. "The great harlot is destroyed by the ten kings (Rev. 17:16); but the city of Babylon is destroyed by God, with John's description being similar to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 13:19-22; Jer. 51:63-64; Rev. 18:2, 8, 21)."³

If these distinctions are valid, then any attempt to view the chapters as a unit will be doomed to failure. However, are these distinctions consistent with the text? A careful evaluation shows that they are not. For example it is held that the harlot was destroyed by men while the Babylon of chapter 18 was destroyed by fire. This does not explain 17:16b, which says, "These will hate the harlot . . . and will burn her up with fire." Thus in reality the Babylon in both chapters is destroyed by fire.

The distinction is made between man's destruction (chap. 17) and God's destruction (chap. 18). This, however, fails to account for 17:17, which explains the destruction of the harlot by the beast and 10 kings as stemming initially from God: "For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose." Both chapters do ascribe the destruction to God.

Chapters 17 and 18 are more similar than many expositors believe. A chart shows that, in fact, the chapters do not have different destroyers.

	<i>Chapter 17</i>	<i>Chapter 18</i>
Object of destruction	"Babylon the great . . . the great city" (17:5, 18)	"the great city, Babylon" (18:10)
Instrument of destruction	"the ten horns which you saw, and the beast" (17:16)	(not given)
Means of destruction	"will burn her up with fire" (17:16)	"she will be burned up with fire" (18:8)
Source of destruction	"God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose" (17:17)	"The Lord God who judges her is strong" (18:8)

³ Allen, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon," p. 26.

This chart shows that the only distinction to be found is the instrument of destruction. Chapter 17 focuses on the human instrument while chapter 18 does not. If the chapters are viewed synthetically, the alleged distinctions between the destroyers vanish. In their place stands a unified whole with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of one destruction.

DIFFERENT RESPONSES

A third distinction between Revelation 17 and 18 is the different responses to the destruction that are ascribed to men. The difference is reflected in the kings of each chapter. The response of the kings in chapter 17 is recorded in verse 16. "And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will *hate the harlot* and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire."

In contrast to the hatred and destruction of Babylon by the kings of chapter 17, the kings of chapter 18 respond by mourning. "And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, *will weep and lament over her* when they see the smoke of her burning" (18:9).

In observing this different response Tenney comments, "Why should the kings both hate her and then bewail her fate at their hands? Perhaps the explanation lies in the difference between religious and commercial Babylon."⁴ Thus Tenney observes the problem of a seemingly opposite reaction by the kings and attributes it to a twofold Babylonian system.

It is granted that two opposite responses are attributed to the kings of each chapter. However, there is an explanation apart from assuming two Babylons.

An alternative to postulating two Babylons is the assumption that two groups of kings are in view in the two chapters. As Ladd has observed, "The kings of the earth [in 18:9-10] are to be distinguished from the 10 kings who joined with the beast to war against the Lamb (17:12-14)."⁵ Thus the kings who hate Babylon (17:16) are those 10 kings who unite with the beast to plot her overthrow. The remaining kings of the earth (18:9-10) are engaged

⁴ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1957), p 85

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1972), p 235

in commerce with Babylon, so they mourn when their source of revenue is destroyed. This view is consistent with the particulars of the text but still seeks to harmonize the two chapters.

DIFFERENT CHARACTER

The final difference between the chapters is the different character of each Babylon that is described. Chapter 17 is said to be religious in nature while chapter 18 is more commercial. Many feel that these differences can best be explained by the existence of two Babylons in the chapters.

Allen points out the main distinction between the character of both Babylons. "In Revelation 17 'mystery Babylon' is referred to as a woman with the exception of the last verse in the chapter, but in chapter 18 the emphasis is on 'the city' or 'Babylon the great' or 'the great city Babylon' or 'the great city.' The change of language is very marked."⁶

Again it must be admitted that the basic observation is correct. Chapter 17 does focus on Babylon the harlot, while chapter 18 looks at Babylon the commercial empire. Allen concludes, "Revelation 17 sets forth a religious power centered at the seven-hilled city of Rome exerting control over all people until the Antichrist has no further use for its existence, while the city of Babylon [chapter 18] is a great commercial center controlling trade and commerce on a worldwide scale."⁷

Allen's initial observation is correct, but his conclusion is not, because he ignored the interpretive keys within chapter 17. He seems to assume that because Babylon is called a woman in chapter 17, she cannot be the city of chapter 18. This assumption needs to be examined.

Chapter 17 contains a vision with an interpretation. Babylon is referred to in the vision as a woman riding a beast. In a sense a vision is a word picture. However, the fact that something is presented in pictorial fashion does not mean that it has no concrete reality. The nation Israel is no less Israel because it is pictured as a woman in Revelation 12. Likewise Babylon is no less Babylon even though it is pictured as a harlot. The key to the vision in chapter 17 is the divine interpretation given in 17:7-18. This gives the concrete reality behind the vision. What then is

⁶ Allen, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon," p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the truth about the harlot? Does she represent a religious system, a spiritual prostitute? Revelation 17:18 suggests that the answer is no: "And the woman whom you saw is *the great city*, which reigns over the kings of the earth."

Allen correctly stated that chapter 17 referred to Babylon as a woman in every case with the exception of the final verse of the chapter. However, he did not note that this final verse was God's identification of the woman, and that this Babylon was definitely identified as a *city*. Therefore the entire argument crumbles because both chapters do contain the same character. Both are talking about a city. This may not automatically mean that the Babylons in the two chapters are identical, but it certainly cannot be used to argue against such an identification.

Four distinctions between chapters 17 and 18 have been examined. Not one of the four distinctions contains compelling evidence for making a division between the chapters. The different settings are merely temporal aspects connected with John's viewing of the visions. Supposed differences between the destroyers vanish when the chapters are viewed synthetically. The different responses by the kings are explained by the existence of two distinct groups of kings within the chapters, and the alleged different character of the chapters actually vanishes when the spotlight of God's interpretation is focused on the woman in chapter 17. All these distinctions can be answered through a synthetic examination of the two chapters.

The Specific Parallels

The first section of this article examined the distinctions between Revelation 17 and 18, discovering that none of the distinctions demanded two Babylons for an adequate solution. At this juncture the positive evidence for viewing the two chapters as a unit will be presented. This is found in the specific parallels between the Babylon of chapter 17 and the Babylon of chapter 18. The striking parallels between the chapters go beyond coincidence to point to a unified system. That system is identified in both chapters as a city that rules the world. This strongly suggests that the Babylon in both chapters must be identical.

To save space, the parallels are divided into four categories, each presented in chart form. Following the chart is a brief analysis of the significance of the parallels.

THE DESIGNATION

The name is the same	"Babylon the great" (17:5)	"Babylon the great" (18:2)
The identity is the same	"The woman . . . is the great city" (17:18)	"Woe, woe, the great city" (18:10)

However one wishes to interpret the Babylon of Revelation 17, he must acknowledge that the divine identification of the harlot is a city, not a mystical system. These two chapters each present a city that has the same name in the same general context. The most natural interpretation is to take the cities as identical unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary.

THE DESCRIPTION

The clothing is the same	"And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls" (17:4)	"Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls" (18:16)
Both hold a cup	"Having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations" (17:4)	"In the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her" (18:6)

Both Babylons are identified as a city, and both are described in the same fashion. Apart from the addition of fine linen in chapter 18, both cities are arrayed with exactly the same materials. Also both are associated with a cup that each possesses. Instead of seeing two cities with the same name and the same description, it is easier to assume the existence of only one city.

THE DEEDS

The relationship to kings is the same	"With whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality" (17:2)	"And the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her" (18:3)
The relationship to the nations is the same	"Those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality" (17:2)	"For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality" (18:3)
The relationship to believers	"And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the	"And in her was found the blood of prophets

is the same	saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (17:6)	and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth" (18:24)
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The Babylons in both chapters perform the same functions. Each commits fornication with the kings of the earth and causes all the nations of the earth to fall into a drunken stupor. Each also persecutes God's remnant who stand in opposition to evil. It is hard to distinguish a political Babylon from a religious Babylon through a comparison of their deeds because the deeds are identical.

THE DESTRUCTION

The means of destruction is the same	"These will hate the harlot . . . and will burn her up with fire" (17:16)	"She will be burned up with fire" (18:8)
The source of destruction is the same	"For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose" (17:17)	"And God has remembered her iniquities . . . for the Lord God who judges her is strong" (18:5, 8)

These final similarities surround the destruction of both Babylons. Physically both are destroyed by fire. In both instances God is the ultimate source of destruction; His judgment is being executed.

The parallels between the chapters are impressive. Each chapter refers to a city with the same name. Each describes a city in the same fashion. Each mentions a city that performs the same deeds, and each refers to a city that is destroyed in the same manner. These descriptions, going beyond mere similarity, point toward unity. Two distinct cities could hardly be described in such a similar way. It is better to view the chapters as two descriptions of the same city.

The Larger Context

The larger context in which these chapters are positioned also underscores the parallelism between the chapters. Chapters 17 and 18 are an interlude placed here to explain the destruction of Babylon the Great mentioned in Revelation 16:19. Thus both chapters would seem to be describing this one event. This also conforms to 19:1-3, in which heaven is said to rejoice over this fall of Babylon. In describing this fall those in heaven mention the

harlot (compare 19:2 with 17:1) and the smoke ascending forever (compare 19:3 with 18:9, 18) and relate both to one judgment. Thus the larger context limits chapters 17 and 18 to such an extent that the Babylons they are describing must be considered identical.

The larger context actually begins in 14:8, which first predicts an angel flying in mid-heaven proclaiming, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality." Several of the phrases used here are later repeated in Revelation 17 and 18. The title "Babylon the great" is used in all three chapters; and the proclamation "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great" is repeated in 18:2. The reference to the nations being drunk with the wine of her fornication (14:8) is also found in 17:2 and 18:3. The one proclamation is fulfilled by chapters 17 and 18, and yet there is only one Babylon in view in 14:8.

The next appearance of Babylon occurs during the outpouring of the seventh bowl in chapter 16. Part of the judgment associated with this bowl is that "Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath" (16:19). Again only one Babylon is in view. Immediately after this pronouncement John recorded the destruction of a "Babylon the great" in chapters 17 and 18. What is important is that chapters 17 and 18 are an expansion of 16:19, which seems to refer to the destruction of a city called Babylon. It is pictured as a literal city. Kuhn captures the exact relationship in these words: "The destruction of Babylon is proclaimed by an angelic voice in 14:8. The place of the fall of Babylon in the apocalyptic drama (with the outpouring of the 7th vial) is indicated in 16:19. Then in 17:1 to 19:10 the divine expressly portrays this city and its fall in 7 visions."⁸

The larger context begins before chapters 17–18, but it does not end there. The subject of the fall of Babylon extends beyond these chapters into chapter 19. The first five verses of chapter 19 present the "Hallelujah Chorus" in heaven following the destruction of Babylon. As Ladd has noted, "The first paragraph of chapter nineteen continues the celebration of the fall of Babylon and consists of a song of thanksgiving in heaven that God had judged the great harlot."⁹

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "βαβυλών," by Karl Georg Kuhn, 1 (1964):514.

⁹ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 244.

Chapter 19 begins with the phrase "After these things." Ryrie notes that "'After these things' evidently refers to the visions of the chapters immediately preceding. In 18:20 the call to rejoice was issued; here is the response to that call."¹⁰ Thus the heavenly chorus is in response to the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18, but it looks back to the destruction in both chapters.

The first part of the heavenly praise focuses on the harlot of chapter 17. The multitude says, "Because His judgments are true and righteous; for *He has judged the great harlot* who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her" (19:2). In response to the angels' call to rejoice over the fall of Babylon in 18:20 the heavens do respond—with a song of praise for the judgment of the harlot. The implication is that the harlot of chapter 17 and the Babylon of chapter 18 are identical.

The song of praise continues in 19:3, which says, "And a second time they said, 'Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever!'" This reference to the smoldering city is drawn from chapter 18, in which the kings of the earth and the shipmasters are said to look on "the smoke of her burning" (18:9, 18). The praise song in heaven over the fall of Babylon incorporates elements of both chapter 17 and chapter 18, and yet it seems to be a song celebrating just one fall and doing so in response to the command of 18:20. Again this larger context can be understood best if chapters 17 and 18 are viewed as a unit that looks forward to the destruction of a single city of Babylon.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to establish the relationship between Revelation 17 and 18. Several arguments advanced against the unity of the chapters were examined and found to be lacking. The arguments were based on the differences between the chapters, but those differences could also be explained by the different focus of each chapter or the different setting in which each chapter was presented to John. In contrast, the parallelism between the chapters pointed toward a strong unity that exists between them. That unity can best be explained by the presence of only one Babylon within the chapters. That one city is the subject of the

¹⁰ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), p. 100.

larger context into which chapters 17 and 18 are set. Whatever the final identity of this Babylon might be, that identity must be the same for both chapters. There is only one Babylon in view. The exact identity of that city will be examined in the second article in this two-part series.



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