

Babylon is **Fallen**

Rev 17-18

Babylon revisited.

This is a hard section of Revelation. In case you're wondering, this is the second version of this bible study. Keep the first draft as a collector's item. Work through it if you like... it represents the views of a number of well respected commentators. Interestingly, while there's plenty of room to debate the details, your understanding of "Babylon" in Revelation 17-18 can potentially change your view of world events. Let's hope George W Bush gets it right!

Babylon in the Bible...

Way back in Genesis 11, "Babel" is painted as the centre of world opposition to God. It was in Babel that men decided to "build a tower" to storm into heaven, so they could run things for themselves. Much later, it was in Babylon where the people of Israel were exiled after the fall of Jerusalem. Babylon was rich, arrogant... and very, very seductive. But here in Revelation 17 and 18, we meet another Babylon. It's confusing, because there's a double layer of symbolism. There's a woman who represents a city... which represents yet another city! Confused yet?



Read Revelation 17-18, looking for clues to the "identity" of the "harlot" and "Babylon". Note any clues below.

Clues to the mystery woman



1. What does the future hold for “the great prostitute who sits on many waters”? (17:1)

2. How is the woman described in 17:18?

3. This is confusing! In this chapter, the great city is called “Babylon.” But in Revelation 11:8, the city has two other names, and an extra description that may be a clue.

What do all the “cities” which are named have in common?

What does the extra clue in 11:8 suggest as the identity of the real city?

4. How has this “mother of prostitutes” treated God’s “prophets and saints” (17:6, 18:24)?

Look back at Luke 11:47-53. Who does Jesus say is responsible for the “blood of the prophets”?

5. Who is the “prostitute” in Ps 106:38-41?

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all make the point that **Jerusalem** has acted like a prostitute. (Ezekiel chapters 16 and 23 make particularly unpleasant reading.)

Could it be...

Could it be that Jerusalem, that was meant to be the holy city of God, is going to face God’s judgement? Could it be that Jerusalem has become a prostitute, riding on the back of the beast that is the Roman empire? Could it be that Jerusalem - the city which spilled the blood of God’s prophets, and finally killed God’s son - is at last going to be judged? In the end, commentators are divided over the identity of the prostitute. Some argue persuasively that “the great Babylon-prostitute” is Rome, the city that ruled the world. A lot depends on the date Revelation was written - whether under the reign of Domitian, in the 90s (well after Jerusalem was actually attacked by Rome) or the reign of Nero, just before the armies of Rome marched on Jerusalem in 70AD. The key piece of evidence is the fact that Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons between 175-190AD, said that as a small child, he had heard Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John, say that John’s exile was in the reign of Domitian.

The Prostitute falls...

In short, the great Prostitute, the great Babylon... the original persecutor of “the saints” ... is going to fall.

6. Who does John see as bringing the final undoing of the prostitute? (17:16) What sense can you make of this?

The biggest weakness in the theory that Jerusalem is on view as “the great city” (and not Rome) is verse 18. It is easier to see Rome as the city that “rules over the kings of the earth.”

7. What future does the angel announce for the prostitute in 18:2-3?

8. How will the kings of the world react? What will they miss most? (18:10)

9. What will the merchants say? What will they miss most? (18:16-17)

10. What will the transport workers union miss most? (18:18-20)

A Lesson from the Original Babylon

It's remarkable in some ways that it's hard to discern whether John's "Babylon" is Jerusalem or Rome. Even more remarkable if - as most of the evidence seems to suggest - Jerusalem, which was meant to be the city of God - is being labeled with the names of the greatest enemies of God's people. How bizarre that the "city of God" could be confused with Babylon, the great enemy of God's people in the past. How sad that Jerusalem can be called "Sodom" and "Egypt" back in Revelation 11.

What do these chapters tell us about God's ongoing interest **today** in earthly Jerusalem?

In a way, the institution we call "the church" takes the place of Jerusalem. Are there ways in which **the church** today has betrayed what she should be?

Is there any guarantee of safety from God's judgement today, simply because we are part of an "institution"?

Reflect...

Imagine a world where luxury and convenience and easy going attitudes ruled "the church". Imagine a world where opinion-poll morals were endorsed by "the church." Imagine a world where Jesus Christ was no longer at the centre of "the church." How do you think God would feel about this?