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Revelation #31

The Fall of Babylon **Revelation 18:1-24**

In Revelation 17:1 John was promised that he would be shown “the judgment of the great prostitute”. Although he was given a brief glimpse in 17:16, the full story is now told in chapter 18.

A working outline for this chapter is as follows: (1) the prediction of Babylon’s fall (vv. 1-3); (2) an exhortation to God’s people to separate from Babylon before judgment comes (vv. 4-8); (3) the lament of those who cooperate with Babylon (the kings of the earth [vv. 9-10], the merchants of the earth [vv. 11-17a], the mariners [vv. 17b-19]); and (4) the rejoicing of the faithful once Babylon’s judgment is complete (vv. 20-24).

It is important to remember that John “is not writing a literal description, even in poetic or figurative language, of the fall of an earthly city, such as Rome or Jerusalem; but in portraying the destruction of a city [in particular, Rome, since that was the expression of Babylon and the beast with which the recipients of this letter had to contend], he describes God’s judgment on the great satanic system of evil that has corrupted the earth’s history. Drawing especially from the OT accounts of the destruction of the ancient harlot cities of Babylon (Isa. 13:21; 47:7-9; Jer. 50-51) and Tyre (Ezek. 26-27), John composes a great threnody [i.e., a song of lamentation for the dead] that might well be the basis of a mighty oratorio” (Johnson, 169).

The Prediction of Babylon’s Fall (vv. 1-3)

Some believe this angelic appearance to be a *christophany*, pointing to its “great authority” but especially to its “glory” whereby the earth is “made bright” or “illuminated”. The same argument was made with regard to the “strong angel” of 10:1ff. Some argue that this must be a christophany because in every place in Revelation where “glory” is ascribed to a heavenly figure it is either God the Father (4:9,11; 5:13; 7:12; 11:13; 14:7; 15:8; 16:9; 19:1; 21:11,23) or Christ (1:6; 5:12-13). See also 21:23. But then perhaps the angelic figure here merely *reflects* God’s glory as his emissary and revelatory agent.

Revelation 18:2b portrays the consequences of Babylon’s judgment. It is only fitting that she who promoted idolatry and reveled in demonic power should become the habitation for such following her demise. The OT background for this text is Isaiah 13:21; 34:11,14. The word used in these texts is that which in other texts simply means “male goat” (the sort presented as a sin offering). It is likely, however, that in the two texts from Isaiah it refers to demons. As Sydney Page notes, “in both cases, the word appears in a prophecy of the destruction Yahweh will bring to an enemy of Israel. Chapter 13 describes the devastation of historical Babylon, and chapter 34

paints a similar picture for Edom. Both passages envisage a time when Israel's enemies will be utterly destroyed, when their centers of power will no longer be inhabited by humans but become a dwelling place for the denizens of the desert. The *se'irim* are included among the future inhabitants of these waste places" (69).

In Isaiah 34:14, another word occurs that probably refers to demons. It is the Hebrew word translated *Lilith*, rendered "night monster" by the NASB and "night creature" by the NIV.

In Babylonian demonology, Lilith could refer to several things: a) a child-stealing witch; b) Adam's first wife, before Eve, believed to be the mother of all demons; or c) a night demon that prowled about in dark and desolate places. In post-biblical times, Lilith became the topic of much speculation in Judaism. "She came to be regarded primarily as a demon who seduced men in their dreams, who murdered young children, and who was a special threat at childbirth. More recently, she has emerged as a positive symbol for Jewish feminists" (Page, 73). Some have argued that the reference to "the terror of night" in Psalm 91:5 is an allusion to Lilith.

The cause or ground of Babylon's judgment is now stated (v. 3). Again, John is not referring to literal sexual immorality (although Babylon certainly promotes it!) but is using the latter to portray religious and philosophical idolatry. To yield to Babylon's demands for allegiance is to insure one's material security. Says Beale,

"Economic security would be removed from Babylon's subjects if they did not cooperate with her idolatry. Such security is too great a temptation to resist. Therefore, the verb 'drank' refers to the willingness of society in the Roman Empire to commit itself to idolatry in order to maintain economic security. Once one imbibes, the intoxicating influence removes all desire to resist Babylon's destructive influence, blinds one to Babylon's own ultimate insecurity and to God as the source of real security, and numbs one against any fear of coming judgment" (896).

The Exhortation to Separate (vv. 4-8)

The destiny of Babylon just described becomes the reason for the urgency of the exhortation that follows. See Jeremiah 51:45 and Isaiah 52:11 for two OT texts that issue similar exhortations concerning historical Babylon. This separation (certainly ideologically and, if necessary, physically) has two aims: that they might not participate in her sins and that they might not suffer her judgment.

We should remember that the people in the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) "were by no means all poor and persecuted, like the Christians at Smyrna. Many were affluent, self-satisfied and *compromising*, and for them John intended an urgent revelation of the requirements and the peril of their situation. Most of the seven cities were prosperous communities with significant stakes, as ports or as commercial, administrative and religious centres, in Roman rule and Roman commerce" (Bauckham, *Climax*, 377). The command in v. 4 "is for the readers to *dissociate*

themselves from Rome's evil, lest they share her guilt and her judgment. It is a command not to be in the company of those who are then depicted mourning for Babylon" (377). Keener's comment is worth pondering:

"'Come out of her' (18:4) also reminds us that we Christians may share in the judgments on our society, in spite of forgiveness for individual sins. Nations and institutions as corporate entities can stand under judgment (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:2-3); we who participate in such institutions share in their responsibility before God unless we explicitly repudiate our complicity with them and declare their activities wrong (Deut. 21:7-9; cf. Amos 4:1-3)" (437).

The imagery of sins "heaped high" or "piling up" or "joining together" or being "lifted up" to heaven is found in the OT with reference to the extreme depths of human sin and the certainty of judgment (cf. Jonah 1:2; Ezra 9:6). That God would "remember" such sin is obviously anthropomorphic (or more accurately, anthropopathic), an echo of Psalm 109:14; Hosea 9:9.

The principle of *punishment fitting the crime* is explicitly affirmed in vv. 6-7a (an allusion to Ps. 137:8). However, if the punishment fits the crime (or sin), why does v. 6 say that she will be paid back "double" and "twice" what she deserves? Several scholars, appealing to the use of these terms in the LXX, have pointed out that the translation "double/twice" is inaccurate and should be rendered, "give *the very equivalent* (i.e., produce a duplicate or repeat) according to her deeds."

Babylon's false sense of security and purported immunity to judgment is described in v. 7b, a text that is clearly based on Isaiah 47:7-8. In view of the obvious dependence on the Isaiah text, we see again that "the pride and fall of historical Babylon is taken as a typological pattern of the hubris and downfall of the worldwide Babylonian system at the end of history. As with old Babylon, latter-day Babylon sees herself as mother to all her inhabitants, whom she nourishes. She has complete confidence that she will never be without the support of her children" (Beale, 903). Such confidence is more delusion; it is idolatry. The warning to the church is evident: ***beware of trusting in economic security; the world may appear to provide a fire-wall against future distress, but it is merely an illusion. Recall the warning to the Laodiceans (3:17).***

David Aune points out that "the emphasis on widowhood [in v. 7] is appropriate since one of the frequent results of war in ancient times (and all times) was the slaughter of adult males, many of whom were husbands and fathers. Widows (and orphans) were extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged in ancient Israel because they were deprived of the protection and financial support afforded them by husbands and their families, and consequently often experienced extreme hardship and oppression. . . . 'Widow' was [also] an appropriate metaphor for cities and nations who were defeated in war and consequently desolated" (cf. Isa. 47:9; 54:4; Lam. 1:1; 5:3-4; Aune, 3:996).

In v. 8 John warns of the impending judgment of the world system as one like unto that which befalls a literal historical city: pestilence and famine (the common results of a prolonged siege) and destruction by fire will destroy everything and there will be great mourning. Cf. Isa. 47:9,14. Babylon's purported strength and stability will pale in comparison with the God who judges her, for he is truly *mighty*, indeed **omnipotent!**

The Lament of the Kings of the Earth (vv. 9-10)

The point of vv. 9-19 is to describe how those who prosper from their cooperation with Babylon will mourn when they see the destruction of that on which they have come to rely for their happiness and prosperity. Thus the principal message of this paragraph is ***despair over economic loss***. For the OT background, see Ezekiel 26-27 and the prophetic dirge over the ancient city of Tyre.

These verses make sense only when we remember the close association in Asia Minor of John's day between idolatry and economic prosperity. There "allegiance to both Caesar and the patron gods of the trade guilds was essential for people to maintain good standing in their trades (see esp. on 2:9-10,12-21). Local and regional political leaders had to support this system to keep their offices and the economic benefits that came with their high positions" (Beale, 905).

The "smoke of her burning" (v. 9) links this judgment with that of 14:9-11. Are these "kings of the earth" the same as those in 17:16? Probably not. The kings of 17:16 appear to be a smaller and more powerful and elite body whereas those here include anyone who had come to depend on Babylon for economic security. That they "weep" and "lament" and stand "at a distance" (v. 10) from her is due both to the gruesome sight of her judgment and fear that such a destiny will soon be their own. The bottom line is that they are afraid of sharing her suffering. Their fear is also traceable to the suddenness with which the judgment came ("in a single hour", v. 10b).

The Lament of the Merchants of the Earth (vv. 11-17a)

Since Babylon has been the principal consumer of all their products (indeed, they "gained wealth from her", v. 15), Babylon's demise means the end of the merchants' prosperity. Their lament is not altruistic or sympathetic but entirely self-centered: they can only think of their personal financial loss.

Vv. 12-13 provide a representative list of trade products, i.e., the commodities that Babylon will no longer purchase. The OT background for this list is Ezekiel 27:7-25 where fifteen of the twenty-eight items listed here are found. (For the most extensive discussion of the various items in the list, see Bauckham's essay, "The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18" in *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 338-383).

The number four is the number of the *world*. Thus, it is certainly no accident, notes Bauckham, "that the list of cargoes which Babylon (Rome) imports from 'the merchants of the

earth' (18:11-13) comprises twenty-eight (4x7) items. They are listed as representative of *all* the products of the whole *world*" (31). Bauckham contends that "while the list includes some items (wine, oil, wheat) which illustrate how the survival of the whole city depended on such imports, it features especially the luxury items which fed the vulgarly extravagant tastes of the rich" (366).

- Be it noted that there is nothing inherently wrong with these products, except for the final one in the list: human slaves. Wealth and possessions, per se, are not what John condemns in Revelation 18, but rather the greed and materialistic spirit that energizes their pursuit, as well as the selfish hoarding that ignores the needy and the pride and self-reliance that excessive wealth often produces.
- The reference to "slaves" in v. 13 is worthy of comment. It should probably be translated, "slaves, that is, human beings" (literally, "souls of men"). This is not only one item in a list, but John's comment on the slave trade. "He is pointing out that slaves are not mere animal carcasses to be bought and sold as property, but are human beings. But in this emphatic position at the end of the list, this is more than just a comment on the slave trade. It is a comment on the whole list of cargoes. It suggests the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome's prosperity and luxury rests" (Bauckham, 370-71).

The phrase, "the fruit for which your soul longed" (v. 14) "expresses that the core of Babylon's being is committed to satisfying herself with economic wealth instead of desiring God's glory" (Beale, 910). The words translated "delicacies" and "splendors" (NASB) allude to the false glitter and glory of Babylon's wealth which one day will be replaced by the enduring brilliance and glory of God. Indeed, the word *lampros* in v. 14 ("splendid") is used of those in God's presence in 15:6; 19:8 and of the New Jerusalem in 22:11 and of Jesus in 22:16. See also 21:11,23-24.

V. 15 repeats vv. 9-11. We see again in vv. 16-17 that the "strength" (v. 10) of Babylon is identified as her wealth (v. 17a). Wealth is transient, unworthy of our soul's trust.

The Lament of the Mariners (vv. 17b-19)

Here the focus is on a particular group of merchants, namely, sailors, who profited from their economic association with Babylon. The language is very similar to that in vv. 9-11 with the additional reference to their throwing dust on their heads, not as a sign of true repentance, but as an expression of sorrow for the personal financial loss they will inevitably suffer. For the OT background, see Ezekiel 27:28-33.

The Rejoicing of the Faithful (vv. 20-24)

In Jeremiah 51:48 we read that “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.” Just as the judgment of historical ancient Babylon was cause for celebration, so too will be the judgment of eschatological Babylon.

The reason for this celebration is found in a difficult statement at the close of v. 20. Although there are a number of possible translations (see Beale, 917-18), it most likely should be rendered either (1) “God has given judgment for you against her” (ESV), or (2) “God pronounced on her the judgment she passed on you.” Together with 19:1-5, this passage constitutes the consummation of God’s response to the prayer of the martyred saints in Revelation 6:10. God has truly acted to vindicate both the honor of his name and the righteousness of those who were killed for the testimony of Jesus.

The judgment of Babylon which has already been described in graphic detail is here again portrayed with stunning imagery. Based on the judgment of ancient Babylon as found in Jeremiah 51:63 and the judgment of Tyre in Ezekiel 26:12, the end of eschatological Babylon will be like that of a giant millstone flung into the sea to sink into oblivion (v. 21). “One quick gesture becomes a parable of the whole judgment on Babylon the Great! Suddenly she is gone forever” (Johnson, 172). All of Babylon’s workers and artisans will be gone. “The various kinds of musicians [v. 22] may be further representatives of crafts or may be merely figurative for the pleasures of an affluent society. Babylon, who removed the joys of life from the saints, will have her own pleasures taken away” (Beale, 920).

This judgment comes for three reasons: first, because “your merchants were the great ones of the earth” (v. 23), and second, the “nations were deceived by your sorcery.” The latter surely refers to Babylon’s idolatrous deception, but what of the former? Much of Revelation has been a call to give God alone the glory of which he is worthy, to enjoy and to rest in him alone. The claim to “glory” or “greatness” which Babylon made for herself is fundamentally idolatrous and echoes the sin of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. The third reason for judgment is her persecution of the people of God (v. 24), where “blood” need not refer exclusively to literal death but, in addition to that, also to any form of oppression and suffering (cf. Rom. 8:36).