Identifying the Babylon of Revelation Chapters 17 & 18

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to identify Babylon as it is presented in Revelation 17 and 18. It will be argued that Babylon is first and foremost a literal city to be rebuilt in modern day Iraq. Additionally, the city will be the hub of influence for an ecclesiastical, political, and economical system that will emerge to reach the far corners of the earth. These dual aspects of Revelation’s Babylon will be examined separately and then blended into a likely scenario of how they will work together. Essentially, it will be asserted that this Babylon will be the Tower of Babel on an epic scale.
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**Introduction**

J. Hampton Keathley writes, “Revelation 17 and 18 are two of the most intriguing chapters of the Bible, yet two of the most difficult and disputed” (Keathley). John Walvoord echoes this sentiment, “Expositors have widely differing views of Revelation 17 and 18” (Walvoord, 2011, c.17). The difficulty inherent in these chapters involves the identity of “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth” (Revelation 17:5, NASB). In his Interpreting Biblical Prophecy class taught at the Baptist Bible College & Seminary, Reverend Jimmy Stallard sums up four common views concerning the identity of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18.¹

Traditionally, expositors have often identified the Babylon of Revelation 17-18 with the Papacy. While the characteristics of Babylon described within Revelation may resemble the Catholic Church, Stallard writes, “Babylon appears to be much more than the Papacy could ever be” (Stallard, 2012, p.4). Preterists, on the other hand, hold the view that Revelation 17 and 18 describe the final days of the Jews and identify Babylon with Jerusalem. However, this view seems to take the passages concerning Babylon out of context and ignores the language of the text that refers to Rome rather than Jerusalem. Having ruled out these two options, students of prophecy are left with two far more palatable interpretations - that Babylon represents an ecclesiastical and political system that centers around a revived Rome or that it represents a literal city that will be rebuilt in modern day Iraq.²

¹ The four common interpretations of Babylon’s identity were taken from Rev. J. Stallard’s week 7 class notes for BI 526 – Interpreting Biblical Prophecy course.
² These four interpretations represent the most common ones. In researching this paper, I discovered many more options including one peculiar one that considered Babylon to represent the modern United States.
This paper will argue for an interpretation that blends the two most likely options. Primarily, the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 represents a literal city named Babylon located in modern day Iraq. Additionally, there is an appropriate secondary interpretation that Babylon represents an ecclesiastical, political, and commercial system. Both interpretations will be examined separately and then conclusions will be made concerning how they may be blended.

**Babylon is a Literal City**

Walvoord writes, “The subject of Babylon in the Scripture is one of the prominent themes of the Bible beginning in Genesis 10, where the city of Babel is first mentioned, with continued references throughout the Scriptures climaxing here in the book of Revelation” (Walvoord, 2011, c.17). In the opening verses of Revelation 17 John is given a vision of “… the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters” (Rev 17:1). The woman in this vision is clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls (Rev 17:4). In her hand is a “… gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality” (Rev 17:4). Her name “Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth” is written on her forehead as was customary for prostitutes in John’s day (Constable, p.154). The question at hand is what or who does this woman named Babylon the Great represent?

Charles H. Dyer suggests there are four keys to interpreting the identity of Babylon (Dyer, 1987, p.434-440). The first key, according to Dyer, is John’s description of Babylon as a harlot in Revelation 17:1 (Dyer, 1987, p.434). Dyer observes, “It is … 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” (Dyer, 1987, p.434). For instance, Isaiah 1:21 describes Jerusalem as a harlot. Likewise, Jeremiah 2:20 describes Jerusalem using the same words. Similarly, the Old
Testament describes the pagan city of Nineveh as a harlot (Nahum 3:4). In light of these Old Testament passages, it is likely that the use of the word “harlot” in John’s vision indicates he is talking about a city.

Dyer’s second key to interpreting Babylon’s identity is Revelation 17:5, “and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev 17:5, NASB) (Dyer, 1987, p.434). Specifically, Dyer is referring to John’s use of the word “mystery” (from the Greek **mysterion**). **Mysterion** can be defined as a hidden or secret purpose, counsel, or thing that is not obvious to the understanding and is only revealed by Divine revelation. Describing the name Babylon as a mystery made it clear that the vision being given to John had never been given before and could only be made known through Divine revelation. Dyer writes, “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” (Dyer, 1987, p.436). It is within this passage that we find Dyer’s next key for identifying Babylon.

Dyer’s third key to interpreting Babylon’s identity is the text of Revelation 17:18, “The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth” (NASB). The text clearly identifies the woman named Babylon as the “great city.” While Dyer is quick to point out that “It is true that the identification can go beyond the city to the system it controls” (Dyer, 1987, p.436), it cannot be denied that the harlot named Babylon is first and foremost demonstrated to be a literal city within the text of Revelation itself.

Dyer’s final key in understanding the identity of Babylon is found in Revelation 17:9-10 as John’s vision describes the woman named Babylon as sitting on seven mountains. While

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3 This definition of Mysterion is derived from the definition in the Thayer’s dictionary although the wording is totally mine.
many expositors associate the seven mountains with Rome, the seven-hilled city, Dyer writes, “The figure of a mountain is used in the Old Testament to refer to a kingdom” (Dyer, 1987, p.439) and associates the seven mountains with seven kingdom’s under Babylon’s influence rather than a physical location. This interpretation serves to disassociate the reference to Babylon from Rome and ties the secondary meaning of its identity that will be explored in detail later in this paper.

As one would expect considering the mystery of the identity of Babylon (Rev 17:5), the interpretation that it represents a literal city has grown more evident with the passing of time. By the time John received and wrote down his vision in the latter part of the first century, approximately six hundred years had passed since Babylon had fallen into the hands of Cyrus the Great. John’s original audience would have never imagined the role the city of Babylon would play in the End Times. However, nearly two thousand years closer to the events John wrote about, his vision has begun to come into focus. At the end of the 19th Century German archeologists discovered the remnants of Babylon in modern day Iraq. Since then, efforts have commenced to restore the city to its former glory. Using money raised by the World Monuments Fund, Iraq’s State Board of Antiquities and Heritage is endeavoring to preserve and restore Babylon (World Monuments Fund, 2012). It is an effort that makes sense if the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 is interpreted as a literal city.

Reverend Jimmy Stallard argues that Babylon has always represented the city of man as opposed to Jerusalem, the city of God and also locates Babylon in modern day Iraq (Stallard, 2012. p.5). Stallard writes, “The modern day state of Iraq with the modern Euphrates River is the same territory that covered ancient Babylon with King Nebuchadnezzar … it is possible that the Antichrist will set up headquarters in a rebuilt Babylon as part of his peace initiative with other
nations and with Israel (Daniel 9:27). This would be a sign that the times of the Gentiles is fast coming to a close” (Stallard, 2012. p.5).

Finally, interpreting Babylon as a literal city has the potential of fulfilling the prophecies of Jeremiah 50 and 51. Jeremiah made many prophecies concerning Babylon. For instance, Jeremiah predicted a sudden destruction for Babylon (Jer. 51:8). However, Dyer asserts this wasn’t the case for ancient Babylon, “Rather than destroying Babylon, Cyrus helped rebuild portions of the city that were in 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” (Dyer, 1987, p.443). Jeremiah also wrote that Babylon’s destruction would be so complete that it would have no inhabitants (Jer. 50:3). However, when German archeologists discovered the remains of the city in the 19th Century, they found makeshift villages within the city’s remnants (Dyer, 1987, p.444). Dyer writes, “… when Babylon fell to Medo-Persia … she remained populated and productive for centuries after her initial fall (Dyer, 1987, p.444). In order for the prophecies of Jeremiah to be fulfilled literally, the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 must be interpreted and fulfilled as a literal city.

However, interpreting Babylon as a literal city does not preclude the possibility there are other meanings behind its mystery. The next section of this paper will explore the possibility that Babylon also represents an ecclesiastical, political, and commercial system.

**Babylon as an Ecclesiastical, Political, and Commercial System**

John Walvoord asserts that the concept of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18 expands upon the revelation found in Revelation 14:8, “… Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality” (Walvoord, 2011, p.17 – Rev 14:8, NASB). Likewise, Revelation 17:5 describes Babylon as the mother of harlots and of
the abominations of the earth. It is within this context that it can be seen that the literal city of Babylon will be at the forefront of an apostate ecclesiastical and political system.

Walvoord argues that the ‘Babylon’ mentioned in Revelation 17 and 18 should be associated with an “ecclesiastical or spiritual entity” (Walvoord, 2011, c.17). It is for this reason that Protestants commonly associate the harlot of Revelation with the Catholic Church. Such an association is understandable, as Walvoord suggests, “It has been noted by many writers that the iniquitous and pagan rites of Babylon crept into the early church and were largely responsible for the corruptions incorporated in Roman Catholicism from which Protestantism separated itself…” (Walvoord, 2011, c.17). However, it seems unlikely that the Roman Catholic Church fulfills the entire scope of this vision.

John writes that the harlot of the vision in Chapter 17 “sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality and … the dwellers on earth have become drunk” (Revelation 17:1-2). The context of this passage seems to suggest that the harlot’s influence will reach the far corners of the earth. While the Roman Catholic Church has exhibited various degrees of influence throughout history, it seems unlikely that the Catholic Church in and of itself can be equated with the sort of influence the harlot of John’s vision exhibits. Rather, it would seem more prudent to view the Catholic Church as merely one player in the Harlot of Babylon’s scheme.

Walvoord asserts, “From these various passages, it becomes clear that Babylon in Scripture is the name for a great system of religious error … a counterfeit religion that plagued Israel in the Old Testament as well as the church in the New Testament…” (Walvoord, 2011, c.17). Constable takes this approach one step further and argues, “The harlot represents Babylon
that is a "mother of harlots," not just one herself, but the fountainhead of many other evil religious systems and everything anti-Christian” (Constable, p.154).

The context of the passage certainly suggests that both Walvoord and Constable are correct. Rather than suggesting that the mystery Babylon in this passage represents a specific entity such as the Catholic Church, the prudent expositor will recognize the spiritual Babylon of Chapter 17 represents something far wider and monstrous in scope. This spiritual Babylon may incorporate several entities including the Catholic Church, paganism, modern skepticism, and alternative religions. In fact, it is rather overwhelming to consider, but the spiritual Babylon of Chapter 17 may include those branches of the Church that claim to be Christian yet teach things in opposition of Christ’s gospel. Basically, this spiritual Babylon is an ecumenical and political system that opposes the true Church of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the ecclesiastical and political aspects of Babylon, there is also a commercial system. In fact, Thomas R. Edgar asserts that the influence of this future Babylon will be chiefly economic, “The control of the city [Babylon] is indirect rather than political. The kings of the earth commit fornication with her – that is, they are involved in an illicit rather than governmental connection. Her merchants (not kings) are the princes of the earth” (Edgar, 1982, p.340). Edgar advances his argument by suggesting that this economical system will be “powerful, rich, and worldwide” in accordance with Revelation 17:4, 17:15, 18:3, 18:19, and 18:23 (Edgar, 1982, p.341).

However, Edgar carries his argument too far by suggesting that this Babylonian system will be economical at the exclusion of any political or ecclesiastical attributes (p.340). It is a mistake that he seems to recognize when he writes, “The statement that this passage does not describe an ecclesiastical entity does not preclude the fact that the entity herein does demonstrate
the spiritual enmity and opposition of the world to spiritual truth” (Edgar, 1982, p.335-336). It is far more likely that the Babylonian system will exhibit ecclesiastical, political, and economic traits collectively.

**Blending the Literal City with the Spiritual, Political, and Economic System**

When an interpreter begins piecing together all of the attributes of the Babylon presented in Revelation 17 and 18, the framework of a likely End Times scenario begins to take shape. First, the literal city of Babylon will resurface in a manner that matches its former glory (Revelation 17:5, 17:18). With this city as a center of influence a corrupt ecclesiastical, political, and economic system will develop that will stretch across the kingdoms of the world (Revelation 17:1-2, 18:3). It is from within this system that the antichrist will emerge (17:8). Quite possibly, the rebuilt Babylon will serve as the Antichrist’s headquarters as he negotiates peace treaties with Israel and other nations (Daniel 9:27). It is at his hands that the city of Babylon and its influential system will suffer judgment (Revelation 17:16-17). Hoyt writes, “The judgment which falls upon this religious system is providential in character, being executed by the antichrist and the ten kings at the middle of the tribulation period when Antichrist has at last come to world power” (Hoyt, 1969, p.218-219). When this judgment is executed, the city of Babylon will suffer an utter and final destruction satisfying the prophecies of Jeremiah 50-51. And all those left on the earth will mourn her destruction (Revelation 18:9-24).\(^4\)

The evolution of the future Babylonian Empire will resemble the building of the Tower of Babel on a much larger scale.\(^5\) It will represent mankind’s attempt to create an artificial heaven. It will be man’s final attempt to make a name for himself outside of the influence of

\(^4\) Of course, it is safe to assume that all of this will take place after the rapture of the Church. Rev 17:8 specifically mentions that those left on the earth during this time possess names that have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the word.

God. Men built the Tower of Babel to demonstrate what he was capable of - the future Babylonian Empire will be no different. When the LORD saw the Tower, He said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech (Genesis 11:6-7, NASB). It was only then that mankind abandoned building their city. From that moment on, however, sinful man has been attempting to rebuild that city. The Babylonian Empire of Revelation 17 and 18 will be the culmination of such efforts. As a result, it will face God’s wrath. In this sense, the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis and the Babylonian Empire of Revelation form the bookends encompassing the story of mankind’s revolt against God.

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the identity and nature of the Babylon of Revelation Chapters 17 and 18. First and foremost, it has been asserted that Scripture clearly identifies Babylon as a literal city. Because of the clarity with which Scripture makes this assertion one must begin here when identifying the Babylon of Revelation. It has also been demonstrated that this city is most likely, the actual city of Babylon known from antiquity. This conclusion is probable in light of the prophecies of Jeremiah 50-51 which have yet to have been literally fulfilled. While the city of Babylon did succumb to neglect, it never experienced the sudden and final destruction that Jeremiah 50-51 predicted. Thus, these prophecies can still be considered to have future fulfillments. Also, the four keys of interpretation as outlined by Dyer all point to the Babylon of Revelation as being a literal city.

However, the acknowledgement that John’s prophesy demonstrates a resurgence of the city of Babylon does not preclude that this city will be the hub of influence for an ecclesiastical,
political, and economical kingdom that will stand in opposition to the Kingdom of God. It has been argued that the influence of this system will reach the far corners of the earth and that the world’s leaders will become “drunk” in their involvement with it.

It should also be noted that it is from this system that the Antichrist will eventually arise. It is by his hands, midway through the tribulation period, that the city of Babylon will suffer its final judgment. It will be a judgment so sudden and final that no one will ever live within the borders of the city again. Thus, the prophecies of Jeremiah 50-51 will be literally fulfilled. Finally, all those left on the earth at this time will mourn over the sudden loss of the city Babylon, the symbol and hub of a corrupt ecclesiastical, political, and economic empire that stretched across the entire world.

Reverend J. Stallard writes that throughout the history of Babylon, “It [has been] portrayed as the city of man as opposed to the city of God, Jerusalem” (Stallard, 2012, p.5). It is for this reason that any interpretation of the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 that fails to recognize it as a literal city and includes a vast ecclesiastical, political, and economical system fails to accurately capture its scope. Essentially, the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 represents the ultimate Tower of Babel. It will be the pinnacle of mankind’s creation as opposed to the Creation of God.

Finally, the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 is a literal city as well as the embodiment of an ecclesiastical, political, and economic system. It will encompass the system of man as it opposes the system of God. It is the Tower of Babel on an epic scale and will suffer a final and complete destruction. This is the most likely answer to the question of the identity of Babylon according to Revelation Chapters 17 and 18.
References


