

# MYSTERY: BABYLON THE GREAT

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Revelation 17

## Introduction:

*“Lying silently in the shifting sands of time, Babylon is destined to rise from the ashes of the past to play a major role in end-time events. The name Babylon brings to mind incredible images of a wicked city-state with an abominable religious system. This wicked religious system will once again sweep across the world, corrupting everything it touches—religiously, politically, and economically.”*  
(David Levy, Revelation: Hearing the Last Word, p. 189)

Chapter 17 is the third time that Babylon is mentioned in the book of Revelation. The name Babylon comes up another 3 times in chapter 18. However the city of Babylon is a very prominent city in the Old Testament and particularly the prophecy of Jeremiah. In the Old Testament the name Babylon is used 262 times, and of those 149 are in the 52 chapters of Jeremiah.

In Revelation 17-18 we find John’s description of the rise and fall of Babylon during the Tribulation period. Earlier in the book of Revelation, the demise of this great revived city is prophesied. In chapter 14, in the messages of the three angels, we read – *read 14:8*. Then last week, in chapter 16, as we read about the seven bowls of God’s wrath and final judgment, we find Babylon’s destruction again predicted. When the seventh bowl is poured out on the earth and everything is coming to a close, we read in 16:19 – *read it*.

Now, in chapters 17-18 we are given more details about the rise and fall of this great city during the Tribulation. The events in these chapters do not follow chapter 16 chronologically. As in a number of other places in this book, we are given additional information that fills in details, without adding to the timeline or chronology of the Tribulation period.

The rise of the revived Babylonian system, as it is described in chapter 17, will occur during the first half of the Tribulation. Chapter 18 describes the destruction of the great economic and commercial centre of Babylon, which will occur quite suddenly at the end of the Tribulation.

## Introducing the Great Harlot, Babylon – vv. 1-6

In vv. 1-6, what John is seeing is a vision of the religious system of the first half of the Tribulation. In verses 1-2, the angel declares to the Apostle John that he is about to be given a new revelation above and beyond what he saw through the first sixteen chapters. As we have already said, by the end of chapter 16, he has received revelation of events through the end of the Tribulation, all the way through the Campaign of Armageddon. Now, he hears an angelic declaration of a new revelation, and in verse one, he is told that the new revelation is that of *the great harlot (prostitute)*.

The angel says, *I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute*. The older translations use the word *harlot* but the more common term today is *“prostitute.”* As a verb, “to prostitute” something is to take something that has a proper use and use it in an improper way. A prostitute, as we usually think of that term, does this with the sexual act. Sex has a legitimate purpose within marriage, but the prostitute takes that which has a legitimate purpose and uses it in an illegitimate way. In this passage, the *harlot (prostitute)* does the same with religion. There is a proper use of religion, as James points out:

*“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (Jas 1:27 ESV)*

True religion is to visit the fatherless and take care of the widows; true religion is taking on the role of a servant; true biblical religion means servanthood, service, serving people who have needs and meeting their needs. However, when religion is prostituted, it moves from the position of servanthood to the position of lordship, where it begins to rule. That is what happens in Revelation 17: the harlot prostitutes religion and moves it from its legitimate use, which is serving, to an illegitimate use, which is ruling.

Throughout the Old Testament, idolatry was viewed as spiritual fornication and spiritual adultery (Hos. 1-3; Ezek. 16:15-41). Furthermore, in this verse, the harlot *sits upon many waters*; verse 15 defines *many waters*: it represents the population of the world.

She sits, then, upon the population of the world, which means she rules over the religious affairs of the world. That is how she has prostituted religion—from a position of service and serving to a position of ruling and authority.

The passage goes on to describe her fornication with the kings of the earth (17:2). This is a union of religion and state that results in mutual corruption, both of the religious and political sphere.

In verses 3-6, John receives the revelation of the harlot. Verse three points out that the woman rules with the support of civil government. In these verses there are a number of elements which really need more explanation than we have time to give this morning. There are a number of OT prophecies, especially those in Daniel, which we have not looked at but are relevant to an understanding of this passage.

In the first half of the Tribulation, the world will be ruled by ten kings over ten nations, and these ten kings will be supporters of this one-world religious system. The woman rules with the support of civil government. Verse three states three things: *first*, the harlot sits on a *scarlet-colored beast*, which is the same as the fourth Beast in Daniel 7; *second*, she has names full of *blasphemy*, showing she is in opposition to the true God and that this is a false religious system; *third*, the Beast has *seven heads and ten horns*, describing the governmental system of the first half of the Tribulation.

In verse four, John describes her as being both wealthy (*adorned with gold*) and influential. She is also guilty of spiritual fornication, because she has in her hand a *golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality*. She is the counterfeit bride of the Messiah. We have already seen Satan's counterfeit trinity. Now we see the false church, the counterfeit bride of Christ.

In verse five, he finally comes to the point of the revelation of the mystery: her name is a name of mystery, meaning a truth that has been unknown, but is now revealed. She is called *BABYLON THE GREAT, MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF EARTH'S ABOMINATIONS*. Here, he describes *BABYLON THE GREAT* as *THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES*, meaning that Babylon is the originator of idolatry and, therefore, of spiritual fornication.

So where does this corrupt religious system originate? The origin is the city of Babylon, and the term *the Mother of Prostitutes* means that Babylon is where idolatry and spiritual fornication began. This is something that is clearly affirmed by the Book of Genesis. Genesis 10:8-12 deals with Nimrod the empire builder. Verses 8-9 describe him as *the mighty hunter*, and in verse ten, he first built the city of Babylon and the nation of Babylonia. Verses 11-12 state that he eventually left Babylonia for Assyria and built Nineveh without stating why he left Babylon. But Genesis 11:1-9, which gives the account of the Tower of Babel, shows why Nimrod left Babylon for Assyria and Nineveh. Babel is Babylon (in Hebrew it is the same word), which was built by Nimrod. The Tower of Babel (Babylon) itself was built for astrological purposes. Here, then, is the first real mention of idolatry; therefore, indeed, *BABYLON THE GREAT* is the *MOTHER OF HARLOTS*. God judged the Tower of Babel in Babylon with the confusion of tongues or languages, forcing a dispersion of the people; it was this confusion of tongues that forced Nimrod to move from Babylon to Assyria, where he built Nineveh.

In Revelation 17:6, the writer moves on to describe the persecution of the saints, pointing out that this false religious system will be the persecutor of believers in the Messiah during the first half of the Tribulation – *read v. 6*. Martyrs – witnesses.

## Explaining the Harlot and the Beast – vv. 7-14

As John looks at the spectacular sight of this woman seated on a scarlet beast, he was no doubt overwhelmed. *“He marveled at her ostentatious dress, her idolatrous practices, the murder of defenseless saints, and her alliance with pagan Rome...”* (Levy, p. 197) At this point the angel asks a somewhat rhetorical question, *“Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with the seven heads and ten horns that carries her...”* (v. 7)

Verses 8-14 proceed to describe the government that is supporting this false religious system. He has already said what the mystery is (v. 7): *I will tell you the mystery of the woman*. The mystery is not Babylon itself, nor is the mystery the fact that Babylon was the originator and center of idolatry; we know all of that from the Old Testament. The mystery is the fact that Babylon will develop into a one-world unified religion,

and will rule the world religiously for the first half of the Tribulation. It will be supported by the governments of that day; and it will be the primary persecutor of believers who will not submit to its religious authority. All of this was totally unrevealed in the Old Testament.

These verses describe in some detail the relationship between the woman and the beast upon which she is being carried. As we have just pointed out, the woman in this chapter is the satanically inspired world religious system, known as Babylon the Great. The identity of the beast is not as clear. Previously in this book, Satan, the Antichrist and the revived Roman Empire have all been identified as beasts. It seems most likely that the beast here is the revived Roman Empire, the one-world government that is being established. What we are seeing is an ecclesiastical and governmental alliance—the coming together of government and religion. The false religious system is being supported and carried by the satanic government system of the Antichrist.

There are a lot of details given in these verses that I am not going to go into, partly for the sake of time, and partly because there is no universally accepted understanding of what is meant by John's description and the angel's explanation of the vision of the heads and the horns.

What I believe is important is found in v. 14 – *read it*. This unholy alliance of government and false religion will oppose the Lamb (Christ) and all those who follow him. But the Bible is clear that the Lamb will ultimately win and will conquer them.

## **The Destruction of the Great Harlot – vv. 15-18**

In the final verses of this chapter we see a dramatic turn-around. The harlot's diabolical religious system will have influence over the entire world by the mid-point of the Tribulation. In verse 2 John saw the woman *"...seated on many waters..."* Verse 15 defines that for us. The waters *"...are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues."* As Levy states, *"The world's population will have become submissive to her seductive lure, being made drunk with the wine of her heathenish religious teaching and worship."*

But at this point everything changes – *read vv. 16-18*. In speaking about what happens at the mid-point in the Tribulation, Levy says,

*"An abrupt turnabout will be made by the "ten horns" (v. 16) who follow the beast in uncompromising obedience. They will awaken from their drunken stupor with the woman, whose charm and seduction will have lost their lure. Love for the woman will turn to "hate" (v. 16) as the ten kings, along with the beast, destroy her just before the midpoint of the Tribulation. They will make "her desolate" (v. 16), or divest her of all the wealth she has confiscated. They will make her "naked" (v. 16), stripping away her personal support, position, power, and prestige, and thus exposing her moral corruption. They "shall eat her flesh" (v. 16), like wild dogs devoured the corpse of Jezebel (cp. 1 Kings 21:23; 2 Kings 9:30-37). They will "burn her with fire" (v. 16), totally eliminating any identity of the woman and her false religious system."*

The interesting thing about this is that, in the destruction of this false religious system, they are actually carrying out God's will. *Read v. 17*. It is at this point, in the middle of the Tribulation, that the beast (the Antichrist) will have consolidated his power over the entire world. He will then rule for the next 3½ years, the second half of the Tribulation.

Finally, in verse 18, it is stated that the headquarters of Mystery Babylon will be the city of Babylon. Chapter 18 then goes on to detail the destruction of the city itself as part of the Campaign of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation.

## **Conclusion**

How do we wrap this up and apply it? Does any of this mean anything for us today? Well, directly I guess it doesn't because if you are a believer you will be taken out in the Rapture before any of this happens.

But I think there are still some valuable lessons in this for us. As we look at the coming one world system of government and religion, we can see the seeds of that future system already beginning to sprout. Economically and politically we are gradually moving further and further toward a global system.

Religiously, we also cannot help but see the steady progression toward a global system. The push is on to bring together all of the world religions into a one-world ecumenical system, where all religious views are not only tolerated, but welcomed. All views, that is, except for those

who cling to the truth of God's Word and the belief that God's Word is the only absolute truth.

As far back as the first century, the Apostle John warned that the spirit of antichrist was already in the world. Listen to these words:

*"Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." (1 John 2:18-19).*

Then in chapter 4 John reminds us again that we need to be on guard against the corruption of the truth:

*"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:1-4).*

So, already the way is being prepared for the coming of that unholy, corrupt religious system that will seduce the world into following the Antichrist during the Tribulation. It will ultimately be destroyed. But we need to be alert and on guard against heretical religious systems in our day, which try to corrupt and subjugate us their evil ways.