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Revelation 17:7-18:8: Interpreting the Beast and Fall of Babylon

Introduction into Chapter 17

Before we move on, I want to return to one Old Testament text. It was Isaiah 21:1 that portrayed Babylon as in connection with a desert, so that may provide some of the background for the setting of John’s vision here in chapter 17. Likewise, when Babylon is called the “mother of all prostitutes,” the imagery may also convey that she produces these things and others in other nations and those that she seduces, as well as the abominations of the earth. Again, calling her responsibility for the idolatrous practices of the nations that now she reproduces in them.

Now, in verse 7 then, John respond with complete astonishment. There may be a couple notions involved in his response. One of them may be fear because of what he sees. Given the angel’s response when he says, “Why are you astonished? I will explain this mystery.” It’s probably also one of perplexity and wondering what in the world that he saw and how to understand it. It may also be that John himself found the vision attractive and was, in a sense, startled by the beauty and attraction of what he saw. Now the angel is going to respond to his astonishment and amazement and perhaps attraction by, actually starting here with verse 7, he’s going to describe exactly what it was John saw, not taking every single detail of the vision in the first six verses, but taking most of the features of the vision and now beginning to unpack them.

Was, Is Not, and Is Coming

The first intriguing thing to note about the vision is John describes the beast in very intriguing language. Three times in the section, here in this verse twice and then later on in verse 11, John will use the language of the beast “was, is not, and is coming.” Probably this is meant as a direct contrast to and parody of the way that God is described
in chapter 1 in verse 8 and chapter 4 in verse 8 and also chapter 11 in verse 10 and in 14 too, where its only twofold. There it is only twofold; you don’t have “is coming” in chapter 11 verse 14 because God has already come. But in 1:8 and 4:8, we find the one “who was, who is, and who is coming” and now, it’s as if in contrast to that as a direct parody the beast is described as one who “was, is not, and who is coming.” The fact that he “is not” probably refers back to Revelation 13, where one of his heads had a death blow because of the death and resurrection of Christ, that spelled out his defeat casting him out of heaven. So the fact that he “was and is not” suggests that his death blow and his judgment and defeat were because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we saw in chapter 13 the entire world was amazed because he apparently was able to overcome that and to survive that.

But the other feature, though, is that he “is coming,” which probably contrasts to all the references throughout Revelation to Christ coming and to God’s coming in the future. Now, Satan is coming but ironically, he comes up out of the Abyss, but in order to go into destruction. So unlike God and the Lamb’s coming, which results in salvation and the establishment of God’s Kingdom, the coming of the beast results in his destruction, which we will see later on in chapter 19. So this is meant to clearly contrast the beast’s existence to that of God and the Lamb. This idea of the Lamb or of the beast, coming out of the Abyss and going into destruction, may also reflect the motif that you find in apocalyptic literature, especially the Enoch literature, 1 and 2 Enoch, of demonic beings who are locked in prison for a time only to be let out to go into their judgment. That would certainly fit here, that the purpose of the beast coming out of the Abyss, he’s locked in the Abyss and then he comes out, in order to go to his destruction, in order to go into his judgment.

So I would take it then that in the next two mentions of this motif, of this title “the one who was and is not and is coming,” the “is coming” would be understood as he is coming in order to go into destruction. It’s because of his nature, because he “was but is not” and now apparently “is coming.” It’s for this reason that the nations are deceived.
Some have suggested this he “is not and is coming,” reflects the myth of Nero, that there were all kinds of uncertainty surrounding his death and some even thinking that he actually did not really die, that he was going to come back and reclaim his throne and some have suggested that that lies behind this title. It’s possible that could provide the backdrop but clearly John’s primary impetus is to draw a contrast with the divine name, the one “who was, who is and who is coming.” Now Satan’s, or the beast’s, existence is seen in similar terms, again he is a poor parody. Instead of “is,” he “is not,” showing his defeat and when he comes, it will be for the purpose of going into destruction. So, that’s how John describes the beast, or the angel describes to John the beast that he saw as a parody of the existence of God and the Lamb. For the beast number one that will result in his punishment and destruction, one that will get narrated in chapter 19.

The Seven Heads

Now, perhaps the trickiest part of this is what the angel does with the seven heads of the beast. The beast is described as having seven heads and ten horns. The angel is now going to interpret those seven heads and the ten horns for us. This is where it gets a little bit tricky. The seven heads are interpreted in two ways and this would not be unusual in apocalyptic literature, that an image could have more than one meaning, so we don’t need to see inconsistency here or more than one source or something like that. It’s possible that an apocalyptic image could carry more than one connotation. So the angel says, “the seven heads are the seven hills,” identifying the beast here with Rome; the woman riding on, or sitting on the beast here identifying the woman as Rome.

But the seven heads are also seven kings, or seven rulers. The angel says out of these seven, five of them have already ruled and fallen, that is the rule is finished. One is currently ruling, he says five have fallen, one is, and one is to come. So five have already fallen, one currently is, and there is one yet to come. If we take these seven heads as seven kings and the seven kings being emperors, the seven kings of Rome, that is seven
emperors. Some have said these are seven kingdoms, but I think probably we should take these as seven rulers, or seven kings, that is, emperors over the Roman Empire.

The question then is: how are we to identify these? Some have used this text to try to date Rome. That is, if we can identify who “the one is,” when John says “five have fallen and one is,” that would give us a clue as to when the book of Revelation was written perhaps. The problem is when you begin to look at the list of emperors. Let’s assume for example that we hold to the view that Revelation probably was written under Domitian, the difficulty is that if you start with Julius Caesar, the first emperor, and work through the list, including Domitian, you have twelve emperors. So if you go through seven, then you fall short of Domitian. In fact, to arrive at any date, you sort of have to do gymnastics with or explain your way around the list of twelve. There’s more after Domitian. There have been a couple suggestions as to even a later date, but since Domitian is the most common date, I’m stopping there. But you have twelve emperors to work through. The question is, out of these seven, which of those twelve might this refer to? That might determine when we date it. Some have suggested we don’t start with Julius Caesar, but we, for different reasons, start a little bit later. We’ve already noted that in 68 and 69 AD, there were three emperors that ruled in quick succession. They were deposed from the throne and some have suggested we retain those in the list, some suggest we should skip that because of the short, brief time that John would not have thought of counting them as part of the seven. So there have been all kinds of suggestions as to where do we start counting the emperors and who do we include in this list of seven.

I think it’s better to take this list as symbolic. That is, we’ve already noted how often the number seven is used of completeness and perfection. Let’s assume it was written during the time of Domitian, I don’t think John is using seven to refer to any seven specific, literal emperors but seven suggests the complete number and the complete rule of Rome’s emperors, rather than seven literal, specific emperors out those that he has in mind. So looking at all of Rome’s emperors, perhaps even beyond, obviously beyond because there’s one still to come, if Domitian is, and I don’t want to place too much
weight on this, “the one who is,” then “the one who is yet to come,” again that is the seventh, John is looking at all of the emperors who would rule Rome, symbolizing their complete rule by the number seven.

Now the fact, what does he mean when he says “five have fallen, one is, and one is to come?” First of all, I think this is another ironic repetition of the formula applied to God, “the one who was, who is, and who is to come.” Now, “five have fallen, one is, and one is coming.” So he’s portrayed not only the beast, but he’s portrayed the entire existence and life of the Roman Empire and its emperors, once more, as a parody of, an imitation of, the moniker of God as “the one who was, who is, and who is coming.” So this language is partially meant to reflect that divine title and that not only the beast but Roman Empire, the life of Rome, the span of the Roman Empire, repeats and imitates and is a parody of the existence of Rome, or God’s existence reflected in “the one who was, who is, and who is coming.”

Furthermore, I think this language that “five have fallen, one is, and one is to come,” is meant simply to demonstrate that evil is running its course, that this will not last. The bulk of Rome’s rule is over and it’s reign is only going to be for a short time before God brings it to an end, before God comes and judges the Roman Empire. So when he says, “five have fallen, one is, one is to come,” it’s simply to show it won’t last forever. The Roman Empire will not last forever, but the last two, “the one who is and the one who is to come,” will fall just like the first five. So we’re not meant to add up and figure out seven literal rulers. By saying “five are already fallen,” the bulk of Rome’s evil rule has already taken place and is yet to last for a short time, but it too, the other rulers will fall just like the first five.

Now, what is intriguing is note how the beast is described in relationship to all this. You can kind of see the apocalyptic symbolism going on here, the rulers are actually the beast’s heads. But now note how the beast is described in verse 11. The beast who “once was and now is not,” he is an eighth king, he belongs to the seven and he is going
to his destruction. So it’s interesting, the beast is associated with the seven heads, which are seven emperors or rulers, yet the beast seems to represent an eighth. What I think this is suggesting most likely is the future coming of the beast at the very end of history, the same beast that inspires the seven, in other words the whole span of the Roman Empire that will run its course, the beast functions then as an eighth that is yet to come at the end of history; but when he does, he will go to his destruction.

So the point of all this then is simply to demonstrate the nature of the beast’s existence, as much as it is able to wield its authority through its emperors and even though it will come at the end of history as the eighth, the Roman rule simply won’t last. It’s headed for destruction and it’s headed for judgment so what do the readers have to fear and now they can see Rome in a new light.

The Ten Horns

The next feature then is the ten horns, which the angel interprets as ten kingdoms. So the seven heads represent the entire span of Roman rule and the emperors with the beast, after that, the beast coming as an eighth at the end of history, but he will go into destruction. So human kingdoms and human rule will not last; it’s temporary, it will end in destruction. Now the ten horns, the angel identifies as ten kingdoms. Probably, like the number seven, we should not take these as ten literal kingdoms that we can identify on a map. Ten is symbolic of completeness, ten being symbolic of a full or complete number, now is meant to symbolize the nations of the world that will rule along with the beast, or along with Rome. Again, I don’t think we are meant to try to identify ten specific ones as much as we are to see the fullness and completeness of all the nations who will be in collusion with the beast.

Probably, these are to be identified with the “kings of the earth” back in chapter 16, verse 14, that Satan and the beast and false prophet are through three frogs allowed to deceive into gathering for an end-time battle. And, in fact, that’s exactly what happens here, the beast and the nations of the earth come together for one purpose, and that is as
allies in an all-out war against the Lamb. But, the result is what has already been depicted and predicted in the first several verses of this interpretation and that is, the beast is going to destruction and so will the nations that collude with the beast and with the Roman Empire. They all will collude and become allies in making war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will defeat them. So there’s really no battle that takes place here at all.

So in a sense then this is another very brief reference to an end-time battle. Back in chapter 16 in verse 14, we were introduced to the Battle of Armageddon, which we saw there. The Battle of Armageddon is a symbol of end-time battle. The Battle is not described here. If we are to identify this with the battle in chapter 16, here the war is sort of described briefly, but it’s really not a war at all. The Lamb simply destroys and defeats his enemies. Note the language of one hour, this happens in one hour. One hour, probably, being a reference to or symbolic of, simply, a short period of time.

The Woman, the Beast, and the Nations

A couple of other interesting features of this interpretation, that leads us to the end of chapter 17. First, note that the angel interprets the waters, back from verse 1 and 2, the waters on which the harlot, the prostitute, Babylon sits. The waters are symbolic of peoples and nations and multitudes and languages. The fact that she sits on the waters probably indicates the beast’s or woman’s, Babylon, Rome’s authority over all the nations. What is next, though, is rather astonishing, we’ve already seen the beast and the woman being separate, the woman riding the beast, which may suggest the beast as symbolic of evil and chaos and demonically-inspired, the beast and the woman being separate.

Now the beast and the ten nations seem to turn on the prostitute, Babylon, the Great City, and to destroy her. What I think this is simply suggesting is, ironically, those who depended on her and even colluded with her for their economic well-being and practices, now turn on her and destroy her. In my opinion, simply, at one level, indicating the self-destructive nature of the empire, the self-destructive nature of sin, that any
empire that sets itself up over God, that arrogates divine authority, that claims the exclusive worship and sovereignty that belongs only to God that maintains itself through violence that seduces others to belong, to participate in its self-seeking wealth. The result is self-destruction. So the beast that gave it the power and underlies its authority and power and now the ten nations that allied with it, now all turn in on it to destroy it, suggesting perhaps, as I said, the self-destructive nature of evil.

So the point of this section so far has been to demonstrate the true nature of, in true apocalyptic fashion, to unveil and demonstrate the true nature of Babylon/Rome. It is a prostitute that seduces other nations to be involved in its idolatrous economic practices. It seduces other nations to participate in its wealth and in its excessive luxury, in its lust for more. It also is guilty of violence in killing those who oppose it, especially the people of God who have maintained their faithful witness. It is guilty of arrogating divine power and divine authority and for all these reasons, its end is destruction. No matter how great the beast appears and no matter how significant a role its seven emperors, play, at the end of the day, it will bring about its destruction.

This demonstrates why Babylon/Rome is ripe for destruction. It demonstrates, “Why chapter 18? Why then the destruction?” Chapter 17 has spelled that out. But it also then shows the churches exactly what or who it is that they are facing by unveiling the true nature of Rome and what is at stake in resisting it or in participating in it. If they choose to participate, they are guilty along with the other nations of committing adultery with her. Churches such as Laodicea, that are complacent and are wealthy, or other churches that have compromised or are allowing those who have compromised with the idolatrous, godless, Roman economic system, now this chapter would remind them exactly what is at stake in colluding with Rome. Why is it that they should be so intent on maintaining their faithful witness and refusing to conform and compromise?

Now, chapter 17 has demonstrated, again, Rome in its true colors. It is a seductive prostitute that through its alluring appearance and through its attraction, covers up its
hideous sinful nature, covers up the fact that it is headed for judgment and causes nations to commit adultery with it. This is a call then for the Church to separate from that. Chapter 18, we’ll begin in verse 4, “Come out of her.” And why? Because she’s this prostitute whose headed for destruction so, “Come out of her. Do not be involved in her sinful practices, so that you will not participate in her judgment.”

**Introduction to Chapter 18**

Now that brings us to chapter 18. Chapter 18, then, reveals in more detail the destruction of the prostitute, Babylon. In fact, this is what we would expect back in chapter 17:1, did not the angel tell John that he was going to show him the judgment of the prostitute, Babylon? And in fact that’s what John narrates here but he’s already introduced that at the very end of chapter 17. We’ve said chapter 17 shows the reason for Babylon’s fall. But chapter 17 already ended with a brief hint of her destruction, that the nations and the beast would turn against her and turn on her and destroy her. So it was briefly referred to in chapter 17:16 at the end, but now chapter 18 gives us more details concerning the destruction of Babylon.

Chapter 18 ends up being sort of a pashtist of Old Testament texts; Old Testament texts taken usually from judgment oracles out of Jeremiah 50 and 51 as we’ve seen, and out of Isiah in relationship to Tyre and other nations, and a couple of other Old Testament texts. All now come together to portray Babylon/Rome as sort of the embodiment of all these other nations who suffered judgment.

The other thing to mention about chapter 18 before we read it is that chapter 18 does not seem to follow into chronological order, or I should say, the events in chapter 18, the sections in chapter 18, do not seem to follow in chronological order. We’ll look at that in more detail in a moment.

But the point is to demonstrate, or the point of this section is that, the saints will one day rejoice over the fall of Babylon because it demonstrates God’s justice in avenging their blood and in vindicating them. So for that reason, they should separate
from it to avoid its judgment. So the saints are called upon to separate from Babylon/Rome, to avoid its judgment, and if they do, they will one day rejoice over Babylon’s fall because the fall of Babylon demonstrates God’s justice. It demonstrates that God is just in judging them but also in vindicating and avenging his people.

The Text of Chapter 18

So chapter 18 continues the vision of chapter 17, but now you’ll notice that as we read this there’s very little by way of what John saw and what John sees are several groups. The main content of chapter 18 is auditory in the form of laments and the form of speech, almost all of them are taken right out of the Old Testament. So chapter 18, “After this,” after John saw chapter 17, now he sees this…

“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird,

For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.’

Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

‘Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup. Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, [and here’s what she boasts] ‘I sit as a am queen;
I am not a widow;  
and I will never mourn.’
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
death, mourning and famine.  
She will be consumed by fire,  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.’

When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see  
the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment,  
they will stand far off and cry:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
O Babylon, city of power!  
In one hour your doom has come!’

The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their  
cargoes anymore— cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls [this is what the  
prostitute was dressed with in chapter 17]; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth [the  
dress of the prostitute too]; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of  
ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense,  
myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep;  
horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men. They will say, ‘The fruit that you long  
for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be  
recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will  
stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,  
glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls [there they are again]!  
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’

Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living  
from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will  
exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their  
heads, and with weeping and mourning, they will cry out:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
where all who had ships on the sea  
became rich through her wealth!  
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’
“Rejoice over her, O heaven!
    Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she has treated you.’

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and hurled it into the sea, and said:

“With such violence
    the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,
    never to be found again.
The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters,
    will never be heard in her again.
No workmen of any trade
    will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone
    will never be heard in you again.
The light of a lamp
    will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride
    will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world’s great men.
    By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.
In her was found the blood of the prophets and of the saints,
    and of all who have been killed on the earth.”

Chronology and Focus of Chapter 18

Starting with verse 4 then, the rest of the chapter becomes a series of speeches and laments that now stem from the voice in verse 4. What is important to understand is this section, as we already mentioned, is not primarily a vision. There are visionary elements; it begins, “after this, I saw another angel.” So John does see things, but what he sees is an angel and what he sees are different groups and persons who uttered the orations or who are responsible for the laments and the speeches.

Verse 4 then begins the voice from heaven that now will characterize the rest of the chapter. I’ve already mentioned and I want to demonstrate briefly, it appears to me that the audition, all these orations are not necessarily in chronological order. For example, in verses 1 through 3, these verses seem to assume that Babylon has already
fallen. To back up, the first thing I want to say, although the angel promises to show John the destruction of Babylon, there’s really no narrative of the destruction at all. Chapter 18 really does not depict in any detail the destruction; it more demonstrates the results of the destruction and those who respond to it. So it more or less assumes the destruction. But verses 1-3, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons,” verses 1-3 seem to assume that Babylon has already or just fallen.

But then with verse 4, when John hears another voice, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.” This seems to assume that Babylon has not yet fallen, that is, these events in 4-8 seem to take place before the fall of Babylon. Then verses 9-20, seem to refer to events following and in response to the fall of Babylon, in the form of persons who mourn because of her fall. So, chapter 18 is not intended to present a chronological order, but again is meant more to interpret the nature of Babylon’s fall through the series of speeches and laments. It’s interesting, as I’ve already mentioned, that chapter 18 assumes the fall of Babylon, yet it does not refer to it explicitly; it never actually narrates it.

**Old Testament Backgrounds**

Chapter 18 then is constructed of Old Testament oracles of judgment against pagan cities such as Jeremiah 50-51 and Babylon. Also oracles against Nineveh or Tyre, are all now combined into this Babylon/Rome, this Great City, that is now going to be destroyed. The rest of the chapter and we’ll move through it quickly, but the rest of the chapter can be divided according to the various voices.

So the first one is in chapter 18:1-3, which verses 1-3 is in the form of an Old Testament prophetic taunt song. For example, Isaiah chapter 21 in verse 9, which is a song against Babylon,

“Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses.
And he gives back the answer:
‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! [Revelation’s “fallen, fallen is Babylon”]
All the images of its gods
lie shattered on the ground!”

So, given the background of Isaiah 21:9, idolatrous practices may still be in mind here. But as a result of Babylon’s fall, it becomes a place for demons and all kinds of unclean animals, again demonstrating the complete destruction and the complete overturning of the former glory of Babylon. In fact, another Old Testament text that plays a role in describing the downfall of the great city, now finally being laid waste, is another text out of Isaiah in chapter 34 and 11-14. Isaiah 34, in a series of judgments, oracles, against the nations in Isaiah 34: 11-14.

“The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
the great owl and the raven will nest there.
God will stretch out over Edom
the measuring line of chaos
and the plumb line of desolation.
Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom,
all her princes will vanish away.
Thorns will overrun her citadels,
nettles and brambles her strongholds.
She will become a haunt for jackals,
a home for owls.
Desert creatures will meet with hyenas,
and wild goats will bleat with each other;
there the night creatures will also repose
and find for themselves places of rest.”

That’s the language in the text, I think, that John draws upon to describe the destruction of Babylon/Rome, the imagery of the city being laid completely waste. It’s been laid waste; it now is reduced to chaos. It’s now reduced to destruction, indicated by the fact that she’s now a desert wasteland inhabited by all kinds of unclean animals, let alone demonic beings as often demonic beings were associated with desert places.

So the Great City has now been laid waste and the reason is articulated in verse 3, which goes back to the description of the prostitute, or Rome as a prostitute. That is verse 3, “All the nations have been drunk with her wine, all the nations have committed adultery with her,” by being seduced and entrapped into her idolatrous economic
practices. That is, they have bought into Rome’s economic system and now they have become wealthy on her excessive luxury.

So what you’ll notice too with these speeches, not only are these speeches laments, or woes, that come out of the Old Testament portraying the downfall and judgment of a great city or people, but you also find alluding back to chapter 17, you also find the author rearticulating the reasons for Babylon’s fall. Here we find that the reason for Rome’s fall is she has caused other nations, again John has drawn on the language of prostitute and adultery, from Nahum chapter 3 and even Isaiah 23, applying the language of prostitution and adultery to foreign countries, foreign nations. So Rome is guilty of seducing other nations, to commit adultery with her; they are now complicit in her crimes. That is the reason why John, or why Babylon/Rome is now guilty of punishment. They’ve involved other nations in her commercial idolatrous practices.

But also on its own Rome is portrayed as having a lust for consuming wealth and having excessive luxury and wealth. We’ve already seen back in chapter 6 that Rome was guilty of, or part of the judgment on Rome in the form of I think seal 3, for example, Rome is guilty of exploiting even its own provinces, simply for its own benefit and for its own lust for wealth and for its own excessive luxury and did so at the expense and even exploiting the other provinces and the other nations as well.

**Models of the Old Testament**

I’ve already mentioned that much of the model for Revelation chapter 18 is Jeremiah chapter 50, but also texts such as Ezekiel. Ezekiel 27, for example, that focuses on Tyre. I’ve already mentioned the reason for that is probably because Ezekiel chapter 27, which focuses on Tyre, is primarily an economic critique of Tyre while Jeremiah 51 does not seem to condemn wealth. Ezekiel 27 clearly condemns Tyre and focuses on Tyre for its economic exploitation, for its excessive luxury. So it provides a fitting model for John’s critique of Babylon/Rome here in chapter 18. So Babylon is condemned then for its ostentatious display of wealth, its lust and thirst for excessive luxury, and
excessive consumption and then by seducing the nations to participate in that. That is what will bring God’s wrath down on Babylon in the first three verses.

Verses 4-8 then are a call for God’s people to come out of Babylon in order to avoid that judgment. Notice it’s actually twofold. Number one, they are to come out of her so that they will not share in her sins, but second, so that they will not share in her plagues or her judgment. Now this call, if John is speaking to people in Asia Minor or even people living in Rome, it’s hard to imagine that the readers were meant to carry this out literally. In fact, if I’m living in Asia Minor, how do you physically come out of Rome? Its empire is spread everywhere. So that probably we’re to understand this coming out not as physical, but as we’ve seen, especially back in chapters 2 and 3, coming out would mean to overcome by refusing to compromise, by refusing to participate in her idolatrous, economic practices. This is how they would come out of her. So it’s not a physical leaving the city of Rome, and many people were not in Rome, they were in the provinces it was almost impossible to come out of her physically. This is more of a call, another way of saying refuse to compromise, refuse to conform and be involved in her idolatrous, economic practices.

The Old Testament background for this is a number of texts that call for God’s people to leave or come out of Babylon. One of those is found in the text that plays a dominant role is Jeremiah 50 verse 8 where we read, “Flee from Babylon; leave the land of the Babylonians.” But another interesting text in Isaiah chapter 48 and verse 2, for example, in Isaiah chapter 48 and verse 20, I think is the text I’m looking for, “Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! And similar language to Jeremiah chapter 50. But then also, one other intriguing text in Isaiah and that is in chapter 52, verse 11, where he says, “Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing!” If this text also parallels Isaiah chapter 52 and verse 11, “Depart, depart, go out,” and may also lie behind John’s call to leave Babylon. As we’ve seen elsewhere John sometimes will combine a number of Old Testament texts, allude to several texts at once. Isaiah chapter 52, if you read the rest of the chapter, is in the context of a new exodus. So John then is calling on
his readers in a new exodus to leave Babylon, as the Israelites first left Egypt, and to touch no unclean thing. Now they are to leave Babylon/Rome, in a new exodus which will eventually lead them to their promised land which is Revelation 21 and 22 and the new creation. The other important feature about this call to leave Babylon the author says, is the reason that “your sins have piled up to the heavens and now God has remembered her crimes.”

**God’s Relationship with the Fallen Babylon**

Note that theme of remembering that we saw back in chapter 16 as well in the seventh bowl; God remembered Babylon for the purpose of bringing about judgment. The idea is not that God had forgotten and all of a sudden it comes to his mind that he has something he needs to do, but the language of remembering again in that context of God is now faithful to keep his promises to bring about judgment on Babylon/Rome. But what is intriguing here is two things. Number one, note over and over this language that we’ve already seen elsewhere in Revelation that comes out the Old Testament of the judgment fitting the crime. Just as a nation did, God would repay them in turn. So you have this legal language of the judgment now fits the crime. And so in verse 6, “Give back to her as she has given.” So in the same way that Babylon/Rome has seduced other nations and involved them in her adultery, in the same way that she has put to death the saints and through violence shed the blood of God’s people, now she is to be given a judgment that fits the crime.

But the second thing to note is the author seems to at first contradict that when he says, “pay her back double for what she has done, mix her a double portion.” And so some will wonder how do we reconcile the fact that the author says, “Give her back according to what she has done,” but now he says, “let’s ratchet it up a little bit and give her double for what she has done.” Grant Osborne and his commentary, has interpreted this to say that actually what is going on here is this reflects Old Testament texts such as Exodus 22, where if you committed a crime, a person was expected to pay double at
times in restitution for the crime they committed. Others have suggested and the majority view is that this is not so much referring to double punishment, literally, as much as the complete or full punishment that God will give to Babylon/Rome for its crimes.

Another one that I’m attracted to is and I think makes good sense here is that the word “double” is better translated “equivalent.” That is, the punishment produces a duplicate or it balances out, that is almost as if on a scale, the crime on one side then the duplicate, the duplicate punishment balances it out. So that it’s just another way of saying the same thing, the punishment fits the crime, it’s a duplicate of the crime, it balances it out. So I don’t know if we should necessarily see the idea of a double portion here, that is that God says, “I’m going to punish Babylon according to the crime. No, I think I’m going to double it,” is instead maybe we should see it more as in terms of equivalent or duplicate so that this is just another way of saying the punishment will match the crime. That certainly fits the punishment will fit the crime motif found within this section.

**Revelation 18:7-8: Babylon Glorifies Herself**

Verses 7 and 8 then, once more and you’ll find this in most of these speeches, is verses 7 and 8 further describe the reason for the punishment, why is it that God is going to give a punishment fitting the crime because, verses 7 and 8, especially the end of verse 7, “in her heart, she boasts, ‘I sit as queen. I am not a widow.’” In other words, the author’s now reminding us of the crime for which she will be punished and that is she glorifies herself rather than God. “‘I sit as queen,’ in her heart she boasts, ‘I sit as queen,’” is probably meant to contrast with, elsewhere, calls to fear God and give him glory. In direct contradiction and opposition to that, now Rome has boasted by setting herself up as God, by claiming the glory and authority that belongs only to God by now saying, “I sit as queen, I am on my throne, now sitting as the queen over all things.”

But furthermore, as the rest of the text will make clear, that she is also judged because she lives in excessive luxury and especially at the expense of the rest of the empire. So notice we’re building a picture here; Rome lives in excessive luxury, its
selfishly accumulates wealth for itself and at the same time it is guilty of persecuting the saints, it is guilty of violently putting them to death. It is also guilty of causing the other nations to commit adultery with its idolatrous economic practices. Furthermore, now it is portrayed as exalting itself, as glorifying itself, as setting itself up over God, as arrogating divine power and authority. For all those reasons, now, God is going to bring about judgment upon Babylon.

Revelation 18:9-19 Lament of those Seduced

Now what we find in the rest of the section, in verses 9-19, is the various people of the earth that benefitted from Rome’s prosperity and from its economic practices, from its excessive wealth and luxury. Now we find those people, we find groups of those people now singing songs of lament, mourning the destruction and mourning the judgment and downfall of Rome. The reason is obvious because the demise of Rome also means their demise. The demise of Rome now means that they’re now cut off from that by which they also grew wealthy and they also accumulated excessive luxury.

In other words, verses 9-19 are going to be the speech of those that the prostitute, Rome, caused to commit adultery with her by getting them to, again, be involved in its idolatrous, economic practices. Those who have grown wealthy off of the seductive wealth of the prostitute, Rome, now those groups stand around and in the form of a funeral dirge actually, in the form of sort of the funeral dirge, and based on Ezekiel 27, which is a lament over Tyre, now we find these groups who have benefitted from Rome mourning over its fall because, as I’ve said, this was the source of their luxury and their excessive wealth. Now that that has been cut off, we find an interesting picture, then, of them mourning, not over their own sin, but they mourn over the fall of Babylon because these are the ones that have been seduced into being involved in Babylon’s excessive luxury and seduced into committing adultery with her.

Note Ezekiel 27, and just to read a handful of the passages, I’ll start with verse 25, “The ships of Tarshish serve
as carriers for your wares.
You are filled with heavy cargo
in the heart of the sea.
Your oarsmen take you out to the high seas.
But the east wind will break you to pieces
in the heart of the sea.
Your wealth, merchandise and wares,
your mariners, seamen and shipwrights,
your merchants and all your soldiers,
and everyone else on board
will sink into the heart of the sea
on the day of your shipwreck.

The shorelands will quake
when your seamen cry out.
All who handle the oars
will abandon their ships;
the mariners and all the seamen
will stand on the shore.
They will raise their voice
and cry bitterly over you; (Over the fall of Tyre)
they will sprinkle dust on their heads (We’ll see, one of the groups does that)
and roll in ashes.

They will shave their heads because of you
and they will put on sackcloth.
They will weep over you with anguish of soul
and with bitter mourning.
As they wail and mourn over you,
they will take up a lament concerning you:
‘Who was ever silenced like Tyre,
surrounded by the sea?
When your merchandise went out on the seas,
you satisfied many nations;
with your great wealth and your wares
you enriched the kings of the earth.
Now you are shattered by the sea
in the depths of the waters;
your wares and all your company
have gone down to the sea.
All who live in the coastlands
are appalled at you;
their kings shudder with horror
and their faces are distorted with fear.
The merchants among the nations hiss at you;
you have come to a horrible end
and will be no more.’’

Now, we’ll see that John will model the responses of those who have benefitted from Rome, he will model their responses on those who responded with mourning and lament to the downfall of Tyre because likewise with Tyre, the nations grew rich and wealthy off of Tyre’s wealth and their excessive luxury. Now in the same way, John will describe the effects of Babylon/Rome’s fall by depicting those who mourn because now they also have benefitted from the wealth of Rome and now that Rome was destroyed and its wealth is no more, their demise is now certain as well.

In the next section, we’ll look more specifically at the three groups and their lament and mourning over the downfall and destruction of Rome.

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