

Things are not what they seem; glimpses from Revelation

A World Without God

Chapters 17:1—19:10

All of us must live in the world and under its governments. Since the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the people of God have never been a nation-state but have been called to live in the world (e.g. Jer. 29:7; John 17:15-18). But how should we think of this world? It remains God's creation, but in this Book it presents itself otherwise—as Babylon.

We really need to know where our world is coming from when it refuses God and his Christ. It's not just a matter of politics. 'Babylon' is the term used to describe both its ideas and its end.

'Babylon' will fall (18:2, 21).

- This fall was introduced as part of God's wrath in the previous scene (16:19; also 14:8).
- It is now opened up by one of the angels responsible for the bowls of wrath (17:1).
- The origins of Babylon are in Babel, where humanity sought to replace God with hubris (Gen. 11).
- Babylon destroyed Israel as a nation-state—with cruelty, ignoring God's revelation that he alone is God (Dan. 5:22-23).
- 'Babylon' is now a descriptor revealing the dynamics of a world power that will not reverence God (cf. 17:1, 15). In the first century, this would have been recognised as the city of Rome.

Babylon is 'the great prostitute' (17:1, 5; 18:1).

- It is Babylon's character as the great prostitute that is predominant here (17:1, 4f, 15f; 18:3, 9; 19:2).
- Kings (or governments) consort with the prostitute, and citizens become drunk with passion in their wrongful relationship with 'Babylon' (17:2).
 - The relationship is wrong because all true community derives from the Father (Eph. 3:14-15) and holds together in Christ (Eph. 4:11-16).
 - The object of secular government becomes immediate pleasure or gain rather than building a true society—a family—where each person has responsibility under God.
- Babylon glorifies herself and celebrates her 'abominations' (in a cup for toasting)—rejecting any relationship with the true God and pursuing idols (17:4).
- God relates to his people as husband, and his Son as bridegroom. When this relationship is broken, the void must be filled, and the result is a demand for sensory gratification, particularly sexual.
- All that the world has, without the Father, is lust and pride, and this will pass away (1 John 2:16-17).
- 'Babylon' as prostitute has control of commerce, trade, food supply—especially luxuries, transport and social acceptance.
- Babylon drinks herself silly on the blood of martyrs (17:6). Because Christ's people are living truly—under God, they become a threat to godless leaders.

The prostitute rides the beast (17:3, 7-8; introduced in 13:1).

- The beast was introduced earlier (13:4) as a tangible world entity to whom Satan gives his powers. The first readers would have recognised this beast as the Emperor and his subordinates (17:9-13) but he may be 'incarnated' in any godless leader. Satan is always trying to 'incarnate' himself in some earthly and tangible rival to Christ.

- The prostitute *riding* the beast suggests a liaison, a marriage of convenience, or even an attempt to rival the marriage of Christ and his people.
 - It is not a relationship ordained by God, does not work by love, and does not last.
 - If the beast works by raw power, the prostitute is an attempt to construct a social order to keep people happy. In the world, there is always an uneasy relationship between these two things.
 - C.f. the philosophy of utilitarianism: ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’—a moral system to replace Biblical ethics and based on results rather than revelation.
- Without knowing, the world colludes with the devil and is drafted into his agenda of removing the witness of Christ in the earth.
- John is perplexed and frightened by the image of the prostitute on the beast and the suffering they cause (17:7).

‘Kings of the earth’ and other references to kings occur eight times in these three chapters.

- Whatever the particular state priorities of each king are, they are united in drunken orgies with the prostitute (17:2).
- The picture is complex (17:7-13), as it always is in human affairs!
- They are united in recognizing the Lamb as their enemy and give their power to the beast to remove the witness to God in the earth (17:13). But this also fulfills God’s purpose (17:17).
- They have gone a step too far! The Lamb will conquer them, through the witness of those who are not only called, but chosen and faithful (17:14; also 12:11; cf. Matt. 22:14).

The world is dismayed as she sees Babylon fall (18:1-24).

- The great city is a ruin, inhabited now by the demons that inspired her actions.
- She had obliged nations to adopt her godless agenda in order to trade.
- This announcement is a call to believers to live truly (18:4)! God has given Babylon what she deserves (18:5-8, 20).
- Those who pride themselves now on their negotiation with Babylon will be bereft of all help (18:9-11, 21-24).

The Lamb’s marriage (19:1-10)

- ‘A great multitude’ recognise that salvation belongs to God and to him alone. This is the central issue for us all.
 - The dragon and prostitute formed a liaison of self-interest, and this has fallen apart.
 - The multitude recognise the rightness of God to destroy all that asserts otherwise.
 - The heavenly elders and creatures agree.
 - Christ made an end of sin, by atonement (Heb. 9:26). Any who refuse this ‘end’ through sin being judged have chosen to face judgement in their own right.
- Again, ‘a great multitude’ with a voice resembling Christ’s (1:15) say ‘God reigns’, ‘we will rejoice’, ‘the Lamb’s marriage has come’ and ‘the Bride is ready’ (19:6-8)!
 - All that has happened in history is with a view to this true marriage celebration.
- Babylon’s agenda won’t work. God reigns, and the end of history will not be the triumph of man but the marriage of the Lamb to the people he has loved.
- Even at this stage, John can get it wrong (19:10)! He is so moved by this announcement that he mistakes the messenger for the Saviour. Our message and our joy are all about the Lamb!