

THE IDENTITY OF “BABYLON”

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Introduction:

- I. Importance of Babylon as it appears in the book of Revelation:
 - A. Although Babylon is not introduced by name until chapter 14, it is tied to other symbols in the book.
 1. Babylon is equated with the harlot.
 - a. Babylon is identified as a great city (14:8; 16:19)
 - b. In chapter 17 we learn that the great city and the harlot are one and the same (from the message written on the forehead of the harlot – 17:5).
 2. Babylon is tied to the beasts of chapters thirteen and seventeen.
 - a. Chapter seventeen reveals a relationship between the harlot and the beast that carries her.
 - b. The sea beast of chapter thirteen and the beast upon which the woman sits in chapter seventeen appear to be the same beast.
 - B. Judgment on Babylon is a major theme of the book.
 1. The judgment of the great harlot consumes a significant portion of the book. Her fall is announced in 14:8 and detailed in 17:1-19:3.
 2. “The latter half of Revelation is without a doubt focused in on the destruction of The Great City -- Babylon. In fact, when one realizes that the second half of Revelation is really a repetition of the first half (from a different perspective), it can be said that the whole of Revelation is about the destructive tribulation of Babylon.”¹
 - C. As the preterist and historical background methods of interpretation suggest, Revelation:
 1. Was written primarily for the people who lived at the time of its authorship.
 2. Is set within a specific historical context with which the original readers would be familiar.
 3. The identity of Babylon, the mother of harlots, is critical to understanding the actual historical context of the book.
 - D. Although there have been a number of views concerning the identity of Babylon, we will concentrate our attention upon the cities of Rome and Jerusalem as possibilities.
 - E. Course of Study:
 1. Discuss the image which the symbolic name “Babylon” would have suggested to first century Jewish readers of Revelation.
 2. Examine the specific characteristics of the great harlot Babylon.
 3. Note the larger historical context of the book of Revelation.

Body:

- I. **The Symbolism of Old Testament Babylon**
 - F. It is generally accepted that the term “Babylon” in Revelation is used in a figurative sense.

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1. Despite the use of symbols and figurative language, the ultimate purpose of apocalyptic literature is to reveal a message.
 2. The writer must expect that his readers will understand the symbols used or his purpose is defeated.
 3. It must be admitted that not every detail of the vivid word pictures painted in Revelation has some spiritual significance.
- G. "In Revelation, John borrows the name of the ancient Babylonians to describe a new enemy of God and His people. Why the name *Babylon*? Because John knew that the use of this word would trigger, in the minds of his audience, thoughts of a proud, ruthless, and materialistic oppressor."²
1. Certainly Babylon was described by the Old Testament prophets as an arrogant, idolatrous oppressor of God's people.
 2. Note the following passages:
 - a. The pride of Babylon and her king (Jeremiah 50:29, 31-32; Isaiah 14:13-14)
 - b. Oppressor of God's people (Isaiah 14:4, 6; Jeremiah 51:25, 34)
 - c. Guilty of idolatry (Jeremiah 50:2, 38; 51:47; Isaiah 21:9)
 - d. Wealthy from the plunder and spoil of other peoples (Habakkuk 2:5-6; Jeremiah 50:10-11, 37; 51:34)
- H. Tyre and Nineveh were also referred to as "harlots" in the Old Testament.
1. Nineveh was also a major oppressor of God's people, responsible for the end of the northern kingdom of Israel. Why is the great harlot not represented by the name "Nineveh"?
 2. Balyeat perhaps answers that question by noting the similarity between the statements in Jeremiah 51:35 and Matthew 27:24-25.³
 - a. [Jer 51:35] "Let the violence done to me and my flesh be upon Babylon," the inhabitant of Zion will say; "And my blood be upon the inhabitants of Chaldea!" Jerusalem will say.
 - b. [Matthew 27:24-25] When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children."
 3. Note also the similarity between Jeremiah 51:6, 45 and Revelation 18:4-7.⁴
- I. Unfortunately, understanding the background of the symbol may help us to appreciate the nature of the great harlot of Revelation, but it may not aid us substantially in making a specific identification of the harlot.
1. Both Rome and Jerusalem qualified as arrogant oppressors of God's people at some point in the history of the church.
 - a. Prior to Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome, the book of Acts confirms that the source of persecution for the church was the Jewish nation. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jewish persecution of the church continued in the context of supporting Roman persecution.
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- b. From the time of Nero's persecution and onward, the church was periodically persecuted by the Roman government until early in the fourth century.
2. Both cities were beautiful and important centers of commerce although Rome's sphere of influence in commerce was more extensive than that of Jerusalem.

II. Characteristics of the Great Harlot

J. Babylon is described as "the great city."

1. Rev 11:8 "And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified."
 - a. Clearly Jerusalem is "where also our Lord was crucified."
 - b. Is there some sense in which we can understand this description to refer to Rome? Or is this passage speaking of Jerusalem as one great city and the passages which describe Babylon as a great city as another great city, probably Rome? Are there two great cities being discussed in Revelation?
 - c. Jerusalem was elsewhere described as a "great city" (Jeremiah 22:8).⁵
 - d. Jerusalem was described spiritually in the Old Testament by both Sodom and Egypt (Isaiah 1:10; Jeremiah 23:14).
 - e. Note that in Revelation 21:10, heavenly Jerusalem is referred to as "the great city."
2. Rev 16:19 "Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath."
 - a. Josephus relates that during the besieging of the city by Titus, Jerusalem was literally divided into three sections by the factions who were feuding among themselves.⁶
 - b. It may be that the division into three parts is a reference by John to Ezekiel's symbolic illustration (Ezekiel 5:1-12).⁷
3. Rev 17:18 "And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth."
 - a. One naturally thinks of Rome as a great city which reigned over the kings of the earth because of her position in the Roman empire and the breadth of that empire.
 - b. Is there any sense in which Jerusalem reigned over the kings of the earth?
 - 1) Certain passages in Acts illustrate the authority of the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem over Jews in other places (9:1-2; 18:15; 22:4-5; 26:10-11).⁸
 - 2) The Jews even exerted some influence over their Roman governors. It is evident that Pontius Pilate wished to free Jesus, but was compelled by the Jews to acquiesce to their bloodthirsty desire to put Jesus to death (Luke 23:13-16, 22-25; John 19:10-16; Mark 15:12-15; Matthew 27:24). See also Acts 24:27.
 - 3) It seems to me that the power exerted by Jerusalem as illustrated above is still too limited to meet the description of Revelation 17:18.
 - 4) Chilton argues that Jerusalem's dominance was not political, but stemmed from her special relationship to God in the Old Testament period.⁹

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- c. It is suggested by some that the word translated "earth" (e.g., Revelation 1:7) can also be translated "land" and sometimes refers specifically to the Promised Land, Palestine.¹⁰
 - 1) In Acts 4, the church in Jerusalem quoted Psalm 2 and made application of the phrase "kings of the earth" (Psalm 2:2; Acts 4:26) to Herod and Pontius Pilate.¹¹
 - 2) Note the similarities between Revelation 1:7 and Matthew 24:30. Matthew 24:30 also uses the phrase "tribes of the earth" with clear application to the Jewish people and in the context of the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem.¹²
 - 4. Rev 18:10 "standing at a distance for fear of her torment, saying, "Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come."
 - 5. Rev 18:16-21 "and saying, `Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.` Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, `What is like this great city?' They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, `Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.` Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her! Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, `Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore.` "
 - K. Babylon the great is the mother of harlots (Revelation 17:5).
 - 1. She is guilty of fornication and has involved the nations in her fornication (Revelation 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2) It is clear that "fornication" is being used in a figurative sense.
 - a. Fornication (and adultery, a term comprehended in the broader term fornication) was used in the Old Testament to denote idolatry. Such idolatry sometimes involved the worship of false gods, sometimes political alliances with other nations.
 - b. Commenting upon 18:3, Hailey identifies the "fornication" of the great harlot as follows: "The nations of the earth which followed her lascivious ways and yielded to her seductive practices, committing political fornication with her to gain power and prestige, were destroyed by the passionate lust of her lewdness. The angel now explains the fornication more fully. It was an unholy, idolatrous political and economic alliance of kings for business and commercial advantage, through which their pleasures were purchased."¹³
 - 2. Both Jerusalem and Rome might be described in such a way.
 - a. Hailey suggests that the great harlot Babylon of Revelation is actually a composite of the cities of the Old Testament which are referred to as harlots (Tyre, Nineveh, Babylon and Jerusalem) and affirms that Rome best fulfills such a composite picture.¹⁴
 - b. Balyeat develops the following argument to support the contention that Jerusalem fits the description of the great harlot:¹⁵
 - 1) Old Testament Israel was the bride of God (Isaiah 54:5).
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- 2) Jerusalem chose the Caesars over the Christ. (Luke 23:2; John 19:12, 15).
 - 3) Thus Jerusalem was guilty of adultery.
 - 4) Balyeat emphasizes that Israel's unfaithfulness is adultery, based upon the Old Testament relationship between the nation and God. Most translations (except the NIV), however, translate "fornication" rather than "adultery" (Revelation 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2).¹⁶
 - c. Paher correctly observes that Jerusalem cannot be identified as the great harlot of Revelation simply because she was described as a harlot in the Old Testament (Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16). As previously noted, Tyre and Nineveh were also likewise labeled!¹⁷
- L. Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus (Revelation 17:6).
1. There is some reason for understanding that this refers to Rome.
 - a. The sea beast, clearly representing the Roman empire, was permitted to make war against the saints (Revelation 13:7).
 - b. It seems to be widely accepted that Nero persecuted Christians, but his persecution was limited in its scope (the environs of Rome) and limited in duration.
 - c. Direct historical evidence for a virulent and widespread Domitian persecution is weak.¹⁸
 - d. Certainly Rome persecuted the church during the second and third centuries and into the beginning of the fourth century. However, the great harlot Babylon is already described as drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus at the time of the writing of the apocalypse.
 - e. While the harlot is said to be drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, Roman persecution was a relatively recent thing, especially when compared to the persecution of God's faithful people by Jerusalem.
 2. It is more likely that this description refers to Jerusalem rather than Rome.
 - a. In his book, *The Identity of Babylon*, Stanley Paher claims that widespread Jewish persecution of the church in the first century is a myth!¹⁹
 - b. Jesus predicted a fierce Jewish persecution of the disciples (Luke 11:49-51; 13:33; Matthew 23:34-37; 24:9; Mark 13:9-13).
 - c. Acts records that the early persecution against the church was Jewish in its source.
 - 1) Acts 4 - Peter and John
 - 2) Acts 5 - all the apostles
 - 3) Acts 7 - Stephen stoned
 - 4) Acts 8 - persecution by Saul
 - 5) Acts 9:1-2 (22:4-5; 26:10) - persecution by Saul
 - 6) Acts 12:1-3 - Herod Agrippa I; note the reason for the persecution - to please the Jews
 - 7) Acts 13:50 - Paul and Barnabas expelled from Antioch of Pisidia
 - 8) Acts 14:2-4 - Paul and Barnabas expelled from Iconium
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- 9) Acts 14:19 - Jews from Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul in Lystra
 - 10) Acts 16:16-23 - Paul and Silas beaten; motive: loss of revenue
 - 11) Acts 17:5 - Jews of Thessalonica stir up mob against Paul and Silas
 - 12) Acts 18:12 - Jews of Corinth bring Paul before Gallio the proconsul
 - 13) Acts 19:23-31 - Demetrius and silversmiths create a mob against Paul & Silas; motive: loss of revenue
 - 14) Acts 20:3 - Jewish plot caused Paul to change his plans
 - 15) Acts 21:32 - Paul beaten by the Jews in the temple
 - 16) Acts 23:12-22 - a plot by the Jews to ambush Paul and kill him
 - 17) Acts 25:1-3 - a plot by the Jews to ambush Paul and kill him
- d. Acts also records that the Roman empire was essentially the protector of Christianity until the time of Nero (e.g., Paul's deliverance from the Jews by the commander of the Roman garrison).
 - e. The vengeance requested by the slain saints in the sixth seal (Revelation 6:9-11) is realized in the destruction of Babylon (Revelation 18:20).
 - 1) The vengeance of God against Jerusalem promised in the gospels matches the statements made in Revelation.
 - a) The gospels: Matthew 23:29-38; Luke 11:47-51; 13:33-34
 - b) Revelation: Revelation 6:9-11; 11:17-18; 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:1-2
 - 2) The identification of Rome as Babylon would necessitate that both Jerusalem AND Rome be held responsible for the same blood which was shed.
 - 3) Note that the retribution is not confined to Old Testament martyrs, but includes the death of apostles also (Revelation 18:20).
- M. Babylon is a woman sitting on seven hills (Revelation 17:9).
1. After the angel promised to show John the judgment of the great harlot (17:1), John saw "a woman sitting on a scarlet beast" (17:3) which had seven heads and ten horns.
 2. The angel revealed the "mystery" of the woman and the beast that "carried" her (17:7). The seven heads represent seven mountains and also seven kings (17:9-10).
 - a. The reference to seven mountains is almost universally accepted to be a reference to Rome, the city of seven hills.²⁰
 - b. Gentry also mentions that the goddess Roma was depicted on coins in the time of Vespasian as a woman seated on seven hills.²¹
 - c. It might be argued that the beast represents the empire in its entirety while the woman represents the capital city, Rome.
 3. Note, however, that the seven heads which represent the seven mountains belong to the beast which carries the woman and not to the woman herself. It would appear that the seven mountains (and the seven kings also) have more to do with the identification of the beast than with the identification of the woman. Rome, as the capital city, was part of the empire.
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- a. Another characteristic of the woman is that she is hated by the ten kings who are represented by the ten horns on the same beast (Revelation 17:16).
- 1) The ten kings may be a reference to the ten provincial governors in the empire who provided armies for Rome or perhaps to an indeterminate number of other armies who encamped around Jerusalem in the course of its besiegement.²² Ogden suggests that the ten kings are a reference to puppet kings who ruled within the Roman empire.²³
 - 2) Associated with the beast, the ten kings are united in their intention to give their power and authority to the beast (Revelation 17:12-13).
 - 3) They will not only hate the harlot, but will "make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire" (Revelation 17:16; 18:8).
 - 4) Revelation 17:17 explains that by giving their support to the beast these ten kings fulfill the purpose of God. Note the possible connection between Revelation 10:7, Luke 21:22 and the last phrase in this verse, "until the words of God are fulfilled."
 - 5) The relationship between the ten horns, the beast and the harlot does not describe the historical attitude of the provinces toward the city of Rome. If Jerusalem is understood as the harlot, the idea of the ten horns supporting the beast (Rome and the empire) at the same time that they hate the harlot is more reasonable.
 - 6) In what sense should we understand the ten kings eating the flesh of Rome and burning her with fire? Paher explains this verse by asserting resentment on the part of the provinces toward Rome because of the allocation of resources.²⁴
- N. The great harlot is sitting on many waters (Revelation 17:1, 15).
1. The angel tells John that the waters are "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."
 2. Rome certainly was supported by many different peoples and nations inasmuch as her empire stretched across the known world.
 3. There is a sense in which Jerusalem also was supported by "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."
 - a. As a result of oppression and exile in the Old Testament period, there were Jews scattered throughout the Roman empire. Acts 2:5ff confirms this fact.
 - b. Josephus quotes a Roman official who said, "Now these Jews are already gotten into all cities; and it is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that hath not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by them..." (*Antiquities*, 14, 7, 2).
 - c. Jerusalem was an extremely wealthy city because of the tithes/contributions sent to her by Jews around the world.
 4. It is interesting that the woman is described (seen - 17:15) as sitting on many waters. However, she is also described as sitting on the scarlet beast (17:3) and as being carried by the beast. The beast clearly represents the Roman empire, an empire which was composed of "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues." It may be, however, that identity is not intended.
- O. The great harlot is clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls (Revelation 17:4; 18:16).
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1. It is commonly suggested that this description indicates the "great wealth and worldly glory" of the harlot.²⁵
 2. Her apparel, however, also fits the description of the garments of the Old Testament high priest of Israel (Exodus 28).²⁶
- P. Babylon became "a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird" (Revelation 18:2).
1. Ogden sees in this verse a reference to the murderous Jews who controlled Jerusalem during the final Roman siege of Jerusalem.²⁷
 2. Preston draws a connection between this description of the harlot and a parable which Jesus told and applied to that wicked generation of Jews (see Matthew 12:43-45).²⁸
 3. Hailey refers to Paul's comments on the relationship between the worship of idols and demons (1 Corinthians 10:20). He applies the comment to the foulness of the idolatry in Rome.²⁹
- Q. The fall of Babylon was swift and complete; she was "not found anymore" (Revelation 18:8, 10, 17, 19, 21).
1. The city of Rome was conquered by barbarians, but not literally destroyed nor burned with fire.³⁰
 2. Jerusalem was literally burned by the Romans after a relatively short siege. The siege was brief because of the infighting among the Jews in the city by which they weakened themselves (see Matthew 24:22).
 3. It is possible that a literal burning is not contemplated (18:8; 17:17:16), but is instead a figurative description of her punishment. Clearly neither Rome nor Jerusalem ceased to exist so we must understand the expression "not be found anymore" in a figurative sense.
- R. The merchants of the earth have been enriched by Babylon and they mourn her fall (Revelation 18:3, 19).
1. Despite the description of Jerusalem by Paher as "a minor city located only on a local trade route and lacking a slave trade" (p. 109) and a city which "hardly possessed the commercial strength to bring about economic change in the single province of Judea, much less a vast multi-cultured empire" (p. 10), both Rome and Jerusalem were rich cities.
 2. The commercial strength of Rome is well documented.³¹
 3. Edersheim affirms that Jerusalem also had extensive trade.³²
 4. It may also be possible that the word "earth" in this context refers to the land of Palestine rather than the entire earth (see previous discussion of this idea).

III. The Greater Context of the Book

- S. While the characteristics of the harlot should probably be considered as primary evidence for her identity, any conclusion about the identity of Babylon must be consistent with the date of authorship for the book.
1. The identification of Babylon as the city of Jerusalem is more dependent upon the date of authorship.

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2. If John wrote the book prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then either Rome or Jerusalem could be understood as the Babylon of Revelation.
 3. If John wrote the book after A.D. 70, then it would not make much sense to identify Babylon as Jerusalem. The apocalypse predicts the fall of Babylon, but the judgment of Jerusalem would already have been past.
 4. If the great harlot is actually Rome, the date of authorship is not as critical since any judgment against Rome would have taken place long after the end of the first century.
- T. The number of arguments of this section will be abbreviated because the date of authorship is the focus of another lecture.
- U. The time frame for the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book is emphasized in the book.
1. John begins and ends the book with the warning that the prophesied events were to transpire soon.
 - a. "things which must shortly take place" - Revelation 1:1
 - b. "for the time is near" - Revelation 1:3
 - c. "the things which must shortly take place." - Revelation 22:6
 - d. "Behold, I am coming quickly" - Revelation 22:7 (the "coming" in this context is the Lord's coming in judgment upon the harlot)
 - e. "Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand." - Revelation 22:10
 - f. "And behold, I am coming quickly," - Revelation 22:12
 - g. "Surely I am coming quickly." - Revelation 22:20
 2. Such statements do not specify a date of authorship, but they indicate that the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book is close in time to the date of authorship.
 3. If the apocalypse was written during the reign of Nero (early date), the relative time frame indicated in the book better supports Jerusalem as the harlot inasmuch as the promised judgment upon the harlot would then have taken place within perhaps a handful of years from the writing of the apocalypse.
 4. If the fall of the city of Rome in A.D. 476 to the barbarian invaders is understood as the promised judgment upon the harlot, even the late date for authorship (during the reign of Domitian) necessitates a period of approximately 375 years between the writing of the prophecies and their fulfillment. In my opinion, such a time frame strains the clear and emphatic language of the apocalypse.
- V. It is argued by some that Revelation 1:7 states the theme of the book. Both the centrality of the judgment of the harlot to the message of the book and the repeated references to the coming of the Lord support the reasonableness of this conclusion.
1. Although the Romans were actually the ones who put Jesus on the cross, the Jews were credited with having crucified the Son of God.
 - a. In the sermons recorded in the early chapters of Acts, the crucifixion of Jesus is clearly imputed to the Jews (e.g., Acts 2:22-23, 36; 3:13-15; 4:10; 5:27-30; 7:52).
 - b. In the writings of the early church fathers, responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus is assigned to the Jews.³³
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2. The significance of this verse is seen in Adam Clarke's comment on the verse: "By this the *Jewish people* are most evidently intended, and therefore the whole verse may be understood as predicting the destruction of the Jews; and is a presumptive proof that the Apocalypse was written *before* the final overthrow of the Jewish state."³⁴
- W. The mystery of the harlot and the beast as explained by the angel in Revelation 17:7-11 gives a historical time reference.
1. The seven heads of the beast upon which the harlot sits are identified as seven kings.
 2. The sixth king is reigning at the time of the writing of Revelation (17:10).
 3. Assuming that the "kings" are emperors (note that the seven heads also represent seven mountains, clearly indicating the city of Rome) in a chronologically sequential order, one must simply determine who the first emperor was and then count to the sixth to identify the time of authorship.
 - a. The common view is that Augustus (31 B.C. - A.D. 14) was the first. If so, the series of emperors would be as follows:
 - 1) Augustus (31 B.C. - A.D. 14)
 - 2) Tiberius (A.D. 14-37)
 - 3) Caligula (A.D. 37-41)
 - 4) Claudius (A.D. 41-54)
 - 5) Nero (A.D. 54-68)
 - 6) Galba (A.D. 68-69; June of 68 to January of 69)
 - 7) Otho (A.D. 69)
 - 8) Vitellius (A.D. 69)
 - 9) Vespasian (A.D. 69-79)
 - 10) Titus (A.D. 79-81)
 - 11) Domitian (A.D. 81-96)
 - b. Galba, Otho and Vitellius are frequently not counted as true emperors because of the brevity of their "reigns." Reckoning in this fashion, Vespasian becomes the sixth emperor. Titus would then be the seventh, the one who would "continue a short time."
 - c. A strong historical argument can be made to the effect that Julius Caesar was actually the first emperor.³⁵ If Julius (49-44 B.C.) was the first, then Nero becomes the sixth. The brevity of Galba's reign (then the seventh) would fit the description of 17:10.
- X. The beast of chapter 13 (apparently the same beast upon which the harlot is sitting in chapter 17) has a name which is designated by a number (Revelation 13:16-18).
1. That number is "the number of a man" and is identified as "666."
 2. The designation of a word or name by a number ("gematria") is an example of a cryptogrammic riddle. The difficulty lies in the fact that a variety of words or names could fit the same numerical total.
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3. It seems to be the general consensus that the name of Nero (Nero Caesar) will provide the total of 666 if the name is translated to a Hebrew spelling.³⁶
 4. There are a few manuscripts which have the number "616" instead of "666." It is interesting that one common variation of Nero's name would produce this number (by use of gematria).³⁷
 5. It is argued by some that the number is purely symbolic and is not intended to designate any particular man.³⁸
- Y. The treading underfoot of the holy city by the Gentiles was a future event when John wrote (Revelation 11:1-2).
1. It is obvious that there is a mixture of the literal and figurative in this passage (chapter 11). For example, the great city of 11:8 is described spiritually as Sodom and Egypt. It is also described as "where also our Lord was crucified."³⁹
 2. There are many theories regarding the symbolism of the temple, altar, outer court and even the holy city.⁴⁰
 - a. The similarity between this passage and the words of Jesus in describing the destruction of Jerusalem is striking (compare Revelation 11:2 with Luke 21:24).
 - b. If Revelation 11:2 is speaking of the literal destruction of the city of Jerusalem, some measure of figurative interpretation must be employed since the literal temple was totally destroyed (Matthew 24:2).
 - c. Although the time period "forty-two months" is viewed by some as symbolic, it should be noted that it also equals the length of the Jewish-Roman war (spring 67 to summer 70).
- Z. As previously noted, the vengeance of God against Jerusalem which was promised by Jesus in the gospels matches the statements made in Revelation regarding the reason for Babylon's judgment.
1. The gospels: Matthew 23:34-37a; Luke 11:49-51; 13:33-34
 2. Revelation: Revelation 6:9-10; 11:17-18; 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:1-2
 3. The finishing of the mystery of God (Revelation 10:7) and the fulfillment of all things which are written (Luke 21:22) appear to refer to the same event (s).⁴¹

Conclusion:

- I. Certainly we will be able to better understand some of the other specific elements of the book of Revelation if we can properly identify the great harlot Babylon.
 - AA. Determining the identity of Babylon is a complex study that encompasses a large body of information. It is my opinion that both the characteristics of the great harlot and the internal and external evidence for the date of authorship of the book work together in the answering of this question.
 - BB. I favor the view that John wanted his readers to understand the great harlot as Jerusalem. Although I recognize that there are some weaknesses to this view, I believe that the strongest evidence supports Jerusalem as Babylon.
- II. However, there is a sense in which the core message of the book doesn't depend on the precise identity of Babylon.
 - CC. She is an oppressor of God's people, but the divine judgment against her is certain.

DD. We don't want to miss the overriding message of the book...which is the same as in all apocalyptic literature...God will win.

1. The dragon, the sea beast, the great harlot...they ultimately will not win.
2. In fact, regardless of what hardships, tribulations, persecutions the saints faced, they needed to know that Jesus had already won (see Revelation 12:10-12)!

EE. The message of Revelation can likewise provide us with comfort in the midst of troubles, assurance that we have chosen the right side and motivation to continue to struggle against the dragon.

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Endnotes

¹ Joseph Balyeat, *Babylon, The Great City of Revelation* (Sevierville, TN: Covenant House Books, 1995), p. 51.

² Wilson Copeland, 1994 Florida College Lectures, *"The Great City of Babylon"* (Temple Terrace, Florida: Florida College Bookstore, 1994), p. 160. Copeland effectively summarizes the prophetic picture of Babylon.

³ Balyeat, p. 77-8. "This very fact of the unrepentant, unashamed murder of Messiah is probably one of the primary reasons why John uses the Babylon imagery to depict apostate Jerusalem...The transformation is astounding -- the innocent victim who once cried down God's just punishment on Babylon to avenge their blood and the blood of their children; transformed into a guilty, unrepentant murderous mob which purposefully perverts the words of scripture to cry down judgment on themselves -- 'Let His blood be on us, and on our children!'"

⁴ Compare also Matthew 24:15-20, Mark 13:14-16 & Luke 21:20-22.

⁵ Stanley Paher, *The Identity of Babylon and the Dating of the Book of Revelation* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1996), p. 116. "Assuming that the words 'great city' have the same meaning throughout Revelation is a case of contrived uniformity. The words 'great city' are not a technical term for Jerusalem, and with the possible exception of the verses in question (11:8, 17:18, etc.), Jerusalem is not called the 'great city' anywhere else in scripture or in other ancient Jewish literature. A departure here to make Jerusalem fit the definition of 'great city' is certainly suspect." Jeremiah does indeed refer to Jerusalem as a 'great city' and in the context of her judgment by the Lord because she had forsaken the covenant and worshipped other gods.

⁶ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977). "When therefore Titus had marched over that desert which lies between Egypt and Syria, in the manner forementioned, he came to Cesarea, having resolved to set his forces in order at that place, before he began the war. Nay, indeed, while he was assisting his father at Alexandria, in settling that government which had been conferred upon them by God, it so happened that the sedition at Jerusalem was revived, and parted into three factions, and that one faction fought against the other; which partition in such evil cases may be said to be a good thing, and the effect of divine justice" (V, I, 1). "And now there were three treacherous factions in the city, the one parted from the other" (V, I, 4).

⁷ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Tyler, Texas: Dominion Press, 1990), p. 415-6.

⁸ Arthur Ogden, *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets* (Louisville: Ogden Publications, 1985), p. 47. "It was from the High Priest that Saul received authority to go to the synagogues in Damascus, a foreign city, to bind Christians and bring them to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 9:1-2; cf. 22:4-5; 26:10-11). This authority residing in the High Priest was recognized, permitted, and upheld by the Roman government. Decrees permitting the continued exercise of these Jewish rights were published by the Roman authorities throughout the empire demanding their recognition and respect under the penalty of the law. (cites Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14, 10, 1-26; cf. 16:2, 3). With the authority and power of the High Priest and Jerusalem firmly established, Jerusalem ruled the Jews throughout the world...So the authority of Jerusalem as a city was universal. It extended to every city on earth which lodged a Jew!"

⁹ Chilton, p. 442-3. "Moreover, says the angel, this City has a kingdom over all the kings of the earth. It is perhaps this verse, more than any other, which has confused expositors into supposing, against all other evidence, that the Harlot is Rome. If the City is Jerusalem, how can she be said to wield this kind of worldwide political power? The answer is that *Revelation is not a book about politics; it is a book about the Covenant*. Jerusalem *did* reign over the nations. She *did* possess a Kingdom which was above all the kingdoms of the earth. Israel was a Kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6), exercising a priestly ministry of guardianship, instruction, and intercession on behalf of the nations of the world."

¹⁰ Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *The Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth, Texas: Foy E. Wallace Jr. Publications, 1966), p. 374-5. Also Gentry, p. 128. Commenting upon Revelation 1:7, Gentry cites lexicographical sources and translations by Robert Young and Marshall which support the view that the land of Palestine is under consideration. Chilton does not address the question of the meaning of the Greek word translated, but clearly believes that it refers to the land of Israel in this passage (Chilton, p. 66).

¹¹ Wallace, p. 375. "The last statement of *verse eighteen* 'which reigneth over the kings of the earth' did not refer to the empire of the Caesars, nor the city of the emperors. The word *reign* here denoted a *dominion*. The *earth*, as defined at the beginning of the visions and later repeated, referred to the land of Judea, inclusive of Palestine. The city of Jerusalem was the royal city where the kings of Judah reigned. The phrase *the kings of the earth* was used in the sense of Acts 4:26-27: 'The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together.' These 'kings of the earth' were of Judah, and Jerusalem was the capital city of the land, standing in the same relation to these 'kings of the earth' as Rome sustained to the emperors."

¹² Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse is even more explicit in its identification of the demise of Jerusalem (vs. 20). Verse 23 predicts that there will be great distress "in the land," clearly meaning the land of Israel (cf. "this people"). The word

translated “land” is the same one translated “earth” in Revelation 1:7 and Matthew 24:30 (NKJV).

¹³ **Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 359.*** Hailey cites Swete on the expression “the wine of the wrath of her fornication”: “The wine of Rome, as of Babylon, was the intoxicating influence of her vices and her wealth; but viewed from another point it was the wine of wrath, the wrath which overtakes sin; cf. Ps. 75:8” (Swete, p. 184). He continues, “The logical conclusion is the phrase looks to the passionate lusts of the world, represented by Rome, by which Rome intoxicated the nations, bringing upon that world God’s wrath; for sin always brings wrath” (p. 309).

¹⁴ **Hailey, p. 343.** Hailey identifies Nineveh as the “harlot of conquest,” Tyre as the “great harlot of commerce,” Babylon as the “mistress of pleasure,” and Jerusalem as “the great religious harlot.”

¹⁵ **Balyeat, p. 79-84.**

¹⁶ **Balyeat.** “If there had not been this special covenantal relationship of husband and bride, there could have been no adultery. Since no other nation was the bride, no other nation could possibly be the one which committed these adulteries in Revelation. Jerusalem (and surrounding Israel) is thus, once again, shown to be the only possible candidate as the Harlot Babylon of Revelation” (p. 80). “He (John - asd) mentions the harlot riding on the beast in several places. (Revelation 17:3, 7, 9) This is figurative of the Jewish religious leaders relying upon the Romans to get their authority. The Romans supported the Jewish hierarchy even as the Beast supported the harlot” (p. 83).

¹⁷ **Paher, p. 89-90.**

¹⁸ **Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell (Atlanta: American Vision, 1998), p. 285-9.*** Gentry cites a number of late-date advocates who are reticent to cite the Domitianic persecution as evidence for the late date. “Notable among these are leading Revelation commentators H.B. Swete, R.H. Charles, James Moffatt, and J.P.M. Sweet, who do not employ the argument at all to prove the late date...Ladd, another late date advocate, even writes of this evidence that ‘the problem with this theory is that there is no evidence that during the last decade of the first century there occurred any open and systematic persecution of the church.’ Reginald H. Fuller argues for a Domitianic date of Revelation but advises that ‘there is otherwise no evidence for the persecution of Christians in Asia Minor’ under Domitian...David H. van Daalen, still another late date advocate, concurs in admitting that we ‘have no evidence that there was any persecution under Domitian.’...Moule and Ladd write of ‘the alleged persecution’ under Domitian. After reviewing the ancient evidence, Hort notes of the data regarding Domitian’s outrageous conduct that ‘there is nothing in the accounts which suggests anything like a general persecution of Christians, even at Rome: it would rather seem that Christians of wealth or station were mainly, if not wholly, struck at.’ Bruce admits of Domitian’s reputation as a persecutor that the ‘evidence to justify this reputation is scanty.’ Despite his employment of the Domitianic persecution as one of the major proofs of the late date, Morris himself admits that the evidence for a general persecution under Domitian ‘is not easy to find.’“! [p. 287-9]

¹⁹ **Paher, p. 11ff.** Paher writes, “Note that Saul did not inquire about authority to kill Christians. Throughout Acts, Saul was involved in the death of only one name Christ-follower (7.58), yet the possibility exists that there were other Saul-inspired martyrs (22:4; 26:10).” [p. 14] The possibility exists? The exact words of Paul are, “This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; **and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them**” (26:10). Not “if,” but “when.”

²⁰ **Gentry, p. 149.** “Rome is the one city in history that has been distinguished for and universally recognizable by its seven hills.” In support of this affirmation Gentry cites Robert Mounce, G. R. Beasley-Murray, H. B. Swete and William Hendriksen.

²¹ **Gentry, 149.** Citing several sources, he writes, “Archaeologists have discovered the Coin (or Medallion) of Vespasian that exhibits a picture of the goddess Roma as a woman seated on seven hills.”

²² **Balyeat, p. 116-7.** “It was not just the Roman army which brought about the destruction of Jerusalem, but in line with Revelation 17, the ten horns of the beast represented ten rulers who would hate the harlot (Jerusalem/Babylon) and lend their power (armies) to the beast. The fact that the Roman Empire included ten provincial governors who provided provincial armies to do the bidding of the Romans is well attested, and Josephus specifically records that there were many armies besides the Romans encamped around Jerusalem at various times, including: the Edomites, the army of Simon, the Arabians, the Syrians, the Bithynians, the Alexandrians, etc.”

²³ **Ogden, p. 331.** “This was the nature of Roman procedure. Some territories were set aside to be ruled by kings. These in turn gave their full power unto the empire. It was in this sense that Herod the Great and Herod Agrippa ruled. They were nothing more than puppet kings who danced to the strings of the emperor. They had but one desire: serve the empire and her emperors with their full strength and might.”

²⁴ **Paher, p. 115.** “In conclusion, in Revelation 17:16 the ten horns and the beast are the Roman empire, and the harlot is Rome. The various provinces constantly showed resentment because of the resources which were expended in maintaining the high degree of living standards in Rome, to the neglect of the provinces. Egyptian wheat, for instance, was shipped directly to Rome, with only the surplus available for other cities.” Paher offers no sources which substantiate this resentment on the part of the provinces, a resentment which John describes as “hate,” if Paher is correct in his identification of the harlot. Paher devotes chapter twenty-five of his book to this verse, asserting that the language is figurative. “Similarly, the burning of Babylon with fire is also strictly figurative, painting a picture of terrible vengeance and extreme hostility toward an enemy of God. This is the point, not literal flesh and fire.” Terrible vengeance and extreme hostility sound like more than “resentment” and it appears that Paher has forgotten that it is the TEN HORNS who eat the flesh of the harlot and burn her with fire!

²⁵ **Copeland, p. 161. Hailey** writes, “The harlot makes herself as attractive as possible, bedecking herself in all the dazzling splendor of earth’s riches. The colors purple and scarlet are slightly different, but when blended they represent royalty, luxury, and splendor. The harlot is adorned or gilded with gold, precious stones (jewels) and pearls, all that attracts attention, allures, impresses with a sense of seductive grandeur. She strives to cover her true harlot’s character with the outward splendor and glory of a queen. In her hand is a golden cup, another symbol of luxury and wealth,…” (p. 346).

²⁶ **Don K Preston, *Who Is This Babylon?* (no publisher information, 1999), p. 68.** Preston quotes Gentry (Dominion, p. 381): “The harlot is arrayed in Jewish priestly colors of scarlet, purple and gold (Ex. 28). She has a blasphemous tiara on her forehead, which reads: ‘Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and the Abominations of the Earth.’ (Rev. 17:5) This gives a negative portrayal of the holy tiara that the Jewish High Priest wore, which said ‘Holy to the Lord’ (Ex. 28:36-38). Also, the Harlot has a gold cup in her hand, as did the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, according to the Talmud.”

Preston continues, “Images and word pictures are created in and by a social environment. It is not a question of what a *modern reader* thinks or sees when he/she reads these words in Revelation, it is a question of what the *first century* readers would have thought. The modern interpreter of Revelation has no right to impose twentieth century social, political, military, or religious figures and symbols on Revelation. These images, the very colors of the harlot’s clothes, the cup in her hand, etc., are taken directly from the cultic world of the Temple at Jerusalem. Thus, the harlot’s clothes are highly suggestive of Jerusalem and not Rome.”

Chilton comments, “There is thus no need to see the Woman’s garments and jewels as merely the loud, bold, and extravagant decking-out of a harlot’s costume. Instead, these are *originally* the clothes of the righteous Woman - the Bride - who is supposed to be arrayed in glorious dress (cf. Ex. 3:22; Ezek. 16:11-14; Prov. 31:21-22). St. John wants his readers to see the Harlot adorned in the beautiful garments of the Church. He wants them to understand that this degenerate whore who fornicates with beasts is still carrying the trappings of the pure and chaste Bride. We should note, however, that the enormous veil covering the Temple gate (over 80 feet high and 24 feet wide) was ‘a *Babylonian* tapestry, embroidered with blue, and *fine linen* [cf. 18:16], and *scarlet*, and *purple*.’ [Josephus, Wars, 5.5.4]” (p. 429-430).

²⁷ **Ogden, p. 337.**

²⁸ **Preston, p. 71.**

²⁹ **Hailey, p. 358-9.**

³⁰ **Paher** describes the gradual deterioration of Rome as transpiring over a period of many years, even a century (p. 112). Hardly a swift demise (“in one hour”)!

³¹ **Paher** does an extensive study of the goods mentioned in Revelation 18:12-13 and concludes that “only Rome could be the great harlot and the object of the merchants’ and seafarers’ trade and delight” (p. 99). While I do not think that Paher’s conclusion is warranted, I believe that this is probably the strongest argument that he presents in his book.

³² **Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 116-118.** “Ancient Jewish writings enable us to identify no fewer than 118 different articles of import from foreign lands, covering more than even modern luxury has devised” (p. 116).

³³ **Gentry, p. 125-6.** Gentry cites Ignatius (c. 50-115), Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Irenaeus (c. 130-202), Melito of Sardis (c. 190), Tertullian (c. 160-220), Hippolytus (c. 170-236), Cyprian (c. 195-258) and Lactantius (c. 240-320).

³⁴ **Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d.), Vol. 6, p. 971.**

³⁵ **Gentry, p. 155-8.** Gentry cites Seutonius (A.D. 70-160; Lives of the Twelve Caesars), Dio Cassius (A.D. 150-235; Roman History, 5), Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-101; Antiquities 18:2:2; 18:6:10; 19:1:11), 4 Ezra 12:13ff, Epistle of Barnabas 4:4, Sibylline Oracles 11:26ff (A.D. 180) and Theophilus of Antioch (A.D. 115-181; Theophilus to Antolycus 2:28). Josephus wrote, “After him

came Annius Rufus, under whom died Caesar, the second emperor of the Romans, the duration of whose reign was fifty-seven years, besides six months and two days, (of which time Antonius ruled together with him fourteen years; but the duration of his life was seventy-seven years;) upon whose death Tiberius Nero, his wife Julia's son, succeeded. He was now the third emperor;..." (Antiquities 18:2:2). "So when Tiberius had at this time appointed Caius to be his successor, he outlived but a few days, and then died, after he had held the government twenty-two years, five months and three days. Now Caius was the fourth emperor;..." (Antiquities 18:6:10).

³⁶ **Gentry, p. 198-200.** Gentry explains how the gematria would work and cites, with references, a large number of Revelation scholars who have accepted Nero as being identified by the number. Even **Hailey**, who does not believe that the number represents a specific individual, writes, "Of the many efforts to reduce the 666 to the name of a man, the most popular choice has been Nero Caesar, which in the Greek is Neron Kaisar. Translated into the Hebrew script and applying the Hebrew system of gematria, the name can be translated into the desired number, 666; however, in Greek it would be 1005" (p. 298).

³⁷ **Gentry, p. 201-2.** Gentry argues that the variant is intentional based on the idea that the number was originally only three letters in the Greek language and it would be difficult to confuse the two letters which would result in a change from 666 to 616. Chilton adds, "Of some related interest is the fact that if Nero's name is written without the final *n* (i.e., the way it would occur to a Gentile to spell it in Hebrew), it yields the number 616 - which is exactly the variant reading in a few New Testament manuscripts. The most reasonable explanation for this variant is that it arose from the confusion over the final *n*" (**Chilton, p. 351**).

³⁸ **Hailey, p. 299.** Hailey writes, "Throughout the book, seven expresses the idea of perfection or completeness: the seven churches, seven horns, seven eyes, seven spirits, and so forth. So six, which falls below the sacred seven, can never be seven or reach perfection; therefore, it symbolizes the imperfect, that which is human and destined to fail. It is said that to the Jews the number six was an omen or symbol of dread and doom, so when it was tripled, 666, it represented the completeness of doom and failure."

³⁹ **Paher** writes, "Further, the text of 11:8 plainly says that the great city is figuratively (i.e., typically or allegorically) called 'Sodom and Egypt.' The text states that in that place (Sodom and Egypt) was where also their Lord was crucified. Thus, Jerusalem is not in view, unless that city is embodied in the typical locality, 'Sodom and Egypt.' ...In a book laden with symbols, and in a verse (11:8) where the author states that the localities are to be taken figuratively, why are 'Sodom and Egypt' interpreted thus, then the phrase 'where also their Lord was crucified' taken literally? Such a course is an inconsistent hermeneutic" (p. 116). In response, Sodom and Egypt are to be understood figuratively precisely *because* John indicated that they were figurative ("which **spiritually** is called")! I find it significant that Paher rejects the literal interpretation of the phrase "where also their Lord was crucified," but offers no explanation of its figurative interpretation.

⁴⁰ **Hailey**, for instance, asserts that the sanctuary, court and city represent the church. He suggests that it is difficult to know if John intends for the sanctuary/court distinction to represent the distinction between the spiritual life of the believers and their physical bodies or the faithful and unfaithful of the church (p. 251-2).

⁴¹ **Ogden, p. 25-26.**