

# WHAT IS THE IDENTITY OF BABYLON IN REVELATION 17-18?

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## MY HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Much controversy surrounds the identification of Babylon in Revelation 17-18. The reason for this controversy is that interpreters disagree over the hermeneutical approach to be employed in deciphering John's Apocalypse. This disagreement over hermeneutics in turn results from disagreement regarding how Revelation's genre should be classified. Should Revelation be classified as belonging to the prophetic genre or apocalyptic genre? The genre categorization selected by the interpreter effects his hermeneutic. Each of these genre categories is accompanied by a different set of hermeneutical principles.

Most New Testament scholars classify Revelation's genre as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature became predominant during the intertestamental period and continued to flourish during the time when the Book of Revelation was written. Such apocalyptic writings include *The Book of Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Baruch*, *Book of Jubilees*, *Assumption of Moses*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *Sibylline Oracles*. These writings possess a common cluster of attributes. Such attributes include the following: extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, angelic guides, activity of angels and demons, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future, the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisaic in character, manifestation of the kingdom of God, a mediator with royal functions, dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about man's ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history, other worldly journeys, the catchword glory, and a final showdown between good and evil.

Revelation shares many of these attributes. Revelation was also written during the general time period when such literature flourished. Thus, most New Testament scholars consider the Book of Revelation part of this apocalyptic literary genre. The decision to classify Revelation as belonging to the apocalyptic genre has a tremendous impact upon how one interprets the book. Numerous hermeneutical doors seem to open to the extent that the primary character of Revelation's genre is viewed as apocalyptic.

For example, it becomes difficult to approach the text with a straightforward literalism. Gregg contends that many interpreters fail to take into account Revelation's apocalyptic character. According to Steve Gregg:

A failure to take into account this feature has led some to the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is 'literal unless absurd.' Though this is good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception.<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth Gentry echoes similar sentiments when he notes:

Before beginning my survey, I must note what most Christians suspect and what virtually all evangelical scholars (excluding classic dispensationalists) recognize

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 11.

regarding the book: Revelation is a highly figurative book that we cannot approach with a simple straightforward literalism.<sup>2</sup>

The reason that apocalyptic literature cannot be approached literally is because of the nature of such literature. At times, the apocalyptists disguised through symbolic language the entity that was oppressing God's people. The apocalyptic writer sought to give hope to the oppressed people of God by predicting the cataclysmic destruction of the enemy that was persecuting them. However, the apocalypticist was not at liberty to literally identify the oppressor. Such a message of hope would have never gotten past the censors of Antiochus or Rome. Had it been written unambiguously that the insane Antiochus would be cast down, such a message would have been proscribed just as the books of the law had been. Thus, the message had to be veiled in symbolic language.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a literal interpretation without properly understanding the genre of the book leads to an inaccurate conclusion.

Thus, categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic significantly influences how one identifies Babylon of Revelation 17-18. If John was following in the pattern of the apocalyptists, he does not mean Babylon when he says Babylon. Instead, he is using the word Babylon as a symbolic disguise to identify an oppressor that was persecuting Gods' people when John wrote. Thus, when John mentioned Babylon, he might have had in mind Jerusalem or Rome.

Another reason apocalyptic writings cannot be interpreted literally is because such writings can be described as crisis literature.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the writing was produced as a result of some impending crisis.<sup>5</sup> In order to highlight the severity of the crisis, the apocalypticist spoke in exaggerated terms. Take by way of analogy the statement, "my world has come to an end because my girlfriend has broken up with me." This statement obviously does not communicate a literal end of the world. Rather, it is using heightened language in order to communicate the significance of a personal event.

Similarly, an apocalyptic understanding of Revelation views John as vesting earthly events with heightened eschatological language in order to communicate the gravity of the immediate crisis. Caird best summarizes the matter when he says, "What seems to have escaped notice at the time is that Eschatology is a metaphor, the application of end of the world language to that which is not literally the end of the world."<sup>6</sup> Understanding Revelation in such hyperbolic terms opens the possibility that the global language of Revelation 17-18 may in actuality be descriptive of a localized phenomenon that John has invested with global language. Thus, when John speaks of a great city reigning over the kings of the earth (17:18), he is speaking in heightened language of an immediate oppressive force in his own day, such as Jerusalem or Rome.

Apocalyptic multivalence is another hermeneutical door that opens when Revelation is classified as belonging to the apocalyptic category. Collins offers the following explanation of apocalyptic multivalence:

In other Jewish apocalypses the Babylonian crisis of the sixth century often provides the filter through which later crises are viewed. The emphasis is not on the uniqueness

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, "A Preterist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 38.

<sup>3</sup> James Kallas, "The Apocalypse-an Apocalyptic Book?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 70.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell G. Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 24.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38.

<sup>6</sup> G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 253.

of the historical events but on recurring patterns, which assimilate the particular crisis to some event of the past whether historical or mythical.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding multivalence affects how one identifies Babylon of Revelation 17-18. If John employs apocalyptic multivalence in these chapters, it is possible that the events of the chapter cannot be anchored to one event but rather can recur repeatedly throughout history. This perspective allows Bock to employ a multi layered hermeneutic in identifying Babylon. According to Bock, Babylon of Revelation 17-18 not only represents Rome but also a future rebuilt Babylon on the Euphrates. He also says that Babylon also refers to any other city in the sweep of history due to the fact that the world empire's center is always shifting.<sup>8</sup> Pate employs a similar rationale in reaching the conclusion that Babylon not only refers to a future Babylon but to Jerusalem as well.<sup>9</sup>

Categorizing Revelation as apocalyptic also influences how one interprets Revelation's numbers. According to Gregg, other apocalypses typically use numbers to convey concepts rather than count units.<sup>10</sup> Bock seems to rely upon such an apocalyptic framework when he remains open to the possibility that the number 1000 mentioned six times in Revelation 20 refers to an extended period of time rather than a literal 1000 year time period.<sup>11</sup> This again effects how one understands Revelation 17-18 because numerical references are used at least twice in these chapters (17:9-10, 12).

However, others believe that while Revelation contains some apocalyptic elements, the book has more in common with the prophetic genre than the apocalyptic genre. If this is the case, then a new set of hermeneutical principles is not needed to properly interpret Revelation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the same literal, grammatical, historical method that is used to understand other sections of scripture and prophetic material is also what is needed in order to understand Revelation. Literalism can be defined as attaching to every word the same meaning that it would have in normal usage, whether employed in speaking, writing, or thinking.<sup>13</sup> By using this approach, the interpreter takes Revelation literally until he encounters some obvious clue in the text alerting him to the fact that figurative or symbolic language is being employed.

How does the interpreter using this approach recognize when figurative or symbolic language is being employed? One clue involves the use of the word sign (shmeion). When John uses this word, it alerts the interpreter to the fact that John is speaking figuratively or symbolically rather than literally. For example, because John uses shmeion to describe the woman in Revelation 12:1, it is obvious that the woman is symbolic or representative of something. Another clue involves the words like (ovmoios) or as (wvs). When John employs such language, he is indicating a correspondence between what he saw in the vision and what he was trying to describe. For example, Revelation 8:8 says, "...And something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea..." The word "like" alerts the

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<sup>7</sup> Collins, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock Craig A. Blaising (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 93-96.

<sup>9</sup> C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 160.

<sup>10</sup> Gregg, ed., 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, "Summary Essay," in *Three Views on the Millennium*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 303-305.

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956), 89-92.

interpreter to the fact that John is simply using comparative language to describe what he saw and the mountain is not to be interpreted literally.

Another clue involves an identical correspondence in the Old Testament. Because the leopard, lion, and bear in Revelation 13:2 are also used in Daniel 7 to depict nations, the interpreter is alerted to the fact that John is employing symbolic language. Thus, the leopard, lion, and bear also represent nations in Revelation 13 just as they did in Daniel 7. Yet another clue involves an interpretation in the immediate context. If something is interpreted for the reader, then the thing interpreted is obviously a symbol. The woman in Revelation 17 is obviously a symbol because the immediate context interprets her to be a city (17:18). A final clue involves looking for absurdity. For example, if the woman in Revelation 12:1 was literally clothed with the sun she would be destroyed by the heat. Because a literal interpretation yields an absurd result, symbolic language must be in use.

After identifying figurative or symbolic language, how is such language to be understood? Sometimes the immediate context interprets the symbol. For example, the dragon of Revelation 12:3 is interpreted as Satan in 12:9. Walvoord identifies twenty-six instances in which a symbol is interpreted in the immediate context.<sup>14</sup> Another method is to see if the same symbol is employed elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, the same symbol of the woman used in Revelation 12:1 is also used in Genesis 37:9-11 to depict Israel. Thus, the woman of Revelation 12 is symbolic of Israel. This strategy is useful because John uses so much of the Old Testament's imagery. According to Thomas, 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude to the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> Fruchtenbaum's work is helpful to the interpreter in this regard because it contains a lengthy appendix listing all of the Old Testament allusions found in Revelation.<sup>16</sup> A final method for understanding Revelation's symbolic language is to note that John through his use of "like" or "as" is attempting to describe futuristic events that are beyond his linguistic ability. Thus, he communicates through language of correspondence. In other words, in order to communicate the contents of his vision, he uses similes or language of comparison by equating things from his own world to the futuristic events that he sees in his vision.

Moreover, Tenney observes that a consistent application of a literal approach to Revelation logically leads to the futurist interpretation.<sup>17</sup> A relationship exists between literalism and futurism because the ordinary import of Revelation's words and phrases makes it impossible to argue that Revelation's contents have already been fulfilled. The sea turning to blood (Rev 16:3), half of the world's population being destroyed (Rev 6:4; 9:15), and the greatest earthquake in human history (Rev 16:18) obviously have never taken place. Thus, literal interpreters are less likely to see events taking place in John's day as significant for interpreting the book's meaning because the events of the book will be fulfilled in the distant future from John's era.

In this introductory section, I have sought to set forth the different hermeneutical principles that will be employed if one views the primary character of Revelation as apocalyptic or prophetic. While no one can deny the many similarities between Revelation and apocalyptic literature, I believe that the book has more in common with prophecy than apocalypticism. My reasons for making this determination will be presented under the Babylon interpretation in the second section of the paper. Thus, my conclusions regarding the

<sup>14</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1983), 454-59.

<sup>17</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 139, 142.

identity of the woman in Revelation 17-18 are based largely upon the literal method of interpretation. I will identify and interpret symbolic or figurative language in Revelation 17-18 according to the principles enumerated above. I know that this approach will not answer all of the questions. However, in comparison to other approaches, it seems to have the best potential of unfolding the true meaning of Babylon in Revelation 17-18.

### **IDENTIFICATION OF BABYLON IN REVELATION 17-18**

This section of the paper will survey five prominent approaches for identifying Babylon in Revelation 17-18. These approaches include identifying Babylon as the world, Jerusalem, Rome, an end time religious system, and futuristic, literal, rebuilt Babylon. As will be discussed below, I lean toward the last option. Other interpretive options exist, such as viewing Babylon as the Roman Catholic Church or as an eclectic amalgamation of two or more of these views. However, spatial limitations cause me to limit the discussion to the previously enumerated five views. For each option, I will follow a two-fold approach. First, I will allow the view to speak for itself by presenting the methodology embraced by its proponents. Second, I will raise objections and potential weaknesses.

#### ***World***

#### **Methodology**

The first interpretive option in identifying Babylon of Revelation 17-18 is to see Babylon as depicting the satanic world system that has corrupted the world's history. This approach is part of the idealist method of interpreting Revelation. According to this method, the events described in Revelation do not necessarily look for individual or specific fulfillments. Rather, the symbolism of the book depicts spiritual lessons or principles recurring throughout history thus edifying believers in every age. Therefore, the view divorces Revelation from history in exchange for finding great principles that are operational in every age. These great principles include the triumph of good over evil, the vindication of martyrs, the sovereignty of God, and spiritual warfare taking place throughout history.<sup>18</sup>

Beale,<sup>19</sup> Hamstra,<sup>20</sup> and Hendriksen<sup>21</sup> heavily incorporate various aspects of idealism into how they interpret Babylon. Beale contends that Rome as well as all wicked world systems take on the symbolic name "Babylon the Great."<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, he maintains that "Babylon is the prevailing economic-religious system in alliance with the state and its related authorities and existing throughout the ages."<sup>23</sup> According to Hamstra:

In the first century, Babylon was Rome. Two generations ago it was Berlin. Today, perhaps, it is Las Vegas or even a university campus. Babylon can be found everywhere throughout the history of the world. It is the center of anti-Christian seduction any time in history.<sup>24</sup>

According to Hendrickson:

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<sup>18</sup> Gregg, ed., 43-44.

<sup>19</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, New Century Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 885-86.

<sup>20</sup> William Hendrickson, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939), 200-202.

<sup>21</sup> Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 116-20.

<sup>22</sup> Beale, 755.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 850.

<sup>24</sup> Hamstra, 117.

...the world viewed as the embodiment of 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life.' Babylon, then, is the world as the centre of seduction at any moment in history, particularly during this dispensation.<sup>25</sup>

The idealist approach heavily relies upon Revelation's apocalyptic content. According to Hamstra, because the idealist begins with the presupposition that Revelation is apocalyptic, the idealist views all of Revelation's episodes and visions as symbolic until proven otherwise.<sup>26</sup> In addition, an idealist employs the above described transtemporal framework when approaching the text of Revelation 17-18. Thus, the woman drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6) not only speaks of Rome's persecution of believers but also of the persecution caused by world governments throughout history.<sup>27</sup> Hendriksen sees the command to leave Babylon (18:4) as relating to believers of all time when he notes:

The admonition to leave Babylon is addressed to believers in all ages (cf. Isa 48:20; 52:11; Jer 50:8, 41-44; Zech 2:7). From this fact it appears that Babylon is not only the city of the end-time. It is the world, as the centre of seduction, in any age.<sup>28</sup>

Hendriksen attaches a similar transtemporal meaning to Babylon's destruction (17:16-17; 18:9-24):

When Babylon perishes, the economic chaos is complete; the world of the unbeliever, on which he has pinned his hopes and built his trust, collapses! This is true with respect to the fall of every Babylon—whether it is literal Babylon, or Nineveh, or Rome.<sup>29</sup>

## Weaknesses

To begin with, a problem with this transhistorical understanding is that Revelation 1:1 seem to be predicting a set of specific events that must shortly come to pass. This verse gives the impression that at least some specific events in some historical setting is intended.<sup>30</sup> Also, Wright similarly contends that biblical prophetic tradition shows a concern for history in addition to theology. He notes:

[Jews] knew a good metaphor when they saw one, and used cosmic imagery to bring out full theological significance of cataclysmic socio-political events.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere Wright indicates:

It will not do to dismiss... 'apocalyptic' as 'merely metaphorical.' Metaphors have teeth; the complex metaphors available to first century Jews had particularly sharp ones, and they could be, and apparently were, reapplied to a variety of scenarios, all within this-worldly history.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, why are the specific details given in Revelation 17-18 if they will have no historical fulfillment? Thus, to refer to the city as merely an ideal city seems to fall short of the

<sup>25</sup> Hendrickson, 202.

<sup>26</sup> Hamstra, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Gregg, ed., 405.

<sup>28</sup> Hendrickson, 208.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>30</sup> Gregg, ed., 44.

<sup>31</sup> N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 1:333.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2:321-22.



requirement of chapters 17-18 of a real city at a certain spot on the earth. Finally, predictive prophecy in Scripture has fulfillments in history that are specific, such as the predictions in Isaiah 53 of Messiah's sufferings.<sup>33</sup>

### **Jerusalem**

Another interpretive option involves identifying Babylon in Revelation 17-18 as the city of Jerusalem. Some of the main proponents of this position include Ford,<sup>34</sup> Russell,<sup>35</sup> Terry,<sup>36</sup> Chilton,<sup>37</sup> Gentry,<sup>38</sup> and Beagley.<sup>39</sup> Most of the proponents of the Babylon = Jerusalem position are either full or partial preterists<sup>40</sup> who see the events described in Revelation 4-22 as predicting the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70 as well as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Thus, Jerusalem advocates typically hold to an early date of the Book of Revelation. However, not all advocates of the Jerusalem view are of this mindset. Some advocating this position hold to a late date of the book and view the imagery of the harlot in Revelation 17-18 to be merely reminiscent of the A.D. 70 event. Thus they understand these chapters as an *eventu* prophecy. Provan<sup>41</sup> is a proponent of this position.

## **Methodology**

### **General Arguments**

Advocates of the Jerusalem view employ some general arguments in reaching the conclusion that the description of Babylon and its destruction are in actuality describing the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. To begin with, some Jerusalem proponents see Peter's reference to the place of origin of his letter as Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 as actually a reference to Jerusalem. By way of comparison, Babylon = Rome proponents view Peter's reference to Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 as a reference to Rome on account of the fact that tradition associates Peter's later life with Rome rather than Babylon. Thus, they see Peter using the term Babylon to speak cryptically of Rome in 1 Peter 5:13. Rome advocates use this verse as proof that Babylon was a common first century Christian code word for Rome. This theory helps them identify Babylon of Revelation 17-18 as Rome.

Babylon = Jerusalem proponents employ this identical rationale. However, they maintain that Peter was referring to Jerusalem rather than Rome in 1 Peter 5:13 and therefore the early church understood Babylon as a cryptic reference to Jerusalem rather than Rome. Russell cites several reasons to substantiate the theory that Peter was referring to Jerusalem through his use of the term Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13.<sup>42</sup> Russell contends that Peter's life and acts were more closely associated with Jerusalem than any other city. For

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<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 226.

<sup>34</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, Anchor Bible, vol. 38 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 54-56, 93, 259-307.

<sup>35</sup> J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming* (London: Unwin, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 482-98.

<sup>36</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics: A Study of the Most Notable Revelations of God and of Christ* (NY: Eaton & Mains, 1898), 426-39.

<sup>37</sup> David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 421-66.

<sup>38</sup> Gentry, 73-79.

<sup>39</sup> Alan James Beagley, *The 'Stitz Im Leben' of the Apocalypse with Particular Reference to the Role of the Church's Enemies* (New York: de Gruyter, 1987), 93-110.

<sup>40</sup> Full preterism sees Revelation 4-22 as finding a total A.D. 70 fulfillment. Russell is a representative of the full preterist camp. On the other hand, partial preterism understands most of the contents of Revelation 4-22 as finding an A.D. 70 realization while allowing for some of these prophecies, such as Revelation 20, to receive a futuristic fulfillment. Gentry is an advocate of partial preterism.

<sup>41</sup> Iain Provan, "Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 64 (December 1996): 81-100.

<sup>42</sup> Russell, 346-50.

example, Peter and the apostles remained in Jerusalem when the rest of the church was scattered (Acts 8:1). Moreover, Peter was in Jerusalem when Herod Agrippa I apprehended and imprisoned him (Acts 12:3). Furthermore, Paul went and visited Peter who was dwelling in Jerusalem (Gal 1:18).

Also, fourteen years later Paul again visited Barnabas, Titus, and Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-9). In addition, Peter was intimidated by those who came from Jerusalem presumably because upon his way home they would hold him accountable. This seems to imply that Peter's residence was in Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-12). Moreover, if Markus named in the epistle is John Mark, we know that his abode was in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). In addition, Silvanus or Silas, the writer or bearer of the epistle, was known as a prominent member of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22-32).

Russell also maintains that 1 Peter 4:17 also supports the notion that Peter was in Jerusalem when he wrote the epistle. 1 Peter 4:17 says, "For the time *has come* for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what will *be* the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"<sup>43</sup> Russell argues that this verse fixes Peter's location in Jerusalem just before the city's imminent destruction in A.D. 70. Russell contends that the phrase "house of God" is an unmistakable reference to the Jewish temple. Moreover, the phrase "and if it begins first with us" places Peter in the temple area when the judgment was to take place. In addition, Russell believes that Peter is drawing his imagery from Ezekiel's vision, which fixes the locality where the slaughter was to commence by speaking of the impending doom of the temple and the City of Jerusalem.

Russell also argues that Peter did not mention Babylon by name in 1 Peter 5:13 because it was possible that the early church already associated Jerusalem with Babylon. The ancient enemy of Babylon would be a fitting description of first century Judaism since both were oppressors of God's people. Thus, just as Peter associated Babylon with Jerusalem in 1 Peter 5:13, John made the same association in Revelation 17-18.

Babylon = Jerusalem proponents marshal other evidence in support of their view. For example, they contend that Revelation's predictions that its prophecies will come to pass "shortly" or "quickly" (Rev 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 12, 20) prevent Babylon from being interpreted as referring to something centuries after the date of the original writing. This limitation is heightened by the fact that Revelation indicates that its prophecies are "near" or "at hand" (Rev 1:3; 22:10) or are "about to" take place (Rev 1:19; 3:10). According to Jerusalem advocates, such a limitation at least narrows the interpretive possibilities of the identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 so that the interpreter at least must consider Jerusalem, which was an immediate oppressor of God's people at the time John wrote the Apocalypse.<sup>44</sup>

Jerusalem advocates also note that many commentators have observed that Revelation appears to be a reworking of the Olivet Discourse.<sup>45</sup> Russell observes numerous parallels between Revelation and the Olivet Discourse such as the Parousia, wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes, false prophets, deceivers, signs and wonders, the darkening of the sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, angels, trumpets, eagles, carcasses, great tribulation, woe, convulsions of nature, the treading down of Jerusalem, the gathering of the elect, the reward of the faithful, and the judgment of the wicked.<sup>46</sup> These similarities allow

<sup>43</sup> All Scripture quotations used throughout are taken from the New King James Version.

<sup>44</sup> Chilton, 421.

<sup>45</sup> Gentry, 52-53.

<sup>46</sup> Russell, 374.



Russell to conclude that same events that are predicted in the Olivet Discourse are also predicted in Revelation but only in “a more figurative and symbolical dress.”<sup>47</sup>

This connection between the Olivet Discourse and the Apocalypse is important for Jerusalem advocates. It allows them to conclude that Revelation is about the approaching judgment upon Israel and Jerusalem because Christ’s prophecy on the Mount of Olives is concerned about this same subject.<sup>48</sup> The fact that the Olivet Discourse concerns primarily the imminent destruction of Israel and Jerusalem can be seen from various texts. For example, Matthew 24:15 speaks of the desecration of the temple. Also, in Matthew 24:20, the Jews are told to pray that their flight will not take place on the Sabbath. In sum, Jerusalem advocates maintain that it should come as no surprise that the harlot of Revelation 17-18 is identified with Jerusalem because the Olivet Discourse and its fuller exposition in Revelation concerns the imminent destruction upon Israel and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem proponents also argue that the New Testament often contrasts the Jerusalem from above and the Jerusalem from below (Gal 4:21-26; Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22). They also observe that this same contrast continues into the Book of Revelation. There, the contrast is made between the holy city (Rev 21:2; 22:19) and the wicked city (Rev 17-18) and between the bride (Rev 21:9; 22:17) and the harlot (Rev 17:15-16). Interestingly, Revelation also refers to the New Jerusalem (Rev 3:12; 21:2). Thus, viewing Revelation 17-18 as Jerusalem from below continues this contrast between the two cities. Such a view also continues the thematic contrast of the two Jerusalems found throughout the New Testament. Therefore, it is appropriate to identify Babylon of Revelation 17-18 as Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup>

One of the stronger arguments used by Jerusalem proponents involves the identification of the phrase “the great city” as used in Revelation 17:18. Jerusalem advocates contend that the only way to properly identify this city is to observe how the phrase “the great city” appears earlier in Revelation. There are only two references to “the great city” prior to Revelation 17:18. These references include Revelation 11:8 and Revelation 16:19. Jerusalem advocates believe that both are unmistakable references to Jerusalem. Thus, Revelation 17:18 must refer to Jerusalem as well.

Revelation 11:8 says, “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.” Here, the city of Jerusalem is obviously in view because it refers to the city where Christ was crucified. Thus, Revelation 11:8 applies the phrase “the great city” to Jerusalem. Since Babylon of Revelation 17-18 is consistently designated as “the great city” (17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21), “the great city” of Babylon must also be a reference to Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup> Jerusalem advocates believe that their argument is strengthened by the fact that Revelation 11:8 figuratively refers to Jerusalem as Sodom and Egypt. They conclude that if Jerusalem can be figuratively called Sodom and Egypt in Revelation 11:8, then she was also figuratively called Babylon in Revelation 17-18.<sup>51</sup>

The other reference to the “great city” is Revelation 16:19, which says, “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.” Jerusalem advocates believe that this reference to “the great city” also refers to Jerusalem.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 375-76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>49</sup> Terry, 460.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, 486-87.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 486.

They arrive at this conclusion by noting that the division of the city into three parts is an allusion to Ezekiel 5:1-5. There God told Ezekiel to cut his hair and divide it into three to depict the fate that the different sections of Jerusalem would experience during the Babylonian siege.<sup>52</sup> Ford observes that the juxtaposition of the phrase “the great city” with the term “nations” suggests that “the great city” of Revelation 16:19 could not be a gentile city such as Rome.<sup>53</sup>

Jerusalem advocates believe that their case is further strengthened by another reference found in Revelation 14 calling Babylon Jerusalem. Revelation 14:20 says, “And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses’ bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.” Because of the grapes/vine imagery that is so typically associated with Israel throughout the Old Testament,<sup>54</sup> most interpreters identify the city of Revelation 14:20 as Jerusalem.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the only other city mentioned within the same chapter is “Babylon the great,” which therefore must also represent Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup>

### **Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17-18**

Jerusalem advocates also point out numerous descriptors of Babylon found in Revelation 17-18 that could only apply to Jerusalem. For example, the harlot imagery (17:1-2) was used most frequently of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness in the Old Testament (Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20-24, 30-33; 3:1-3, 8; Ezek 16; 23; Hos 9:1). Chilton explains that such imagery was typically associated with Israel when God brought a covenant against His people.<sup>57</sup> Terry observes that harlot imagery connotes covenant unfaithfulness in the Old Testament.<sup>58</sup> Chilton notes that the only two cities outside of Israel that are accused of harlotry are Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4). Yet, both had been in covenant with God (1 Kings 5:1-12; 9:13; Amos 1:9; Jonah 3:5-10).<sup>59</sup>

Chilton sees the reference to the wilderness in Revelation 17:3 to be an allusion to Israel’s wilderness experience as depicted in Numbers 13-14.<sup>60</sup> Jerusalem advocates also see the reference to the harlot riding on the beast as an allusion to Israel’s dependence upon the Roman Empire for her existence and power. The interdependence between Israel and Rome is seen in the New Testament as Israel turned Jesus over to Rome to be crucified (John 19:12-16) and encouraged Rome to persecute the church (Acts 18:12-13).<sup>61</sup>

Gentry points out that the color and adornment of the harlot in Revelation 17:4 reflects the Jewish priestly colors of scarlet, purple, and gold (Exod 28:33). These same colors were also found in the tapestry of the temple.<sup>62</sup> Beale notes that the combination of the words in the Greek that describe the harlot’s garb is identical to the LXX description of the Jewish high priest’s garments.<sup>63</sup> According to Beagley, the outward beauty of the cup and its inward impurity is reminiscent of Christ’s denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:35.<sup>64</sup> In

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 487-88.

<sup>53</sup> Ford, 264.

<sup>54</sup> Russell, 487.

<sup>55</sup> Gregg, ed., 404.

<sup>56</sup> Russell, 487.

<sup>57</sup> Chilton, 424-26.

<sup>58</sup> Terry, 427.

<sup>59</sup> Chilton, 424, n. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>62</sup> Gentry, 76.

<sup>63</sup> Beale, 886.

<sup>64</sup> Beagley, 94.

addition, the woman's title of harlot written across her forehead in Revelation 17:5 is a direct reference to Jeremiah 3:3 where God told apostate Judah that she had a harlot's forehead.<sup>65</sup>

Jerusalem advocates maintain that Jerusalem best fits the description of the woman's persecution of the saints, apostles and prophets (Rev 17:6; 18:20, 24). Unlike Rome, Jerusalem was responsible for killing Old Testament prophets (Matt 23:35; Luke 1:50-51; Acts 7:52) in addition to the New Testament saints and apostles.<sup>66</sup> Russell believes that Jerusalem also fits the description of the city on seven hills as depicted in Revelation 17:9. He enumerates seven prominent hills found in Jerusalem. He also notes Psalm 48:1, which depicts Jerusalem as "a city set upon a hill."<sup>67</sup> Russell also sees that it is possible to harmonize Jerusalem with seven kings mentioned in Revelation 17:10 by taking the seven kings either symbolically or as Herodian kings or procurators of Judea.<sup>68</sup> Russell also harmonizes the Jerusalem view with the ten kings of Revelation 17:12 by interpreting them as auxiliary chiefs and princes who were allies of Rome and received their commands from Rome during the Jewish War.<sup>69</sup>

Most Jerusalem view advocates interpret the destruction of the harlot by the beast in Revelation 17:16-17 as Rome's siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Beagley sees the stripping and burning of the harlot depicted in these verses alluding back to similar Old Testament prophecies of Israel's destruction found in Ezekiel 16:35-41 and Hosea 2:3, 9-10.<sup>70</sup> Jerusalem advocates have different ways of explaining how their view can be harmonized with the description of the city reigning over the kings of the earth as described in Revelation 17:18. Russell notes that the term "earth" (gh) in the phrase "kings of the earth" can have a localized meaning elsewhere in Scripture (Acts 4:26-27).<sup>71</sup> Chilton argues that Jerusalem did in fact reign over the kings of the earth when she obeyed God and consequently experienced the blessings of her covenant (Deut 28:1-14).<sup>72</sup> Ford contends that the language of Revelation 17:18 is similar to hyperbolic language of Jerusalem's exaltation found in the Old Testament as well as other early Jewish sources.<sup>73</sup>

Jerusalem advocates often interpret the description of Babylon having become the dwelling place of demons (18:2) as the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy found in Matthew 12:38-45 that Israel would be overrun by demons as an act of judgment because of the nation's rejection of Him.<sup>74</sup> They also view the call for God's people to come out of Babylon (Rev 18:4) as a reference to Christ's admonition to His disciples in the Olivet Discourse to flee from condemned Jerusalem at the first sign of its imminent doom (Luke 21:20-23).<sup>75</sup> Provan notes that the reference to pay her back double according to her deeds (18:6) is a phrase used only of Israel (Jer 16:18; 17:18; Isa 40:2; 61:7; Hosea 10:10).<sup>76</sup> In addition, regarding the description of her punishment as being given a cup to drink from, God used this same imagery when describing Israel's punishment in the Old Testament (Jer 25:15-18; Isa 51:17, 22-23; Ezek 23:32-34).

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<sup>65</sup> Gentry, 75.

<sup>66</sup> Ford, 300.

<sup>67</sup> Russell, 492.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 499-502.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 502-4.

<sup>70</sup> Beagley, 95.

<sup>71</sup> Russell, 493-95.

<sup>72</sup> Chilton, 442-43.

<sup>73</sup> Ford, 285.

<sup>74</sup> Gregg, ed., 424.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>76</sup> Provan: 94.

Jerusalem advocates have explained the commercial items enumerated in Revelation 18:11-15 in various ways. Ford believes that most of these items were used in the temple.<sup>77</sup> Beagley understands them in the context of Judean imports.<sup>78</sup> Provan sees this section of Scripture as recalling the familiar Old Testament lament song pattern echoing God's past judgment on pagan peoples rather than a description of economic details.<sup>79</sup>

Most commentators see the analogy between Babylon's destruction and a millstone sinking to the bottom of the sea as an allusion to Babylon's destruction that is similarly described in Jeremiah 51:63. However, Beagley notes that Revelation 18:21 adds the phrase "like a great millstone" and replaces the term "the Euphrates" with "the sea." According to Beagley, this change is due to the author's desire to draw a parallel with Christ's words in Matthew 18:6 rather than Jeremiah 51:63.<sup>80</sup> In Matthew 18:6, Christ warned that it would be better for a person to have a millstone tied around his neck and cast into the sea than to offend a little one. Finally, Jerusalem advocates parallel the predictions of the cessation of the sound of music and the millstone and the shining of the light (Rev 18:22-23) with similar Old Testament prophecies relating to Israel's destruction (Jer 7:34; 16:9-13; 25:10).

## Weaknesses

### General Problems

Before responding to some of the specific arguments advanced by Jerusalem advocates, I will first specify some general weaknesses with the position. To begin with, to refer Jerusalem to Babylon is unprecedented.<sup>81</sup> While Scripture typically relates Jerusalem to the people of God, it relates Babylon to the world.<sup>82</sup> Although Sodom and Egypt have precedent for being used as a metaphor for Jerusalem, Babylon is never used in this way.<sup>83</sup> Also, there is no example in Jewish literature of the use of the name Babylon for Jerusalem.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, if the Babylon = Jerusalem hypothesis is correct then Jerusalem will never be rebuilt again. Revelation 18:21-23 describes the permanent destruction of Babylon. Revelation 18:21 says, "...Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore." Thus, according to the Babylon = Jerusalem view, Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and will never be rebuilt again. Yet, how can this be a description of Jerusalem when scripture repeatedly speaks of its return to prominence during the millennial reign (Isa 2:3; Zech 14:16; Rev 20:9). Scripture is quite plain that God still has a plan for ethnic Israel and yet the Jerusalem view seems to teach the opposite.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, the description of the harlot in Revelation 17-18 seems to communicate her heavy involvement with idolatry.<sup>86</sup> This seems to be communicated by terms such as "spiritual adultery," "unclean things," and "abominations." This is an odd description of first century Jerusalem in light of the fact that the city of that era was strictly monotheistic and never compromised with the idolatry of their pagan neighbors.<sup>87</sup> First century Jews

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<sup>77</sup> Ford, 304-5.

<sup>78</sup> Beagley, 109.

<sup>79</sup> Provan: 81-100.

<sup>80</sup> Beagley, 99.

<sup>81</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 307.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>83</sup> Beale, 25.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Pate, 169-70.

<sup>86</sup> Beale, 885.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

recognized idolatry had caused the Babylonian captivity. This recognition had the effect of curing the nation of that particular sin.

In addition, while idealist, historicist, and futurist interpretations of Revelation can be sustained regardless of whether one assigns a Neronian or Domitianic date to John's Apocalypse, the type of preterist interpretation advocated by Gentry, Chilton, and Russell does not enjoy the same luxury. Because Revelation 17-18 obviously cannot be a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 if these prophecies were written 25 years later, the Jerusalem view has a tendency to rise or fall depending on whether one assigns an early or late date to the book. This generalization, of course, exempts the work of Provan who argues for a late date while seeing Revelation 17-18 as an *ex eventu* prophecy that is merely reminiscent of the A.D. 70 event.

It is interesting to observe Jerusalem advocates either expressly or tacitly admitting their dependence upon an early date. According to preterist R.C. Sproul, "If the book was written after A.D. 70, then its contents do not manifestly refer to the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem—unless the book is a wholesale fraud, having been composed after the predicted events had already occurred."<sup>88</sup> Similarly, upon reviewing the Revelation commentary called *Days of Vengeance* of fellow preterist David Chilton, Gentry noted, "If it could be demonstrated that Revelation were written 25 years after the Fall of Jerusalem, Chilton's entire labor goes up in smoke."<sup>89</sup>

Needless to say, Jerusalem advocates must go out of their way to demonstrate Revelation's early date. This explains why Gentry devoted his doctoral dissertation to the subject of Revelation's early date. The content of this dissertation was later published in his book *Before Jerusalem Fell*.<sup>90</sup> The Jerusalem view's dependence on Revelation's early date is also demonstrated by a recent Dallas Theological Seminary master's thesis arguing for identifying Babylon of Revelation 17-18 as Jerusalem. In this thesis, the author devotes an entire chapter toward defending Revelation's early date.<sup>91</sup>

The problem with the Jerusalem view's dependence upon assigning an early date to Revelation is that most modern New Testament scholars will not date the book that early. Thus, Gentry is candid in his admission that his assignment of an early date for the book has caused him to swim against the tide of contemporary opinion.<sup>92</sup> I believe that most of the external and internal arguments for Revelation's early date have already been successfully rebutted.<sup>93</sup> In sum, the Jerusalem view's dependence upon an early date places it in a precarious situation. D. A. Carson echoes such a sentiment when issuing the following critique of Chilton's commentary:

...Chilton ties his interpretation of the entire book to a dogmatic insistence that it was written before A.D. 70, and that its predictions are focused on the destruction of Jerusalem. Although there are some excellent theological links crafted in this book, the

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<sup>88</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 140.

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Days of Vengeance: A Review Article," *The Council of Chalcedon* (June 1987): 11.

<sup>90</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

<sup>91</sup> D. Ragan Ewing, "The Identification of Babylon the Harlot in the Book of Revelation" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002), 22-54.

<sup>92</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Beast of Revelation* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2002), 109.

<sup>93</sup> J. Ritchie Smith, "The Date of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 45 (April-June 1888). For a more recent work specifically critiquing the early date arguments raised by Gentry, see Mark Hitchcock, "The Stake in the Heart: The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation," in *The End Times Controversy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 123-50. It is my understanding that much of the material from this chapter will provide the basis for Hitchcock's upcoming doctoral dissertation arguing for a Domitianic date for Revelation.



central setting and argument are so weak and open to criticism that I cannot recommend the work very warmly.<sup>94</sup>

The Jerusalem view is further weakened to the extent that it appears to come on the scene rather late in church history. Frost explains:

The postmillennialism and partial preterism of Gentry and Seraiah is not of the fathers. It hardly bears resemblance. Gentry borrowing from late nineteenth century theologian Milton Terry interprets the Babylonian whore in Revelation 17:1-ff to be Jerusalem in the age of Paul. This is brand new. No father taught this that we are aware of. For nearly two thousand years this view never breathed, if and only if we are to maintain that all eschatology can be found in these writings.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the Jerusalem view has problems handling the global language found in Revelation 17-18 and Matthew 24. For example, the waters on which the woman sits (Rev 17:1) are later defined as peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (Rev 17:5). Except for the replacement of tribes with multitudes, these are the same categories are mentioned in Revelation 5:9 regarding those for whom Christ died.<sup>96</sup> Thus, viewing the categories of Revelation 17:15 as pertaining to the local situation of A.D. 70 logically leads to the conclusion that Christ only died for those within the same localized sphere rather than the whole world. This example illustrates the daunting task Jerusalem advocates face. Because of their prior understanding that Revelation pertains to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jerusalem advocates are forced to allegorize Revelation's global language into local language. Jerusalem advocates face similar problems upon encountering global language elsewhere in Revelation 17-18 (Rev 17:18). As previously indicated, Jerusalem advocates view Revelation as merely a fuller exposition of the Olivet Discourse. Because they see the Olivet Discourse as a warning of Jerusalem's imminent destruction, Jerusalem advocates also face the problem of handling global and futuristic language in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:15, 21-22, 27, 29, 30-31).

### **Specific Arguments**

Now that some of the general weaknesses of the Jerusalem view have been presented, I will now respond to some of the previously mentioned arguments advanced by Jerusalem proponents. To begin with, stronger arguments can be made for either a literal understanding of Babylon or Roman identification of Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 than for a Jerusalem identification of Babylon. The Roman view has in its favor tradition that places Peter in Rome during his later years as well as extra biblical writings indicating that Babylon was a common way of referring to Rome. The Jerusalem view is unable to marshal similar evidence. Thus, most scholars believe that Peter was referring to Rome rather than Jerusalem in 1 Peter 5:13. The strengths of a literal interpretation of 1 Peter 5:13 will be explored later on.

Second, Revelation's timing texts do not limit the scope of its fulfillment to the first century. It is possible to understand the timing texts qualitatively rather than chronologically. In other words, these texts could indicate the manner of Christ's return rather than when he will return. Thus, when the action comes, it will come suddenly with great rapidity.<sup>97</sup> Moreover,

<sup>94</sup> D.A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 129.

<sup>95</sup> Samuel M. Frost, *Misplaced Hope: The Origins of First and Second Century Eschatology* (Colorado Springs: Bimillennial Press, 2002), 154.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 303.

<sup>97</sup> Walvoord, 56.



the action is to be regarded as impending as if it could be fulfilled at any moment.<sup>98</sup> The New Testament allows for such a usage. For example, while it is true that Scripture often uses “shortly” or “quickly” (tacos) in a chronological sense to indicate when (1 Timothy 3:14), Scripture also uses the same word in a qualitative sense. For instance, Acts 22:18 uses tacos to indicate manner when it says, “Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.”

In addition, the Septuagint often uses *tavcos* qualitatively in prophetic passages.<sup>99</sup> It is obvious that the use of *tavcos* in the following passages cannot be chronological and therefore must be qualitative because contextually these prophetic passages would not find their fulfillment for hundreds and even thousands of years after they were written. For example, Isaiah 13:22 says, “...Her (Israel) fateful time will *soon* come...” This verse was written around 700 B.C. and predicted Israel’s destruction under Babylon that did not occur until 539 B.C. Isaiah 51:5 says, My righteousness is *near*, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust.” Many scholars believe that this passage will not be fulfilled until the millennium. Similar Septuagint uses of the timing phrases utilized in Revelation can be found in Isaiah 5:26; 13:6; 58:8; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14.

Also, the argument regarding Jerusalem from above and Jerusalem from below would be persuasive as a secondary argument only if it is first exegetically established that Jerusalem is in view in Revelation 17-18. However, Jerusalem proponents are not able to leap this initial hurdle. Finally, the argument that “the great city” of Revelation 17-18 is identical to “the great city” of Jerusalem found earlier in Revelation 11:8 represents a hermeneutical error known as “illegitimate totality transfer.” This error arises when the meaning of a word or phrase as derived from its use elsewhere is then automatically read into the same word or phrase in a foreign context.<sup>100</sup> Jerusalem advocates commit such an error when they define “the great city” in Revelation 17-18 from how the same phrase is used in totally different contexts elsewhere in Revelation. The same error occurs when the identification of “city” in Revelation 14:20 is then read back into the same word in an entirely different context in verse 8 of the same chapter. Such a hermeneutical approach neglects the possibility that Revelation could be highlighting two “great” cities. Both the city of Jerusalem and the city of Babylon could be separately designated “the great city.”

Moreover, one of the earlier references to “the great city” that Jerusalem advocates believe is speaking of Jerusalem may not be a reference to Jerusalem at all. As previously indicated Jerusalem proponents believe that Revelation 16:19 is speaking of Jerusalem because its division into three parts is identical to the destruction of Jerusalem as portrayed in the Old Testament (Ezek 5). However, equating Babylon and Jerusalem on the basis of similarities between Revelation 16:19 and Ezekiel 5 may be unwarranted. John may simply be borrowing familiar imagery from Israel’s past destruction and applying it in Revelation 17-18 for purposes of communicating the manner of Babylon’s future destruction.

### **Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17-18**

It should first be observed that similarity of language between Revelation 17-18 and Old Testament Jerusalem does not necessarily indicate that John is identifying Babylon as

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Ice, “Has Bible Prophecy Already Been Fulfilled? (Part 2),” *Conservative Theological Journal* 4 (December 2000): 306.

<sup>100</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 217-18.

Jerusalem. John may simply be borrowing familiar imagery from Israel's past destruction and applying to Babylon in Revelation 17-18 in order to clearly communicate the manner of Babylon's future destruction. In addition, a scrutiny of some of the parallels between Revelation 17-18 and Old Testament Jerusalem that are relied on by Jerusalem advocates demonstrates that they are not as convincing as perhaps they initially appear. For example, the harlot imagery (Rev 17:1, 5) need not automatically refer back to God's accusations of Israel as an unfaithful harlot. Thomas notes that the angel describing the woman uses the term *pornh* (harlotry) rather than *moiceia* (adultery). The latter word is more restrictive implying a previous marital relationship. Although *pornh* can include adultery, it is much broader. Thus, it is possible that the woman represents all false religions of all time rather than just the spiritual unfaithfulness of God's covenant people Israel.<sup>101</sup>

In addition, as previously indicated, Jerusalem proponents believe Revelation 17:3, which describes the woman riding the beast, refers to the alleged first century alliance between Jerusalem and Rome. However, Thomas questions whether such imagery is consistent with that historical situation when he observes, "Rome's prolonged siege and destruction of Jerusalem from the late 60's to 70 hardly gives the impression of any alliance between the Jews and the Romans."<sup>102</sup> Moreover, as previously indicated, Jerusalem proponents believe that only Israel can satisfy the details of Revelation 18:20, 24. These verses state that Babylon killed the apostles and prophets. Jerusalem advocates maintain that only Israel killed the Old Testament prophets. However, none of these texts specifies which prophets are in view. It is possible that the references to prophets in these verses could refer to New Testament prophets such as Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10). If this is the case, then the possibility opens for another political power besides Israel to be the persecutor that is depicted in Revelation 17:6; 18:20, 24.

Finally, Russell's understanding of *gh* in Revelation 17:18 as the local land of Canaan is unsatisfactory. Although the term "earth" (*gh'*) can have a local meaning in the New Testament and the LXX by referring to the land of Israel (1 Sam 13:19; Zech 12:12; Matt 2:9), the word can also have a universal meaning by referring to all the earth (Gen 1:1). Thus, the meaning of the term depends upon the context in which it is used. The global emphasis of the immediate context (Rev 17:15) argues for *gh'* to be given a global rather than local understanding.

### **Rome**

The most common approach among New Testament scholarship is to identify Babylon of Revelation 17-18 as Rome. This interpretive approach is essentially historicist. It sees Revelation's prophecies regarding Babylon as finding their fulfillment in the life and destruction of the Roman Empire. Thus, the prophecies of Revelation 17-18 span from the date of the book's composition until Rome's destruction in A.D. 476. Like the previously discussed Jerusalem option, this approach is predicated largely upon the assumption that John was speaking of an entity that posed an imminent threat to the churches of his immediate era. Aune is one of the most visible proponents of this position.<sup>103</sup> Other

<sup>101</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 283.

<sup>102</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 458.

<sup>103</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 906-1012.

commentators that incorporate all or at least some of Aune's approach include Charles,<sup>104</sup> Swete,<sup>105</sup> Caird,<sup>106</sup> Mounce,<sup>107</sup> and Beasley-Murray.<sup>108</sup>

### Methodology

The Babylon = Rome view is largely built upon the presupposition that the name Babylon was a common way that early Christians had of disguising their mention of Rome. The early Christians supposedly engaged in this practice in order to avoid detection from Rome and thus insulate themselves from Roman persecution. The reason that the early Christians selected the name Babylon to be used for Rome is that Babylon and Rome are comparable in a variety of ways. For example, both were centers for world empires. Moreover, both captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the Babylon = Rome hypothesis presupposes that John employed such imagery in light of the destruction of the temple that was first executed by Babylon and subsequently reenacted by Rome.<sup>110</sup>

In addition, there are five oracles against Babylon in the Old Testament (Isa 13:1-22; 14:22-23; 21:1-10; Jer 25:12-14; 50:1-51:64). Rome proponents assume that John in Revelation 17-18 has transferred the hostility that the prophets had toward historical Babylon to Rome.<sup>111</sup> Rome advocates contend that it should not be surprising to find Rome as a symbolic name for Babylon because there were other symbolic names for Rome in use within early Judaism including Edom and Kittim.<sup>112</sup>

### General Arguments

Advocates of the Rome view employ some general arguments in reaching the conclusion that the identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 is actually Rome. To begin with, Rome advocates rely upon the symbolic nature of the Book of Revelation. Rome proponents Pate and Hays explain:

The extensive use of symbolism and figurative language by the apostle John to convey specific statements at least opens the door to the possibility that the terms *Babylon* may be symbolic as well. In fact, since practically all other terms in Revelation 17-18 are symbols (harlot, beast, horns, etc.), understanding the term Babylon in a symbolic sense would reflect a more consistent interpretation of this passage than that of interpreting this term alone as literal reference.<sup>113</sup>

Rome proponents further point out that Babylon should be understood in more of a symbolic rather than literal way based upon the use of the word "mystery" (mustrion) in Revelation 17:5. Robertson believes that musthriion is part of the woman's full name "Mystery Babylon the Great." He also believes that the word "mystery" connotes the notion of mysticism or symbolism. Thus, he concludes, "...the name Babylon is to be interpreted mystically or spiritually (cf. pneumatikws 11:8) for Rome."<sup>114</sup>

<sup>104</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ed. S.R. Driver and A. Plummer and C.A. Briggs, International Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 75.

<sup>105</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, ed. 3d (London: Macmillan, 1911), 226.

<sup>106</sup> G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, ed. Henry Chadwick, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Black, 1966), 213.

<sup>107</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, rev. ed., Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 308.

<sup>108</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1974), 225.

<sup>109</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-19*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 829.

<sup>110</sup> Beale, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-19*, 830.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 103.

<sup>114</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 6:430.

Moreover, the assumption of Rome advocates that the early Christians commonly used the name Babylon for Rome is built around two pieces of evidence. These two pieces of evidence include Peter's mention of Babylon as his place of writing in 1 Peter 5:13 and references in extra biblical literature equating Rome with Babylon. Regarding 1 Peter 5:13, Rome advocates cite several reasons to support the conclusion that Peter was speaking of Rome rather than literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13.<sup>115</sup> First, tradition places Peter in Rome at the end of his life.<sup>116</sup> Second, according to 1 Peter 5:13, one of Peter's companions was Mark. Mark was with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (Col 4:10; Phlm 22-23) and may have accompanied Timothy to Rome for the second incarceration (2 Tim 4:11). Therefore, it is more rational to assume that Peter and Mark got together in Rome rather than in Babylon.

Third, Peter and Mark are never associated with the literal city of Babylon. No where in Scripture or in extra biblical Christian material does one find a reference to Peter or Mark visiting Babylon.<sup>117</sup> Fourth, a consultation with a map demonstrates that the letter must have been sent from the West or Rome because of the order in which the names or provinces appear. Fifth, Scripture depicts Peter's ministry moving northward from Canaan to Syrian Antioch (Gal 2:11) and then Westward to Corinth (1 Cor 1:12) in the direction of Rome. Sixth, there was no reason for Peter to visit Babylon. Because of the Babylonian Captivity, a large number of Jews continued to reside in the East. However, in the last years of Caligula's life (Caligula died in A.D. 41), there was a persecution of the Jews in Babylon. Consequently, many of these Jews migrated to Selucia. Five years later a plague diminished their number further.<sup>118</sup> Thus, historians of the day referred to Babylon as uninhabited, declining, and deserted.<sup>119</sup>

Seventh, because Peter uses figurative language elsewhere (1 Peter 1:2, 13; 2:4), it is likely that he is also employing figurative language in 1 Peter 5:13. Perhaps Peter refers to Babylon figuratively in this verse in order to build upon the exile motif that he has been using throughout the epistle. Eighth, because other cities are used in a figurative sense elsewhere in Scripture (Gal 4:25; Rev 11:8), Peter is probably referring to the city of Babylon figuratively here as well. Ninth, the majority of New Testament scholars believe that Peter is referring to Rome in verse 13. Thus, Peter was obviously speaking figuratively of Rome through his use of the term Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13.

Regarding the references in extra biblical literature equating Babylon and Rome, both the *Sibylline Oracles* (V. 143, 159-60, 434) and the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7) use Babylon as a code name for Rome. Because Rome advocates believe that these Christian writings were composed during the same general time period as John's composition of the Apocalypse, it is likely that John was also drawing from the common Christian understanding that Babylon was a code word for Rome when writing Revelation 17-18. Pate and Hays buttress their position by noting the many parallels between Revelation 17-18 and the *Sibylline Oracles*. In both writings, Rome is called Babylon, Rome is portrayed as an immoral woman, and this immoral woman sits by the banks of the Tiber River.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Most of these reasons were taken from Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 351.

<sup>116</sup> Thiessen lists the following ancient sources placing Peter in Rome toward the end of his life: Ignatius, Papias, First Clement, Hegesippus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysius of Carthage, Tertullian and Jerome. See Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 285.

<sup>117</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 108.

<sup>118</sup> Thiessen, 285.

<sup>119</sup> Russell, 347.

<sup>120</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 109.

The Rome view is also built upon the assumption that the seven hills of Revelation 17:9 identify the topography of the ancient city of Rome. Because literature of the ancient world contains dozens of references to the seven hills of Rome,<sup>121</sup> the ancient city of Rome was universally known as the city of the seven hills.<sup>122</sup> Thus, such a topographical reference would immediately suggest Rome in the minds of John's original audience.<sup>123</sup> This suggestion is especially true given the fact that the seven hills were the nucleus of the city on the left bank of the Tiber River and given the fact that an unusual festival called the septimontium received its name because of this topographical feature.<sup>124</sup>

In addition, the notion that John's audience would have understood the imagery of Revelation 17 as referring to the topography of Rome seems strengthened by the discovery of the *Dea Roma* Coin minted in A.D. 71 in Asia Minor. One side of the coin contains the portrait of the emperor. The reverse side of the coin depicts Roma, a Roman pagan goddess, sitting on seven hills seated by the waters of the Tiber River.<sup>125</sup> There are obvious similarities between the *Dea Roma* Coin and the imagery of Revelation 17. In both cases, the goddess and the harlot are seated on seven hills and are seated either on or by the waters (Rev 17:1). In addition, the name of the goddess was thought by many Romans to be Amor, which is Roma spelled backwards. Amor was the goddess of love and sexuality. Thus, both the woman on the coin and the woman in Revelation 17 represent harlotry (Rev 17:5). Furthermore, the coin equates Roma with the power of the Roman Empire, which was active in persecuting Christians of John's day. The placement of Vespasian on one side of the coin and Roma on the other makes this connection. Interestingly, Augustus initiated the custom of dedicating temples to both Caesar and Roma. The goddess is also pictured as holding a sword, which may depict Rome's imperial power. This imagery parallels with the woman in Revelation 17 who is said to be drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6).<sup>126</sup>

Rome proponents also build their case upon Revelation 17:18. This verse says, "And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth." Rome advocates maintain that such a description would have been immediately identifiable as Rome to John's original audience because it was the city ruling the known world at the time John wrote. Keener expresses such a sentiment when commenting on Revelation 17:18. According to Keener:

In John's day, no one in the Roman Empire could have doubted that the city that "reigns over the kings of the earth" meant Rome, any more than anyone would have doubted that the seven hills (17:9) alluded to Rome.<sup>127</sup>

### **Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17-18**

Rome advocates also point out numerous descriptions of Babylon found in Revelation 17-18 that apply to Rome. For example, Aune observes that in the Old Testament, prostitution imagery (Rev 17:1-2, 5) is not just applicable to Israel but also to pagan cities such as Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4). In addition, the water imagery (Rev 17:1) is reminiscent of the goddess on the *Dea Roma* Coin who was seated by the rivers of the

<sup>121</sup> The names of the seven hills are Capitol, Aventine, Caelin, Esquiline, Quirinal, Viminal, and Palatine.

<sup>122</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 103.

<sup>123</sup> Mounce, 313-14.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 295.

<sup>125</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 919-28.

<sup>126</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 104-107.

<sup>127</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Iyp Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 807.



Tiber River.<sup>128</sup> Charles sees the array and adornment of the harlot in Revelation 17:4 as a reference to the luxury and splendor of imperial Rome.<sup>129</sup> Mounce sees the harlot's name inscribed upon her forehead (Rev 17:5) as a reference to the Greco-Roman culture of John's day in which prostitutes are said to have worn headbands with their names on them.<sup>130</sup>

Aune sees the reference to the woman's drunkenness with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6; 18:24) as descriptive of the numerous Christian martyrdoms perpetrated at the hands of the Roman Empire.<sup>131</sup> In addition, he points out that the references to the beast's demise and return in verse 8 and 11 could refer to the popular Nero Redivivus Myth circulating throughout the empire of John's day.<sup>132</sup> Some commentators observe that the ten kings mentioned in verse 12 refer to ten literal Romano-Gothic kingdoms existing in A.D. 532.<sup>133</sup> Rome proponents view the beast's destruction of the harlot (Rev 17:16-17; 18:8, 18) as either Nero burning Rome<sup>134</sup> or the spoiling and burning of Rome by Gothic powers in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>135</sup>

Aune sees the wealth of Babylon that is described four times in chapter 18 (vv. 3, 9, 16-17, 19) as alluding to the massive wealth accumulated by the Roman government through its oppressive taxation system.<sup>136</sup> Aune also observes that many of the commercial items enumerated in Revelation 18: 12-13 are repeated practically verbatim by first century Roman historians describing Rome's commercial trade.<sup>137</sup> Gregg notes that many Rome proponents understand the reference to Babylon trafficking in the souls of men to be consistent with Rome's victimization of people through its regular slavery and prostitution practices and its victimization of people through the amphitheater.<sup>138</sup>

## Weaknesses

### General Problems

Before responding to some of the specific arguments advanced by Rome advocates, I will first specify some general weaknesses with this position. To begin with, most interpreters who identify the harlot as Rome also identify the beast as Rome. Gregg remarks, "That the beast from the sea is closely identified with Rome will scarcely be disputed by members of most interpretive schools."<sup>139</sup> This identification is no doubt due to the dependence of the image of the beast of Revelation upon Daniel 7. The beast of Revelation and the fourth beast of Daniel 7 are both noted for their blasphemies and protruding ten horns. Thus, to the extent that many commentators identify the fourth beast of Daniel 7 with Rome, the beast of Revelation must be identified with Rome as well. Therefore, the identification of the harlot as Rome is problematic because one ends up with two images for Rome; the beast and the harlot. Beasley-Murray embraces the notion that both entities represent Rome when he says, "The two figures of monster and woman are really alternative representations of a single entity."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 929.

<sup>129</sup> Charles, 64.

<sup>130</sup> Mounce, 310-11.

<sup>131</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 960, 1011.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 960.

<sup>133</sup> Gregg, ed., 414.

<sup>134</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1006.

<sup>135</sup> Gregg, ed., 414.

<sup>136</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 989.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 981-82.

<sup>138</sup> Gregg, ed., 433, 435.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>140</sup> Beasley-Murray, 249.



If these two characters represent the same entity, why are they depicted as two separate entities in verse 11 and 18 of chapter 17? Why is the beast punished in chapter 19 after the harlot has already been destroyed in chapter 18? If these two characters represent the same entity, how are they able to interact with one another? Revelation 17:3 depicts the woman as riding on the beast. How can Rome ride upon Rome? Revelation 17:16-17 depicts the beast destroying the woman. How can Rome destroy Rome?<sup>141</sup> Perhaps it is possible to propose that the imagery could be satisfied through Nero's burning of Rome in A.D. 64. However, the destruction of Rome portrayed in Revelation 17:16-17 cannot be a picture of Nero burning Rome because Nero did not destroy Rome in its entirety. Rather, he only wanted to destroy a part of Rome in order to make room for a building project.<sup>142</sup> In sum, the imagery makes more sense if Rome destroys a rival power. This fact should prevent interpreters from identifying the woman as Rome.

In addition, the geographic situation depicted in Revelation 18 has made some commentators reluctant to identify Babylon as Rome. Some commentaries observe that Rome was not a major seaport or trading city.<sup>143</sup> Rome was never a great city of commerce described in Revelation 18.<sup>144</sup> Revelation 18:17 actually fits Babylon better than Rome because Rome had no seaport.<sup>145</sup> The description of the deserts and many waters also fits Babylon better than Rome.<sup>146</sup>

Furthermore, like the Jerusalem view, the Rome view also has difficulty handling the global language of Revelation found in Revelation Rev 17:15. While Rome exercised jurisdiction over the known world of John's day, it never exercised the type of global control that is spoken of in Revelation 17:15. No single historical city, especially Rome, can meet all of the criteria that John mentions in Revelation 17-18.<sup>147</sup>

### Specific Arguments

Now that some of the general weaknesses of the Rome view have been presented, I will respond to some of the previously mentioned arguments advanced by Rome proponents. To begin with, it is odd for Pate and Hays to contend that their approach of identifying Babylon as Rome takes into consideration Revelation's symbolic character while they simultaneously interpret other aspects of Revelation 17-18 with extreme literalness. For example, Rome advocates interpret the seven hills (Rev 17:9) literally. Their number, location, and topographical characteristics are not approached symbolically by Rome advocates. It is interesting to note that although the Babylon view is typically labeled as "overly literalistic," most Babylon proponents do not take the seven hills literally. Thus, at least on this point, it seems that the Babylon interpretation rather than the Rome interpretation better takes into account Revelation's symbolic character. Moreover, Rome proponents also interpret the word "city" (Rev 17:18) literally. Despite the fact that some Rome advocates believe that their approach best takes into account Revelation's symbolic character, it appears these same interpreters have no problem vacillating toward literalism when necessary in order to furnish further support for their view.

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<sup>141</sup> Beagley, 92-93.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 307.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>147</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; reprint, 1979), 228.

Moreover, it is debatable whether *musthrion* in Revelation 17:5 has the nuance that A.T. Robertson attaches to it. Several issues seem to be at stake.<sup>148</sup> The first question is whether *musthrion* should be interpreted as being in apposition with *ovnoma*? If not, John would be saying that the name on the woman's forehead is "Mystery Babylon the Great." If so, John would be saying that the name "Babylon the Great" written upon the woman's forehead is a mystery. Although most Rome proponents prefer viewing *musthrion* as not being in apposition to *ovnoma*, the evidence seems to favor the second option. Walvoord observes:

The word mystery is a descriptive reference to the title, not part of the title itself as implied by the capitalization in the Authorized Version. This can be seen by comparing the name given to the woman in 16:19 and 18:2.<sup>149</sup>

Thus, the repetition of the woman's title as "Babylon the Great" (14:8; 16:19; 18:2) rather than "Mystery Babylon the Great" favors the appositional relationship.<sup>150</sup>

Second, does *musthrion* refer to mysticism or simply new revelation? Although most Rome proponents take the word in the first sense, the New Testament evidence seems to support the latter sense. According to Vine

In the N.T., it [*musthrion*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit.<sup>151</sup>

Hoehner's word study of *musthrion* demonstrates this understanding as well.<sup>152</sup>

Third, can *musthrion* of Revelation 17:5 be equated with "spiritually" (*pneumatikws*) of Revelation 11:8 to support the notion that Babylon of Revelation 17:5 deserves the same type of spiritual interpretation that is given to Jerusalem in Revelation 11:8? Thomas believes that such a comparison is inappropriate. *Musthrion* is a noun and not an adverb like *pneumatikws*. In addition, *musthrion* comes from a different root than *pneumatikws*.<sup>153</sup> In sum, John in Revelation 17:5 does not seem to be saying that the woman's name is to be understood mystically or symbolically. Rather, he seems to be simply saying that the revelation of Babylon's dominant role in the end times is a previously unknown truth now revealed.

Furthermore, it is also debatable that the Christians of John's day commonly used Rome as a code for Babylon. The evidence favoring such a code is built upon certain assumptions that may or may not be true. For example, it is possible that Peter is referring to literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 rather than Rome. A straightforward reading of the text would lead readers to this conclusion.<sup>154</sup> According to Alford, "...we are not to find an allegorical meaning in a proper name thus simply used in the midst of simple and matter-of-fact sayings."<sup>155</sup> According to Gromacki:

<sup>148</sup> Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (October-December 1987): 434-36.

<sup>149</sup> Walvoord, 246.

<sup>150</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 289.

<sup>151</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 424.

<sup>152</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 428-34.

<sup>153</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 288-89.

<sup>154</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3d ed., 4 vols. (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1866), 4:128.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

There is no reason to suspect that Peter asserted a symbolic name into a non-symbolic context. The normal reading of the passage would cause the reader to think of the literal reading on the Euphrates.<sup>156</sup>

Moule argues that that the epistle contains nothing that requires the use of such a code.<sup>157</sup>

In addition, if one interprets the geographic areas in the greeting section of the letter literally (1:1), then consistency seems to dictate that the geographic area mentioned in the conclusion of the epistle (5:13) deserves the same literal interpretation. A literal interpretation of Babylon becomes even more compelling to the extent that it is recognized that 1 Peter was written to a predominantly Jewish audience. His use of the word “diaspora” in 1:1 always refers to Jews in all of its New Testament uses (John 7:35; James 1:1) and LXX (Deut 28:25; 30:4; Isa 49:6; Ps 174:2; 2 Macc 1:27). If Babylon refers to Babylon in all of its Old Testament uses, why would 1 Peter 5:13 be the exception considering Peter’s Jewish audience?

Although Peter does use figurative language in other sections of his letter, this fact does not automatically lead to the conclusion that Peter is employing figurative language in 5:13. Each use of figurative language must be proven from its immediate context rather than how the author employs figurative meaning in a remote context. In addition, it is difficult to argue that 1 Peter 5:13 is describing a figurative city just as cities are used in a non-literal fashion in Galatians 4:24-25 and Revelation 11:8. In Galatians 4:24-25, the text itself uses the word “allegorically” to explain that the city of Jerusalem is being figuratively used of Hagar, Mount Sinai, and the Old Covenant. Similarly, Revelation 11:8 uses the word “spiritually” to demonstrate that Jerusalem is being used figuratively of Sodom and Egypt. However, no similar designations are specified regarding the city of Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13. Although the majority of scholars believe that Peter was referring to Rome in 1 Peter 5:13 rather than literal Babylon, it is interesting to note that many prominent interpreters throughout church history have held to the literal Babylon interpretation. These prominent interpreters include Erasmus, Calvin, Hort, Gregory, Alford, Mayor, Moorehead, and Thiessen.<sup>158</sup>

While it is true that there is no evidence outside of the epistle of Peter’s visit to Babylon, there is no evidence to contradict it either.<sup>159</sup> There may be evidence testifying to Peter’s visit to Babylon that we are not yet aware of.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, Babylon would have been a logical place for Peter to visit. Because of the Babylonian Captivity, a large number of Jews continued to reside in that area. Not only did the Magi come from that region (Matt 2:2), but pilgrims from Mesopotamia also came to hear Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9).<sup>161</sup> The persecution of the Jews in Babylon and subsequent plague does not preclude their increase in number and return to Babylon during the twenty years that intervened in between these events and the writing of Peter’s epistle.<sup>162</sup> In fact, Fruchtenbaum argues that at the time Peter’s epistle was written, Babylonia had the largest concentration of Jews living outside the land. Moreover, Babylon was also the center of Judaism outside the land. The Babylonian Talmud would later be developed from this area. Because Peter was the apostle to the circumcised (Gal 2:8), it would have been a logical place for him to travel.

<sup>156</sup> Gromacki, 351.

<sup>157</sup> Charles Moule, "The Nature and Purpose of 1 Peter," *New Testament Studies* 3 (1956-7): 9.

<sup>158</sup> Thiessen, 285.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Alford, 131.

<sup>161</sup> Gromacki, 352.

<sup>162</sup> Thiessen, 285.

Understanding Babylon as the place of writing of Peter's epistle might also explain the heavy Jewishness of the letter.<sup>163</sup>

As previously mentioned, the notion that Babylon was a code word that early Christians used to disguise their reference to Rome is not only built upon Peter's use of Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 but also upon the *Sibylline Oracles* (V. 143, 159-60, 434) and the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7), which both use Babylon as a code name for Rome. However, the hypothesis that such a practice was common in John's day is only workable to the extent that these writings were composed during the time period when John wrote. This assumption is not necessarily true.

Klijn dates the *Apocalypse of Baruch* in the second century.<sup>164</sup> Although Collins appears to lean towards a first century dating of Book 5 of the *Sibylline Oracles*, he remains open to the suggestion that the *Sibylline Oracles* as a whole can be dated in the early years of the second century.<sup>165</sup> Kreitzer accepts the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) as a date for the composition of *Sibylline Oracles* 5.<sup>166</sup> Thomas dates both the *Apocalypse of Baruch* and the *Sibylline Oracles* in the second century noting that they were composed quite a while after John wrote Revelation.<sup>167</sup> Interestingly, Thomas also indicates that Tertullian late in the second century is the first church father to use Babylon as a name for Rome.<sup>168</sup>

Because all of these writings may have been composed after John's era, their use of Babylon as a code for Rome only proves that such a practice came into existence after John wrote Revelation. Therefore, because this practice may have come into prominence after his era, it is difficult to dogmatically say that John was employing this practice when he mentioned Babylon in Revelation 17-18. In sum, given the notions that Peter could have been referring to literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 and that the extra biblical Christian writings using Babylon as a code word for Rome may have been composed long after John wrote the *Apocalypse*, it is difficult to dogmatically assert that John was employing the well entrenched practice of his day that Babylon refers to Rome when he wrote Revelation 17-18.

As previously indicated, the Rome position is also built upon the notion that John's description of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 would have been immediately recognizable to John's original audience as Rome. Rome advocates appeal to the seven hills (Rev 17:9) as descriptive of Rome's topography. They also appeal to the "great city which reigns over the kings of the earth" (Rev 17:18) as a descriptive phrase for Rome that any first century person would recognize. They also appeal to similarities between the *Dea Roma* Coin and Revelation 17-18 to support the assertion that John's description of Babylon would be understood as Rome by John's original audience. However, the assumption that John's apocalypse was written exclusively for the purpose of being understood by the people of his day is open to question.<sup>169</sup> Walvoord explains:

One of the common assumptions of those who reject the futurist position is that the *Apocalypse* is the creation of John's thinking and was understandable by him in his generation... The difficulty with this point of view is twofold: (1) Prophecy, as given in

<sup>163</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 1003.

<sup>164</sup> A. Klijn, "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:616-17.

<sup>165</sup> J. J. Collins, "The Sibylline Oracles, Book 5," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:390.

<sup>166</sup> Larry Kreitzer, "Hadrian and the Nero Redivivus Myth," *Zeitschrift Fur Die Nuetestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79 (1988): 97.

<sup>167</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>169</sup> Dyer: 438.

the Scripture, was not necessarily understandable by the writer or his generation, as illustrated in the case of Daniel (Dan 12:4, 9). It is questionable whether the great prophets of the Old Testament always understood what they were writing (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-11). (2) It is of the nature of prophecy that often it cannot be understood until the time of the generation which achieves fulfillment. The assumption, therefore, that the book of Revelation was understandable in the first generation or that it was intended to be understood by that generation is without real basis.<sup>170</sup>

Even if Revelation was intended to be understood by John's original audience, it is doubtful whether the seven hills of Revelation 17:9 are descriptive of the topography of Rome. Several reasons call this interpretation into question. First, this interpretation is suspect because those who employ it frequently employ a dual hermeneutic resulting in hermeneutical vacillation. For example, Aune takes the seven hills (17:9) literally,<sup>171</sup> the seven kings (17:10) symbolically,<sup>172</sup> and the ten kings (17:12) literally.<sup>173</sup> Such an inconsistent approach leaves the impression that Aune arbitrarily vacillates back and forth between hermeneutical approaches based upon what fits his preconceived system. Second, it seems odd that the seven hills should be equated with the well-known topography of Rome because verse 9 indicates that the identification of the hills calls for special wisdom. Why should such a well-known geographical locale to John's first century audience require special theological and symbolic insight for proper identification?<sup>174</sup>

Third, it is unclear that John's audience would have automatically understood the reference in 17:9 to the seven hills of Rome. Although Rome was known as the city on the seven hills, it is interesting to note that eight and possibly nine hills could be counted for Rome.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, because every other occurrence to *ovros* in Revelation refers to a mountain rather than a "hill,"<sup>176</sup> Ewing advises caution before automatically viewing 17:9 as a reference to the seven "hills" of Rome.<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, the evidence to which we have access only places the "seven hills" language in the Western Mediterranean area. There is no record to indicate whether this usage was familiar in the East. Thus, it may be unwarranted to automatically presume that Rome as the city of the seven hills reference would be the shared understanding in Asia Minor.<sup>178</sup> In addition, Russell enumerates the seven hills of Jerusalem and then observes that Jerusalem has as good a claim as Rome to sit upon seven mountains.<sup>179</sup>

Fourth, if the reference to the city on the seven hills was universally well-known in John's day as a reference to Rome, how would the use of this reference insulate John or his readers from Roman persecution? Those found with a copy of the document within their possession would be immediately suspected of advocating the overthrow of the capital of the Roman Empire. Thus, there is no security to be gained by using the phrase "seven hills."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Walvoord, 22-23.

<sup>171</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 944.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 948.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 951.

<sup>174</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 295-96.

<sup>175</sup> Beale, 870.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 868.

<sup>177</sup> Ewing, 63.

<sup>178</sup> Beagley, 103.

<sup>179</sup> Russell, 492.

<sup>180</sup> Beagley, 103.



Fifth, the reference to the seven mountains (17:9) which are seven heads (17:8) actually belong to the beast (17:3, 7; 13:1) and not the woman named Babylon. Thus, these seven heads or mountains really have nothing to do with the entity Babylon at all. It is possible to argue that the woman is still associated with the seven hills because she is sitting on them. However, it is better to see this as referring to the woman's control rather than her location. The other references to the woman sitting also refer to her control. Revelation 17:1 portrays the woman sitting on many waters. Verse 15 explains that the waters represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. Thus, Revelation 17:1, 15 show the harlot's control over the entire world. Furthermore, Revelation 17:3 depicts the woman as sitting on the beast, which again indicates control rather than location. Thus, if the harlot's sitting indicates control rather than location twice in chapter 17, then consistency would seem to dictate that the harlot sitting on the seven hills in 17:9 would also indicate control rather than location.<sup>181</sup>

Sixth, the reference to the seven hills is better understood as referring to seven kingdoms. In order to correctly understand the symbolism of the seven mountains, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate culture of John's day and instead to look to John's Jewish heritage. Thus, Revelation must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament.<sup>182</sup> Such an approach makes sense because 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude to the Old Testament.<sup>183</sup> Jenkins explains:

The book of Revelation is the most thoroughly Jewish in its language and imagery of any New Testament book. The book speaks not the language of Paul, but of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.<sup>184</sup>

The Old Testament frequently uses the term "mountain" to refer to a kingdom or empire (Ps 30:7; 68:15-16; Isa 2:2; 41:15; Jer 51:25; Dan 2:35, 45; Hab 3:6, 10; Zech 4:7).<sup>185</sup>

This type of imagery seems to be employed in Revelation 17:9 because verse 10 explains that the seven mountains are a metaphor for seven kings. This symbolic understanding of the seven mountains seems buttressed by the fact that the harlot sits on or beside seven mountains (17:9) just as she sits on or beside the many waters (17:1). Since the waters are symbolic of peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (17:15), consistency seems to dictate that the seven mountains are symbolic as well.<sup>186</sup> This non-literal interpretation of the seven hills is also strengthened by the fact that the other references to *ovros* in Revelation are sometimes to be understood non-literally as well (Rev 8:8).

Although Revelation 17:10 uses the word "kings," kingdoms or national entities opposing God's people throughout world history is probably the intended meaning. Expositors face numerous difficulties when they interpret the content of Revelation 17:10 as seven kings of Roman history. For example, in order to apply the seven kings to Roman history, most interpreters leave out Galba, Otho, and Vitellius who reigned briefly between Nero and Vespasian.<sup>187</sup> Bell comments upon the folly of such an omission when he notes:

But an ancient writer could no more have omitted them from his list of emperors than a modern American historian could omit William Henry Harrison, the ninth

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<sup>181</sup> Dyer: 437-38.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*: 438.

<sup>183</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 40.

<sup>184</sup> Ferrel Jenkins, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 22.

<sup>185</sup> Ladd, 227-28.

<sup>186</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 458.

<sup>187</sup> Ladd, 228-29.



president, who caught pneumonia at his inauguration in 1841 and died a month later.<sup>188</sup>

Moreover, it is unclear with which emperor the count should begin. For example, should the count begin with Julius Caesar who appears first in the list in most of the ancient sources or with Augustus, who was the emperor in power when the empire officially began? Perhaps the count should begin with Caligula, who was the first persecuting emperor? Should we count all of the emperors or only those deified by an act of the Senate? Consequently, Aune enumerates nine different schemes for counting the kings.<sup>189</sup> Beale designates five such schemes.<sup>190</sup> Some interpreters have attempted to resolve these problems by taking the number seven allegorically.<sup>191</sup> However, this approach ends up defeating the Rome interpretation, which is built upon a literal understanding of the seven hills. In addition, the allegorical approach fails to take into account the literal use of the number seven elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 2-3). The allegorical approach also seems inconsistent with the amount of intricacy and method of description presented by John.<sup>192</sup> In sum, these types of interpretive dilemmas begin to proliferate when the seven kings of Revelation 17:10 are understood as seven individual kings of Roman history.<sup>193</sup>

On the other hand, these interpretive problems are avoided when the seven kings of Revelation 17:10 are understood as kingdoms opposing God's people throughout world history. In the book of Daniel, the term's kings and kingdoms are used interchangeably. In Daniel 2:37-38, Daniel wrote that the head of gold is a king. In Daniel 2:39, Daniel wrote that the breast and arms of silver were another kingdom.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, in Daniel 7:17, Daniel describes the four beasts as kings. In Daniel 7:23, he describes the fourth beast as a kingdom.<sup>195</sup> Thus, Daniel obviously uses kings and kingdoms interchangeably. Because Revelation draws heavily from Daniel, it is likely that John in Revelation 17:10 is employing this same practice. Walvoord identifies the seven kingdoms as those that have persecuted and will persecute Israel throughout her existence. The five fallen kingdoms include Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. Rome was the kingdom reigning when John wrote. The seventh kingdom will be the revived Roman Empire headed by the antichrist.<sup>196</sup> In sum, Kiddle is correct when he observes that Revelation 17:9-10 refers to the scope and nature of the beast's power rather than to the physical layout of the City of Rome.<sup>197</sup>

### **Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17-18**

A scrutiny of some of the parallels between Revelation 17-18 and Rome that are relied on by Rome advocates demonstrates that they are not as convincing as perhaps they initially appear. For example, as mentioned earlier, the water imagery of 17:1 seems inapplicable to Rome since Rome had no seaport and more applicable to Babylon which was located on the bank of the Euphrates. Moreover, the notion that the forehead writing (Rev 17:5) is an allusion to prostitutes of the Greco-Roman culture wearing headbands inscribed with their

<sup>188</sup> Albert A. Bell, "The Date of John's Apocalypse. The Evidence of Some Roman Historians Reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 25 (October 1978): 99.

<sup>189</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 947.

<sup>190</sup> Beale, 874.

<sup>191</sup> Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 708.

<sup>192</sup> A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 245-49.

<sup>193</sup> Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 217-18.

<sup>194</sup> Dyer: 440.

<sup>195</sup> Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," 203.

<sup>196</sup> Walvoord, 251-54.

<sup>197</sup> M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (New York: Harper, 1940), 349.

names is questionable. Some scholars are questioning the historicity of this practice altogether.<sup>198</sup>

Furthermore, the Christian martyrdoms supposedly alluded to in Revelation 17:6 and 18:24 do not uniquely identify Rome due to the fact that Israel (Matt 23:35; Acts 7:52) and historical Babylon (Jer 51:35, 36, 49) were also causes of such martyrdoms. In addition, it is doubtful that John was referring to the Nero Redivivus Myth in Revelation 17:8, 11 simply because it is doubtful that John himself believed in such a myth. This myth was unknown to the early church fathers. More importantly, Irenaeus, who was the disciple of Polycarp who in turn was the disciple of John, had no knowledge of the Nero Redivivus Myth.<sup>199</sup> Finally, some have contended that the historical dissolution of the Roman Empire does not match the description of Rome's destruction given in Revelation 17:16-17.<sup>200</sup>

### ***End Time Religious System***

#### **Methodology**

Yet another approach to identifying Babylon of Revelation 17-18 is to view Babylon as an end times religious system that will dominate the world during the coming tribulation period. This position is the one adopted by most classical and revised dispensational scholars, including Walvoord.<sup>201</sup> While this coming religious system may include prominent religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, its scope will go far beyond particular religious institutions and instead encompasses the ecumenical movement thus forming an all inclusive world religion. This religious system is called Babylon because it opposes God's purposes and people as did ancient Babylon in Old Testament times. Ryrie best summarizes the position when he notes:

The harlot is also the mother of harlots. In other words, many groups will join together under the one harlot, in a kind of federated church. With the identification in Revelation 17:9 and with the interrelation of Babylon and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Roman church is the harlot. But this is not the whole picture, for the apostate church is not merely the Roman Church. It will include other groups in a family relationship with their mother. The tie that will bind them will be their harlotry.<sup>202</sup>

Walvoord sees this false church as forming after the rapture:

In the absence of the redeeming presence of any true believers, the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches will combine into a powerful religious and political institution. The super-church will be able to command the obedience and devotion of hundreds and millions throughout the world and will have power to put to death those who resist its demands for adherence. The new world church will be in alliance with the political powers of the Middle East. This combined effort will prepare the way for a new government with absolute power over the entire world. This unholy alliance is portrayed symbolically in Revelation 17, which describes a wicked harlot riding a scarlet-colored beast. For centuries, expositors have recognized the harlot as a symbol of religion and the scarlet beast as representing the political power of the

<sup>198</sup> Beagley, 102. Beale, 858.

<sup>199</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 158.

<sup>200</sup> Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 211.

<sup>201</sup> Walvoord, 243-67.

<sup>202</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 101-2.

Mediterranean Confederacy in the end time. While their alliance will bring a temporary stability to the world, it will also create a blasphemous religious system which will lead the world to new depths of immorality and departure from true faith in God.<sup>203</sup>

Proponents of this position also seem to advocate a well-defined eschatological scenario. On the one hand, the Babylon of Revelation 17 is the religious system that the antichrist destroys mid way through the tribulation period. On the other hand, the Babylon of Revelation 18 is distinct from the Babylon of chapter 17 because it is commercial and political in scope and will be destroyed toward the end to the tribulation. Walvoord explains:

Babylon, ecclesiastically symbolized by the woman in Revelation 17, proposes a common worship and a common religion through uniting in a world church. This is destroyed by the beast in Revelation 17:16 who thus fulfills the will of God (Rev 17:17). Babylon, politically symbolized by the great city of Revelation 18, attempts to achieve its domination of the world by a world common market and a world government. These are destroyed by Christ at His second coming.<sup>204</sup>

## Weaknesses

Despite the widespread acceptance of this view at the popular level, it has deficiencies. First, the harlot imagery of Revelation 17:1-5,<sup>205</sup> which is so frequently employed throughout Scripture to depict man's infidelity to God, convinces Walvoord that the city in 17:18 is not a literal city but rather a religious system.<sup>206</sup> However, this assumption seems unfounded. The Old Testament uses harlot imagery to depict the Gentile cities of Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4) while never hinting that these cities are not meant to be understood literally. Similarly, the harlot imagery in Revelation 17 should not deter interpreters from understanding the city in Revelation 17:18 literally as well.

Second, the same phrase "great city" that is used in Revelation 17:18 to depict Babylon is also repeatedly used in chapter 18 (vv. 10, 16, 18, 19, 21). Moreover, the same sort of harlot imagery that describes the city in chapter 17 is also employed in chapter 18 (vv. 3, 9). Yet, despite these similarities, Walvoord interprets the city in Revelation 17 non-literally<sup>207</sup> while simultaneously interpreting the city in Revelation 18 literally.<sup>208</sup> Such inconsistent exegesis can only be explained in terms of a presuppositional bias that sees Revelation 17 as religious and Revelation 18 as political. Perhaps the source of this presupposition is the Scofield Reference Bible, which contains an explanatory note advocating the religious Babylon and political Babylon distinction.<sup>209</sup>

Third, a strong exegetical case can be made to support the proposition that Revelation 17 and 18 should be viewed as a unit speaking of one Babylon rather than two separate units speaking of two Babylons. The notion of viewing Revelation 17 and 18 as a unit is buttressed by noting the similarities between the chapters.<sup>210</sup> Both chapters refer to Babylon as having the same name (17:5; 18:2), being a city (17:18; 18:10), wearing the same clothing (17:4; 18:6), holding a cup (17:4; 18:6), fornicating with kings (17:2; 18:3), being drunk with wine of

<sup>203</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon: Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 108-9.

<sup>204</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 267.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-48.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>209</sup> C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1369-70.

<sup>210</sup> Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 1)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (July-September 1987): 311-13.

immorality (17:2; 18:3), persecuting believers (17:6; 18:24), experiencing destruction by fire (17:6; 18:8), and experiencing destruction by God (17:17; 18:5, 8).

Furthermore, most of the arguments used to prove two Babylons have been answered.<sup>211</sup> For example, the phrase “after these things” (meta tauta) in Revelation 18:1 can simply indicate the time sequence in which the visions were revealed to John (chronological use) rather than something that must take place later chronologically (eschatological use) because the phrase is accompanied by a verb of perception “I saw.” Whenever a verb of perception accompanies “after these things” in Revelation, the phrase is used chronologically (4:1b; 7:1; 7:9; 15:5; 19:1) rather than eschatologically (1:19; 4:1b; 9:12; 20:3). In addition, it is claimed that Babylon in chapter 17 is destroyed in a different manner and by a different source than the Babylon in chapter 18. However, this contention is without merit because the Babylons in both chapters are both destroyed by fire (17:16; 18:19) and by God (17:17; 18:8).

Moreover, it is claimed that the response to the destruction of the two Babylons is different because chapter 17 records the kings hating the harlot (17:16) and chapter 18 records the kings weeping over the harlot (18:9). However, this discrepancy can be explained. The kings in 17:16 are those who unite with the beast to defeat the harlot while the kings in 18:8 are those engaged in commerce with Babylon mourning over the loss of their source of revenue. Finally, it is claimed that the Babylon in chapter 17 is referred to as a woman while the Babylon in chapter 18 is referred to as a city. However, this argument collapses upon realizing that 17:18 explains that the woman represents a city.

### **Babylon**

A final option involves interpreting Babylon of Revelation 17-18 as the futuristic literal city of Babylon on the Euphrates. Seiss<sup>212</sup> represents an interpreter from a previous generation that held this view. Modern scholars who hold the view include Dyer and Thomas. Proponents of this position believe that because the Old Testament and New Testament prophecies regarding Babylon remain largely unfulfilled, the world’s center of power must once again return to the ancient city of Babylon in order for biblical prophecies to be fulfilled.

## **Methodology**

### **General Arguments**

Many of the previously described approaches (e.g., world, Jerusalem, Rome) seem to approach Revelation 17-18 with the pre-understanding that Revelation cannot be understood literally. The basis for this pre-understanding is that Revelation is part of a special type of literary genre that flourished in the intertestamental period as well as the time of Revelation’s composition known as apocalyptic literature. *The Book of Enoch, Apocalypse of Baruch, Book of Jubilees, Assumption of Moses, Psalms of Solomon, Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and Sibylline Oracles* as well as Revelation are all considered to be part of this literary era. When interpreting such literature, symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception.<sup>213</sup> Because Babylon proponents approach Revelation 17-18 in more of a literal manner, they seem to distance themselves from the less than literal hermeneutical approaches introduced when the genre of Revelation is categorized as apocalyptic literature.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.: 305-11.

<sup>212</sup> J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1909; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1964), 397.

<sup>213</sup> Gregg, ed., 11.

Thomas, for example, rejects the classification of Revelation as apocalyptic literature and instead opts for viewing the book as prophetic rather than apocalyptic. While acknowledging the numerous similarities between Revelation and apocalyptic literature, Thomas highlights the differences and concludes that the differences outweigh the similarities.<sup>214</sup>

For example, although apocalyptic literature was typically pseudonymous, Revelation bears the name of its author (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Moreover, Revelation fails to share the pessimism of the apocalyptists who despaired of all human history. Rather, Revelation reflects the optimism of God working redemptively through the lamb presently as well as in the future. Furthermore, apocalyptic literature contains no epistolary material. By contrast, seven ecclesiastical epistles are found in Revelation 2–3. In addition, non-canonical apocalyptic literature lacked moral imperatives. By contrast, Revelation utilizes moral imperatives. Humanity’s need for repentance is not only found in Christ’s exhortations to the seven churches (Rev 2: 5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), but the exhortation to repent is found throughout the book as a whole (Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11). Moreover, the coming of messiah in apocalyptic literature is something that takes place exclusively in the future. By contrast Revelation portrays Christ as having already come and laid the groundwork for His future coming through His redemptive death.

Finally, Revelation makes numerous self claims to be prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). In fact, John uses the term *profeths* or its cognates eighteen times in Revelation’s twenty-two chapters.<sup>215</sup> Thus, John seems to stress that the dominant character of the book is prophetic rather than apocalyptic. Interestingly, Old Testament prophets comforted Israel

in the midst of her adverse circumstances by providing the nation with prophecies of millennial blessing to be fulfilled in the distant future (Isa 40–66; Ezek 36–48; Amos 9:11–15). Revelation fits this identical pattern by providing the oppressed seven churches (Rev 2–3) with a prophecy to be fulfilled in the distant future regarding the believer’s and God’s ultimate triumph (Rev 4–22). Although *avpokalupsis* appears in the opening verse of the book, it simply means unveiling and probably does not have the meaning that modern scholars attach to the term “apocalyptic.”

These differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature are summarized in the following chart taken and slightly adapted from Thomas.<sup>216</sup>

**Table 1**

| <b>Apocalyptic Genre</b>            | <b>Revelation</b>                         |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Pseudonymous                        | Not pseudonymous                          |
| Pessimistic about the present       | Not pessimistic about the present         |
| No epistolary framework             | Epistolary frame work                     |
| No admonitions for moral compliance | Repeated admonitions for moral compliance |
| Messiah’s coming exclusively future | Basis for Messiah’s future coming is past |
| Does not call itself a prophecy     | Calls itself a prophecy                   |

<sup>214</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 23-28.

<sup>215</sup> Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," 224.

<sup>216</sup> Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 338. I took the liberty of slightly modifying the order of items in the chart in order to better harmonize them with the preceding discussion.



Another ingredient of the Babylon approach is the recognition that the harlot of Revelation 17 represents a city. This identification becomes obvious upon observing Revelation 17:18, which says, “And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.” Thus, Dyer correctly observes, “Whatever else is said about the harlot, she is first a city, not an ecclesiastical system.”<sup>217</sup> Although the recurring harlotry imagery (Rev 17:1, 2, 4, 15, 16: 18:3, 7) has led many interpreters to the conclusion that Babylon is a false religious system on account of the fact that infidelity is frequently used in Scripture to depict man’s rebellion against God (Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; Ezekiel 16; 23), harlotry is also used in Scripture to personify individual Gentile cities in rebellion against God. The Old Testament uses such imagery to portray the spiritual rebellion of Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4). A similar understanding of harlotry seems to be in operation in Revelation 17-18 because of the fact the harlot is also a city (17:18).<sup>218</sup> Aune buttresses this interpretation when he observes that there are a few places in the Old testament where the commercial trade of a city is described with the metaphor of prostitution because economic relationships typically led to the exchange of religious practices.<sup>219</sup>

Babylon proponents also note that in addition to the fact that the woman is a city (17:18), she is also named Babylon (17:5). As already discussed in the Rome section of this paper, it is best to view the syntactical role of musthrion (17:5) as one of apposition to ovnomia rather than part of the harlot’s name. It was also mentioned in the Rome section that it is best to understand musthrion as connoting the notion of revealing new truth rather than communicating the idea of mysticism, spiritualism, or symbolism. In sum, Revelation 17 teaches that the harlot is a city who is named Babylon.

Thus, Babylon advocates observe that when other cities or geographic areas are mentioned in Revelation, they are always understood in a literal sense. Although not all names in Revelation are meant to be understood literally (Rev 2:14, 20), it does seem to be a general rule that the names of cities and geographical regions are literal. For example, most interpreters typically understand the following places and cities in Revelation literally: Patmos (1:9), Ephesus (2:1), Smyrna (2:1), Pergamum (2:8), Thyatira (2:12), Sardis (3:1), Philadelphia (3:7), Laodocia (3:14), Jerusalem (11:8), the Euphrates (Rev 9:14; 16:12) and Armageddon (16:16). Why should the city of Babylon depicted in Revelation 17-18 not be given the same literal interpretation? Moreover, when John wants to communicate that he is using a city in a non-literal sense, he makes this explicit as in 11:8 where he says “the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt.” Because no similar formula is found in Revelation 17-18 to alert the reader that John is speaking of the city of Babylon figuratively, there is no reason that Babylon should be interpreted non-literally.<sup>220</sup>

A mention of the Euphrates at two places in the Apocalypse (9:14; 16:12) further confirms that assigning Babylon the literal significance of the city on the Euphrates is the most natural way of understanding Revelation 17-18.<sup>221</sup> The literal Babylon also seems bolstered by Revelation’s use of the Old Testament. Jenkins explains:

<sup>217</sup> Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 436.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*: 434.

<sup>219</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 930.

<sup>220</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206-207.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*



The book of Revelation is the most thoroughly Jewish in its language and imagery of any New Testament book. The book speaks not the language of Paul, but of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.<sup>222</sup>

Because these prophets only used Babylon in the literal sense, it is logical to assume that John who is drawing so heavily from these prophets would also use Babylon in the same literal manner.

Understanding Revelation 17-18 as literal Babylon also seems most consistent with how these chapters describe the city's geography. For example, the imagery of the many waters corresponds well with Babylon's location on the Euphrates with its canals, dikes, irrigation ditches, and marshes surrounding the city.<sup>223</sup> Furthermore, according to Thomas and Seiss, Babylon on the Euphrates has a location that fits the description of the city of Revelation 17-18 politically and geographically as well as in the areas of accessibility, commercial facilities, and centrality of world trade.<sup>224</sup> Moreover, Revelation 18:17-18, which describes those who make their living from the sea standing a far off and wailing at the sight of Babylon's destruction, fits well with the geography of Babylon on the Euphrates. In ancient times, the Euphrates was navigable for ships for some 500 miles from its mouth.<sup>225</sup>

Another component of the literal Babylon view is the notion that the prophecies regarding Babylon's destruction as recorded Isaiah 13-14 and Jeremiah 50-51 have never been satisfied as demanded by the specific details of these passages and therefore await a future fulfillment. Therefore, the supposition that the destruction of literal Babylon on the Euphrates awaits a future fulfillment gives interpreters more confidence in assigning a literal meaning to Babylon's destruction in Revelation 17-18 since the both the Old Testament and New Testament passages regarding Babylon's destruction seem to be speaking of the same event. Dyer contends that the prophecies regarding Babylon's destruction as recorded in Jeremiah 50-51 were not fulfilled in Babylon's defeat in 539 B.C. because Babylon was never destroyed in the manner depicted by Jeremiah. Dyer points to the many differences between Babylon's historic defeat and how Jeremiah 50-51 describes Babylon's ultimate destruction.<sup>226</sup>

For example, Jeremiah predicts that an enemy from the north would destroy Babylon and yet the Persians came from the east. In addition, Jeremiah 51:8 predicts that Babylon would be destroyed suddenly and yet the actual destruction of the city was a gradual process taking several centuries. Furthermore, Jeremiah predicts that Babylon would be completely destroyed (Jer 50:3, 13, 26, 39-40; 51:29, 43, 62) and yet Babylon remained productive and populated after her initial fall. In fact, the city was spared and made one of the ruling centers of the Persian Empire with Daniel serving in an administrative position (Dan 5:30; 6:1-3).

Moreover, Jeremiah 51:26 predicts that Babylon's destruction would result in even her building materials never being used again and yet the materials from which ancient Babylon may have been built have been used extensively in the building of many surrounding cities. Also, Jeremiah predicts that believers would flee Babylon upon her destruction (Jer 50:8; 51:6, 45) and yet there is no record of the Jews fleeing Babylon when she fell to the Persians. In fact, Scripture specifically states that Daniel remained in the city after its fall (Dan 5:28, 30-

<sup>222</sup> Jenkins, 22.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 283.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-17.

<sup>226</sup> Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 443-49.

31; 6:1-3). Finally, Jeremiah predicts the reuniting and national repentance of Israel following Israel's fall (Jer 50:2, 4-5, 20; 51:50) and yet such a reuniting never took place after Babylon fell. In fact, the postexilic record evidences God's continual rebuking of His people.

Others have noticed a similar pattern in Isaiah 13-14, which also is a prophecy of Babylon's destruction. Chapter 13 equates Babylon's destruction to the day of the Lord (13:6-9), cosmic disturbances (13:10-13), the judgment of the world (13:11-12), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (13:19), and complete and final desolation (13:20-22). Chapter 14 indicates that the world's universal rest and peace (14:5-8) and Israel's restoration (14:1-4) will transpire immediately after Babylon's destruction.<sup>227</sup> Again, a comparison of these chapters with the historic defeat of Babylon in 539 B.C. makes it difficult to argue that they have already been fulfilled. Thus, many commentators have noted a distinction between the fall of historic Babylon in 539 B.C. and the ultimate destruction of Babylon depicted in Isaiah 13-14, Jeremiah 50-51, and Revelation 17-18. Walvoord best summarizes the matter when he notes:

As far as the historic fulfillment is concerned, it is obvious from both Scripture and history that these verses have not been literally fulfilled. The city of Babylon continued to flourish after the Medes conquered it, and though its glory dwindled, especially after the control of the Medes and the Persians ended in 323 B.C., the city continued in some form or substance until A.D. 1000 and did not experience a sudden termination such as is anticipated in this prophecy.<sup>228</sup>

Another Old Testament passage that seems to have some bearing on interpreting Revelation 17-18 as a future rebuilt Babylon is Zechariah 5:5-11. In these verses, Zechariah sees a woman named wickedness carried away in a basket in the last days to the land of Babylon where a temple will be built for her. Although the Babylonian Empire had already fallen, this passage seems to indicate that wickedness will again reside in that region of the world.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, the similarities depicted in the following chart seem to indicate that both Zechariah 5:5-11 and Revelation 17-18 are speaking of the same event.<sup>230</sup>

**Table 2**

| <b><u>Zechariah 5:5-11</u></b>                           | <b><u>Revelation 17-18</u></b>   |
|--|--|
| Woman sitting in a basket                                | Woman sitting on the beast, seven mountains, and many waters (17: 3, 9, 15)        |
| Emphasis on commerce (a basket for measuring grain)      | Emphasis on commerce (merchant of grain, 18:13)                                    |
| Woman's name is wickedness                               | Woman's name is Babylon the Great, Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth |
| Focus on False worship (a temple is built for the woman) | Focus on False worship (17:5)  |
| Woman is taken to Babylon                                | Woman is called Babylon  |

<sup>227</sup> Mark Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 79-91.

<sup>228</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 63-64.

<sup>229</sup> Charles H. Dyer, *Old Testament Explorer*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 825-26.

<sup>230</sup> Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 109.

In sum, various Old Testament passages (Jer 50-51; Isa 13-14; Zech 5:5-11) predicting the future rise and destruction of Babylon give the interpreter further confidence in literally construing Revelation 17-18, which also speaks of Babylon's future rise and fall.

### **Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17-18**

The literal Babylon view is also strengthened upon observing how John in Revelation 17-18 consistently employs Old Testament imagery of ancient Babylon. For example, the language Babylon the Great (16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21) seems to be drawn from Nebuchadnezzar's description of the Babylonian Empire in Daniel 4:30.<sup>231</sup> Moreover, the reference to the wilderness in 17:3 may be a reference to the "oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea" in Isaiah 21:1. The wilderness of the sea is a reference to the sandy wastes of the Persian Gulf area outside of Babylon on the Euphrates. Interestingly, this oracle also includes the statement "fallen, fallen is Babylon" (Isa 21:9).<sup>232</sup>

Furthermore, the imagery of the many waters (Rev 17:1, 15) is reminiscent of the waters of Babylon (Ps 137:1; Jer 51:13). Thus, such imagery seems intentionally selected in order to conjure up the memory of ancient Babylon, with its series of canals, that straddled the Euphrates. In addition, the boast of Babylon, "I sit as queen and am no widow, and will not see sorrow" (18:7) echoes that of ancient Babylon (Isa 47:7-9).<sup>233</sup> John also employs imagery from the Tower of Babel. When Revelation 18:5 says, "her sins have piled up as high as heaven," the allusion is possibly to the use of bricks in building the Tower of Babel.<sup>234</sup> In using such imagery, John skillfully connects future worldwide apostasy led from Babylon back to the first wild apostasy that began from the central locale of Babylon.

Revelation 17-18 also repeatedly draws imagery from the description of Babylon and its destruction given in Jeremiah 50-51.<sup>235</sup> For example, both passages describe Babylon as holding a golden cup (Jer 51:7; Rev 17:3-4; 18:6), dwelling on many waters (Jer 51:13; Rev 17:1), involved with the nations (Jer 51:7; Rev 17:2), and having the same name (Jer 50:1; Rev 17:5; 18:10). Moreover, both passages illustrate Babylon's destruction the same way (Jer 51:63-64; Rev 18:21) and depict Babylon's destruction as sudden (Jer 51:8; Rev 18:8), caused by fire (Jer 51:30; Rev 17:16; 18:8), final (Jer 50:39; Rev 18:21), and deserved (Jer 51:63-64; Rev 18:21). Furthermore, both passages describe the response to Babylon's destruction in terms of God's people fleeing (Jer 51:6, 45; Rev 18:4) and heaven rejoicing (Jer 51:48; Rev 18:20). Other commentators have also noticed how frequently John in Revelation 17-18 draws from the imagery of Jeremiah 50-51. For example, Thomas observes ten parallels between the two sections of Scripture.<sup>236</sup> Aune also observes at least ten parallels between Jeremiah 50-51 and Revelation 18.<sup>237</sup>

### **Potential Weaknesses**

The literal Babylon view is not without its critics. However, I believe that most of the criticism raised against the view is answerable. Perhaps the most strenuous objection to the view is that it treats literally what should be treated symbolically given the fact that Revelation is apocalyptic literature. When interpreting such literature, symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception. Thus, most New Testament scholars would counter Thomas' list of differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature by emphasizing the similarities

<sup>231</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 207.

<sup>232</sup> Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 105.

<sup>233</sup> Gregg, ed., 431.

<sup>234</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 260.

<sup>235</sup> Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 441-43.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 307.

<sup>237</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 983.

between the two and by arguing that the similarities outweigh the differences. Using *Semeia* 14<sup>238</sup> as a starting point, most New Testament scholars, such as Ladd<sup>239</sup> and Murphy,<sup>240</sup> would argue that a common cluster of traits characterizes apocalyptic literature. They would also argue that Revelation shares in these characteristics.

These characteristics include the following: extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation (Rev 1:10-11), angelic guides (Rev 1:1), activity of angels and demons (Rev 12:7-8), focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come (Rev 1:3), urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future (Rev 21:1), the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisaic in character (Rev 21-22), manifestation of the kingdom of God (Rev 11:15), a mediator with royal functions (Rev 3:7), dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about man's ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history (Rev 6:11), other worldly journeys (Rev 4:1-2), the catchword glory (Rev 4:11), and a final showdown between good and evil (Rev 19:11-21). The scriptural citations from Revelation in the preceding list indicate that Revelation obviously shares many of these attributes. The question at this point is do the similarities between Revelation and apocalyptic literature outweigh the differences? While most New Testament scholars would say yes, some Babylon advocates such as Thomas would say no.

Moreover, many New Testament scholars would object that the differences between Revelation and apocalyptic literature cited by Thomas are significant enough to take Revelation out of the category of apocalyptic genre. For example, apocalyptic writings sometimes do contain moral imperatives. 1 Enoch 91:19 says, "...walk in the way of righteousness and do not walk in wickedness..." Other apocalyptic writings also contain moral imperatives (Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs; 1 Enoch 92-105) and focus upon a sense of human sinfulness (4 Ezra 4:12; 7:118). However, the apocalyptists are not generally motivated by a strong sense of moral urgency. The reason for this is the apocalyptists' conviction that they were part of the righteous remnant. Thus, they saw their role as one of encouraging the righteous remnant to endure, remain faithful, and have hope rather than persuade people to turn from known sin.<sup>241</sup>

In addition, Collins contends that Revelation's self claim of prophecy is not sufficient to disqualify the book from the apocalyptic category. According to Collins, "Prophecy was a broad category in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds; it could encompass various kinds of Revelation including what we call apocalyptic."<sup>242</sup> However, because 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude to the Old Testament, it is more likely that John was employing the word prophecy as it is commonly used in the Old Testament. Most would agree that the function of Old Testament prophecy was to cause God's people to repent and bring them back to their covenant so that the covenant curses would stop and the covenant blessings would begin. This type of understanding of prophecy seems to be absent from most apocalyptic writings because of their focus upon the righteous remnant.

Observing other differences between Revelation and apocalyptic genre also strengthens Thomas' argument that Revelation should not be regarded as apocalyptic literature. For example, according to Kallas, apocalyptic literature has a different view of

<sup>238</sup> John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia; 14 (Missoula: MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 9.

<sup>239</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 76-101.

<sup>240</sup> Frederick J. Murphy, *Early Judaism: The Exile to the Time of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 130-33.

<sup>241</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2d ed. (New York: OUP, 2000), 227.

<sup>242</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 269.

suffering than that portrayed in Revelation. In apocalyptic writings, suffering is something that emanates from God opposing forces that God will eventually overthrow rather than from God Himself. Thus, the apocalyptists did not see suffering as something good that is to be submitted to. By contrast, in Revelation, suffering comes from the hand of God because it is He who initiates the judgments (Rev 5:5; 6:1; 16:1). Therefore, at times, suffering is something good and must be submitted to.<sup>243</sup>

Moreover, apocalyptic literature is pseudo-prophecy or *vaticinia ex eventu*, which means “prophecies after the fact.” In other words, apocalyptists typically retrace history under the guise of prophecy. From the perspective of someone in the remote past, they predict what will happen up to their own day. However, this is not so in Revelation where John looks from his own day into the future.<sup>244</sup> In addition, Revelation is dominated by an already not yet tension as John looked to the needs of his own day as well as the eschatological “Day of the Lord.” Yet, this same tension is not evident in other apocalypses.<sup>245</sup>

Furthermore, according to Gregg, other apocalypses typically use numbers to convey concepts rather than count units.<sup>246</sup> By contrast, Revelation appears to use many numbers to indicate specific count units. For example, many futurist scholars believe that various numbers found in Revelation, such as 1260 days (Rev 12:6) or 42 months (Rev 11:2; 13:5), are direct references to the unfulfilled aspects of Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan 9:24-27).<sup>247</sup> Because Hoehner’s calculations indicate that the fulfilled aspects of this prophecy had the potential of being accurate to the exact day,<sup>248</sup> it stands to reason that the prophecy’s unfulfilled aspects will also be fulfilled to the minutest detail. Thus, the numbers 1260 days and 42 months should not be taken as merely communicating concepts but rather should be interpreted as specific count units. According to Thomas, “...no number in Revelation is verifiably a symbolic number. On the other hand, nonsymbolic usage of numbers is the rule.”<sup>249</sup>

Moreover, Revelation’s heavy dependence upon on Ezekiel and Daniel<sup>250</sup> also raises questions as to whether the book should be categorized as apocalyptic. Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied 400 years before apocalyptic literature became dominant in the intertestamental period. Also, Revelation 12:1 borrows imagery from Genesis 37:9-10, which took place in the patriarchal era nearly 1800 years before apocalypticism began to flourish. A further variance from apocalyptic writings includes Revelation’s unique epistolary introduction (Rev 1:4-5).<sup>251</sup> Finally, many apocalyptic writings, such as the *Book of Watchers*, fail to present a precise eschatological scheme.<sup>252</sup> Yet, many have argued that Revelation 6-19, with its telescoping and fixed seven-year duration, does communicate a fixed eschatological scheme. A chronology of events also seems to be employed in Revelation 20-22.<sup>253</sup>

In sum, although Revelation has many affinities with apocalyptic literature, it is difficult to classify it as apocalyptic because these similarities seem slightly outweighed by the

<sup>243</sup> Kallas: 169-80.

<sup>244</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 94.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Gregg, ed., 11-12.

<sup>247</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 177, 191, 200.

<sup>248</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 115-39.

<sup>249</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 408.

<sup>250</sup> Jenkins, 22.

<sup>251</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 22.

<sup>252</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 56.

<sup>253</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, "Evidence from Revelation 20," in *The Coming Millennial Kingdom*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 245-61.



differences between it and apocalyptic writings. A better classification for the book is prophecy rather than apocalyptic. This classification best takes into account Revelation's numerous self claims to be prophecy, emphasis upon repentance, and purpose of comforting God's people in the present through a vision of victory to take place in the distant future. Although this classification is a minority opinion, it is interesting to observe other scholars reaching the same conclusion. Among them are the previously cited Morris and Thomas as well as Michaels<sup>254</sup> and even preterist David Chilton.<sup>255</sup>

The literal Babylon view is also criticized on the grounds that Isaiah 13-14 and Jeremiah 50-51 were essentially fulfilled in 539 B.C. and therefore do not await a future fulfillment. Critics maintain that these prophetic texts should not be approached with a wooden literalistic hermeneutic that demands that every minute prophetic detail come to pass before these prophecies can be labeled fulfilled.<sup>256</sup> For example, Heater points out that it is common for various Old Testament passages as well as Ancient Near East treaties to describe the coming destruction of an enemy in hyperbolic, non-literal terms. Heater categorizes such language as "destruction genre."<sup>257</sup> Chisholm calls such language "stylized and exaggerated" and therefore argues that these texts were "essentially fulfilled" with the historic defeat of Babylon.<sup>258</sup> Johnston echoes these thoughts when he notes, "...Dyer's approach shows the danger of an overly narrow hermeneutic of prophecy which always demands a literal/precise fulfillment."<sup>259</sup>

However, none of these critics sufficiently interacts with Dyer's argument that after Babylon's destruction, the northern and southern kingdoms would be reunited and national repentance would result. Moreover, following Babylon's destruction, Isaiah 14 indicates that the world's universal rest and peace (14:5-8) and Israel's restoration (14:1-4) will transpire. Because these events await the fulfillment of Israel's covenant's after her national repentance, they have never happened in history and are yet to occur. Interestingly, Chisholm treats Israel's restoration as depicted in Amos 9:11-15 as a future event.<sup>260</sup> Why should Israel's restoration be treated differently in Isaiah 13-14 and Jeremiah 50-51?

It is also possible to question the literal, futuristic Babylon interpretation on the grounds that such a prophecy would have little relevance to John's original first century audience. However, such a criticism also calls into question the routine practice of numerous Old Testament prophets who comforted Israel with prophecies predicting the ultimate triumph of God to be fulfilled in the distant future (Isa 40-66; Ezek 36-48; Amos 9:11-15).

Finally, the Babylon view has been criticized as being the product of reading current events regarding the present Iraqi crisis back into the text rather than being the product of sound exegetical principles. Pate and Hays either expressly or tacitly level this charge in several instances.<sup>261</sup> However, this accusation seems unfair in light of the fact that numerous interpreters held the view long before Saddam Hussein rose to power. Such commentators include Newell (1935),<sup>262</sup> Jennings (1937),<sup>263</sup> Cooper (1942),<sup>264</sup> and Lang (1948).<sup>265</sup> Other

<sup>254</sup> Michaels, 21-23.

<sup>255</sup> Chilton, 25-27.

<sup>256</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 41.

<sup>257</sup> Homer Heater, "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Rebuilt in the Eschaton?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (March 1998): 31-36.

<sup>258</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 53, 213.

<sup>259</sup> Gordon Johnston, *Introduction to the Study of the Prophets. Unit 5: Hermeneutics of Fulfillment / Non-Fulfillment of Prophecy* (unpublished class notes in 104 Hebrew Exegesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring Semester, Spring 2003), 26.

<sup>260</sup> Chisholm, 401-403.

<sup>261</sup> Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 40, 97, 100.

<sup>262</sup> William R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Grace Publications, 1935), 268.

commentators held the view even before Iraq became a nation in 1932. Such commentators include Seiss (1909)<sup>266</sup> and Larkin (1919).<sup>267</sup> It is true that Dyer released his book advocating the literal Babylon view on the eve of the Gulf War<sup>268</sup> and recently on the eve of the present war with Iraq.<sup>269</sup> However, it should also be noted that the content of these books is based upon Dyer's master's thesis that was completed in May of 1979<sup>270</sup> long before Hussein's rise to power and escalating tensions between America and Iraq.

### **Conclusion**

This section of the paper has surveyed five prominent approaches for identifying Babylon in Revelation 17-18. These approaches include identifying Babylon as the world, Jerusalem, Rome, an end time religious system, and futuristic, literal, rebuilt Babylon. As indicated in the preceding discussion, I lean toward the Babylon position. Although this position is not without its weaknesses and is presently a minority position in the scholarly world, it seems to have fewer problems than the other views.

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<sup>263</sup> Frederick C. Jennings, *Studies in Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1937), 476.

<sup>264</sup> David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1942), 114.

<sup>265</sup> George H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Paternoster, 1948), 305.

<sup>266</sup> Seiss, 397.

<sup>267</sup> Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation* (Glenside, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1919), 150.

<sup>268</sup> Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1991).

<sup>269</sup> Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003).

<sup>270</sup> Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979).

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