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## *Table of Contents*

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<b>The Contribution of Kenneth Korby to a Renewed Reception of Wilhelm Löhe's Pastoral Theology</b>	
John T. Pless .....	99
<b>The Liturgical Shape of the Old Testament Gospel</b>	
Alan Ludwig .....	115
<b>Its End is Destruction: Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation</b>	
Peter F. Gregory .....	137
<b>Another Look at Luther's Battle with Karlstadt</b>	
Richard A. Beinert .....	155
<b>Theological Observer</b> .....	171
Kenneth F. Korby – A Teacher of Pastors	
Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009)	
Work and Reality in Latvia	
The Doctrine of Christ in Theological Education	
Löhe Studies Today	
<b>Book Reviews</b> .....	187
<b>Books Received</b> .....	192

## Its End Is Destruction: Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation

Peter F. Gregory

The title "Babylon the great" appears six times in the book of Revelation (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21), beginning with an angel's proclamation, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great" (Rev 14:8). Revelation uses it as the name for the enemy of God's people. Interest in Revelation's "Babylon the great" has often focused on identifying *who* "Babylon" is, that is, on decoding the name.<sup>1</sup> Less focus has been placed on *why* this title is used. Why was Babylon singled out as the "whore" in Revelation? What so distinguished "Babylon" that it best suited the purposes of this book?<sup>2</sup> Why is this particular designation used in Revelation and not others, for example, Egypt, Tyre, Assyria, the Seleucids, or Rome? The name "Babylon" certainly brings to mind ideas of worldwide rule, the destruction of the temple, the exile, and vast economic control, yet these themes are insufficient to explain its use in Revelation. By connecting this name to the descriptions of Babylon in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and

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<sup>1</sup> Among the main interpretive approaches to Revelation, G. K. Beale lists the preterist view, which identifies Babylon either as apostate Israel or as the Roman Empire, and the historicist view, which sees Revelation as an unfolding of historical events (for example, sections may be interpreted as depicting the Goth and Muslim invasions of the Roman Empire, the medieval papacy, the Carolingian Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and the rule of Napoleon and Hitler). See Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans and Paternoster Press, 1999), 44-49. Moreover, Francesca Aran Murphy states, "Dispensationalist Apocalypse interpreters [such as Hal Lindsey and the fiction of Tim LaHaye] were in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century . . . identifying modern politicians with the agents of Revelation." See Murphy, "Revelation, Book of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 685-686. There have doubtless been interpretations of Revelation that find in it references to communist states (the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and North Korea), Iraq under Saddam Hussein, militant Islam, the European Union, and even the United States.

<sup>2</sup> "Babylon" was a name that John saw and heard during his prophetic vision by divine revelation (e.g. Rev 17:5 and 18:2). Although Revelation is a record of the vision that John had, he also wrote it with a great deal of care and attention to detail. For an example of the detail and careful composition of Revelation, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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Daniel, Revelation recalls the idolatry and pride of that ancient city, a city whose rulers saw themselves and their gods as supreme. More importantly, it recalls the Lord's swift and sure destruction of that ancient kingdom. The name "Babylon" is a guarantee that no "Babylon"—ancient or modern<sup>3</sup>—is able to stand before God; consequently, the use of this particular title brings encouragement to those who hear and read Revelation. Regardless of Babylon's outward strength and prosperity, the reality is that Babylon was, is, and will be fallen.

### I. Babylon: Chosen with Care

#### *The Alternatives*

From among all of the cities and nations that had opposed God's people, Revelation uses only the name of Babylon.<sup>4</sup> It is not obvious why this name should have been chosen over others. In fact, Revelation echoes many Old Testament and literary descriptions, themes, and images connected with places such as Egypt, Assyria, Tyre, the Seleucids, and Rome. This shows that the "Babylon" of Revelation encompasses more than a single historical nation; it is a complex reality which gathers into one name a vast array of images and themes. Yet "Babylon" was purposefully chosen as the name for this complex picture of evil.

The care with which "Babylon" was chosen becomes evident when one considers the other possibilities. According to David Aune, "There were symbolic names for Rome in use by early Judaism, including Edom, Kittim . . . and Egypt."<sup>5</sup> First, the image of the exodus from Egypt—so important throughout the Scriptures—appears also in Revelation. Richard Bauckham identified "the eschatological exodus" as one of the major symbolic themes of the Lamb's victory in Revelation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, "Egypt" was used in the

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<sup>3</sup> For "Babylon" as a general term that encompasses more than a single, specific historical reality, see David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 52C, Revelation 17–22* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1998), 985.

<sup>4</sup> In Revelation 11:8, John also refers to "the great city that symbolically [spiritually] is called Sodom and Egypt." Sodom and Egypt—names that John could have used instead of "Babylon"—participated in the reality now being described in Revelation with the name "Babylon." See Beale, *Revelation*, 591.

<sup>5</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 830. Thus, there were not only other possibilities available for John, but there is evidence that different names were actually used by early Jews with reference to Rome.

<sup>6</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 70. On pages 70–72, Bauckham points out the imagery of the Passover Lamb in Revelation 5:6–10, the new song in Revelation 15:2–4, the plagues in Revelation 15:1,5–16:21, and various other images.

early church as a name for the Roman Empire in its opposition to the Christians.<sup>7</sup> Second, Revelation employs language from Ezekiel's oracle against the great commercial center of Tyre (Ezek 27-28) but applies it to "Babylon." The lamentation over Babylon in Revelation 18 derives from the lamentation over Tyre in Ezekiel 27. In the latter, the merchants cry out, "Who is like Tyre?" (Ezek 27:32); in the former, the kings, merchants, and sailors lament, "What city was like that great city?" (Rev 18:18). Third, religious persecution, martyrdom, and the temptation of cultural/religious accommodation are themes which Revelation has in common with 1 Maccabees. The annual Hanukkah celebrations would have kept Seleucid oppression fresh in the memory of a first-century Jew. Fourth, the reference in Revelation to "the seven mountains" upon which the harlot Babylon sits was unlikely to have been lost on those under Roman rule (Rev 17:9). It is a not-so-veiled reference to Rome herself. John, however, chose to use the name Babylon rather than Egypt, Tyre, the Seleucids, or Rome.

"Babylon the great" of Revelation does partake in various aspects of these cities, nations, and dynasties. Though the Christians to whom John wrote were not all slaves, they all could still celebrate the victory of the Lamb with "the song of Moses" when Pharaoh and his chariots were drowned in the sea (Rev 15:3-4). If the bloodshed of the Assyrian army brought about its complete destruction by God as prophesied by Nahum, then surely the blood of the martyrs "slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" called also for the Lord to take similar vengeance against his enemies in Revelation (Rev 6:9-10). Nineveh is called a harlot long before Revelation takes up this term to describe "Babylon" (see Nah 3:4-5).<sup>8</sup> The economic critique of "Babylon" which echoes the judgment and lament over Tyre has already been mentioned. "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!" (Rev 3:15) is a warning against cultural and religious accommodation. These connections with Revelation certainly exist and contribute to the church's understanding of who "Babylon the great" is and what she does. Each of these historical nations can be seen in the "Babylon" of Revelation. Yet the

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<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," trans. R. E. Wallis, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, American Edition, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 702.

<sup>8</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 885.

"Babylon" of Revelation is a greater, more all-encompassing reality than can be captured by any one of the nations previously mentioned.

*The Traditional Explanations*

Why, then, does Revelation speak of "Babylon"? The destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, the exile, and the return from exile are arguably the most significant Old Testament events in the six hundred years prior to Jesus' birth. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* describes this as a reason for the continuing significance of Babylon in "western thought," from Revelation to Avignon to Martin Luther<sup>9</sup>:

The fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C. marked the end of the contentions between Babylon and the Hebrews; but it is clear that that century of difficult relationships greatly influenced the people of Israel and their writings. Consequently, one can understand how the biblical and Greek traditions joined together to confer on Babylon a place of exceptional importance in western thought.<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between Babylon and Judah brought a revision in how the Jews viewed their place in history, their expectations about the future, and their understanding of God's promises.

From this relationship, the New Testament derived the exile motif to describe the life of the Church ("they were scattered," Acts 8:1; "to those who are elect exiles," 1 Pet 1:1; "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," Jas 1:1). The conclusion of 1 Peter probably refers to Rome with the statement, "She who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings" (1 Pet 5:12-13). The exile motif does appear in Revelation. The seven letters are encouragement to faithfulness for Christians in an anti-Christian world (Rev 2:1-3:22). Some had already been martyred for the faith, since the author sees "under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" (Rev 6:9). There is also the reference to John on the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ, Rev 1:9), though it could refer to forced exile, self-imposed exile, or

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<sup>9</sup> When the papacy was moved to Avignon, France, in the middle ages, it was described as "the Babylonian captivity of the Papacy." Martin Luther used similar language, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," to describe the church of his day.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Claude Margueron and Duane F. Watson, "Babylon," trans. Paul Sager, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume I, A-C, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 563.

a preaching station. Exile is a theme in Revelation, but one that appears separate from the references to "Babylon."

Babylon also brings to mind scenes of destruction. Louis Brighton draws attention to this in his commentary: "Because of the destruction and horror perpetrated by ancient Babylon, she henceforth became a type of all enemies of God."<sup>11</sup> David Aune related the use of the name "Babylon" specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem. He wrote, "The comparison between Babylon and Rome is based implicitly on the parallels between the conquest of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 B.C. and the conquest of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70."<sup>12</sup> Aune's view, however, assumes that Revelation was written after AD 70, a conclusion debated by some scholars.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Ezekiel brought comfort to his flock in the wake of the first destruction by envisioning a new temple at the center of restored Jerusalem (Ezek 40-48), Revelation downplays the significance of the temple. "I saw no temple in the city," John wrote, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev 21:22). In Revelation the temple has been reinterpreted through the lens of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a point that is more significant for Christianity if the Second Temple is still standing than if it has been destroyed. In contrast, *2 Baruch* describes Rome with the name "Babylon" precisely because both empires destroyed the temple in Jerusalem: "The king of Babylon will arise, the one who now has destroyed Zion" (*2 Bar* 67:7).<sup>14</sup> Revelation makes no such explicit statement regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

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<sup>11</sup> Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 378.

<sup>12</sup> Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 52B, Revelation 6-16* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1998), 830. Aune also connects Babylon and Rome through the destruction of the temple on page 829.

<sup>13</sup> While the scholarly consensus holds that Revelation was written around AD 95, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, a minority position considers it as coming from the time immediately prior to the destruction of the temple. For how the title "Babylon" fits with each position, see Beale, *Revelation*, 4-27, esp. 18-19 and 25, and the bibliography on 27 n. 136. Contra Beale, it is possible that a Christian writing, such as Revelation, would have a different purpose for the title "Babylon" than did Jewish writings (such as 4 Ezra, *2 Baruch*, and the *Sibylline Oracles*), which explicitly connect the name with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.

<sup>14</sup> A. F. J. Klijn, "Introduction" for 2 (*Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch in The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Volume II, ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), 644.

The destruction of the temple either had not yet occurred or was more significant to a first-century Jew than to a Christian.<sup>15</sup>

Revelation 18 also offers an economic critique of “Babylon the great” by applying to this city the language used by Ezekiel for ancient Tyre. Robert Mounce described ancient Babylon as “renowned for its luxury and moral corruption.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Richard Bauckham wrote: “Any society which absolutizes its own economic prosperity at the expense of others comes under Babylon’s condemnation.”<sup>17</sup> The economic factor is significant but should not be allowed to dominate the understanding of Babylon in Revelation.<sup>18</sup> Bauckham provides a good balance: “[T]he Babylon of Revelation 17–18 combines in itself the evils of the two great evil cities of the Old Testament prophetic oracles: Babylon and Tyre. . . . If Rome was the heir of Babylon in political and religious activity, she was also the heir of Tyre in economic activity.”<sup>19</sup> This is true, but one still must ask why Revelation chose “Babylon” over “Tyre.”

## II. The Old Testament “Babylon” in Revelation

Revelation’s use of “Babylon” allows the hearer to understand the present in terms of the past. Thus, it is necessary to take a closer look at where Revelation picks up Old Testament language about Babylon, that is, what literary connections or intertextuality can be found between “Babylon the great” in Revelation and Babylon in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel? While the themes of idolatry, perseverance in confession, and

<sup>15</sup> Aune, *Revelation* 6–16, 829.

<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, First Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 271.

<sup>17</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 156. His longer study of Revelation, *The Climax of Prophecy*, even included an entire chapter (ch. 10) titled “The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18.” Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1993), 338–383.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Trafton overemphasized the economic critique when he wrote, “Conspicuous by its absence in this [Revelation’s] description is any mention of the city’s gods – i.e., Babylon is not condemned for idolatry but for its influence on the rest of the world. Could this be an indication that one of the most pressing concerns in the book is that of accommodation to the socioeconomic enticements of the Roman Empire?” Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), 163. Idolatry does, in fact, appear in connection with the “Babylon” of Revelation (see Revelation 13), unless one sees the two beasts as an entirely separate reality from the harlot city.

<sup>19</sup> Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 345–346.

the temptation to cultural accommodation all appear, the common thread is the language of the fall and destruction of Babylon. This is the motif and association which the name “Babylon” brings from the Old Testament into Revelation.

### *Isaiah*

The language used for Babylon recalls the words of Isaiah by which he foretold the fall of Babylon. From the beginning—before Babylon was a world power—the Lord promised her fall and judgment through the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah, a rider proclaims, “Fallen [LXX: *πέπτωκεν*], fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground” (Isa 21:9). This is the same language used of Babylon in Revelation: “Fallen [*ἔπεσεν*], fallen is Babylon the great” (Rev 14:8; 18:2).<sup>20</sup> Revelation also proclaimed beforehand the fall and judgment of another Babylon, that is, Rome, and of every incarnation of Babylon that would follow. The fall of the first Babylon (fulfilled in Daniel 5) guarantees the fall of every present and future Babylon. The prophecy of Revelation takes up the language of Isaiah as a way to underscore the truthfulness of its claims: “The announcement of Babylon’s fall as a realized event is both in Isaiah and Revelation a dramatic way of emphasizing the certainty of the divine decree which lies behind the prophet’s message.”<sup>21</sup> The same God who ruled before, during, and after the Babylonian exile is the God of Revelation. While the Christian lives in the midst of this Babylon, John’s prophecy sees Babylon as already having fallen (*ἔπεσεν*) in the past tense. John Strelan wrote, “The verb which John uses (‘fallen’) is in the past tense: in the past Babylon fell, as all Babylons fall, and will fall; always her condition is: she has fallen. God always triumphs over all opposition. The fall of all who rebel against God is inevitable; it is only a matter of time.”<sup>22</sup> Thus “Babylon” becomes in Revelation a form of “encouragement to those waiting for her judgment.”<sup>23</sup>

John also picks up from Isaiah the language he used regarding the pride and blasphemy of Babylon. Isaiah described Babylon as follows:

<sup>20</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) of Isaiah uses the perfect tense; Revelation uses the aorist.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Fekkes III, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and Their Development*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 93 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 205.

<sup>22</sup> John G. Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven: A Commentary on Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 288.

<sup>23</sup> Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 205.



You [Babylon] said, "I shall be mistress forever. . . ." [You] say in your heart [ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου], "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow [οὐ καθιῶ χήρα] or know the loss of children." These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day [ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ]; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure. . . . (Isa 47:7-9)

Revelation uses this same language for the pride and downfall of the New Testament "Babylon":

Since in her heart [ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς] she says, "I sit as a queen, I am no widow [χήρα οὐκ εἰμί], and mourning I shall never see." For this reason her plagues will come in a single day [ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ]. (Rev 18:7-8)

The judgment will be swift and sure; "in a single day" proud Babylon will be brought low. It will become utterly desolate, a haunt of demons and unclean birds and beasts (a description found in Isa 13:20-22).<sup>24</sup> Revelation likewise pictures the city as deserted and forgotten, "a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast" (Rev 18:2).<sup>25</sup> Thus, Revelation takes from Isaiah the language of the fall and utter desolation of Babylon. As Louis Brighton states, "John would not live to see his prophecy fulfilled even in the form of Rome's fall, but it would surely come to pass."<sup>26</sup> This is the picture of "Babylon" which is formed by Revelation's echoes of Isaiah.

### Jeremiah

Jeremiah also foresaw the destruction of Babylon in language later used by Revelation. He told Seraiah—one of the exiles—to say,

When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, "O Lord, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate forever." When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, "Thus [οὕτως] shall Babylon

<sup>24</sup> Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 214-217.

<sup>25</sup> On Revelation 18:2, Robert H. Mounce wrote, "For background we should turn to Isaiah's oracle against ancient Babylon. There we find that Babylon once fallen will never again be inhabited except by creatures of the desert (Isa 13:20-21)." Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 325.

<sup>26</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 465.

sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted." (Jer 51:61–64)<sup>27</sup>

Revelation takes up this parabolic judgment of Babylon in 18:21. "Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'So [οὕτως] will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.'" The symbolic actions and their interpretations are the same in Jeremiah and Revelation.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the words of encouragement which Jeremiah gave to the exiles are gathered into Revelation's picture of Babylon. It is a picture of reality from the divine perspective and thus offers hope to those who are afflicted and oppressed.

Jeremiah also described Babylon as "a golden cup in the Lord's hand; making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad" (Jer 51:7). Then her judgment comes: "Suddenly Babylon has fallen [ἔπεσεν] and been broken; wail for her!" (Jer 51:8). Revelation 14:8 is similar: An angel declared, "Fallen [ἔπεσεν], fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality." In Revelation 18, the kings, merchants, and sailors who "wail for her" are pictured. Thus, Revelation alludes to Jeremiah precisely in the contexts where the fall and desolation of Babylon are in view.

### *Ezekiel*

Ezekiel provides the perspective of a Babylonian exile. His prophetic oracles, directed to the exiles and those remaining in Jerusalem, ceased prior to the fall of Babylon and well before the restoration of the Jews under Cyrus. It is interesting to note that although Ezekiel proclaimed oracles against seven nations, Babylon is not among them. Self-interest hardly seems a reasonable explanation for this: for example, Jeremiah did not hesitate to speak against Egypt while he was in exile there (Jer 43, 46). Ezekiel did not see the Lord's deliverance, yet he proclaimed that the rule of the Lord God knows no geographical, political, or economic boundaries. Even in a foreign land—in exile among an unbelieving society—the God of Israel was in charge. All appearances to the contrary, Babylon's gods had not triumphed. They were powerless beside Ezekiel's God.

This perspective of living in the midst of Babylon was the same situation faced by John's addressees. All who follow Christ face the

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<sup>27</sup> The Masoretic and English texts place this in Jeremiah 51; the LXX in Jeremiah 28.

<sup>28</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 918–919.

challenge of confessing the true faith when confronted by a powerful foe who denies it. Christians were called to remain set apart and separate from these societies and cultures, confessing their faith in the one God of Israel despite all persecution. Thus, in Revelation the voice from heaven calls, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities" (Rev 18:4-5). No accommodation is acceptable with Babylon, though the temptation to accommodate will never cease. Ezekiel's prophecies encouraged God's people to confess, rather than compromise, their faith. Such language in Revelation "is a solemn reminder to all Christians that they actually live in Babylon," John Strelan wrote. "If they do not want to share her [Babylon's] fate, they have to ensure that although they live in Babylon, they never become part of her (see Rev 3:13; Rom 12:1-3)."<sup>29</sup> A Christian lives trusting that Revelation is indeed true: Babylon has no future, for the future belongs to God alone.

### Daniel

The similarity between Daniel and Revelation begins with false, idolatrous worship. Daniel 3 records the account of Nebuchadnezzar's golden image: "King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits" (Dan 3:1). Then, at the dedication ceremony,

[T]he herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples [LXX: λαοί], nations [LXX: ἔθνη], and languages [LXX: γλώσσαι], that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." (Dan 3:4-6)

Revelation describes the authority which was given to the first beast<sup>30</sup> as being "over every tribe and people and language and nation" (ἐπι πᾶσαν φυλὴν καὶ λαόν καὶ γλώσσαν καὶ ἔθνος, Rev 13:7), four terms which appear in Daniel 3.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in the Septuagint text, Nebuchadnezzar is referred

<sup>29</sup> Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, 284.

<sup>30</sup> The beast of Revelation 13 rolls into one figure the four beasts of Daniel 7.

<sup>31</sup> The LXX uses the following phrases in Daniel 3: those whom Nebuchadnezzar gathers to worship the beast include πάντα τὰ ἔθνη καὶ φυλὰς καὶ γλώσσας (Dan 3:2); the command of the herald is directed to ἔθνη καὶ χώραι, λαοὶ καὶ γλώσσαι (Dan 3:4); the result is that πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, φυλαὶ καὶ γλώσσαι worship the image (Dan 3:7); and, finally, English Bibles following the Masoretic have a similar reference in

to as the king over all who dwell upon the earth (πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, Dan 3:1), like unto the beast of Revelation who would deceive all who dwell upon the earth (πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, Rev 13:7; τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, Rev 13:14) so that they worshipped its image.<sup>32</sup> In Daniel, the peoples worshipped the image of gold (προσεκύησαν τῇ εἰκόνι τῇ χρυσοῦ, LXX Dan 3:7) which Nebuchadnezzar had set up; those who would not were to be cast into a fiery furnace (Dan 3:6). Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, three who “refused to worship any god except their own God,” were subsequently thrown into the fire, and were delivered unharmed (Dan 3:13–30). In Revelation, the first beast and his image receive the worship (καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν αὐτόν, Rev 13:8) of those who dwell upon the earth; those who would not were to be put to death (καὶ ποιήσῃ ἵνα ὅσοι ἂν μὴ προσκυήσωσιν τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου ἀποκτανθῶσιν, 13:15). The common temptation for God’s people in both testaments was to follow the ways of the world, abandon God, and worship the false images.

In both Daniel and chapters 4, 5, and 14 of Revelation, the worship of the image is contrasted with the true worship of God. The worshipers of the beast do not have their names written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain (οὐ οὐ γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, Rev 13:8), while those who have worshipped neither the beast nor his image are the ones who dwell in the presence of the Lamb (οἵτινες οὐ προσεκύησαν τὸ θηρίον οὐδὲ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ, Rev 20:4). Though separated from the narrative of Nebuchadnezzar’s image, Daniel also refers to the deliverance and triumph of all whose names were written in the book (πᾶς ὁ εὐρεθείς γεγραμμένος ἐν τῇ βιβλίῳ, LXX Dan 12:1). The fiery furnace is not the only reference in Daniel to the persecution of those who worship the God of Israel. In the well-known story of Daniel and the lion’s den, King

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Nebuchadnezzar’s statement glorifying God, “any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego” (Dan 3:29). For a reference in Hippolytus to the image in Daniel being an image of Nebuchadnezzar, see Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 761. This four-fold designation of universality—every tribe, people, language, and nation—also recalls Genesis 10:5 and 11:1–9. Further study could be done on the connection between “Babylon” in Revelation and the Tower of Babel narrative.

<sup>32</sup> G. K. Beale believes that Revelation 13:7–8 relies more on Daniel 7:14 than Daniel 3. He notes, however, that the verb προσκυέω appears in Daniel 3:7 and not in 7:14. He does not mention the similar phrase, πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, found in Daniel 3:1 and Revelation 13:7. Beale wrote: “From these textual comparisons it could be concluded that Daniel, 3, 6, and 7 equally provided the quarry from which John has drawn. But Daniel 7:14 is the strongest influence because of the dominance of Daniel 7 in Rev. 13:1–7a.” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 699.

Darius (who ruled after the fall of Babylon) decreed “that whoever makes a petition to any god,” other than himself, “shall be cast into the den of lions” (Dan 6:7). Strelan also connected the worship of Daniel and Revelation: “Once upon a time, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego lived in the city of the beast. They had to choose: worship a statue of the beast and stay alive, or worship God and be put to death (Dan 3:1-7).”<sup>33</sup> Those to whom John wrote faced the same test from the “Babylon” of their day, as do many twenty-first century Christians.

The “Babylon” of Revelation and the Babylon of Daniel both exhibit the same blasphemous pride. In setting up the images for worship, both Nebuchadnezzar and the beast set themselves in the place of God. Neither ancient Babylon nor the “Babylon” of Revelation had any use for the Lord God; they believed that no one had any authority or power over them. Revelation’s title “Babylon the great” is found in the Old Testament only at Daniel 4:30, where King Nebuchadnezzar declared, “Is not this great Babylon [LXX: Οὐχ αὕτη ἐστὶν Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη], which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” Revelation uses the title Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη frequently (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, and 21). Nebuchadnezzar declared himself and his city as supreme upon the earth, having received nothing from anyone and owing nothing to anyone. Judgment swiftly followed—for Nebuchadnezzar it was the humiliation of living like a beast for seven years—and revealed that neither Babylon nor her king were the supreme authorities upon the earth. Daniel later mentioned this incident to Nebuchadnezzar’s successor, Belshazzar, to show that the Lord of heaven and earth will not tolerate such pride. “When his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne and his glory was taken from him” (Dan 5:20). Pride went before the fall.

This prideful disregard for God was also a cause of Belshazzar’s fall. “And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven” (Dan 5:22). This pride had manifested itself in the arrogant defiling of the sacred vessels from Solomon’s temple, which Belshazzar used to serve wine at a great feast. His pride led to his downfall and the fall of his kingdom. As Daniel 4:37 put it, “those who walk in pride he [the Most High] is able to humble” (Dan 4:37). Revelation picks up this theme of

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<sup>33</sup> Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, 223.

pride most clearly in chapter 18 where judgment is pronounced against the city of pride, and then the kings and merchants lament its unbelievable fall. A voice from heaven declares the destruction of Babylon, the city which says in her heart, "I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see" (Rev 18:7). "For this reason" she will fall, "for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her" (Rev 18:8). The Lamb is "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev 17:14), a title used by the Babylonian kings previously and by Roman emperors in John's day. Strikingly, the Lamb's title in Revelation 17:14 echoes Nebuchadnezzar's confession of the Most High God in Daniel 4:37 (LXX).<sup>34</sup> The Lord "has revealed Nebuchadnezzar as an empty parody of the name by judging the beastly king of 'Babylon the Great.'"<sup>35</sup>

Revelation also appears to make reference to ancient Babylon's last act of pride, that is, the feast of Belshazzar in which the holy vessels of the Lord's temple were paraded before a thousand people. It was the greatest mockery of God, for it depicted the superiority of Babylon over Jerusalem and of Babylon's kings and gods over the Lord God. Daniel recorded:

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. . . . Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. (Dan 5:1-4)

By this time, the handwriting was literally on the wall, and Babylon's judgment was imminent. Worth note are the following: first, that a large number of high ranking officials and people joined Belshazzar in these deeds; second, that the king and his followers drank "wine" (ὁ οἶνος); third, that they used the "golden vessels" (τὰ σκεύη τὰ χρυσᾶ) of the Jerusalem temple; and, fourth, that their revelries ended with the praise of the Babylonian idols.<sup>36</sup> In multiple places, Revelation refers to Babylon the great as a city which seduced kings and those who dwell on earth to imbibe the wine of her sexual immorality (καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες

<sup>34</sup> Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, 282.

<sup>35</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 881.

<sup>36</sup> The Greek is from Theodotion's Greek version of Daniel 5:1-4, which refers to vessels of gold and silver (τὰ σκεύη τὰ χρυσᾶ καὶ τὰ ἀργυρᾶ).

τὴν γῆν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς, Rev 17:2).<sup>37</sup> Babylon is, in fact, “the great prostitute” (τῆς πόρνης τῆς μεγάλης, Rev 17:1) arrayed in fine clothing and “holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality” (ἔχουσα ποτήριον χρυσοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτῆς γεμὸν βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς, Rev 17:4). The association of wine and a golden cup (or vessel) with Babylon in Daniel 5 and Revelation 17 may seem incidental, but idolatry is often associated with sexual immorality in the Old Testament, even for nations other than Israel.<sup>38</sup> While the religious cults often included sexual activities, sexual immorality may refer more generally to idolatry and the worship of false gods. Thus, the combination of wine, gold, and sexual immorality suggests a further link between Revelation and Daniel.

Finally, there is a similarity between the fall of the two Babylons. God’s judgment against the pride and idolatry of Belshazzar’s Babylon was delivered by the mouth of Daniel:

And you his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Dan 5:22–28)

The judgment was not long in coming. “That very night [ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ νυκτὶ] Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed” (LXX Dan 5:30). The “Babylon” of Revelation receives a similarly swift judgment. Revelation 18:10 declares, “For this reason her plagues will come in a single day [ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ], death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her [ὅτι ἰσχυρὸς κύριος ὁ

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<sup>37</sup> Revelation 14:8 and 18:3 declare that “all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality” (ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).

<sup>38</sup> For a reference to Israel as a whore, see Ezekiel 23:22–35. Assyria is described in a similar fashion in Nahum 3:4.

θεός ὁ κρίνας αὐτήν].”<sup>39</sup> In both cases, the Lord’s judgment comes swiftly and surely.<sup>40</sup> For all her pride and arrogance, despite her show of power and even her persecution of the faithful, Babylon is no match for the Lord God. Even the sounds which encouraged false worship will be stilled. The sound of the horn (σάλπιγγος), pipe, lyre (κιθάρας), trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music (μουσικῶν)—so prominent in Nebuchadnezzar’s idol worship—will cease. The mighty angel of Revelation 18 proclaimed: “And the sound of harpists [κιθαροφθῶν] and musicians [μουσικῶν], of flute players and trumpeters [σαλπιστῶν], will be heard in you no more [οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῆ ἔν σοι ἔτι]” (Rev 18:22).

The picture of Babylon culled from Daniel, therefore, confirms that the Lord is God. Despite the outward pretensions, power, idolatries, and wealth of Revelation’s “Babylon,” he remains in control. It is the Lord who sets up rulers and kingdoms, and it is he who brings them down, whether that be Nebuchadnezzar’s version of “Babylon the Great,” the incarnation of “Babylon” in John’s day, or those “Babylons” of today. The enemies of God’s people—first century AD or twenty-first century AD—await the same end as that which met the enemies of God’s people long ago. Their judgment and fall is assured and guaranteed by the fall of the previous Babylon. God will triumph. “The Lamb has conquered, he conquers, and he will conquer.”<sup>41</sup> Appearances to the contrary, Revelation directs its hearers to the reality that her enemies are already fallen.

### III. Conclusion

Why is the name “Babylon” used for the enemy of God’s people in Revelation? For those who know the Old Testament prophets, the answer seems clear. The title “Babylon” is the assurance and guarantee that the Lord will prevail. Revelation takes the language of Babylon’s fall from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel to show that there are no doubts about the outcome. “Babylon” is not a name that should cause consternation or concern for the people of God. It is not primarily a code to be cracked or a power to be feared. It ought, however, to be taken with seriousness, for Revelation also shows that “Babylon the great” is outwardly powerful. It

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<sup>39</sup> The laments of the kings of the earth, the merchants, and the shipmasters also describe her fall as occurring in “a single hour” (Revelation 17:10, 17, 19). That the phrase “in a single day” comes from Isaiah 47:9 should not negate any connection with Daniel 5:30, since it is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s oracle.

<sup>40</sup> Mounce likewise sees a connection between Daniel 5 and Revelation 18 in *The Book of Revelation*, 329.

<sup>41</sup> Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, 282.



can and will demand obedience, conformity, and accommodation to false worship with threats of persecution and death. This is the reality of life for all who trust in God, whether in the sixth century BC, the first century AD, or the twenty-first century AD. Ezekiel and Daniel, the two exilic prophets, provide the encouragement to confess the faith purely and clearly when confronted by the powers of evil. The way in which Revelation weaves together a variety of images and pictures from the Old Testament also prevents "Babylon" from being read as a single reality. Certainly it had a particular fulfillment in the Roman Empire of John's day, but the name "Babylon" broadens, rather than narrows, the list of those who fit the description. Ancient Babylon participated in this reality. So also did Egypt, Assyria, Tyre, the Seleucids, Rome, and a great many powers since then, including the Roman Papacy.<sup>42</sup>

The title "Babylon" should not be explained simply by making a connection with Rome through the themes of exile, world domination, or the destruction of the temple. Of course these can never be forgotten when discussing Babylon, but it should be noted that Revelation picks up most particularly the language of Babylon's fall. "Part of the reason for using 'Babylon,'" Mounce wrote, "is that the readers will know what God did to the first Babylon and be quick to recognize that in giving Rome that title he will once again carry out his judgment on the city."<sup>43</sup> It is, in fact, a large part of the reason. Aune referred to the "Fallen, fallen" of Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 as "the use of the *perfectum confidentiae*, 'perfect of assurance,' or the *perfectum propheticum*, 'prophetic perfect' . . . in which an event of the future is described with a past tense as if it had already occurred."<sup>44</sup> This "perfect of assurance" and "prophetic perfect" gives hope to the church. What is happening now has happened before and the outcome will be the same, even to the end of time. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* describes the connection between ancient Babylon and "Babylon the great" (Rome) as follows: "Like Babylon, Rome ruled the kings of the earth (14:8; 17:1-2, 15, 18), was a center of world trade (14:8; 18:2-3; 11-19, 23), reveled in luxury (18:7, 11-17, 22-23), was a persecutor of God's covenant people (17:6; 18:24;

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<sup>42</sup> While discussions of the Roman Papacy as the Antichrist are frequent in Lutheran writings, the title "Babylon" is rarely used for the Papacy, except by Luther (see n. 9 above). The association appears almost offhandedly in Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, 2 vols. (St. Louise: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 2:696, and, in quoting another author, Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3:467 n. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 325.

<sup>44</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 829.

19:2), and was destined to fall (14:8; 18:2, 10, 21).<sup>45</sup> Babylon is truly all those things, but finally it is fallen. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual impurity," angels declare twice in Revelation (14:8 and 18:2). To call the city by the name "Babylon" was to declare it "fallen." Thus, "Babylon" is a name that ultimately brings encouragement to those who worship the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. Wherever a "Babylon" appears with its pride and idolatry, its end is destruction. The Christian canon closes with a fall—the fall of God's enemies—and the restoration of the Holy City, God's people, the New Jerusalem.

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<sup>45</sup> Margueron and Watson, "Babylon," 566.