

The Great City: Jerusalem

Revelation 18:16-21 is a profound, albeit truncated, summation of the fall of Babylon. In the Old Testament, the term “Babylon” referred to either 1) the Babylonian Empire, which domineered present-day Iraq and Syria (for the sake of this argument, most notably in the 6th century BCE), or 2) the capital of the empire, Babylon, which was in ancient Mesopotamia. Scholars agree that the Babylon of Revelation references neither. Perhaps such a cipher in the last book of Scripture signals a people and a place found throughout the Biblical arc, carefully traced from beginning to end. Conversely, by using a largely *critical* or *futurist* perspective, a popular conclusion implicates either pagan Rome or the Roman Catholic Church as the Babylon of Revelation—both of which, in my opinion, veer from Old and New Testament continuity, if not historic account. Through an analysis of vv. 16-21, using a *preterist* perspective—with a *literal* and *anagogical* interpretation—Jerusalem (Israel, in general) stands as a more comprehensive representation.

¹⁶ “Alas, alas, for the great city
that was clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,
with jewels, and with pearls!

¹⁷ For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.”
And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea,
stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,
“What city was like the great city?”

¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out,

“Alas, alas, for the great city

where all who had ships at sea

grew rich by her wealth!

For in a single hour she has been laid waste.

²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven,

and you saints and apostles and prophets,

for God has given judgment for you against her!”

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,

“So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence,

and will be found no more;¹

Most of the Bible is debated, and even more so any book detailing events that some purport to have not yet happened. The book of Revelation, written by St. John the Apostle, stands above the rest in such context. As apocalyptic literature, even St. Jerome stated that Revelation “has as many mysteries as words.”² Because of this reality, it is appropriate to note my vantage point will be among countless others. To be clear, however, this short analysis assumes either ancient Rome or Jerusalem as the Babylon of Revelation.

Dr. Craig Koester makes compelling arguments for ancient Rome. One of his loudest claims, which is based on first-century imperialism, highlights traits such as military strength and economic power to identify Rome with Babylon. He says the Babylonian Empire was referred to as “great”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Augustine Bible, English Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (Greenwood Village, CO: Augustine Institute, 2019)

² *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament, Second Catholic Edition RSV* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2010), 490.

during its reign; the same for Rome. And the way in which the first temple was destroyed by Babylonians was similar to how Romans destroyed the second temple. Lastly, just as ancient Babylon was a world power who exiled others, Rome was—and did—the same. Koester concludes: “Revelation’s critique of the city on seven hills (Rev 17:9) is clear enough for a Roman official to understand, and ancient Christian writers identified Revelation’s Babylon with Rome.”³ Therefore, he says, Jerusalem as Babylon is “implausible.” Despite these points—alongside the fact that ancient Jerusalem was also identified with seven hills⁴—vv. 16-21 and parallel verses prove Jerusalem not only plausible, but the better depiction of Babylon.

Beginning with Revelation 18:16, the first prominent phrase to exegete is “the great city.” Spanning the Bible are 15 other occurrences of “great city”—including those found in Genesis, Joshua, Jeremiah, and Jonah. None of these indicate a consensus of location, however. While Genesis 10:12 labels Resen *the* great city (which is modern-day Kalhu, once a capital city for the Assyrian Empire), Joshua labels Gibeon *a* great city, indicating one of many cities, further clarified with the phrase “like one of the royal cities.” And while Jeremiah cites the House of David—Jerusalem—when he writes, “*this* great city,” three times Jonah cites Nineveh as *that* great city. The exception is in Jonah 3:3: “Now Nineveh was *an* exceedingly great city...” which does not isolate Nineveh as *the* great city.

As it relates to the Babylon of Revelation, the clearest indication of what v. 16 is referencing is found seven verses earlier in Rev 11:8, which states: “and their dead bodies will lie in the street of *the* great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, *where their Lord was crucified*” (emphasis added). This verse implicates Jerusalem.

³ Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 675.

⁴ “Mountains Surrounding Jerusalem | A Biblical Overview of Jerusalem’s Location,” Sar-El Tours and Conferences, last modified October 04, 2020, <https://sareltours.com/article/mountains-surrounding-jerusalem>.

The second part of Rev 18:16—“...that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls!”—unmistakably ties wealth to the adjective *great*. “Fine linen” is found in the Bible 20 times, with the first mention coming in Gen 41:42 related to Pharaoh donning Joseph in such clothing. Other references are found in David, Esther, Proverbs, Ezekiel, and Luke—all connoting wealth. Both Rome and Jerusalem could be implicated on this point.

Also to note: purple, scarlet, gold, jewels, and pearls all reference Rev 17:4, where the Whore of Babylon’s clothing is described. Fascinating here is the connection to Israel historically “playing the whore.” In the OT—most emphatically in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea—Israel is identified as behaving as a prostitute (Hebrew: זָנָה, *zānâh*: to commit idolatry, to play a harlot),⁵ in utter infidelity to God’s covenant. In the NT—most emphatically in Revelation—Babylon is identified in the same way (Greek: πόρνη, *pórnē*; an idolater, a strumpet).⁶ Therefore, it is a stretch to turn a predominant Scriptural theme of Israel’s prostitution into one associated with Rome in Revelation. On this point, Jerusalem is implicated.

In v. 17 we are told: “In one hour all this wealth has been laid waste,” and again, in v. 19, as a nice bookend to the larger section: “In one hour she has been laid waste.” Considering the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (lasting five months) and the Fall of the Western Roman Empire (lasting over a period of 100 years), “one hour”—if representing a condensed duration (i.e. hyperbole)—favors Jerusalem as Babylon. Given the time frame in which historians state Revelation was written, and with only Jerusalem and Rome as options, a great city that was laid waste in such a short period of

⁵ *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2008), 1820.

⁶ Paul R. McReynolds, *Word Study Greek-English New Testament with Complete Concordance* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999), 1623.

time does not implicate pagan Rome. Even if broadening the context to include the last 2,000 years, it still fails to implicate Rome.

This is also true of vv. 17-18: “And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’” In keeping with two distinct options, the nearest port to Jerusalem is 41 miles, while the nearest port to Rome is 23 miles. While the phrase “stood far off” does not imply such seafaring men were at their typical posts, it is reasonable—for the sake of argument—to assume they were. If following this outer-limit scenario, logical questions follow: would the smoke from an annihilated city be seen as far as 40+ miles? Even more so when such a city housed a population of 70,000+? Even more so when such a city is on a hill? With all questions, “yes” is a reasonable answer for Jerusalem and Rome.

In addition, the phrase “smoke of her burning” is found eight verses earlier in Revelation 18:9, where it is tied directly to “the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her...” This could speak to Jerusalem or Rome, for both historically had grave issues with lust and greed.

In v. 19, I want to focus on the phrase “threw dust on their heads.” Such a statement is also found in the books of Joshua, Job, Lamentations, and Ezekiel. The most compelling typology, however, relates to Lamentations 2:10: “The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth...” This is in response to the destruction of the first temple in 587 B.C. If Jerusalem is Babylon, Rev 18:19 is a fitting response to the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D.—which fits within one possible timeline of John’s writing. Rome, on the other hand, would not begin to fall for several centuries. Important to note here is commentary from the Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, which states a “significant minority”

date the book of Revelation in the late 60s (citing Syriac writings which place John at Patmos during this period), while the majority date it between A.D. 81 and 96.⁷

Returning to v. 19, the next statement to unpack is: “Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth!” While there is no clear connection to which sea is being discussed, whether the Tyrrhenian or Mediterranean Sea—related to food, textile, or other trade—the key to this verse is the *wealth* of the great city.

In Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, he writes: “And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worshipped God, nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times.”⁸ As the central part of the Jewish economy, an abundance of wealth in the temple could impact the greater city. However, it’s crucial to note, as potentially the greatest objection to my assertion, cities under Roman control greatly suffered from inequality. There was no middle class, and even though an elite Jewish strata existed, it by no means signaled “wealth” for all of Jerusalem. Conversely, “by her wealth” does not necessarily imply that indigenous people were the creators or partakers of such wealth. The phrase could mean that foreign occupants took advantage of a plentiful land. Furthermore, the text could be tied to one of the successful client kings during the Herodian Tetrarchy or even the reign of Herod the Great, only 70 years earlier. Herod—despite his tyranny—“generally raised the prosperity of his land.”⁹

V. 20 begins with the words: “Rejoice over her...,” which parallels Jeremiah 51:48: “Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, *shall sing for joy over Babylon*, for the destroyers shall

⁷ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*, 490.

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews: Book XIV: From the Death of Queen Alexandra to the Death of Antigonus*, trans. William Whiston (Project Gutenberg, 2009), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm>.

⁹ Stewart Henry Perowne, “Herod,” Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., last modified February 25, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea>.

come against them *out of the north*, declares the LORD” (emphasis added). Whereas Jeremiah speaks of the Babylonian Empire, it is worth noting that the Roman army—in this case, the “destroyers”—attacked from the north during the Siege of Jerusalem (see figure 1).

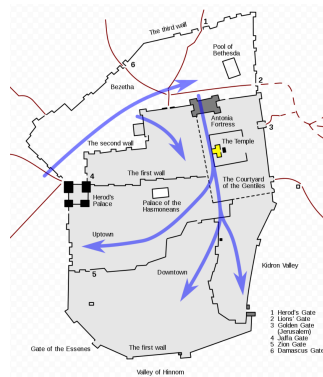


Figure 1. The Siege of Jerusalem¹⁰

V. 20 continues with: “...O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!” This verse of celebration from those who had been subject to Babylon is juxtaposed in the previous verse of mourning for those who had benefitted from her. For those asserting pagan Rome as Babylon, this passage speaks to Christian persecution under Nero or Domitian. However, there are at least two other possibilities: the passage speaks to the great men and women of God who had been persecuted by the Jews throughout salvation history, or to first-century Christian persecution by the Jews. Whether Herod Antipas, Saul of Tarsus, the Sadducees, or the Sanhedrin, some Jews imitated the Romans in this period, viewing Christians as apostates.

Furthermore, the mention of saints, apostles, and prophets rejoicing over God’s justice better correlates with Jerusalem as the great city. Granted, regarding “saints,” the Biblical narrative

¹⁰ *Map Indicating Progress of the Roman Army During the Siege*, 2018, Accessed March 16, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(70_CE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70_CE)).

of persecution of God-fearing people occurs within Egypt, Israel, Assyria, Babylon, etc. (coming at the hands of many, including Jews and Romans); as well, “apostles” were persecuted by both Jews and Romans. However, with regard to the “prophets,” the diversity of suspects narrows significantly. For example: Manasseh killed Isaiah; Haman killed Daniel; Jehoram killed Micah; and King Herod killed St. John the Baptist—none of which implicate Rome. And while Jesus’ words in Luke 13:33 do not include at whose hands prophets die, the next verse, Luke 13:34, which is also found verbatim in Matthew 23:37, reads: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *the city* that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (emphasis added).

Additionally, to provide a bookend to v. 20, v. 24 should be considered: “And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints...” This answers the question: why were these people rejoicing in v. 20? Because Babylon, in v. 24, had been found with their blood on her hands. Again, while “saints” could be attributed to persecution at the hands of Jerusalem or Rome, only “prophets” correlate to Jerusalem.

Even if Rev 17:6 (“blood of martyrs”) is brought forth to help solidify Rome as Babylon, it falls short in light of other Biblical accounts and tradition. For example, while Antipas of Pergamum was martyred at the hands of Romans, Saint Stephen died at the hands of the Jews. Ironically, by adding this fourth category of persecuted people, it only further cements Jerusalem as “the great city,” for she remains the one who persecuted: 1. saints, 2. apostles, 3. prophets, and 4. martyrs.

Because of such persecution, the final verse under analysis, Rev 18:21, speaks of violent retribution: “Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea...” This verse is reminiscent of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all affirming that Jesus gravely warned those who cause His followers to sin would be better off with a millstone tied around their neck and thrown into the sea. With this parallel, John equates Babylon to the one through which sin came. This verse can be connected to what was previously stated: if Babylon is the whore, and Israel is the

one throughout the Bible who played such a whore, then she—by chasing idols, selling herself to foreign powers, and paying tribute to pagan kings—certainly caused the little ones to sin. Therefore, while a departure from this narrative is not impossible in the book of Revelation, it remains debatable.

V. 21 concludes with: “...‘So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.’” In the words “found no more” much speculation can be found. Is John describing a literal end to a piece of land? The end of an empire? The end of a people?

To answer this question, I propose a comparison to Jeremiah 51:63-64, which addresses the ancient Babylonian Empire with phrases like “cast it into the Euphrates”; “Thus shall Babylon sink”; and “rise no more.” Ezek 26:21, on the other hand—and also an apt comparison—addresses the city of Tyre and includes phrases like: “dreadful end”; “shall be no more”; and “never found again.” Even with its destruction spelled out, the Lebanese city of Tyre, which has been occupied by Greeks, Romans, and Muslims over the centuries, exists to this day.¹¹ As does Rome. As does Jerusalem. With this in mind, and in keeping with a preterist view of Revelation, it appears that regardless of which city is labeled Babylon, it remains a city to this day. With “new Jerusalem” as the climax of Revelation, the words “found no more” find their meaning. In other words, while it is reasonable to suggest that pagan Rome is Babylon, the text of Revelation does not culminate in the declaration of a *new Rome*, nor does an old Rome correlate to a new Jerusalem. “New Jerusalem” infers the existence of an old Jerusalem (with very specific characteristics), thus it is more logical to see a depiction of Jerusalem’s ending rather than Rome’s.

In summary, whether an embodiment of wealth, destructive behavior, or societal collapse—or a place that persecutes saints, apostles, and martyrs—both Jerusalem and Rome are plausible

¹¹ Joshua Mark, “Tyre,” World History Encyclopedia, last modified September 02, 2009, <https://www.ancient.eu/Tyre/>

archetypes for Babylon. However, when overlapping “the great city” and corresponding verses concerning “prostitutes” and “prophets,” Jerusalem is more comprehensive. In addition, Jerusalem spans the entire Bible. She does not merely appear in a few books, nor is her narrative timid or otherwise masked. Just as Jesus Christ is the *red thread* and the *fulfillment*, saturating the entire canon, so too is the story of Israel. From Abraham receiving a blessing from the king of Salem, Melchizedek (Gen 14:18), to the establishment of the twelve tribes, to David marking Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish kingdom, to the fall of the first temple, to the exile, to the return, to the New Covenant, God’s people and land—regardless of their failures and resulting chastisements—never cease to represent that through which Christ came and redeemed. As chosen, cherished, and covenantal—and because the Lord “reproves him whom he loves” (Proverbs 3:12)—both people and land should be viewed in light of the greater Biblical arc, which is affirmed in Rev 21 with the words: “new Jerusalem” and “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.”

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