



THE REIGN OF SATAN

The Fall of Power, Privilege, Pleasure and Value

October 1, 2017

Revelation 18

The Fall of Babylon

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. 2 And he called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

She has become 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.

3 For all nations have drunk

the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality,
and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her,
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.”

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,

“Come out of her, my people,
lest you take part in her sins,

lest you share in her plagues;

5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities.

6 Pay her back as she herself has paid back others,
and repay her double for her deeds;
mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.

7 As she glorified herself and lived in luxury,
so give her a like measure of torment and mourning,
since in her heart she says,

‘I sit as a queen,
I am no widow,

and mourning I shall never see.’

8 For this reason her plagues will come in a single day,
death and mourning and famine,
and she will be burned up with fire;
for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”

9 And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. 10 They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

“Alas! Alas! You great city,
you mighty city, Babylon!
For in a single hour your judgment has come.”

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

14 “The fruit for which your soul longed
has gone from you,
and all your delicacies and your splendors
are lost to you,
never to be found again!”

15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

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;
22 and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters,
will be heard in you no more,
and a craftsman of any craft
will be found in you no more,
and the sound of the mill
will be heard in you no more,
23 and the light of a lamp
will shine in you no more,
and the voice of bridegroom and bride
will be heard in you no more,
for your merchants were the great ones of the earth,
and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.
24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,
and of all who have been slain on earth.”

i. The fall of Babylon (18:1-3)

An angel announces the fall of the great city. We already know that it will be the forces of evil that will bring this about (17:16) and the angel does not repeat this. He concentrates on the result.

1. Once again events are set in motion by an *angel*, this one having *great authority*. This is one of few places in Revelation where angels are said to have authority, though authority is often said to be ‘given’ to various forces of evil (they have none of their own). Clearly this angel is particularly important; in addition to having authority he has a *splendour* that shone like light over all the earth (cf. Ezek. 43:2). That the angel is seen *coming down* shows that John’s standpoint is now on earth.

2. He cried *with a mighty voice*. This is the only place in the book where this adjective (*ischyros*) is applied to a voice (though it is used of ‘the voice of mighty thunderings’, 19:6).

It is applied to angels (5:2; 10:1; 18:21) and they speak in 'great' (*megalē*) voices. The statement that Babylon is *fallen* is repeated (the same words occur in 14:8, where see note; cf. Isa. 21:9). The city's doom is still future but it is so certain that it can be spoken of as already accomplished. For *Babylon* see note on 14:8, and for 'the great city' on 11:8.

The angel speaks of the complete desolation of the city under three heads. First, it has become *a home for demons*. It is deserted by men and regarded as a dwelling only by evil spirits. Secondly, it is *a haunt for every evil spirit*, the place where evil spirits have their being. Thirdly, it is *a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird*. Such birds commonly choose deserted places and this will be the significance of the term. We should perhaps notice that the Old Testament says Babylon became the habitation of some curious creatures (Isa. 13:21–22; Jer. 51:37; cf. also Isa. 34:10–15).

3. The reason for the city's desolation is her sin in corrupting others. Not content with sinning herself she brought others to share in *the maddening wine of her adulteries* (see the note on 14:8). *The kings of the earth* may here include the people over whom they ruled. More probably the thought is that the kings themselves had become wealthy through their countries' trade with the harlot. This is clearly the reason for mentioning *the merchants of the earth*. Strong words are used of both. The kings *committed adultery with her*, while the merchants *grew rich from her excessive luxuries*. This last word (*strēnous*) seems to contain the thoughts of self-indulgence and arrogance (Beckwith).

ii. A call to leave the city (18:4–5)

Persecuted and harried as they were, the people of God must have been sorely tempted to come to terms with the city. Then not only would their persecution cease, but the city would make them rich and comfortable. But it is important that they see the issues for what they really are and have nothing to do with unclean things. So they are called to come out of her. Such a call is frequent in the Old Testament from Abram on (Gen. 12:1; 19:12ff.; Num. 16:23ff.; Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 45; Zech. 2:6–7), and it is not lacking in the New (2 Cor. 6:14–15; Eph. 5:11; 1 Tim. 5:22). Compromise with worldliness is fatal. God's people must, while playing their full role in the community, hold themselves aloof from what is involved in being worldly minded.

4. Again John hears an unidentified voice from heaven, but from *another* speaker. The words *my people* seem to show that the voice is God's, but the next verse can scarcely be from him, though the speaker appears to be the same. Charles suggests that it may be Christ who speaks. Perhaps better is the suggestion that an angel begins by quoting the command of God (Beasley-Murray). The voice calls on people to leave the city and not *share in her sins* (cf. Eph. 5:11; 1 Tim. 5:22). In this way they will ensure that they *will not receive any of her plagues* (cf. Jer. 50:8–9; 51:6, 45).

Some critics make much of the fact that the city is regarded as already destroyed in verse 2. They hold that John has made use of sources which contradict each other or is

guilty of careless writing. No such hypothesis is needed. They fail to note that past, present and future tenses are all used of the destruction of the city. This is a song, not a piece of prose carefully arranged in chronological order. This verse follows quite naturally on from verse 2. The call to God's people is supremely important. John is writing to believers, some at least of whom did not perceive the urgency of the situation. They were ready to compromise with the vices of Babylon. In a sense this appeal is the key to the whole chapter. John is not gloating over the city's downfall. He is appealing to Christians to see the realities of the situation and act accordingly.

5. In a vivid figure John depicts the sins of the city as heaped in a pile that reaches heaven (cf. Jer. 51:9; the word rendered *piled up* means literally 'were glued together'). Then the imagery changes and we are reminded that God does not forget the evils people do (cf. 16:19). From the standpoint of the persecuted church it might seem that evil men were getting away with their sins. From the standpoint of heaven it is plain that God is not mocked. He remembers.

iii. Judgment on the city (18:6-8)

The voice calls for the city to be destroyed completely. She has no notion of the fate that awaits her, but the speaker is sure that destruction is coming.

6. It is just possible that a new voice is to be understood here, a voice breaking in from the earth. John however does not say this and it is better to think of the same speaker. But there is certainly a change in those to whom the words are addressed. Verses 4-5 are addressed to the people of God, but this verse to God's ministers of judgment. They are commanded to do to the city what she has done to others (cf. Jer. 50:29). *Give (apodote)* has about it the idea of recompense. It denotes not revenge but just requital. *A double portion* means punishment in full measure (cf. Isa. 40:2; Jer. 16:18). There is tremendous depth of feeling against the guilty city. There is also the recognition that the simple 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' is not sufficient. In view of Babylon's fuller culture and enlightenment, a more severe punishment is required. She has mixed a cup for others (*mix* is the verb translated 'poured' in 14:10, where see note). So the voice calls 'mix her a drink of double strength' (Phillips).

7. The voice continues to call for condign punishment. It now looks for torment in proportion to the way the city gave herself *glory* and *luxury* (*estrēniasen*; this verb is found only here and in v. 9 in the New Testament; see the note on the cognate noun in v. 3). She has acted irresponsibly. *In her heart* points to a deepseated attitude and possibly one of which she is quite unconscious. She sees herself as a *queen* supreme over all, and does not envisage a change. It is curious that she says she is no *widow*, but this is possibly taken from old Babylon's view of herself (Isa. 47:7-8). *I will never mourn* looks for the happy state to continue, the illusion of the materially prosperous in every age. Cf. the church at Laodicea (3:17).

8. This is the reason (*Therefore*) for her sudden punishment, which will take place *in one day* (cf. Isa. 47:9). There is no warning and no delay. Four *plagues* are singled out. *Death*, of course, should end everything. The meaning may be that, though some die in the city, the city continues for a time. Or we could translate the word as ‘pestilence’ (RSV). With this are linked *mourning, famine* and *fire*. Together this means disaster for the city and this will certainly happen, for *mighty is the Lord God who judges her*. The word *mighty* is specially emphatic. The power of the Lord must not be overlooked. And *judges* is important. This is not an arbitrary display of power. God inflicts on the city merited judgment.

iv. A lament over the city's fall (18:9-19)

John proceeds to bring out the total destruction of the great city by picturing the lamentation of those who had cause to mourn her passing, the kings, the merchants, those whose trade was on the sea. None is depicted as loving the city for herself, but only for what they could get out of her. She might seduce and enrich people but there was nothing lovely in her. ‘With a touch of grim humour he paints them as standing at a safe distance from the conflagration, and contenting themselves with idle lamentations’ (Swete).

Rome was the centre of the world’s trade and during the first century engaged in unparalleled ostentation and extravagance. Barclay has a series of quotations from contemporary pagan authors which amply document the senseless waste practised in the city (e.g. Vitellius, emperor for less than a year, managed to spend £7,000,000, mainly on food. Barclay’s book was published in 1959, since when inflation would have increased the amount considerably, but even at today’s prices £7,000,000 is a colossal amount to spend on food.) Contemporary Rome formed a magnificent pattern for John’s Babylon. It shows that John was not a mere fanatic denouncing without cause. It also illustrates the way the whole world may depend on trade with one great centre.

9. Earth’s rulers will be exceedingly distressed at the city’s overthrow, for they have been closely associated with her in the sins that brought about her fate (for *shared her luxury, strēniasantes*, see note on v. 7). They gaze on the city as she burns.

10. But they keep their distance for fear lest they be caught up in *her torment*. The onomatopoeic word, *ouai, ouai*, doubled for emphasis, brings out their grief. The meaning is rather ‘Woe to the great city’ (cf. Isa. 5:8, 11, 20; etc.) than ‘Alas! alas!’ (RSV). Babylon is characterized as powerful as well as *great*. The might of Babylon was all too obvious to the little church. But John wants believers to see that no might can stand against that of the Lord God. Even as he mentions Babylon’s might he speaks of her destruction. In verse 8 the suddenness of her destruction was emphasized as her plagues were seen coming ‘in one day’. Now this is intensified, as her judgment (*krisis*; NIV, *doom*) is seen coming *in one hour*. That the kings speak of judgment shows that they recognize the justice of what is happening.

11. *The merchants* (‘businessmen’, GNB) *of the earth* join in. They wail (*klaiousin* means

a loud wailing, not silent weeping) and mourn (the verbs are present tense, as *RSV*). Their reason? *No-one buys their cargoes any more*. Financial loss, not esteem for the city, prompts their distress.

12. John gives a list of cargoes for which there will no longer be buyers. *Gold* and *silver* are obvious enough. *Precious stones* is singular and may possibly mean costly stone like granite. If precious stone in our sense, then *pearls* are singled out as specially important. Next comes fine clothing of various sorts. For *purple* and *scarlet* see note on 17:3–4. *Citron wood* is ‘hard, fragrant and prettily marked and therefore is much esteemed by cabinet makers ... the Romans ... liked it immensely’. The veining and colour seem both to have varied considerably, which may explain *every sort*. *Ivory* is included, as also costly wooden vessels.

13. The list continues with spices of various kinds, then items of drink and food. Rome’s *wheat* came largely from Egypt and so is appropriate in a list of what sea traders carried. Next come animals, and finally people. *Bodies* are slaves, an eloquent commentary on the way slave-traders approached their subject. *Souls of men* are also slaves (as in the Hebrew of Ezek. 27:13); the evil that was Rome included a profound disrespect for persons (contrast Jesus’ teaching, Matt. 16:26). And in various ways all the world’s great empires have had their traffic in ‘the souls of men’.

14. The city is addressed directly, and informed that her luxuries are things of the past. *The fruit she longed for* is gone. The *riches (lipara)* are the ‘oily’ or ‘fat’ things, and thus luxuries; the *splendour (lampra)* are ‘the splendid things’. The former refers primarily to exotic foodstuffs, the latter to clothing and decorative objects. People will no longer find them in the great city. The wealth of Rome, which clearly lies behind this passage, was proverbial. Thus the Talmud says, ‘Ten *kabs* of wealth descended to the world: nine were taken by the early Romans and one by the rest of the world’ (*Kidd.* 49b).

15. It is those who have a vested interest in the city who bewail her passing (and the passing of their profits!). First are *the merchants*. Like the kings, they do not approach to help or to offer comfort. But they will stand at a distance for fear at *her torment*. They, too, wail and mourn (the same verbs as in v. 11).

16. Now comes the content of their dirge. Like the kings, they begin with a doubled *Woe* and a reference to the *great city*. But whereas the kings went on to speak of her might, the merchants refer to her clothing and her wealth.

17. Once more they resemble the kings when they say *in one hour*. The suddenness and completeness of the destruction strikes them. Though the city had *such great wealth* all has *been brought to ruin*. It is the loss of the wealth, not any care for the people, that concerns the merchants.

Next it is the turn of seafarers to mourn (cf. Ezek. 27:28ff.). First to be mentioned is *every sea captain (kybernētēs)*, but it is not easy to be certain what the next expression

means. *All who travel by ship* is literally ‘everyone who sails for a place’. This may be meant to cover all who travel by sea, or perhaps merchants who travel with their wares on board ship and transact their business when they reach port. If this be accepted we have references to captains, merchants and sailors, with the final expression, *all who earn their living from the sea*, comprehensive enough to cover all three. All these had secured their livelihood from the activities of the great city and accordingly all lament her passing. But, like the groups previously mentioned, they stand *far off*. No-one stretches out a hand to help. The great city has brought profit to many but affection to none.

18. We have had the future tense of the mourning of the kings (v. 9), and both present (v. 11, Gk.) and future (v. 15) of the merchants. Now the seafarers stood (aorist, v. 17) and ‘were crying out’ (imperfect). In this poetic section John has a variety of tenses. The first point in their dirge is the incomparableness of the great city. None was like her (the expression is like the Hebrew of Ezek. 27:32, though LXX differs).

19. The sailors carry their mourning further than the other groups. They *throw dust on their heads* (cf. Ezek. 27:30), they were crying out, wailing and mourning. For the third time we have the conjunction of these two latter verbs (cf. vv. 11, 15), for the third time the doubled *Woe* to the great city (10, 16), and for the third time the suddenness of it all is expressed in the phrase *in one hour* (10, 17). And, as with the merchants, what excites this distress is the loss of profits.

v. The destruction of the city (18:20-24)

From the forces of evil, attention switches to those of good. First there is a call to rejoicing on the part of the righteous, then an emphatic statement of the complete overthrow of the city, and finally a brief statement of the justification of this overthrow. NIV, RSV and others include verse 20 in the previous section, but these words are surely not from the seafarers. They are probably John’s own.

20. The call to *rejoice* at the destruction of the city appalls some modern students. But we should notice in the first place that this is not a vindictive outcry. It is a longing that justice be done. And in the second, John and his readers were not armchair critics pedantically discussing rights and wrongs in an academic fashion. They were existentially committed. They had staked their lives on the truth of the Christian faith. Paul could point out that if Christians had nothing to look for other than the things of this life, they were more to be pitied than all men (1 Cor. 15:19).

But John wrote out of a passionate conviction that they were not to be pitied. Why should they be? They were on God’s side. This meant great suffering here and now. It meant that they were persecuted and despised. But it meant also ultimate vindication and it is this vindication for which John looks. These words are a passionate cry uttered out of the deep conviction that right must triumph and which eagerly welcomes that triumph.

Rejoice is in marked contrast with the mourning of the previous verses. The appeal is comprehensive, being addressed to *heaven*, the *saints*, *apostles* and *prophets*. Curiously angels are not listed, though they figure so prominently in this book. Perhaps they are included in the call to *heaven*. The cause of rejoicing is that God *has judged* the city. Wrongs had been done to the saints and these are now put right. Justice, not vengeance, has been done.

21. The expression *a mighty angel* (*heis angelos ischyros*) does not appear to be paralleled in this book. It is certainly unusual, but in a book concerned with power it emphasizes the might of this representative of heaven. The throwing of a great stone *into the sea* is a symbolic action like many recorded in the prophets. It recalls Jeremiah's action in having a stone attached to a book thrown into the Euphrates, symbolizing the destruction of Babylon (Jer. 51:63). Here it points to the complete and violent destruction of the city. *Never to be found again* is an emphatic expression for the complete and final overthrow of the city (cf. Ezek. 26:21; here an emphatic double negative, *ou mē*, and the addition of *eti* drive the point home).

22. Now comes a list of things that will no longer be heard or done in the city. Previously the lament has been concerned with external relations, trade and politics; now John turns to internal affairs. The word rendered *musicians* (*mousikon*) might be neuter, meaning 'instruments of music'. But as it is preceded and followed by words meaning performers it is likely that this does too; it probably means 'minstrels' (RSV). The city had taken kindly to the arts, but their practice will cease. There is an air of finality about *will never be heard in you again* (there is a double negative *ou mē*, reinforced by *eti*, and this continues throughout the lists). Like the arts, craftsmanship of all kinds had evidently flourished, but will be no more. The cessation of *the sound of a millstone* points to the disappearance of normal daily life with its routine activities such as preparation of food. Bit by bit John is picturing the stilling of all the life of the great city.

23. Lamps will no longer shine. Marriage will cease (cf. Jer. 7:34, etc.). 'For' before *your merchants* is difficult (NIV omits). It should introduce the reason for the foregoing, but it is hard to see the connection. Perhaps the thought is that Babylon's very greatness has brought about her destruction. The city's merchants were the earth's grandees. Or the thought may be that they concentrated on greatness and interpreted it in terms of material prosperity. They forgot God. The point of the second 'for' is plainer (before *by your magic*; again NIV omits). Mingled with their profit-making went all manner of evils. All the nations were deceived by the city's *magic*.

24. Babylon was spoken of in the third person in verse 21. Then she was directly addressed in verses 22–23. Now we have the third person once more. In this city was found *the blood* of God's people, specified as *prophets* and *saints*. To this is added *all who have been killed on the earth*. This is another indication that we must take 'the great city' symbolically. There is no one city on earth of which this can be said. Babylon is clearly a

symbol for all earthly cities (cf. the similar statement about Jerusalem, Matt. 23:35).¹

REVELATION 18:1-8

Babylon's Plagues

One of the constant problems in a small country like mine is the challenge of where everyone is going to live. Despite government regulations which, in theory, protect what is called 'green belt', one hears almost every day of this developer, that local council, or even the national government itself, deciding that, no matter what had been said before, this particular piece of land needs, alas, to be paved over with concrete, to make a car park, a new supermarket, a fresh bit of line for a highspeed train, or yet another city by pass.

No doubt, case by case, the argument can often be made—though sometimes it appears that the power exercised by special interests, such as the big supermarket chains, may tip the scales in ways that shouldn't be allowed. But we live in a world where the danger seems to be that the city will encroach upon the wild, open spaces.

John, and many of his readers, lived in a world where the danger seemed to go the other way. The open spaces were often deserted and wild, not in a positive sense ('Oh, look, there's some nice countryside for us to go and enjoy') but in a negative sense: the wilderness became a haunt of wild animals, the desert offered criminals a place to hide and plot, and open spaces between towns and cities were lawless, dangerous places from which travellers would be eager to escape by scurrying into the next built-up area.

Cities, in short, were often seen as the result of humans extending their civilizing reach into previously uncharted territory. John would have understood this from a biblical perspective: the garden of Eden was the start of a project in which the humans were commanded to bring God's fruitful rule to bear upon the world. Creation was designed to be a garden city, a place where the delights of human community and the delights of glorious countryside were somehow combined—a balance that has proved harder and harder to maintain.

We shall see John's own vision of this ideal city at the end of the book. But for the moment we are shown its opposite: the city which tried, like Babel of old, to make itself The Place, the summit of human achievement, by its own efforts and to its own glory—and which ends up shrinking to a shell, with the wild desert creeping back into its palaces, its temples, its fine streets and shops and courtyards. Creation will reclaim what arrogant humans had thought to construct. Babylon will become a place for **demons**, for unclean

¹ Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 205–213). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

spirits, for birds and monsters of all the wrong kinds.

And this, John says, is **good news**—just as the destruction of Babel, and the confusion of tongues (Genesis 11) was good news. The angel who shouts out that Babylon has fallen (echoing Isaiah 21:9 and Jeremiah 51:8) is bringing the news that human arrogance and oppression, and the wanton luxury and vice to which they lead, will not have the last word. God will have the last **word**, and creation itself will hear this word as a word of freedom, a sigh of relief, a flood of glorious light (verse 1) let in upon a darkened dungeon.

The judgments articulated in verses 6–8 are carefully structured so as to emphasize that what happens to the wicked city is what she has brought upon herself. These are not arbitrary. Nor will the vengeance be brought about through the agency of God's people; vengeance is too dangerous a weapon to be handled by the followers of the lamb (Romans 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35). It is God's own work, turning wickedness back on itself, allowing arrogance to reach a giddy height from which it can only crash helpless to earth (verse 7, echoing Isaiah 47:8–9). Babylon is to be given the only medicine she knows, the medicine she mixed for others; she has been using her cup to brew a potion for those she wanted to poison, and she will now have to drink it herself (verse 6).

The command is therefore given that God's people should 'come out of her'. That, clearly, echoes the summons of Isaiah 48:20 and 52:11–12, and particularly Jeremiah 51:45. But how should John's hearers apply this **message** to themselves? The faithful among them have not compromised with Babylon. The unfaithful or compromised (as in the seven letters) have already received stern warnings about the persecution that is to come, and the urgent need to 'conquer'. Maybe John directs this summons to the latter group. Or maybe, as well or instead, he is hoping that this voice from **heaven** will be heard by yet others, who at the moment are still firmly in the grip of Babylonian captivity, and who might just, even at this last hour, recognize the hollowness of it all, the way in which the entire system is riddled with deceit, based on lies, and heading for disaster. Are such people 'God's people'? Well, John believes in the God who delights in calling 'my people' those who were 'not my people'. Perhaps there is yet hope—for those who will renounce Babylon, and run from it as from a great fire.

It is perhaps important to say at this stage that, though Rome went through all kinds of internal troubles during the first century, of which we have mentioned one in particular (the 'year of the four emperors' in AD 69) and might have mentioned others such as the great fire of Rome in 64, for which Nero blamed the Christians, John's picture of the fall of Babylon has a wider reference than this. Nor is it simply a long-range prophecy of the eventual sack of Rome, centuries later, by invading hordes from the north (in 410, by the Visigoths; in 455, by the Vandals; in 546, by the Ostrogoths). Rome has after all been rebuilt, and some, however misguidedly, still refer to it as the 'eternal city'.

No. John's vision is of that which Rome in his day was the obvious and classic example: the city which sits in luxury at the heart of empire, dispensing favours upon fawning (and

fee-paying) visitors, giving royal treatment to those who can be useful, or who have substantial bank balances, and tossing aside as so much trash those who can't and haven't. Empires come and empires go; it is cold comfort to be told that this or that great system will eventually fall by its own weight, to be replaced by another which may be still worse. What matters is that God's purposes of judgment and mercy will be worked out, not necessarily as we might like but as God sees best. Hence the stress on angels with great authority, and voices coming from heaven itself.

It isn't enough merely to topple tyrants. The difficulty is that God does not want anarchy either. Human rulers are there because that is how God wants to run the world; structures of authority are part of the good creation (Colossians 1:15–16). The problem comes when those structures arrogate to themselves powers beyond those of being humble servants of God's good purposes for his world and his image-bearing creatures. The part of God's faithful people has always been to discern the point at which the one passes into the other, and to have no hesitation, when that happens, in leaving, either physically or spiritually. Like Lot, pleading to be allowed to stay in the vicinity of Sodom (Genesis 18:16, 18, 20), it is all too easy even for the followers of the lamb to become embroiled in the imperial sins, and to run the risk of sharing the plagues (verse 4).

REVELATION 18:9–24

Babylon's Judgment

We smelt it before we saw it: a sour, bitter stench which seemed to cling to the nostrils. We looked at one another and ran outside. There, about a mile away, but with a gentle wind carrying it in our direction, was a cloud of thick, grey-black smoke, rising above the trees, hanging in mid-air. As we listened, we could even hear the noise of crackling.

Soon a crowd gathered. It was the old mill at the bottom of the road. Still half-full of bales of wool, it had caught light. Soon, on that bright Friday morning, it was beyond rescue. Never again would anyone make anything there. For days afterwards, despite the fire brigade's energetic hosing, there were still smouldering remains, still the sour smell in the air.

Now multiply a building in a country lane by a million; and, instead of an old woollen mill, imagine a city with every kind of building and every kind of trade. Cities develop their own life, as complex as a human body. Every part links up with every other part: an elaborate interlocking network of trade and travel, of manufacture and communication. When you work there, there is so much you take for granted: this shop on this corner, that factory down that street, this temple, that restaurant, these streets leading to those homes, and schools, and markets.

Suddenly, in an hour, it is all gone (verses 10, 17). The long lament of the kings and the merchants, in which John has drawn together material from Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 27

(though as usual constructing a fresh picture of his own), is as much a lament about the sudden speed of Babylon's downfall as about the lost opportunities for trading, great though that loss is. Those who remember one or other of the great stockmarket crashes will know that sense: systems that you could, literally, bank on have suddenly collapsed. The bottom goes out of the market. Millionaires become paupers overnight. The speed of ruin is crucial to the sense of shock in this haunting description.

John does not say that the gold, silver, precious stones and the rest were bad things which nobody should have celebrated in the first place. Interestingly, many of them find an honoured place in the New Jerusalem of chapter 21. Rome was able to bring all these fine commodities, listed in verses 12–14, from the ends of the earth. Among the things John mentions are goods that would have come from India, China and Africa, as well as Arabia, Armenia and beyond. This was truly a worldwide trade.

But the giveaway point comes at the end of verse 13. John has built up a marvellous catalogue of luxury goods as well as the basics of trade—flour, wheat, cattle and so on. But then, right at the end, we find the horror. Among the goods are *bodies—yes, human lives*. When you worship idols, the idols demand **sacrifices**. When you worship Mammon the money-god (or Mars the war-god; or Aphrodite the sex-goddess), they will demand sacrifices all right. And some of those sacrifices will be human. Here, in the middle of this lament over Babylon, we find one of the many places in the New Testament where a small but significant note of implacable protest is raised against the entire system upon which the ancient world was built. Slavery—the buying, selling, using and abusing of human beings as though they were on a par with gold and silver, ivory and marble (except that you could ill-treat them in a way you would never do with your luxury jewels and furnishings!)—was the dark thread that ran through everything else. Slavery was to the ancient world, more or less, what steam, oil, gas, electricity and nuclear power are to the modern world. Slavery was how things got done. Life was almost literally unthinkable without it.

And yet John believed in the God of the **Exodus**, the God who sets slaves free. A huge amount of his book, as we have seen, was built up on the basis that what God did in Egypt he will do again, this time on a cosmic scale—and that the basic act of slave-freeing has already taken place with the sacrificial death of Jesus. 'With your own blood you purchased a people for God' (5:9). That's Exodus-language, buying-slaves-to-set-them-free language. Now John looks at Rome/Babylon and sees, with his mind's eye, the slave-market. He sees, perhaps, families: captured far away and now auctioned off, the husband to this person, the wife to that, the beautiful daughter to a seedy, smirking old man, the strong son to a mine-owner. The system is rotten, and its rottenness infects everything else that happens in such a city.

John can clearly understand the shock and bemusement of the merchants and mariners, can hear their cries of dismay echoing out across the countryside as they see the plume of smoke and smell the acrid, bitter smell. He can appreciate how great this ruin is. He has

written a beautiful and haunting lament over it. But he has no sympathy for Babylon. Babylon, after all, has accused and condemned God's people, and now God is passing that same sentence on her (verse 20). God is (in other words) allowing the ancient law of Deuteronomy 19:16–20 to come into force in this particular case. The false accuser must suffer the penalty he intended to inflict on his victim.

For Babylon has gained her power from the monster, and the monster from the **accuser**, the **satan**, the old dragon who, though out of sight for the moment, is remembered from chapter 12 and will shortly reappear. The whole system is built on lies, on false accusations and false claims. So much of Revelation is about being able to tell the difference between the lie and the truth; and so many of the lies appear as accusations. That is why it is so difficult to overthrow the Babylons of this world, unless it is simply by the force of the new Babylon, whatever that may be. In fact, it is impossible—except through the blood of the lamb, and the faithful witness of his followers.

The scene ends with a prophetic act worthy of Jeremiah, or indeed of Jesus—both of whom spoke of stones being cast into the water. Jeremiah (51:63–64) was commanded to tie the scroll of his own words to a stone, and throw it into the river Euphrates, declaring, 'Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more.' Jesus (Mark 9:42) spoke of a millstone around someone's neck, dragging them down into the water, as the punishment for child abuse; and he spoke of 'this mountain', perhaps meaning the **Temple** mount itself, being 'thrown into the sea' (Mark 11:23). Now John sees an angel performing an act of great and powerful prophetic symbolism. Babylon is to be hurled into the sea, never to rise, never again to hear its musicians and workmen, never again to see the lighting of lamps or the making of a marriage. An enormous splash, and Babylon sinks like a stone, never to be seen again.

Once more, in case anyone should feel the last vestiges of sympathy for Babylon and all that it stood for, we have the explanation: Babylon is a city founded on violence, not only the blood of the martyrs. Babylon has been at the centre of a network of violence that spanned the world, and all who have been slaughtered on earth have, in a sense, been slaughtered at the behest of Babylon. The merchants have grown rich on the back of military conquest. Money and power have done their collective worst, and John lumps them together, as we have seen, under the metaphor of fornication. Babylon the whore is gone, and will not return. And we, who live in the shadow of modern Babylons, can and must shudder as we, too, watch the plume of smoke and smell the bitter smell.²

² Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 157–166). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.