

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 26 The Mystery of Babylon the Great

The interpretation of the “great whore who is seated on many waters” (Rev 17:1), ultimately identified as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18), is not simple. As with most of the figures in Revelation, much depends on one’s presuppositions regarding the nature of the Apocalypse (preterist, idealist, futurist, or historicist). Because my purpose in *The Fathers on the Future* is to avoid outright speculation, I will not engage deeply with the identity of the woman except to suggest that, in my view, a consistent futurist interpretation in the Irenaeian eschatological tradition will conclude that Babylon in Revelation 17 is a symbol for a future apostate Jerusalem as the antichrist’s capital.

The vision of the woman riding the scarlet beast involves a number of clues to her identity. She sits on many waters (Rev 17:1). She is guilty of immorality with kings and nations (17:2). She rides on—probably symbolizing a close relationship and support by—the beast; that is, the antichrist (17:4). She is described as luxuriously and seductively adorned with purple, scarlet, gold, and pearls (17:4). Yet all her lovers—the kings of the earth—will turn on her, leaving her desolate and naked and even burn her with fire (17:16). She is drunk with the blood of the saints and witnesses to Jesus (17:6). She is, in fact, a city: the great city ruling over all the kings of the earth (17:18). Importantly, “on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’” (17:5). Finally, we are told that the “seven heads” of the beast “are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings” (17:9).

A minority view has interpreted the figure of the woman as actual Babylon, which would need to be rebuilt in modern-day Iraq.¹ Without directly engaging the details of this argument,² I believe several considerations rule it out as a possibility. First, we are told that the name “Babylon” is a “mystery (μυστήριον)” (Rev 17:5). The term indicates a puzzle or symbol that must be figured out,

¹ The series of six articles begin with Andrew M. Woods, “Have the Prophecies in Revelation 17–18 about Babylon Been Fulfilled? Part 1,” *BSac* 169 (2012): 79–100.

² See, for example, Charles Dyer, *Future Babylon: The Biblical Arguments for Rebuilding Babylon* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2017).

like the “mystery” of the seven stars and seven gold lampstands in Revelation 1:20; the solution to the mystery is not stars and lampstands but angels and churches. Similarly, the “mystery” of the woman and of the beast in Revelation 17:7 means that the symbols do not stand for themselves. The woman is not a literal woman. The beast is not a literal beast. John’s use of μυστήριον in 17:5, saying that the name “Babylon” is a mystery, must mean that term “Babylon” could potentially refer to any city *except* Babylon, because that would not be a mystery. While some may argue that the whole ordeal of the rebuilding of Babylon is a “mystery” in the sense of something that had not been known before now being revealed,³ Revelation 17:5 does not say that the vision is a mystery being revealed but that the name itself—or even the word *Babylon* itself—is the mystery: ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη (“a name was written, a mystery, Babylon the great”).

Second—and more devastating—the interpreting angel tells John that the seven heads of the beast “are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings (ἑπτὰ ὄρη εἰσιν, ὅπου ἡ γυνὴ κάθηται ἐπ’ αὐτῶν. καὶ βασιλεῖς ἑπτὰ εἰσιν)” (Rev 17:9). This poses an insurmountable topographical problem as Babylon has no hills, much less seven. Built on either side of the Euphrates River, joined by a bridge, and surrounded by massive walls, Babylon was built on a flat plane. In fact, the massive walls around ancient Babylon were called “artificial mountains,”⁴ owing to the fact that the city had no other natural defense against aggressors. The only mounds recorded in the history of its geography are actually the ruins of the ancient city itself, hardly fitting the description that the city sits on seven hills (Rev 17:9). In defense of the literal Babylon interpretation, one may suggest that the “seven mountains” are actually themselves symbols for the real interpretation of the seven heads: the seven kings. Yet this requires us to accept the unprecedented and absurd idea that the angel—whose task it is to explain the mystery of the woman, beast, the heads, and the horns (Rev 17:7)—actually explained a symbol with another symbol, which itself required further explanation. Such a scenario pushes against the bounds of credulity. Where in all of apocalyptic literature does an interpreter interpret a symbol with a second symbol that needs an interpretation? Appealing to “apposition”—that the “seven kings” is in an exegetical relationship to the “seven hills”—suffers from the same problem of the irrelevant and inexplicable half-way interpretation; but it also fails because the appositional use of καὶ follows the phrase it explicates immediately without an additional verb, while Revelation 17:9 has the words ὅπου ἡ γυνὴ κάθηται ἐπ’ αὐτῶν intervening and a second εἰσιν. No, Revelation 17:9 says the seven heads are symbols for seven literal hills or mountains on which the woman (a city) sits. The figure of the heads also plays double duty as symbolizing seven kings, probably related to the history of that city in some way.

Dispensing with the interpretation that “Babylon” means Babylon, what options are left to us? Literally dozens of cities past and present claim to have been built on seven hills (Babylon is not

³ L&N, 344.

⁴ William Smith, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible, Comprising Its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and Natural History* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1884), 88.

one of them).⁵ However, the primary candidate is Rome, known famously as the City on Seven Hills. Grant Osborne writes, “The image is so general that the only likely antecedent might be the goddess Roma, represented on a coin minted in A.D. 71 in Asia during the reign of Vespasian (father of Domitian) as sitting on the seven hills of Rome (cf. 17:9), bearing a sword.... The prostitute is clearly Babylon/Rome, depicted in all her alluring depravity.”⁶ This is further supported by the fact that Peter surreptitiously referred to Rome as “Babylon” in 1 Peter 5:13. And the most compelling proof of this interpretation is that Revelation 17:18 calls it “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” In the first century, this was clearly Rome.

However, from a futurist perspective, which views the book of Revelation as referring primarily to events and conditions of a future period of tribulation prior to the intermediate kingdom, the appeal of identifying eschatological Babylon as “Rome” fades. We have seen in Scripture, and in the early Irenaean eschatological consensus, that the antichrist’s exploits will focus on Jerusalem and its environs (Dan 9:27; 11:41, 45; 2 Thess 2:4; Rev 11:2; 16:16). In fact, as the man of lawlessness—by means of strong deception (2 Thess 2:9–12)—establishes himself as the “savior” of the world, perhaps even masquerading as the true messiah himself, Jerusalem will become the capital of his global empire (2:4). Though it has become a mainstay of preterist interpretations of Revelation,⁷ it seems necessary that the ultimate fulfillment of the mysterious figure, Babylon the Great, must be the actual future capital of the antichrist’s empire: the apostate Jerusalem of the tribulation period. This futurist understanding of the ultimate manifestation of Babylon as the antichrist’s Jerusalem does not rule out a both/and understanding by which, in the first century, “Babylon” could be spiritually applied to Rome. Nor does it prevent the label from being spiritually applied to any city that takes (or has taken) a stand against God and his people—from Berlin to Beijing to Berkeley.

Regarding the symbolism of Revelation and the seven hills, Malinowski notes, “From Roman times Jerusalem has been identified as having seven hills: 1) Mount Ophel, 2) the original Mount Zion, 3) the New Mount Zion and 4) the hill on which the Antonia Fortress was built, 5) the Mount Scopus, 6) Mount Olivet and 7) the Mount of Corruption (the latter three are peaks in a mountain ridge that lies east of the old city).”⁸ Also, according to the fantastical account of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, based on Jonah’s descent to the roots of the mountains below the temple, “we may learn

⁵ See Cościwit Malinowski, “Septimontium (Seven Hills) as *conditio sine qua non* for a City to Pretend to Be a Capital,” *Horizons* 8.1 (June 2017): 3–26.

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 608–609. The hills of Rome are 1) the Capitoline (Tarpeius), 2) the Palatine (Pallanteum), 3) the Quirinal, 4) the Caelian, 5) the Aventine, 6) the Esquiline and 7) the Viminal (Malinowski, “Septimontium,” 4). For those who take the extra step and regard the woman to be the Roman Catholic Church, it should be noted that “Vaticanus” is not one of the seven traditional hills of Rome.

⁷ E.g., Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 2d ed. (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997), 392. However, preterists obviously understand the symbol as fulfilled in first-century Jerusalem, not as pointing to future Jerusalem.

⁸ Malinowski, “Septimontium,” 19–20.

that Jerusalem stands upon seven (hills).”⁹ In reality, the identification of the so-called seven hills of Jerusalem seems rather forced; and in any case, modern Jerusalem is a sprawling city that occupies far more than seven hills.

Yet other factors help us identify antichrist’s apostate Jerusalem of the future with the symbol of the woman. The woman is referred to as a “harlot” or “whore” (πόρνη) (Rev 17:1). Except in Revelation, the term πόρνη is used in the New Testament only of literal prostitutes. However, in the Old Testament Greek Septuagint, of its ten uses, five refer to literal prostitutes (Gen 34:31; 38:21 [2x]; Deut 23:17; and additions to 1 Kgs 12:24). The other five use the term πόρνη figuratively. The first is applied to the city of Nineveh: “O city of bloodshed, entirely lying, full of injustice.... Beautiful and gratifying prostitute, leader of sorcerers, she who sells nations with her fornication, and people by her sorcerers” (Nah. 3:1, 4 [Brannan]). The second is Jerusalem: “How did a faithful city, Zion, full of justice, in whom justice slept, become a harlot, but now murderers are in her?” (Isa 1:21 [Brannan]). The third instance applies the epithet to Tyre (Isa 23:16). The fourth and fifth again apply πόρνη to Jerusalem: “Son of man, warn Jerusalem of its lawlessness.... You prostituted yourself with the daughters of Assyria.... You became like a harlot (πόρνη) gathering her wages.... On account of this, O harlot (πόρνη), hear the word of the Lord” (Ezek 16:1, 28, 31, 35 [Brannan]). Thus calling apostate Jerusalem a “harlot (πόρνη)” in a spiritual sense has deep roots in the Old Testament.¹⁰

By combining imagery usually associated with Babylon—including the very name of Babylon assigned as a “mystery”—the vision of Revelation 17 communicates the depths of apostasy that Jerusalem will experience under the tyranny of the antichrist. Revelation 17:1 is not the first time the book of Revelation cast Jerusalem as a villainous enemy of God. In Revelation 11, in an account of the fate of the mysterious “two witnesses” who prophesy for 1,260 days (the first half of the seven-year tribulation) (Rev 11:1–14), we are told that they are killed by the “beast that comes up from the bottomless pit” (11:7). Their dead bodies, we are told, “will lie on the street of the great city (τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης) which spiritually (πνευματικῶς) is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (11:8). Having already called Jerusalem “spiritually” Sodom and Egypt, it is certainly not a stretch that Revelation would later call Jerusalem “mysteriously” Babylon and a harlot. Note also that the term “great city” is used in reference to Jerusalem (cf. 11:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 19, 21).

All things considered, the “great city ruling over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18) will be the capital of the antichrist’s empire: Jerusalem. From there, the antichrist will oversee a reconstruction

⁹ Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, “The History of Jonah,” in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, edited and translated by Gerald Friedlander (New York: Bloch, 1916), 71.

¹⁰ This image of a prostitute contrasts with the image of the 144,000 Israelites from the twelve tribes who symbolize the righteous remnant of Israel sealed and protected: “It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Rev 14:4). Not only will the remnant not be counted among the spiritually apostate πόρνη, but they will be pure and undefiled in a spiritual sense from all impurity (14:5).

of the temple and claim to be the long-awaited messiah and savior of humanity. This likely will constitute the great apostasy that will reveal to those with wisdom that this figure is the antichrist (2 Thess 2; Rev 13). His miraculous restoration after a mortal wound will only strengthen the deception, enabling him to take complete control of the world for forty-two months, after which the coming of Christ will destroy him, his allies, and his armies (2 Thess 2; Rev 19). This is consistent with both the biblical testimony as well as classic Irenaean premillennial expectations.