

Revelation 18
The Fall of Babylon the Great

Revelation 18 (NKJV)

¹ After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory.

² And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!

³ For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury."

⁴ And I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.

⁵ For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

⁶ Render to her just as she rendered to you, and repay her double according to her works; in the cup which she has mixed, mix double for her.

⁷ In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow; for she says in her heart, 'I sit *as* queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.'

⁸ Therefore her plagues will come in one day—death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong *is* the Lord God who judges her.

⁹ "The kings of the earth who committed fornication and lived luxuriously with her will weep and lament for her, when they see the smoke of her burning,

¹⁰ standing at a distance for fear of her torment, saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.'

¹¹ "And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore:

¹² merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble;
¹³ and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil and frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men.

¹⁴ The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things which are rich and splendid have gone from you, and you shall find them no more at all.

¹⁵ The merchants of these things, who became rich by her, will stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing,

¹⁶ and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls!

¹⁷ For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.’ Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance

¹⁸ and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What *is* like this great city?’

¹⁹ “They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.’

²⁰ “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and *you* holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!”

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw *it* into the sea, saying, “Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore.

²² The sound of harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters shall not be heard in you anymore. No craftsman of any craft shall be found in you anymore, and the sound of a millstone shall not be heard in you anymore.

²³ The light of a lamp shall not shine in you

	<p>anymore, and the voice of bridegroom and bride shall not be heard in you anymore. For your merchants were the great men of the earth, for by your sorcery all the nations were deceived. ²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who were slain on the earth.”</p>
--	--

REVELATION 18

Here we read of commercial Babylon, which represents the great global system of the latter days. Of course, religious Babylon (the apostate church) will have a great part to play in the economics of the nations. When this religious system collapses, it will be the beginning of the end for the Beast’s entire empire, although he will have three and one-half years yet to reign. It is comforting to read 17:17 and realize that all of these things fulfill the Word of God! Note in this chapter four different voices:

I. The Voice of Judgment (18:1–3)

This angel announces the fall of Babylon, an event that has already been announced (14:8 and 16:19). The repetition of “is fallen, is fallen” suggests the dual judgment of the two chapters (on religious and commercial Babylon), as well as the statement in v. 6 that she would receive double for her sins. This “great city” (v. 10), the center of the world economic system, will finally get what it deserves from the hand of God. It has become a habitation of demons (see Eph. 2:22, where the church is a habitation of the Spirit), and a haven for foul spirits (see 16:13–14). Satan is often pictured as a bird (Matt. 13:4, 19, 31–32). Verse 3 indicates that Babylon influenced the nations of the earth the way wine influences drunkards. But this city made them rich, which was all that mattered to them.

II. The Voice of Separation (18:4–8)

Some of God’s people are in this city, and God wants them to come out for two reasons: (1) the city will be destroyed and He wants them saved; (2) the city is satanic and He does not want them defiled. “Come out!” has always been God’s call to His people, for salvation means separation from the world unto the Lord (2 Cor. 6:14ff). The world glorifies itself (v. 7); the Christian seeks to glorify God. The world lives for the “delicious pleasures of sin,” while the Christian lives for the pleasures of Christ. Look at Babylon’s pride in v. 7: “I sit a queen . . . and shall see no sorrow!” But v. 8 indicates that in one day she will exchange her joys for sorrow, her riches for famine! There is a lesson here for God’s people today: “Do not share in other people’s sins” (see 1 Tim. 5:22; also Jer. 51:9).

III. The Voice of Mourning (18:9–19)

We see two groups lamenting the fall of Babylon: the kings of the earth (vv. 9–10), and the merchants of the earth (vv. 11–19). They had “committed fornication” with Babylon by rejecting the true God and going after idols, money in particular. They sold their souls for wealth. Their luxurious living was now at an end. Note the repetition of “Alas, alas!” in vv. 10, 16, and 19. Babylon is judged in one day (v. 8) and one hour (vv. 10, 19).

Why do the merchants and kings lament? Because their merchandise is now gone. Verses 12–13 indicate the vast wealth of the mercantile system, including “slaves and the souls of men.”

Slavery will increase in the last days, for Satan has always wanted to enslave the souls and bodies of humans. The rich will get richer, the poor will get poorer. Both luxuries and necessities will be destroyed when God judges Babylon. Shipping will be destroyed and the shipping industry brought to ruin. The world's peoples depend on this economic system to care for them, protect them, and satisfy them; but ultimately it will fail them.

IV. The Voice of Rejoicing (18:20–24)

The men of the earth never have the same viewpoint as the people of God. When Satan was cast out of heaven, heaven rejoiced but the earth mourned (12:10–12). Now that Babylon has been destroyed, heaven rejoices but earth laments.

The main reason for heaven's rejoicing is that God has avenged the blood of the martyrs. The Babylonian system is satanic and from the very beginning (Gen. 4) has been responsible for the martyrdom of God's faithful people. The souls under the altar in Rev. 6:9–11 had asked, "How long, O Lord?" Now their prayer is answered: God has avenged their blood. See Rom. 12:19.

The casting down of the millstone indicates the suddenness of God's judgment on the empire of the Beast. Some students see in this millstone the return of Christ, the Smiting Stone, as pictured in Dan. 2:34–35, 44–45. Just when the world thinks it is performing beautifully, Christ will return to destroy its works.

Note the repeated "no more" statements in this chapter, and read Jer. 25:9–11. When God says "No more!" there is nothing man can do to change it. Read Jer. 51 also.

We have seen, then, the destruction of the Beast's economic and religious empire. All that remains is for Christ to destroy his armies, and this we see in chapter 19.¹

18:1 The **angel** which John now saw had **great** (divine) **authority**, not just short-term authority like the ten horns and the Beast (17:12, 13). In coming from the glorious abode of God, this angel still reflects the Lord's **glory** upon **the earth** (15:8), perhaps much as Moses' face shone with God's glory after being in His presence (2 Cor. 3:7–11).

18:2 **Babylon ... is fallen** continues the thought introduced in 14:8 and 16:19, describing the city's destruction. The normal **dwelling place of demons** is the bottomless pit (9:1, 2). A **prison** is a place of banishment. Thus, Babylon, in the wake of her fall and judgment, will become a virtual hell on earth.

18:3 This unparalleled judgment from God has come because of Babylon's spiritual **fornication** (idolatry and abominations; 17:4) with the **nations** and their **kings**, largely through **rich** commerce, providing many **merchants** an **abundance** of wealth.

18:4, 5 **Come out ... my people** is a command that echoes Is. 52:11 and especially Jer. 51:45, prophecies proclaimed at a time when the Babylonian Empire was ripe for judgment.

18:6–8 God will avenge Babylon's long history of iniquities and sinful **works** to the fullest extent and beyond (**double**; Is. 51:19). Instead of glorifying God, Babylon **glorified herself** (14:7; Rom. 1:21) with a royal lifestyle. She had thrived on pleasure and excess, but now judgment will leave her with only **torment and sorrow**. The climactic judgment of ancient Babylon also arrived **in one day** ("one hour" in vv. 10, 17, 19), as Darius the Mede invaded the city and killed Belshazzar (Dan. 5:30, 31).

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997, c1992, S. 372

18:9–19 This section is framed like an ancient **lament** and is especially similar in content to Ezekiel’s lament over the destruction of Tyre (Ezek. 27).

18:9, 10 The world’s **kings**, the illicit partners of **Babylon**, will **see her burning** and **weep** out loud, probably as much for their loss as hers. They will, however, stay at a **distance** (v. 15) to escape **her torment**.

18:11–13 The **merchandise** includes **purple**, an expensive dye; **citron wood**, valuable material for cabinet making; and **fragrant oil** (literally “myrrh”) and **frankincense**, both of which the wise men gave as gifts to the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:11). **Bodies and souls** refers to the slave trade.

18:14–16 clothed ... adorned: The description of wealthy Babylon is almost identical to that of the harlot Babylon in 17:4.

18:17–19 Those who make their living from **trade on the sea** also lament the judgment and **burning** by which Babylon is **made desolate**. They throw **dust on their heads** in an expression of great sorrow, which is also seen in Ezek. 27:30 in the lament over Tyre.

18:20 This call to **rejoice** is a compressed introduction to the longer praise hymn in 19:1–5. Judgment for killing God’s **prophets** is mentioned in 16:6, but this is the only place in Revelation other than 21:14 where Christ’s **apostles** are mentioned. If specific apostles are in mind here, Peter and Paul’s deaths at the hands of the state in Rome probably apply here. If Babylon is the symbol of all the enemies of God and His people, and not just the Babylonian or Roman manifestations, even the killing of James in Acts 12:1, 2 is being **avenged** here.

18:21, 22 The concluding lament over the fall of **the great city Babylon** comes from an **angel** powerful enough to hurl a huge **millstone** weighing thousands of pounds **into the sea** as an illustration of the swiftness and **violence** of Babylon’s judgment.

18:23 From this point on in Revelation, **the voice of bridegroom and bride** is heard only in regard to “the marriage of the Lamb” (19:7–9) and the New Jerusalem, “a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). **Sorcery** (literally “magic arts”) is used in 9:21 to refer to the sins of humankind at large. Perhaps Babylon’s influence is seen as corrupting **all the nations**.

18:24 **The blood** of the slain seem to refer to all the martyrs for the cause of Christ throughout history (6:10; 17:6). However, it may refer specifically to those who were slain during the tribulation, particularly during the beast’s reign (13:7, 15).²

(**18:2**) Babylon, “confusion,” is repeatedly used by the prophets in a symbolic sense (see Isa. 13:1). Two “Babylons” are to be distinguished in the Revelation: ecclesiastical Babylon, which is apostate Christendom, headed up under the Papacy; and political Babylon, which is the Beast’s confederated empire, the last form of Gentile world-dominion. Ecclesiastical Babylon is “the great whore” (Rev. 17:1), and is destroyed by political Babylon (Rev. 17:15-18), that the beast may be the alone object of worship (2 Thes. 2:3, 4; Rev. 13:15). The power of political Babylon is destroyed by the return of the Lord in glory.

(See “Armageddon,” Rev. 16:14; 19:17) The notion of a literal Babylon to be rebuilt on the site of ancient Babylon is in conflict with Isa. 13:19–22. But the language of Rev. 18 (e.g. vs. 10, 16, 18) seems beyond question to identify “Babylon,” the “city” of luxury and traffic, with

²Radmacher, Earl D. ; Allen, Ronald Barclay ; House, H. Wayne: *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*. Nashville : T. Nelson Publishers, 1999, S. Re 18:1-24

“Babylon” the ecclesiastical centre, viz. Rome. The very kings who hate ecclesiastical Babylon deplore the destruction of commercial Babylon.³

Most of this chapter consists of funeral dirges over Babylon, following Old Testament models; prophets sometimes ironically mourned a city’s destruction, thereby prophesying its ruin. It is difficult for us to catch the impact today: an aged prophet, confined to an island for defying the whims of the mightiest empire the world had ever known, prophesied that empire’s destruction. Yet the faith he proclaimed has spread throughout the world, and Rome has now been fallen for fifteen centuries. Although “Babylon” stood for Rome in John’s day, other embodiments of the oppressive world system have risen and fallen since then.

Ancient rhetoricians and writers often showed off their epideictic (praise) rhetorical skills by praising important cities, as in Aelius Aristides’ lavish flattery of Rome. In contrast to such praises, John describes the city’s power and wealth to condemn it, as the Old Testament prophets did with arrogant empires, and to produce a funeral eulogy that curses instead of blesses. Oracles of woe against the nations were common in the Old Testament and continued in some Jewish literature of John’s day (particularly Sibylline Oracles).

18:1. Powerful angels were frequently described as shining like lightning or the sun (Dan 10:6 and often in later Jewish texts).

18:2. Old Testament prophets often pronounced an event as done even though it had yet to be fulfilled in practice. John takes this taunt lamentation directly from the Old Testament (Is 21:9; cf. Jer 51:8), as well as the description of a barren land possessed only by desert creatures (Is 34:9–15; cf. Jer 50:13; 51:29, 37; other cities—Jer 9:11; 49:33; cf. Baruch 4:33–35).

18:3. Later Jewish resistance oracles (some Sibylline Oracles) likewise portrayed Rome as lying with many suitors but headed for judgment.

18:4. In pronouncing judgment on Babylon, Jeremiah warned his people—who were supposed to be at home there in the short term (29:4–10)—to flee from the city’s midst, because God would destroy it (51:6, 45; cf. Zech 2:7); even the presence of some of the righteous would not stay the judgment (cf. Gen 19:17). (In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the righteous were to “separate” themselves

³Scofield, C. I.: *The Scofield Study Bible*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2002, S. Re 18:2 Old Testament ***Old Testament**. The common modern term for the Hebrew Bible (including Aramaic portions) as defined by the Jewish and Protestant Christian canons; Jewish readers generally call this the Tenach.

rhetoricians ***Rhetoric**. The art or study of proper forms and methods of public speaking, highly emphasized in antiquity. Although only the well-to-do had much training in it, the rhetorical forms and ideas they used filtered down to the rest of urban society through public speeches, in a manner similar to that in which television permeates modern Western society.

Sibylline Oracles **Sibylline Oracles**. Pseudepigraphic Jewish oracles modeled after pagan oracles of the same name, attributed to the ancient prophetess Sibyl and probably collected from Jewish circles in Alexandria, Egypt, and Asia Minor. Their composition spans a wide range of time, but they are mainly pre-Christian.

Dead Sea Scrolls ***Dead Sea Scrolls**. Writings from a strict Jewish sect (usually agreed to be Essenes) that lived in the Judean desert, near modern Khirbet Qumran. The writings include the War Scroll, the Community Rule, the Damascus Document, the Thanksgiving Hymns, the Genesis Apocryphon, the Temple Scroll and commentaries on and expansions of various biblical books.

from the “children of the pit”; in one Essene commentary on Nahum, when the iniquity of those who were leading people astray was exposed, the righteous of Ephraim would flee from among them, joining the forces of the true Israel.) Getting out of an imminently doomed city was common sense for anyone who believed the prophecy (cf. Tobit 14:8; Ex 9:20–21).

18:5. Jewish people recognized in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 15:16; 2 Kings 22:20) that if God’s full judgment was delayed, it meant only that he was storing up retribution for the sins of many generations to pour them out on an even more wicked generation (also Mt 23:34–36).

18:6. Paying retribution to the wicked according to their mistreatment of others was a fairly common theme in the Old Testament (Neh 4:4; Esther 9:25; Ps 7:15–16; 35:8; 57:6; Prov 26:27; 28:10; Dan 6:24; Jer 50:15, 29—Babylon; Obad 15); paying someone back “double” indicated that the retribution would be more than complete (Is 40:2). For the cup with the wine of judgment, cf. Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:22 and other references in comment on Revelation 14:9–10.

18:7. Here John cites Isaiah 47:8–9 (also used by the Sibylline Oracles), condemning Babylon’s arrogance and smug security that it would never fall (cf. also, e.g., Is 32:9; Jer 48:11; 49:31; Ezek 16:49; Amos 6:1; Obad 3). Rome’s luxury (including grain subsidies to keep the masses happy) came at the expense of other nations, such as the heavily taxed peasants of Egypt. The thoughtless extravagance of the Roman elite invited God’s wrath; cf. Amos 4:1–2.

18:8. Beset by problems ignored by its king Nabonidus, ancient Babylon had fallen without battle to its conquerors in a single night, as Jewish people well knew (Dan 5:30). But this new “Babylon,” the new site of the oppression of God’s people, would be judged with fire (see comment on Rev 17:16).

18:9–10. Although the imagery is not totally consistent here (cf. 17:16; but apocalyptic imagery did not have to be consistent), genuine mourning might be natural: client kings were normally appointed only with the favor of Rome, and Rome’s fall would grant freedom and prestige to political competitors.

18:11. The imperial grain fleet, by which the fertile soil around the Nile fed the masses of Italy, represented the largest form of transport in the Mediterranean world, but Revelation especially addresses the luxury trade (18:12–16), focusing on nonessential items secured for those who could afford them. The image of merchants mourning over a great trade center is from descriptions of Tyre in Isaiah 23:1–8 and especially Ezekiel 27, a passage that describes in more detail the city’s greatness.

Essene ***Essenes.** A strict group of pietists, some of whom withdrew into the wilderness as monastics. The Dead Sea Scrolls are probably from one group of Essenes.

prophecy **Prophecy.** Speaking forth God’s message by his inspiration. It can, but need not, involve prediction. Although “prophet” technically refers to anyone who prophesies, Judaism generally reserved this title for God’s spokespeople of the distant past.

apocalyptic ***Apocalypses, apocalyptic literature.** The broadest use of the term today (usually followed in this commentary) refers to the thought world of literature dealing with the end time, often replete with symbols. The most precise sense of the term refers to a category of ancient Jewish literature growing out of Old Testament prophecy (especially Daniel and parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, etc.) in which visions or travels through the heavens reveal divine secrets, usually including many about the future. Nonfuturistic Jewish mysticism was probably a truncated apocalyptic with future expectations played down.

18:12–13. As commentators have pointed out, gold, ivory and this special kind of scented wood (“citron wood”—NIV, NASB) were imported especially from North Africa, precious stones and pearls particularly from India, purple dye mainly from Phoenicia, silk and cinnamon from China, the other spices from Arabia and slaves ultimately from subjugated peoples but in more recent times mainly from breeding slaves. “Human lives” (NASB, NRSV, TEV), distinguished from “slaves,” probably refers to people reserved for gladiatorial shows and other forms of death to entertain the public; criminals, prisoners of war, the lowest of slaves and Christians were commonly used in such shows.

A second-century writer estimated Rome’s imports just from China, India and Arabia at roughly thirty million denarii (a denarius was a day’s wage in Palestine). Rome was a center of international trade, and no merchant marine existed like Rome’s for a thousand years after its demise.

18:14–15. For “fear” at its fall, cf. the reaction predicted for Tyre’s fall in Ezekiel 26:17–18; the merchants’ investments are lost.

18:16. On the adornments cf. 17:4; these represent Rome’s extravagance and wealth. Those who had never been to Rome often had an exaggerated opinion of its greatness (some later Mesopotamian rabbis spoke of 365 sections of Rome, each with 365 palaces, each with 365 stories!). But it was the most powerful city that the ancient Mediterranean had ever known and that most of the world would know for many centuries after it. No one in the provinces could describe the judgment on Rome and not think of the destruction of great wealth (e.g., also the Sibylline Oracles).

18:17–19. The merchants themselves had good reason to mourn—they were now out of business, perhaps with outstanding debts on their expensive cargoes that would lead to the loss of everything they had.

18:20. Judgment of the wicked is vindication of the righteous; cf. 6:9–11. The Greek phrase (literally “God has judged your judgment from her”) may mean that God convicted Rome by applying to that city the judgment of its own law courts against the Christians. When Rome was later sacked by the barbarians of northern Europe after its acceptance of Christendom, the North African theologian Augustine explained that the judgment was due to Rome’s past sins (cf. 18:5) and a church too weak to avert judgment in its own time (cf. 18:4).

NIV New International Version

NASB New American Standard Bible

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

TEV Today’s English Version

rabbis ***Rabbi.** Jewish teacher. Sometime after A.D. 70 the term became a technical one for those ordained in the rabbinic movement, which probably consisted primarily of Pharisaic scribes. (To accommodate customary usage this commentary sometimes applies the term to Jewish teachers of the law in general, although such common usage may have technically been later; it also applies the term to the teachings of Jewish legal experts collected in rabbinic literature.)

church ***Church.** The Greek term used in the New Testament reflects the terms often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for the “congregation” (*qahal*) of Israel: “church” (assembly) and “synagogue” (gathering). Although some scholars have suggested that Jesus could not have spoken about the church during his earthly ministry, the Dead Sea Scrolls used the Hebrew term for God’s community; hence Jesus could use this word in talking about his

18:21. In Jeremiah 51:63–64, the prophet is commanded to hurl a stone into the Euphrates and declare that Babylon would likewise sink, never to rise again. Here the stone is the kind of millstone turned by a donkey, so heavy that it could never be retrieved from the sea (Mk 9:42).

18:22. The ghastly silence of Babylon here means complete devastation, as it meant in Isaiah 13:20–22: the city is without inhabitants.

18:23. The “voice of the bridegroom and bride” was the ultimate sound of joy; the prophets used the image of its stifling for terrible destruction (Jer 16:9; 25:10; Joel 1:8). Babylon, who would be left a widow (Rev 18:7, following Is 47:8), was a sorceress (Is 47:9) like Nineveh of old, a harlot who enslaved nations (Nah 3:4); the “sorceries” (KJV) here may refer to love potions or to the occult rites of their pagan priests.

18:24. God dealt vengeance against those stained with the blood of the innocent (Jer 2:34). Although it is not technically true that all the righteous were killed in Rome (cf. Mt 23:35), Rome assumed responsibility for their slaughter as the present embodiment of the oppressive empire, a trait of corporate human sin that recurs throughout history.

4

future community (Mt 16:18; 18:17). The term was in common use in Greek culture for “assemblies,” especially citizen assemblies in cities. (The popular modern surmise that the Greek word for “church,” *ekklēsia*, means “called-out ones” is thus mistaken; that sense is actually more appropriate for “saints,” i.e., “those separated [for God].”)

KJV King James Version

⁴Keener, Craig S. ; InterVarsity Press: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : New Testament*. Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1993, S. Re 18:1