

Revelation 17-18 Fallen is Babylon

Tim Anderson 13/9/20

Well I hope the kiddies are doing their activities,  
because Revelation 17-18 is probably not child safe.  
The imagery of prostitution to picture unfaithfulness to God  
is scattered throughout the Bible.  
Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe Israel's unfaithfulness  
as consorting with prostitutes.  
The prophet Hosea is commanded to marry a prostitute  
as an object lesson in God's marriage to his people.  
That's a tough assignment.  
And here in Revelation, the image of the beast is supplemented  
by the scarlet clad prostitute riding on its back.

Why is prostitution the go to metaphor for idolatry?  
Because prostitution involves unfaithfulness.  
And idolatry is being unfaithful to God.  
Prostitution also involves seduction.  
Prostitutes don't wear tracky pants and windcheaters.  
At least not while they are at work.  
Their aim is to lure people  
away from the spouse they've promised faithfulness to.  
So who is the prostitute in Rev 17,  
and what does she use to lure people away from Christ?

If the beast is the apparatus of the state  
that turns itself against Christians,  
the prostitute is the allurements of our society.  
They don't beat us with a big stick and tell us to worship the emperor.  
Instead they dangle money in front of us,  
career prospects,  
holidays back in the time when you were allowed to go on them,  
nice houses, nice cars,  
all these can be yours if you just worship the idols.

For the people in the first century,  
these temptations were right in their faces.  
Suppose you lived in one of the towns  
that John addressed the letters to in chapters 2&3,  
Symrna or Philadelphia,  
if you were a tradesman,  
a metal worker or a baker,  
then you were part of a guild.  
A guild was like a professional body for your trade.  
And the guilds had patron gods.  
When you went to the guild hall,  
you were expected to make a sacrifice to the little idol in the entry foyer.  
To opt out of the idolatry meant to cut yourself off economically  
from the profession you were part of.

We don't have quite the same operating in Australia today.  
But it's not far from it.  
There are plenty of professions where you have to bow before the idols.  
If you want to be a teacher, a counsellor or a psychologist,  
you are expected to tug the forelock  
to radical theories on gender and sexuality.  
If you refuse to bow the knee before the idol,  
they can get you disbarred from your profession.

There's an artist I wanted to invite to speak at Holy Trinity.  
Bindi Cole Chocka is her name.  
She's been exhibited at the NGV.  
She's a serious artist.  
But she became a Christian.  
10 exhibitions she'd been invited to give prior to becoming a Christian.  
Zero since becoming a Christian.  
She's been cancelled.  
She refused to bow the knee to the idols.  
And she's been frozen out economically.

The prostitute was dressed in gold, precious stones and pearls.  
 Her customers think, "Wow, isn't she beautiful?"  
 They ought to be thinking,  
 "Where did she get the money to pay for the pretty trinkets?  
 By fleecing her customers, of course!"

We're told that "the inhabitants of the earth  
 were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." 17:2  
 Alcohol has a strong association with sexual unfaithfulness.  
 Once you start drinking, you lose the will to resist.  
 Once you start drinking at the well of the economic prosperity,  
 you lose the will to resist the temptations to idolatry.  
 It's relatively easy to say, "No I'm not going to compromise myself,"  
 when society offers a nice job if you acknowledge their idols.  
 But once you have the nice house, the mortgage,  
 the loans that come with the requirement to keep paying,  
 and then they slip in a little requirement that wasn't there before.  
 "Oh by the way, you have to pay homage to our new theory."  
 It's much harder at that point to give it up.  
 You already tasted the delights that Babylon can provide,  
 drunk her wine.

In Revelation, your true loyalties are written on your forehead.  
 Followers of Jesus have his name and the name of his father  
 written on their foreheads.  
 Those who worship the beast have his number  
 written on their foreheads.  
 The prostitute has "Babylon the Great,  
 the mother of prostitutes  
 and of the abominations of the earth,"  
 written on her forehead.  
 Civilisation is capable of greatness.  
 What have the Romans ever done for us?  
 The road, the aqueducts, the sanitation, the peace.  
 The list of civilisation's achievements is long.

But inevitably there is drift towards idolatry.  
Idolatry and an unwillingness to compromise  
with those who won't bow the knee.

The inhabitants of the earth are intoxicated  
with the allurements of the prostitute,  
she is intoxicated with the blood of God's holy people,  
those who bore testimony to Jesus. 17:6.

When the angel introduced the vision to John,  
he was told he would see the punishment of the great prostitute.  
So far all he has seen is her blood thirsty magnificence.  
But now the vision turns to the future.

17:8 "The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not,  
and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction."  
This is a take off of Jesus.

Jesus is the one who was and is and is to come.

But the beast once was -

that is once the evil world powers reigned on this earth -  
he now is not -

that is, his days of victory are over, Jesus triumphed in his resurrection,  
and he will come up out of the Abyss -

that is the judgement of the devil is set down for a future date.

He has a date with destiny and his destiny is destruction.

Lots of people have got themselves  
into a whole lot of unprofitable speculation  
when it comes to the heads and horns of the beast.

It's not about trying to work out which Roman emperor  
corresponds with which head.

Or which world empire corresponds with which horn.

Numbers like seven and ten are symbolic numbers in Revelation.

They symbolise completeness.

All the Roman emperors led the world to idolatry.

All the empires of the world do the same.

The beast, the power of evil that draws people to serve the devil,

works across time and across political systems.

He is at work in all of them.

But in the end, he will not triumph.

17:11 "The beast who once was, now is not, is an eighth king.

He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction."

17:14 The ten horns will "wage war against the Lamb,

but the Lamb will triumph over them

because he is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings."

At the end of the day,

the outcome for the beast will be like the empires of the world.

Was there ever an empire that didn't fall?

The Egyptians, the Babylonians, Persians, the Greeks, the Romans.

They all fell.

Napoleon's France, Capac's Incas, Genghis Khan's Mongols,

Tokugawa's Japan, Hitler's Germany, Lenin's Russia.

They all fell.

You might respond that the American empire has not yet fallen.

Give it time.

They all go the same way.

And the beast hitches his wagon to whoever is in power,

and he uses their authority

to draw people away from worshiping the Lord,

and seduce them with stuff.

How does the power of evil get destroyed?

Now this is interesting.

If it were a fairy tale, God's people would form a righteous army,

and conquer the power of evil.

But this is not a fairy tale.

This is God's world.

And his plans are better.

17:16 "The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute.

They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked;

they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire."

Evil turns on itself.

It's gruesome and disgusting stuff.  
But that's what we expect from evil.  
We expect it to be evil.  
God's people always look so small and powerless.  
We wonder how they can survive  
with the might of evil arrayed against them.  
Here is the mystery.  
Evil is so evil, it can't stay united.  
It turns on itself and devours itself.  
This is God's purpose.  
17:17 "God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose."  
God wills an end to evil.  
And the powers of evil carry out his purposes.

This is a good reminder to us,  
God's people.  
We don't have to plot the destruction of the evil systems that oppress us.  
The problem for fallen humans  
is that we can't be part of plotting destruction,  
and keep our hearts from hatred and our minds from sin.  
It seems that the right course of action for us is patient endurance.  
And wait for the evil to finally destroy itself.  
And it will because that's what evil does.  
It destroys.

Chapter 18 contains laments over Babylon.  
I don't have time to go through them in detail.  
But here are some highlights that speak to us and our situation.  
The first is a call not to get entangled in Babylon.  
"Come out of her my people,  
so that you will not share in her sins,  
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;  
for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes."  
Of course we can't entirely withdraw from Babylon.

To withdraw from Babylon would be to withdraw from the world.  
Maybe I shouldn't say of course.

At various times God's people have tried to completely withdraw.

Some made little hermit communities in the deserts.

Some boarded boats in England

and sailed to America to start again.

Some formed monasteries to withdraw from the world.

But these efforts were not crowned with success.

You can leave the problems of England in England,

but you take the problems of the human heart to America with you.

Even monasteries get entangled in world affairs.

And the biblical calls to be a witness in the world are loud,

these verses notwithstanding.

The key phrase is 'so that you will not share in her sins'.

The point at which we must withdraw is where we are being led astray.

This calls for wise reflection.

It's not always obvious where the world is seducing us.

That's where we need each other and the humility to listen to each other.

It's more obvious to me where the world is seducing you.

It's more obvious to you where the world is seducing me.

It's hard to see you own blind spots.

But God has put us in the church to work together.

So let's help one another to keep separate from Babylon

so we don't share in her sins.

The second thing to notice in the laments of chapter 18  
is the mourning of the merchants.

When Babylon falls,

there is no one to buy their cargos any more.

And there is a great list of the cargos they brought to Babylon.

Of course in that day, Rome was the Babylon,

and the cargos are those

that were transported around the Roman Empire.

And except for one cargo, slaves,

there is nothing wrong with what the merchants have been doing.

Supplying goods so people could enjoy God's good creation.  
But when God's judgement falls,  
the healthy sides of society grind to a halt  
at the same time as the evil side.  
We've seen that with the pandemic.  
I've rejoiced to see some businesses closed.  
Pokie machine clubs  
that trade in the addiction and misery of their customers.  
I haven't been sad at all to see them closed.  
But most businesses are run by hard working folk  
who are providing something that enhances other people's lives.  
And it's very hard to see them struggling.  
But when God's judgement on a civilisation falls,  
everyone is affected.  
The traders in fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth;  
cinnamon and spice, wine and olive oil,  
they are caught up with those who are drunk on the blood of the saints.  
How is that fair?  
The first thing to say is that no one is guiltless  
who is complicit with evil.  
We have no trouble seeing that  
when we prosecute the baker or the laundry maid  
from a concentration camp.  
If you enable evil, you are guilty.  
Our problem is perceiving that whole societies can be run on evil.  
Both in the sense of worshiping idols rather than then one true God  
and in the sense of economic exploitation.  
Because of course the worship of idols never comes alone.  
Sin always has social consequences.  
The whole of Saudi Arabian society today  
is built upon slave labour of Asians who live in Saudi,  
almost without rights.  
If you took away the Filipino house workers and labourers,  
the whole society would crumble.  
And is this unrelated to the worship of the false god of Islam?

It's totally related.

Who says that it's OK to economically exploit the infidel?

Allah says it is.

And so when God's hand of judgement falls,  
we don't weep with the merchants.

We rejoice with those who love justice.

18:20 "Rejoice over her, you heavens!

Rejoice O people of God!

Rejoice apostles and prophets!

For God has judged her with the judgement she imposed on you."

Of course, I've been talking about these chapters  
using examples we see around us today.

We see little foretastes of what is to come.

Revelation shows us patterns of what history is like.

But by chapters 17-18, we are looking at the end.

What these chapters are telling us

is that the sort of thing we have seen over history,  
great civilisations rising,

marked by impressive culture

and the oppression of God's people,

will be writ large at the end of history.

There will arise a culture that will dwarf the Roman Empire.

It will be both greater in its culture

and more evil in its idolatry.

And its fall will mark the end of history.

Could that be the fall of the American Empire we see at the moment?

It's possible.

It's a greater Empire than the Roman Empire.

But every generation is tempted to see their own situation  
reflected in the prophecy.

There could be many more empires to rise and fall before the end.

Who knows?

Only God knows.

But while we can't say that the end is nigh.  
 Except in the sense  
 that it has been nigh ever since the resurrection of Jesus.  
 What we can say is what the end won't be like.  
 Some people have nursed the optimistic hope,  
 that as faith in the Lord Jesus gradually spreads over the world,  
 that the culture would gradually be shaped by the gospel of peace.  
 That we would move towards an era marked by love.  
 It would be like a stepping stone on the way to heaven.  
 I don't think Rev 17-18 leaves you with that possibility open.  
 History is building towards a climax.  
 And even as the church grows around the world,  
 opposition to God's people by the beast and the prostitute will intensify.  
 Until God brings it to an end.  
 And when the end comes it is final.  
 Listen to the sound of finality  
 in the angel's description of fallen Babylon.  
 18:21-23 "With such violence  
 the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,  
never to be found again.  
 The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters,  
 will never be heard in you again.  
No worker of any trade will ever be found in you again.  
 The sound of the millstone will never be heard in you again.  
 The light of a lamp will never shine in you again.  
 The voice of the bridegroom and bride  
 will never be heard in you again."  
 It's over Babylon.  
 There are no Dame Nellie Melba come backs.

What should we take away from this passage?  
 Well there is one imperative in the passage for the people of God.  
 "Come out of her my people,  
 so that you will not share in her sins."

Don't get entangled with Babylon.  
Reflect wisely  
on where you are in danger of being seduced by the prostitute.  
The culture will entice us to be unfaithful to our Lord.

But the second take away is more of a mindset.  
It's about recognising where this world is going  
so it doesn't surprise you or destabilise you.  
And recognising that the final word will be spoken by our great God.  
However insignificant you feel  
in the face of a world opposed to your Lord.  
And however impressive that world appears.  
It is coming to a certain and final end.  
But God's people have the sure and certain hope of eternity.