

Babylon of the End Times

In the coming tribulation period, the antichrist will rule the entire world from his headquarters located in the literal, rebuilt city of Babylon on the Euphrates River found in modern day Iraq. Not only have numerous Christians throughout church history embraced this view,¹ but it has also been incorporated into the best selling *Left Behind* series.² The question is whether such a view can be successfully defended from Scripture. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that it can. This article will survey various lines of biblical evidence that call for a futuristic, literal Babylon. These lines of evidence include Gen 10–11, Isa 13–14, Jer 50–51, Zech 5:5-11, and Rev 17–18. After this evidence has been presented, this article will then highlight the inadequacy of other approaches that view the prophecies regarding Babylon as something other than the literal city of Babylon.

An important principle that the interpreter must adhere to in order to accurately decipher biblical prophecies is to resist the temptation of employing a “dual hermeneutic.”³ Such a hermeneutic treats prophecy as a special category that must be approached with a different set of interpretive principles than one would use in interpreting other portions of Scripture.⁴ Thus, the interpreter’s ability to accurately interpret God’s future program is contingent upon his willingness to embrace the same interpretive method that he would use when interpreting any other portion of Scripture. Some may balk at such a statement on the basis that Revelation is too symbolic to be approached literally. While not disputing Revelation’s symbolic character, it must be understood that many of the symbols employed in Revelation are either identified in the immediate context⁵ or in the Old Testament.⁶

The Tower of Babel

God’s end time program for Babylon has its roots in the historical account of the Tower of Babel found in Gen 10–11. This section of Scripture is significant in that it records humanity’s

first worldwide rebellion against God. Here, we learn of mankind's rebellion against God's command to scatter throughout the face of the earth following the flood (Gen 9:1, 7). Under the leadership of Nimrod (Gen 10:8–12), mankind instead gathered in the land of Shinar (Gen 11:2) for the purpose of building a city and tower to reach into heaven (Gen 11:4).

While the political components of this apostasy are evident in the tangible manifestations of a city and tower at Shinar, it is important not to underestimate the religious dimension of this rebellion. Because of the desire to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4), "Babylon is the city where mankind first began to worship himself in an organized manner."⁷ Moreover, the "*ziggurat*, intended by them to reach the heavens, was no doubt intended to be a place of occult worship of the stars and heavens."⁸ Babel is also the place of the origin of the infamous mother-child cult. According to extra biblical tradition, Nimrod's wife, Semiramis founded the secret Babylonian religion. She also had a son named Tammuz through an alleged miraculous conception. According to tradition, Tammuz was killed by a wild animal and miraculously restored to life.⁹ Hitchcock explains the global influence of this mother child cult that began at Babel:

The legend of Semiramis and Tammuz spread around the world. Their names were changed in different places, but the basic story remained the same. In Assyria, the mother was Ishtar, the son was Tammuz. In Phoenicia, the mother was Astarte and the son was Baal. In Egypt, she was Isis and her son was Osiris, or Horus. In Greece she was Aphrodite and her son was Eros. For the Romans, the mother was Venus and the son was Cupid.¹⁰

In sum, the Tower of Babel represents humanity's first collective rebellion against God. Gen 11 emphasizes both the political and religious facets of this apostasy. Moreover, "this initial centralization, followed by the global distribution, is the primary mechanism by which Babylon became the central influence in all cultures and civilizations which followed."¹¹ It is in this sense that the Tower of Babel incident at Shinar uniquely characterizes Babel, or Babylon, as the ultimate source or mother of all spiritual harlotry.

God's response to this collective rebellion was swift and decisive. According to Gen 11:5-9, God frustrated this worldwide apostasy by confounding human language thus inhibiting the builders from communicating with one another. God's action had a purpose. Satan's capacity to lead humanity away from the truth is enhanced if only one government exists and this single government happens to fall into the hands of anti-God forces. No opposition to an anti-God agenda is even possible under this scenario. However, with the existence of multiple nations, those nations that reject anti-God agendas can work to oppose those nations that embrace such agendas. Consequently, evil is restrained at least to some extent.¹² Thus, ever since the Tower of Babel incident, God has decreed that humanity be ordered according to national boundaries, rather than global government (Deut 32:8; Isa 2:4; 66:18; Acts 17:26; Rev 12:5; 20:3; 21:24, 26).¹³

However, one of Satan's purposes throughout history has been to subvert this divine ordering of nations. His desire is instead to bring the world back together so that he once again can have unlimited control of it through one man. Thus, Satan's ambition has always been "to bring man back to Babylon under His rule. This will finally happen according to Revelation 17–18. Both the city of Babylon and the false religious system of Babylon will be resurrected in the end times."¹⁴

The fact that human rebellion will one day cycle back to where it all began comes as no surprise to diligent Bible students due to numerous parallel themes or common denominators running through both the books of Genesis and Revelation. Of this phenomenon, Henry Morris observes, "The Book of Revelation is the sequel to the Book of Genesis, the two books together bounding all history and bounding all of God's revelations to mankind. They constitute the alpha and omega of God's written word, the Book of Beginnings and the Book of Unveilings."¹⁵ Examples include the thematic parallels between the probationary world of Gen 1-2 and the eternal state of Rev 21–22 as well as the parallels between the cursed world as depicted in Gen 3 and the eternal state of Rev 21–22.¹⁶

Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51

The next piece of evidence calling for a futuristic, literal rebuilt Babylon is the prophecies depicting Babylon's destruction found in Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51. The eighth and seventh century prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah repeatedly warned Judah of impending disaster that she would suffer at the hands of foreign powers because of her repeated violations of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 28:49). Yet at the same time, these prophets also comforted God's people by predicting the ultimate destruction of the very nations that were oppressing them. Such is the case in Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 where we find two prolonged passages dealing with the destruction of Babylon. How do these passages contribute further evidence favoring a futuristic, rebuilt Babylon? Although Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian Empire (Dan 5:31) in 539 B.C., Babylon's historic fall does not match the cataclysmic language found in Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51. The details of these texts were not satisfied in the historic fall of Babylon. In other words, the biblical information regarding Babylon's fall does not fit the known facts of history. Thus, in order for these prophecies to be accurately fulfilled, Babylon must be revived so that it can be destroyed again according to the specific details given by Isaiah and Jeremiah.¹⁷ Babylon's ultimate destruction will take place in the coming tribulation period (Rev 16:19). Let's take a look at both of these prophetic passages and observe how their details were not satisfied in the historic fall of Babylon.

The Isa 13–14 passage appears in an extended section dealing with God's coming judgment on the surrounding nations (Isa 13–23). Yet Isaiah appears to be drawing special attention to the Babylon oracle in comparison to the oracles against the other nations. Not only does the Babylon oracle appear first on the list, but it also consumes more verses than any of the other oracles.¹⁸ Moreover, there are at least seven clues found within Isa 13–14 that clearly require a prophetic fulfillment beyond the historic fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.¹⁹

First, Isa 13:6, 9 uses the expression “Day of the Lord” to describe the fall of Babylon. Although some may argue that this expression is sometimes used to depict events of judgment that have already happened (Ezek 30:3, 10), the phrase typically concerns a time of divine judgment that is yet future.²⁰ Second, Isa 13:10-13 predicts that a host of cosmological disturbances will take place when Babylon falls and these obviously did not take place in 539 B.C. Interestingly, these signs have far more in common with language that is used to describe the Second Coming (Matt 24:27-30) than they do to any past event. Third, Isa 13:11-12 indicates that Babylon’s judgment will actually inflict punishment upon the world making mankind scarcer than gold. The magnitude of this prophecy obviously never happened in the past and therefore awaits a future fulfillment (Matt 24:21-22).

Fourth, Isa 13:19 analogizes Babylon’s destruction to the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, this prophecy does not fit the facts of history. Ancient Babylon gradually declined and therefore never experienced a sudden, fatal cataclysmic destruction as did Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24-28). Fifth, Isa 13:20-22 predicts that subsequent to her destruction Babylon will never be inhabited again. Yet Babylon has been inhabited numerous times since 539 B.C.²¹ Sixth, Isa 14:5-8 predicts that the world will enter a time of universal peace and rest following Babylon’s destruction. Certainly such peace and rest did not begin in 539 B.C. Nor are such conditions present in today’s war torn world. Seventh, Isa 14:1-4 predicts that Israel’s spiritual restoration will transpire immediately after Babylon’s demise. Because such a restoration is consistently portrayed as an eschatological event throughout Scripture (Rom 11:26-27), Isa 14:1-4 obviously awaits a future fulfillment.

All of these facts make it clear that the prophecy of Isa 13–14 goes far beyond the historic fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. and is speaking of a futuristic destruction of Babylon. Interestingly, Isa 21:1-10 again records the destruction of Babylon. Perhaps Isaiah records two

destructions of Babylon because Isa 21 pertains to the historic fall of Babylon either in 686 or 539 B.C. while Isa 13–14 is speaking of the futuristic destruction of Babylon.²² At any rate, because Isa 13–14 is speaking of a future destruction of Babylon, it is apparent that this empire must again be revived in order for Isaiah’s prophecy to find a literal fulfillment.

We find an identical pattern in Jer 50–51. This passage, like Isa 13–14, also appears in an extended section dealing with God’s coming judgment on the surrounding nations (Jer 46–51). Yet Jeremiah appears to be drawing special attention to the Babylon oracle in comparison to the oracles against the other nations. Unlike the other oracles, two full chapters are devoted to predicting the destruction of Babylon.²³ Moreover, there are at least six clues found within Jer 50-51 that clearly require a prophetic fulfillment beyond the historic fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.²⁴

First, Jeremiah 50:3 predicts that an enemy from the north would destroy Babylon and yet the Persians came from the east.²⁵ Second, Jeremiah 51:8 predicts that Babylon would be destroyed suddenly and yet the actual destruction of the city was a gradual process taking several centuries. Third, Jeremiah predicts that Babylon would be completely destroyed (Jer 50:3, 13, 26, 39-40; 51:29, 43, 62) and yet Babylon remained productive and populated after her initial fall. In fact, the city was spared and made one of the ruling centers of the Persian Empire with Daniel serving in an administrative position (Dan 5:30; 6:1-3).

Fourth, Jeremiah 51:26 predicts that Babylon’s destruction would result in even her building materials never being used again and yet the materials from which ancient Babylon have been used extensively in the building of many surrounding cities.²⁶ Fifth, Jeremiah predicts that believers would flee Babylon upon her destruction (Jer 50:8; 51:6, 45) and yet there is no record of the Jews fleeing Babylon when she fell to the Persians. In fact, Scripture specifically states that Daniel remained in the city after its fall (Dan 5:28, 30-31; 6:1-3). Sixth, Jeremiah predicts the reuniting and national repentance of Israel following Babylon’s fall (Jer 50:2, 4-5, 20; 51:50) and

yet such a reuniting and repentance never took place. In fact, the postexilic record evidences God's continual rebuking of His people through the ministries of the prophets such as Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Furthermore, as previously indicated, the reuniting and restoration of Israel is typically treated as an eschatological event throughout Scripture (Ezek 37; Rom 11:26-27).

In sum, it is quite plain that the prophecies of Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 were never fully exhausted in the historic fall of Babylon. The predicted cataclysm never came to pass. In fact, it is safe to say that although the city fell politically to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 B.C., it never fell physically.²⁷ Interestingly, because the Medes and Persians diverted the waters of the Euphrates and entered the city at night through the dried up channel, the city fell by surprise. Half the city was captured while the rest were not even aware of what had happened.²⁸ This hardly satisfies the cataclysmic language of Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51.²⁹ Walvoord best summarizes the matter when he notes:

As far as the historic fulfillment is concerned, it is obvious from both Scripture and history that these verses have not been literally fulfilled. The city of Babylon continued to flourish after the Medes conquered it, and though its glory dwindled, especially after the control of the Medes and the Persians ended in 323 B.C., the city continued in some form or substance until A.D. 1000 and did not experience a sudden termination such as is anticipated in this prophecy.³⁰

The implications of these unfulfilled prophecies for a future Babylon are obvious. As Clarence Larkin observes, "...the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah cannot be fulfilled unless there is to be a future Babylon that shall be thus destroyed."³¹

Zechariah 5:5-11

Another piece of evidence favoring a futuristic Babylon is a prophetic vision found in Zech 5:5-11. This vision was given 519 B.C. and is the seventh of Zechariah's eight night visions that are recorded in Zech 1:7–6:8. Let us first describe the contents of the vision and then provide an interpretation. In order to grasp the meaning of the vision, the following five elements must be understood.³²

First, Zechariah saw a basket for measuring grain otherwise known as an ephah. Because an ephah was the largest measure in the Old Testament and was typically used for measuring flour and barley, the basket signifies commerce. Second, in the basket, Zechariah saw a woman signifying wickedness. Third, Zechariah saw the woman being pushed back into the basket and a heavy lid was closed on top of her. This incarceration of the woman in the basket signifies that God is in control and He will release her from the basket only in accordance with His timetable (2 Thess 2:7). Fourth, Zechariah saw the basket being transported to the land of Shinar. This part of the vision identifies the specific geographic locale that the woman will one day operate from once she is released from her incarceration. The Old Testament repeatedly identifies Shinar as the exact same piece of real estate where the Tower of Babel as well as historic Babylon once stood (Gen 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Isa 11:11; Dan 1:2). Fifth, Zechariah was told that the woman one day be will be released and set upon the pedestal of a temple in Shinar. Because this part of the vision conjures up religious imagery, it communicates that the woman will be vested with future religious authority.

Putting all of this together, Zechariah's vision teaches that in God's providence, wickedness, commerce, and religion will once again return to the land of Babylon. Because Babylon had already fallen (539 B.C.) by the time that this prophecy was given (519 B.C.), Zechariah's vision furnishes a clear biblical prediction of a futuristic, rebuilt Babylon. Henry Morris aptly observes, "Zechariah's vision thus clearly foretells a time when the center of world finance and commerce will be removed from its bases in New York and Geneva and other great cities and transported quickly across the world to a new foundation and headquarters in the land of Shinar."³³

Rev 17–18 records the circumstances by which this vision will be fulfilled. In the coming tribulation period, the literal city of Babylon (Rev 17:18) will exert wicked influence (Rev 17:2), religious authority (Rev 17:2; Jas 4:4), and commercial power (Rev 18:10-18) over all the

inhabitants of the earth (Rev 17:15). In fact, note the parallels between the woman of Zech 5 and the harlot of Rev 17–18.³⁴

<u>Zechariah 5:5-11</u>	<u>Revelation 17-18</u>
Woman sitting in a basket	Woman sitting on the beast, seven mountains, and many waters (17: 3, 9, 15)
Emphasis on commerce (a basket for measuring grain)	Emphasis on commerce (merchant of grain, 18:13)
Woman’s name is wickedness	Woman’s name is Babylon the Great, Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth
Focus on False worship (a temple is built for the woman)	Focus on False worship (17:5)
Woman is taken to Babylon	Woman is called Babylon

Revelation 17–18

The final piece of scriptural evidence favoring a literal, futuristic Babylon is found in Rev 17–18. Chapter 17 features a woman with a title inscribed on her forehead, which reads, “Mystery Babylon the Great the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth” (Rev 17:5). Several preliminary steps must first be taken before it is possible to properly identify this woman. A proper identification of the woman first begins with correctly interpreting her title. In order to do this, two questions must be answered.³⁵ First, is her name “Mystery Babylon the Great” or is her name “Babylon the Great” which happens to be a mystery? Although either reading is linguistically possible, the latter reading is preferred. All other references to this title in Revelation cite it as “Babylon the Great” (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 18:2) rather than “Mystery Babylon the Great.”³⁶

Second, what is meant by the word “mystery”? Some believe the word “mystery” connotes the notion of mysticism or symbolism. Thus, these interpreters use the presence of this word in the woman’s title as a justification for interpreting the name Babylon in a mystical, spiritual, non-literal manner.³⁷ However, “mystery” simply means the revelation of new truth that has been previously undisclosed.³⁸ In sum, the woman’s name is “Babylon the Great.” Her name is a mystery in that it represents new truth that has never been previously disclosed.

Furthermore, in order to properly interpret the woman, it is necessary to follow the interpretation given at the end of the chapter, which identifies the woman as a city (Rev 17:18). Although much speculation surrounds the identity of the woman, most of it would cease by simply following the interpretation given in Rev 17:18.³⁹ Dyer correctly observes, “Whatever else is said about the harlot, she is first a city, not an ecclesiastical system.”⁴⁰ By combining this insight with the preceding discussion regarding the woman’s title, we are now in a position to offer an identification of the woman of Revelation 17. She is a city (17:18) named “Babylon the Great” (17:5).

However, the question still remains as to whether this city named Babylon is meant to be understood literally. This question can be answered by observing how other cities and geographic locales are understood in the rest of Revelation. It does seem to be a general rule that the names of cities and geographical regions are treated literally throughout the book. For example, most interpreters typically understand the following places and cities in Revelation literally: Patmos (1:9), Ephesus (2:1), Smyrna (2:1), Pergamum (2:8), Thyatira (2:12), Sardis (3:1), Philadelphia (3:7), Laodicia (3:14), the Euphrates (9:14; 16:12), Jerusalem (11:8),⁴¹ and Armageddon (16:16).⁴² Why should the city of Babylon depicted in Revelation 17–18 not be given the same literal interpretation? Moreover, when John wants to communicate that he is using a city in a non-literal sense, he makes this explicit as in Rev 11:8 where he says “the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt.” Because no similar formula is found in Revelation 17–18 to alert the reader that John is speaking of the city of Babylon figuratively, there is no reason that Babylon should be interpreted non-literally.⁴³ Henry Morris appropriately sums up the matter:

It must be stressed again that *Revelation* means ‘unveiling,’ not ‘veiling.’ In the absence of any statement in the context to the contrary, therefore, we must assume that the term Babylon applies to the real city of Babylon, although it may extend far beyond that to the whole system centered at Babylon as well.⁴⁴

Equating Revelation's use of the word Babylon with the literal city on the Euphrates is further strengthened when recalling Revelation's dependence upon the Old Testament. Because Daniel is the most frequently referenced book in Revelation, the Book of Revelation can be viewed as a type of sequel to Daniel. When Daniel uses the word Babylon he is referring to literal Babylon. Therefore, why should Revelation's use of this identical term be treated any differently especially considering Revelation's dependence upon Daniel?⁴⁵ Moreover, Revelation evidences great dependence upon the Old Testament due to the fact that 278 of Revelation's 404 verses refer to the Old Testament.⁴⁶ The Old Testament uses the word Babylon nearly 300 times. In every instance Babylon refers to literal Babylon. Thus, why should Revelation's use of this identical term be treated any differently especially considering Revelation's heavy dependence upon the Old Testament?

This connection between the Babylon of Revelation and the literal Babylon of the Old Testament is further strengthened upon noticing the number of allusions Rev 17–18 makes to Old Testament Babylon. For example, the reference to the wilderness in 17:3 may be a reference to the “oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea” in Isaiah 21:1. “The wilderness of the sea” refers to the sandy wastes of the Persian Gulf area outside of Babylon on the Euphrates. Interestingly, this oracle also includes the same statement “fallen, fallen is Babylon” (Isa 21:9) that is used in Revelation's description of Babylon (Rev 14:8; 18:2).⁴⁷ In addition, the boast of Babylon, “I sit as queen and am no widow, and will not see sorrow” (18:7) replicates that of ancient Babylon (Isa 47:7-9).⁴⁸

Along these same lines, commentators have also noticed similarities between the destruction of Babylon as depicted in Jer 50–51 and Rev 17–18.⁴⁹ For example, both passages associate Babylon with a golden cup (Jer 51:7; Rev 17:3-4; 18:6), dwelling or sitting on many waters (Jer 51:13; Rev 17:1), intoxicating the nations (Jer 51:7; Rev 17:2), and having the same

name (Jer 50:1; Rev 17:5; 18:10). Moreover, both passages illustrate Babylon's destruction as a stone sinking into the Euphrates (Jer 51:63-64; Rev 18:21) and depict Babylon's destruction as sudden (Jer 51:8; Rev 18:8), caused by fire (Jer 51:30; Rev 17:16; 18:8), final (Jer 50:39; Rev 18:21), and deserved (Jer 51:63-64; Rev 18:21). Furthermore, both passages describe the response to Babylon's destruction in terms of God's people fleeing (Jer 51:6, 45; Rev 18:4) and heaven rejoicing (Jer 51:48; Rev 18:20).⁵⁰

A mention of the Euphrates at two places in the Apocalypse (Rev 9:14; 16:12) further confirms that assigning Babylon the literal significance of the city on the Euphrates is the most natural way of understanding Revelation 17–18.⁵¹ Interestingly, the Rev 9:14 reference anticipates the coming of a host of demons to kill one third of humanity. The Rev 16:12 reference anticipates the coming of the kings of the east. These connections between the Euphrates and the anticipation of evil point to the fact that something evil is occurring in the region beyond the Euphrates. The rebuilt city of Babylon functioning as the headquarters of the antichrist during the tribulation period furnishes a plausible explanation of such evil.⁵² Understanding Revelation 17–18 as literal Babylon also seems most consistent with how these chapters describe the city's geography. For example, the imagery of the many waters corresponds well with Babylon's location on the Euphrates "with its canals, irrigation trenches, dikes, and marshes surrounding the city."⁵³

The part of the woman's title that reads "the mother of harlots" also uniquely identifies her as Babylon. "The mother of harlots" conveys the notion that she is the one who ultimately gave birth to all harlotry. Only the Tower of Babel fits this description.⁵⁴ Because the Tower of Babel incident took place before God had established national divisions through the creation of languages, this event stands in its own unique category as the first and only collective rebellion by mankind against God that has ever occurred in past history. As previously indicated, this initial apostasy in one centralized locale "followed by the global distribution, is the primary mechanism by which

Babylon became the central influence in all cultures and civilizations which followed.”⁵⁵

Consequently, the Babylonian mystery religions were exported throughout all the nations of the earth. Revelation 17:15 draws upon this concept when it explains that the woman sits on “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.”

Despite all of this evidence, many still resist viewing Babylon as the literal city on the Euphrates. Many contend that the harlot imagery of Rev 17:1-5 conveys the notion of a religious system due to the fact that such imagery is consistently used in Scripture to depict man’s rebellion against God (Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; Ezek 16; 23). However, this harlot imagery is not enough to disqualify Babylon from being a literal city. The Old Testament uses such harlot imagery to depict the Gentile cities of Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4) while never hinting that these cities are not meant to be understood literally.⁵⁶ Thus, the harlot imagery communicates that Babylon of Rev 17–18 is a literal city on the Euphrates that will have a religious influence over the entire world. In this regard, Babylon will be identical to the Tower of Babel, which was a literal city in the land of Shinar that exercised a universal, religious, apostate influence.

Others resist the literal Babylon view on the grounds that it is the product of reading current events regarding the recent Iraqi crisis back into the text rather than being the product of sound exegetical principles. However, this accusation seems unfair⁵⁷ in light of the fact that numerous interpreters held the view long before Saddam Hussein rose to power. Such commentators include⁵⁸ Newell (1935),⁵⁹ Jennings (1937),⁶⁰ Cooper (1942),⁶¹ and Lang (1948).⁶² Other commentators held the view even before Iraq became a nation in 1932. Such commentators include Seiss (1909)⁶³ and Larkin (1919).⁶⁴

Corroborating Evidence

Now that the biblical evidence for the literal Babylon view has been presented, allow me to briefly present two-pieces of corroborating evidence demonstrating the feasibility of a future

world capital in Babylon. The first piece of evidence involves geography. According to Henry Morris:

...Babylon is very near the geographical center of all the earth's land masses. It is within navigable distances to the Persian Gulf and is at the crossroads of the three great continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Thus, there is no more ideal location anywhere for a world trade center, a world banking center, a world educational center, or especially, a world capital!⁶⁵

The second piece of evidence involves oil. "Iraq sits on at least the second largest crude oil reserves in the world."⁶⁶ With such vast oil resources comes tremendous power to wield influence over the nations of the earth. For verification of this statement, one need only remember back to the Arab oil embargo of 1973 when the Arabic nations reduced their oil supply and implemented an embargo against those nations supporting Israel. Interestingly, although these oil reserves were not discovered until 1927, God in His word predicted thousands of years ago that the world's center of commercial power would once again return to the ancient city of Babylon.

Alternative Views

Unfortunately, the literal Babylon view is not the only view that interpreters have embraced. Before concluding this article, I will briefly highlight some alternative approaches to the identification of Babylon as well as point out their main inadequacies. Generally speaking, three reasons should cause interpreters to reject these approaches. First, they ignore the plain meaning of the word Babylon as consistently found throughout in Scripture and instead pour some alien meaning into this word. Second, to the extent that they often identify Babylon as some historical city or empire, they frequently force the text's global language (Rev 17:1, 15, 18) into local language. Third, they give inadequate attention to the description of Babylon as "the mother of harlots" (Rev 17:5). As previously discussed, this phrase uniquely identifies the Tower of Babel. By associating Babylon with some city, later city, or empire, these alternative approaches end up

identifying Babylon with a descendant of Babel or a daughter of harlotry while the text calls for identifying Babylon as the “mother of harlotry.”⁶⁷

The first approach identifies Babylon with Jerusalem. The most vociferous proponents of this approach today are preterists who date Revelation in the mid 60’s and see some or all of its contents as finding a fulfillment in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. At least two reasons cause this approach to be suspect. First, it requires an early date for Revelation. Revelation obviously cannot be a prophecy about A.D. 70 if it was written after A.D. 70. This fact is problematic for preterist interpreters because the overwhelming opinion among modern New Testament scholarship is that Revelation was written in A.D. 95.⁶⁸ Second, throughout Scripture, Jerusalem means Jerusalem and Babylon means Babylon. Yet suddenly in Revelation, preterists change the meaning of these words. Babylon suddenly becomes Jerusalem. No scriptural or logical justification exists for this sudden alteration except to satisfy preterist theological presuppositions.

The second approach identifies Babylon with Rome. A variation of this view is to identify Babylon with the Roman Catholic Church reigning from Vatican City. Much of the impetus for this view comes from the assumption that the seven hills of Rev 17:9 identify the topography of the ancient city of Rome. Although literal interpretation is to be employed whenever possible, there are times when the text specifically mandates a non-literal interpretation (Rev 11:8). Rev 17:9-10 informs the reader that the seven hills are not literal hills but rather are a metaphor for kings. Kings and kingdoms are often used interchangeably in Daniel and Revelation (Dan 2:37-39; 7:17, 23). Thus, the seven hills represent seven kingdoms. The Old Testament frequently uses the word “mountain” to refer to a kingdom or empire (Ps 30:7; 68:15-16; Isa 2:2; 41:15; Jer 51:25; Dan 2:35, 45; Hab 3:6, 10; Zech 4:7).⁶⁹ Walvoord identifies the seven kingdoms as those that have persecuted and will persecute Israel throughout her existence. The five fallen kingdoms include Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. Rome was the kingdom reigning when John wrote. The seventh

kingdom will be the revived Roman Empire headed by the antichrist. Thus, the seven hills have nothing to do with the topography of Rome.

Moreover, the seven hills have nothing at all to do with the entity Babylon. The seven hills are seven heads (17:9) that belong to the beast (17:3, 7; 13:1) rather than the woman named Babylon. It is possible to argue that the woman is still associated with the seven hills because she is sitting on them. However, it is better to see this as referring to the woman's control rather than her location. The other references to the woman sitting in Rev 17 also refer to her control (17:1, 15, 3).⁷⁰

The Babylon = Rome view is also built upon the notion that Babylon was a common code for Rome in the first century world and John was employing this practice when he wrote Revelation. Support for this view is supposedly found in various extra biblical writings that use Babylon as a code for Rome. Support for this view is also found in 1 Peter 5:13 where Peter indicates that he is writing from Babylon and yet church tradition places his death in Rome. Yet such support is unpersuasive. Many of the extra biblical writings equating Babylon with Rome were written in the second century quite some time after John wrote Revelation.⁷¹

Furthermore, use of 1 Peter 5:13 to support the code theory is damaged upon recognizing that Peter could have very well been in Babylon when he wrote his epistle. At the time Peter's epistle was written, Babylonia had the largest concentration of Jews living outside the land. Not only did the magi come from the region (Matt 2), but pilgrims from Mesopotamia also came to hear Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). The Babylonian Talmud would later be developed from this area. Because Peter was the apostle to the circumcised (Gal 2:8), Babylon would have been a logical place for him to travel to.⁷² In sum, the notion that John in Revelation used Babylon as a code for Rome is mere speculation at best. Moreover, the code theory should be rejected because it wreaks havoc upon the Old Testament eschatological Babylon predictions.

“Identifying Babylon as Rome implies that God gave numerous prophecies using a code name which would not obtain its true meaning until hundreds of years later.”⁷³

The third approach identifies Babylon with the world system in general rather than with a specific geographic locale. This view has trans-historical and a-temporal aspects. Hamstra, a proponent of this position, contends:

In the first century, Babylon was Rome. Two generations ago it was Berlin. Today, perhaps, it is Las Vegas or even a university campus. Babylon can be found everywhere throughout the history of the world. It is the center of anti-Christian seduction any time in history.⁷⁴

However, this view should be rejected because of its failure to interact with the details of the text that clearly call for Babylon to be a specific place on the earth at a particular time in history.

Predictive prophecy in Scripture has fulfillments in history that are specific, such as the predictions in Isaiah 53 of Messiah’s sufferings.⁷⁵

A fourth approach views Babylon as an eclectic amalgamation of two or more of the preceding views. For example, Pate identifies Babylon as having both a futuristic component as well as being historical Jerusalem.⁷⁶ However, this view should be rejected because of its reliance upon a dual hermeneutic that is simultaneously inconsistent. On the one hand, Revelation’s global language is allegorized to accommodate the Jerusalem view. On the other hand, a literal interpretation is embraced to accommodate the futuristic view. Milton Terry warned against such an approach through his articulation of the principle of single meaning: “a fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, the plain teaching of Scripture is that human history will one day cycle back to where it all began. In the same region where the first world emperor led mankind

in a universal political and religious revolt against God, the future antichrist will also lead the last collective revolt before Christ returns. Sadly, many reject this view. Why? Unbelief and timing are the two primary reasons that cause interpreters to reject the literal Babylon view.⁷⁸ Unbelief occurs when interpreters refuse to take God at His word. Timing also motivates unbelief because the type of Babylonian world capital spoken of in the Bible has not yet materialized in the Middle East. However, because God knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:9-10), it is simply a matter of time before these prophecies are literally fulfilled. Prior to 1948, Bible students faced a similar dilemma regarding how to interpret the plethora of prophecies requiring a Jewish return to their ancient homeland.⁷⁹ However, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 vindicated those who insisted upon a literal interpretation. Those that insist upon literally construing the prophecies regarding Babylon will one day be similarly vindicated.

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¹ It was commonly held within the early church that the Antichrist would actually be born in the City of Babylon. See Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 102.

² Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1995), 352.

³ Hermeneutics is the science and art of biblical interpretation. It deals with the question of how Scripture is to be interpreted.

⁴ Many justify a dual hermeneutic when interpreting the Book of Revelation on the basis that the book represents a special category of literature known as apocalyptic literature. This type of literature, which flourished during the intertestamental period, is highly symbolic and therefore cannot be understood through straightforward literalism. Once Revelation is lumped into this apocalyptic category, the interpreter is then liberated from consistently employing the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutical method. However, those that employ this approach typically overestimate the similarities and simultaneously marginalize the differences between apocalyptic literature and Revelation. For a refutation of this approach see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 323-48.

⁵ Walvoord identifies twenty-six instances in which Revelation's symbols are interpreted in the immediate context. See John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 29-30.

⁶ It only makes sense to turn to the Old Testament for assistance in this matter due to the fact that 278 of Revelation's 404 verses allude in some way to the Old Testament. See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 40. In addition, the literal interpreter is also assisted upon understanding that much of the figurative language in Revelation can be explained in terms of John's use of

comparative language. John frequently employs terms such as “like” and “as” indicating a correspondence between what John saw in the vision and what he was trying to describe (e.g. Rev 8:8-9).

⁷ Mark Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, “Revelation,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 2:970.

¹⁰ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 42.

¹¹ Tony Garland, “*Revelation Commentary*,” online: www.spiritandtruth.org, accessed March 1 2004,

3.17.1.

¹² Examples of how the existence of multiple nations allows for the opportunity of opposition against those nations with evil intent can be found in the World War II allies’ response to Hitler’s Nazi Germany and the United States’ recent response to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

¹³ John Eidesmoe, *God & Caesar* (Westchester, Ill: Crossway, 1984), 209-12.

¹⁴ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 43.

¹⁵ Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1983), 14.

¹⁶ Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 33-34. For another extensive list of thematic comparisons and contrasts between the Books of Genesis and Revelation, see E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or “The Day of the Lord”* (Great Britain: Hollen Street, 1935; reprint, London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1972), 57-59.

¹⁷ Interpreting prophetic events whose details do not fit the known facts of history in such a futuristic framework is a common method of biblical interpretation. For example, it is because of such a methodology that we know that prophecies of Matt 24–25 and Rev 4–22 are not speaking of the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 but rather pertain to the future events.

¹⁸ Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer*, Swindoll Leadership Library, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 538-39.

¹⁹ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 80-91.

²⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 183-88.

²¹ Consider the following: Herodotus visited and wrote about Babylon, Alexander the Great visited and died in Babylon, Seleucus conquered Babylon, Strabo visited and wrote about Babylon, Jews from Babylon were present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:8-10), Peter wrote First Peter from Babylon (1 Peter 5:13), and the Babylonian Talmud was created in Babylon. See Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 85-86.

²² *Ibid.*, 181.

²³ Dyer and Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer*, 633-42.

²⁴ Charles H. Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (October-December 1987): 443-49.

²⁵ Charles H. Dyer, “Jeremiah,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 1:1199.

²⁶ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1999), 135.

²⁷ Tony Garland, “*Revelation Commentary*,” online: www.spiritandtruth.org, accessed March 1 2004,

3.17.2.1.

²⁸ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002), 1462.

²⁹ An unfortunate trend among evangelicals involves taking passages like Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 as conveying dramatic hyperbole rather than literal prediction. Proponents of this approach would see these prophecies as having found an “essential fulfillment” in the historic fall of Babylon although the specific details were never fulfilled. Sometimes the hyperbolic language of destruction common in Ancient Near East treaties is used to argue for such an approach. See Homer Heater, “Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Rebuilt in the Eschaton?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (March 1998): 23-43. However, this approach is questionable. Not only does it ignore the details of the text but it also opens the door for viewing other portions of prophetic Scripture as having found merely an “essential fulfillment.” For example, if Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 were “essentially fulfilled” in 539 B.C., then why cannot the same interpretive approach be used to argue that Matt 24–25 or Rev 4–22 were also “essentially fulfilled” in A.D. 70. Moreover, if it is indeed God’s desire to communicate future events in Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 and yet the language of these texts is insufficient to communicate futurism, one wonders how God could have better communicated His point. Also, there is more taking place in these passages than mere destruction. The regeneration of Israel is also in view. Where else in Scripture is the reunification and restoration of Israel treated as anything other than a future event?

³⁰ John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 63-64.

³¹ Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation* (Glenside, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1919), 158.

³² Dyer and Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer*, 825-26; Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 96-99; Arthur Pink, *The Antichrist* (Swengel, PA: I. C. Herendeen, 1923), 279.

³³ Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 355.

³⁴ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 109.

³⁵ Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 434-36.

³⁶ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 246; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 289.

³⁷ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 6:430. Robertson seeks to buttress this interpretation by equating the word "mystery" of Rev 17:5 with the word "spiritually" of Rev 11:8. In Rev 11:8, "spiritually" is used to introduce a spiritual, non-literal interpretation. However, it is fallacious to equate these two words. "Mystery" is a noun and not an adverb like "spiritually." Also, "mystery" comes from a different root than "spiritually." See Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 288-89.

³⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 428-34; W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 424.

³⁹ Allowing Rev 17:18 to interpret the identity of the harlot is a textbook example of the hermeneutical philosophy provided in the introductory section of this article. The Book of Revelation can be interpreted literally despite its symbolic content because many of these symbols are identified in the immediate context. Earlier, it was observed that there were at least 26 instances where Revelation's symbols were identified somewhere in the immediate context.

⁴⁰ Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 436. Bullinger is another commentator who accurately identifies the woman as a city based upon Rev 17:18. See Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord,"* 509, 557-58.

⁴¹ Although Rev 11:8 speaks of Jerusalem that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, this text in no way denies Jerusalem as a literal city. Rather, this text is simply saying that in the coming tribulation, Jerusalem will have a spiritual aspect resembling Sodom and Egypt in addition to being a literal city.

⁴² Armageddon is an actual geographic area located in Northern Israel.

⁴³ Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206-07.

⁴⁴ Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 323.

⁴⁵ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 105.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 40.

⁴⁷ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 105.

⁴⁸ Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 431.

⁴⁹ Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 441-43; Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 307; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 983.

⁵⁰ Dispensationalists are divided concerning the timing of Babylon's destruction. Some see the destruction of religious Babylon (Rev 17) at the mid point of the tribulation and the destruction of commercial Babylon (Rev 18) toward the end of the tribulation. For an articulation of this view see C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1369-70. I think the preferred view is to see Rev 17 and 18 as a unit describing the singular destruction of Babylon toward the end of the tribulation period. For a defense of this view see Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 1)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (July-September 1987): 305-13. However, despite whichever view is taken, the fact remains that Babylon must be rebuilt in order to experience future destruction.

⁵¹ Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206-07.

⁵² Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 107-08.

⁵³ Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 283.

⁵⁴ Pink, *The Antichrist*, 259.

⁵⁵ Tony Garland, "Revelation Commentary," online: www.spiritandtruth.org, accessed March 1 2004, 3.17.1.

⁵⁶ Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 434.

⁵⁷ It is true that Dyer released his book advocating the literal Babylon view on the eve of the Gulf War [Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1991) and on the eve of the recent war with Iraq [Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise Of Babylon*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003). However, it should also be noted that the content of these books is based upon Dyer's master's thesis that was completed in May of 1979 [Charles H.

Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979)] long before Hussein's rise to power and escalating tensions between America and Iraq.

⁵⁸ For a more extensive list of early commentators who held to the literal Babylon view see Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 27-32; Thomas Ice, "Babylon in Bible Prophecy," *Pre-Trib Perspectives* 7, no. 11 (March 2003): 5.

⁵⁹ William R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Grace Publications, 1935), 268.

⁶⁰ Frederick C. Jennings, *Studies in Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1937), 476.

⁶¹ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1942), 114.

⁶² George H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Paternoster, 1948), 305.

⁶³ J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1909; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1964), 397.

⁶⁴ Larkin, *The Book of Revelation*, 150.

⁶⁵ Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 349.

⁶⁶ Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon*, 147.

⁶⁷ Pink, *The Antichrist*, 258-59; Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord,"* 506.

⁶⁸ For a refutation of preterist arguments used to support an early date see J. Ritchie Smith, "The Date of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 45 (April-June 1888): 297-328; Mark Hitchcock, "The Stake in the Heart: The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation," in *The End Times Controversy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 123-50.

⁶⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; reprint, 1979), 227-28.

⁷⁰ Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 (Part 2)," 437-38.

⁷¹ Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206.

⁷² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1993), 1003; Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 352.

⁷³ Tony Garland, "Revelation Commentary," online: www.spiritandtruth.org accessed March 1 2004, 3.17.3.3.

⁷⁴ Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 117.

⁷⁵ Robert L. Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 226.

⁷⁶ C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 160, 68-69; C. Marvin Pate and Calvin Haines, *Doomsday Delusions* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill, 1995), 43-44.

⁷⁷ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1947), 205.

⁷⁸ Tony Garland, "Revelation Commentary," online: www.spiritandtruth.org accessed March 1 2004, 3.17.3.5.3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.17.3.5.