

Revelation 17-18 Babylon Genesis 11:1-9

Readings: Revelation 17:1-6 and 18:1-5, 9-13 (but ideally the two chapters should be read in their entirety)

The city of Babylon often occurs in the Bible, for example in Jeremiah. Why? Because the Bible shows us patterns and repetitions in history. History repeats itself. Babylon is a type of the powers that resist God and make life hard for the believers. It already occurred in Genesis, then in Kings, in the prophets, here as a reference to the Roman Empire, and in the future as well (17:8). Nazi Germany was another incarnation of Babylon. Babel (= Babylon) is not just past tense. The theme shows that humankind is inclined to sin: they are defiant against God.

Genesis 11 tells how humans want power, at God's expense, rather than take their proper position; the tower they try to build is a ziggurat, a temple. In Kings and in the book of the prophets Babylon is the occupier which takes Judah into exile.

Revelation is rougher, more realistic than Genesis 11: here the anti-Christian powers are exposed: greed, occultism, sex and money. These chapters are unsuitable for children. It is very clear that Jesus/John primarily thinks of the Roman Empire, for Rome was known as the city built on seven hills (17:9). This makes Revelation a political text! Totalitarianism is exposed by Jesus/John. Babylon is a war machine masquerading as a theme park.

The emphasis in these two chapters is on economic and ideological aspects; they are critical of the veneration of trade and humanity. Rome is a society with a false religion: 17:8 is a parody of God, 'the one who was and is and is to come'. John suggests that living in Asia Minor equals living in Babylon; people like it because of the prosperity which the Romans brought [see last week]. The cargo list in chapter 18 criticises the slave trade by mentioning slaves last.

John glaringly describes the sexual and economic temptations of his time, hence the image of the prostitute. In our time we hear slogans like 'Life is all about...'; 'You deserve this...'; 'your M&S'. The Australian prime minister says his country can't do without coal, which simply shows how naked economic interests trump the climate.

These chapters are about sex, power and money. According to the Bible these things are not bad in themselves, but they are very dangerous and need to be handled with care.

If he addressed us, living in the West, John would argue that we are also living in Babylon; the similarities abound. And the church is warned: 'Go out from her!' 18:4 is easily the most important verse in these chapters. Apparently the Christians in Asia Minor needed this warning and so do we. But it cannot mean they have to move away physically, and neither do we need to move house. It is a call to keeping their distance from the Roman system. We too need to keep our distance from the system in which we live. We must honour God, not the Emperor.

As believers we need each other to remain pure, we need to sharpen each other because it is hard to resist the temptations of money, sex and power.

The system may also persecute Christians who refuse to cooperate. We cannot escape entirely (18:24). Many Christians suffer and die for non-co-operation.

Yet John hears that the horrible city is fallen (18:2). This shows that Revelation also contains the expectation of God's victory, the moment when Jesus' victory on the cross will finally take full effect. While we anticipate God's future, let's preserve ourselves untainted.

In Bible times cities were always described as women. Feminist readers have criticised John for using very negative images of a woman in these two chapters. It's good to know that soon afterwards in the book John will introduce a very positive image of a woman: the alternative city, the new Jerusalem (chapters 21-22). These two cities are absolute opposites.

We are in the world but we don't belong to it. Let us be careful with sex, power and money.