

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BABYLON: ITS CHARACTER AND DOOM

(Lecture 17)

I AM to address you to-night on a theme, the wonder of which grows upon me every time I speak of it, namely, the Mystery of Iniquity in its final form: Babylon the Great. It is that vast system of error which is so like Christianity in some respects that thousands of apparently spiritually-minded people like Fenelon, Pascal, Faber and others, have not been able to distinguish it from Christianity; yet, when tested by the Word of God it is seen to be but a counterfeit of that church which God has purchased with the blood of His own Son.

Twice already in the course of this book we have heard of Babylon's fall, but as yet we have not learned what city or system was referred to. But the chapter now before us is entirely devoted to that interesting and solemn subject, and a careful study of what is here revealed ought to leave us free from all doubt or perplexity as to the identification of Babylon.

This chapter, and the one that follows, is another of the great parentheses of this book. Chronologically the 19th chapter immediately follows chapter 16; but ere going on with the direct order of events, John is taken aside as it were to see this remarkable vision of the false church, ere he beholds the union of the true church with the Lamb in the glory.

I ask your careful attention to the apostle's own words as recorded in verses 1 to 6:

“And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgment of the great harlot that sitteth upon many waters; with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet-colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

“And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: and upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY: BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration (or, amazement).”

I have quoted this somewhat lengthy portion in full that we may have the complete description before us.

The beast is beyond question the same as that of chapter 13, and is therefore indubitably the Roman Empire. It is the empire as a whole, but with the last phase especially emphasized. The woman is a religious system, who dominates the civil power, at least for a time. The name upon her forehead should easily enable us to identify her. But in order to do that we will do well to go back to our Old Testament, and see what is there revealed concerning literal Babylon, for the one will surely throw light upon the other. We have also the added instruction of secular history which supplies us with some very important facts in this connection, and throws a flood of light upon the succession of spiritual Babylon of the Apocalypse to literal Babylon of the Old Testament.

As we go back into the dim twilight of history with Scripture, we learn that the founder of Babel, or Babylon, was Nimrod, of whose unholy achievements we read in the 10th chapter of Genesis.

He was the arch-apostate of the patriarchal age.

He is described as **“a mighty hunter before the Lord”**, *“a hunter of the souls of men,”* the rabbis said. Going out from the presence of the Lord, he impiously sought to gather a multitude about himself, and, in defiance of the express command of God to spread abroad upon the face of the earth, he persuaded his associates and followers to join together in **“building a city and a tower which should reach unto heaven.”**

Not surely, as some of us were taught in our childhood, a tower by which they might climb up into the skies to escape another possible flood, but a tower of renown, rising to a great height, to be recognized as a temple or rallying center for those who did not walk in obedience to the word of the Lord.

With all the effrontery of our modern apostates, they called their city and tower Babel, *the gate of God*; but it was soon changed by divine judgment into Babel, *Confusion*. It bore the stamp of unreality from the first, for we are told **“they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.”**

An imitation of that which is real and true has ever since characterized Babylon, in all ages.

Nimrod, or Nimrod-bar-Cush, as he is called on the monuments, was a grandson of Ham, the unworthy son of Noah, whose character is revealed in his exposure of his father’s shame.

We know that Noah had brought through the flood the revelation of the true God, for he was a preacher of righteousness, and his utterances on more than one occasion show that he had the prophetic gift.

Ham on the other hand seems to have been all too readily affected by the apostasy that brought the flood, for he shows no evidence of self-judgment, but the very opposite. His name, as spelled out upon Egyptian monuments, is Khem, and this agrees with the literal sound of the Hebrew word rendered Ham in our Bibles. It means “*swarthy*,” “*darkened*,” or, more literally, “*the sunburnt*.” And the name indicates the state of the man’s soul. For what is a sunburnt person? One who is darkened by light from heaven. Ham had been granted wonderful mercies, he was saved from the flood because of his father’s faith; but he abused his privileges and “**turned the grace of God into lasciviousness.**” He was actually darkened by the burning rays of the light that God caused to shine upon his soul. Thus his conscience became seared as with a hot iron, and he became the founder of a race that departed from the living God and led the way into idolatry, worshiping and serving the creature more than the Creator.

We know something of what this means. We speak of people to-day who have become, as we say, gospel-hardened. They too have been darkened by the light, and they are often the ring-leaders in apostasy: “**If the light that is in thee become darkened, how great is that darkness.**”

There are many in the world to-night, who used to listen with tears in their eyes to the story of the matchless grace of God as revealed in the cross of Christ, but are unmoved now though that story be told never so tenderly; they have become hardened in their sins, and their seared consciences no longer feel the Spirit’s breath. It is a most dangerous thing to trifle with light from heaven.

But to proceed with our theme. Ham became darkened by the light. We know his failure and sin. But when Noah had recovered himself and knew what his son had done unto him he pronounced, by the spirit of prophecy, a curse upon Canaan, not on Ham. Do you wonder at that? I did, until I saw that God had already pronounced a blessing upon all the three sons of Noah - Shem, Ham and Japheth. So Noah passes over his unworthy son and utters a curse upon Canaan, who we can well believe was, as we say, “a chip off the old block.” Ham begat a son named Cush, “*the black one*,” and he became the father of Nimrod, the apostate leader of his generation.

Ancient lore now comes to our assistance, and tells us that the wife of Nimrod-bar-Cush was the infamous Semiramis the First. She is reputed to have been the foundress of the Babylonian mysteries and the first high-priestess of idolatry.

Thus Babylon became the fountainhead of idolatry, and the mother of every heathen and pagan system in the world. The mystery-religion that was there originated spread in various forms throughout the whole earth, and, as we shall see in a few minutes, it is with us to-day: it is identical with the mystery of iniquity which wrought so energetically in Paul’s day, and shall have its fullest development when the Holy Spirit has departed and the Babylon of the Apocalypse holds sway.

Building on the primeval promise of the woman's Seed who was to come, Semiramis bore a son whom she declared was miraculously conceived and when she presented him to the people, he was hailed as the promised deliverer. This was Tammuz, whose worship Ezekiel protested against in the days of the captivity. Thus was introduced the mystery of the mother and the child, a form of idolatry that is older than any other known to man. The rites of this worship were secret. Only the initiated were permitted to know its mysteries. It was Satan's effort to delude mankind with an imitation so like the truth of God that they would not know the true Seed of the woman when He came in the fullness of time. To this Justin Martyr bears definite witness.

From Babylon this mystery-religion spread to all the surrounding nations, as the years went on and the world was populated by the descendants of Noah. Everywhere the symbols were the same, and everywhere the cult of the mother and the child became the popular system; their worship was celebrated with the most disgusting and immoral practices.

The image of the queen of heaven with the babe in her arms was seen everywhere, though the names might differ as languages differed. It became the mystery-religion of Phoenicia, and by the Phoenicians was carried to the ends of the earth. Ashtoreth and Tammuz, the mother and child of these hardy adventurers, became Isis and Horus in Egypt, Aphrodite and Eros in Greece, Venus and Cupid in Italy, and bore many other names in more distant places. Within 1000 years Babylonianism had become the religion of the world, which had rejected the Divine revelation.

Linked with this central mystery were countless lesser mysteries, the hidden meaning of which was known only to the initiates, but the outward forms were practiced by all the people. Among these were the doctrines of:

- purgatorial purification after death,
- salvation by countless sacraments such as priestly absolution,
- sprinkling with holy water,
- the offering of round cakes to the queen of heaven as mentioned in the book of Jeremiah,
- dedication of virgins to the gods, which was literally sanctified prostitution,
- weeping for Tammuz for a period of 40 days.

Prior to the great festival of Istar, who was said to have received her son back from the dead - for it was taught that Tammuz was slain by a wild boar and afterwards brought back to life. To him the egg was sacred, as depicting the mystery of his resurrection, even as the evergreen was his chosen symbol and was set up in honor of his birth at the winter solstice, when a boar's head was eaten in memory of his conflict and a Yule-log burned with many mysterious observances.

The sign of the cross was sacred to Tammuz, as symbolizing the life-giving principle and as the first letter of his name. It is represented upon vast numbers of the most ancient altars and temples, and did not, as many have supposed, originate with Christianity.

From this mystery-religion, the patriarch Abraham was separated by the divine call; and with this same evil cult the nation that sprang from him had constant conflict, until under Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, it was grafted onto what was left of the religion of Israel in the northern kingdom in the day of Ahab, and was the cause of their captivity at the last.

Judah was polluted by it, for Baal worship was but the Canaanitish form of the Babylonian mysteries, and only by being sent into captivity to Babylon itself did Judah become cured of her fondness for idolatry. Baal was the Sun-God, the Life-giving One, identical with Tammuz.

When Christ came into this world the mystery of iniquity was everywhere holding sway, save where the truth of God as revealed in the Old Testament was known.

Thus, when the early Christians set out upon the great task of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth, they found themselves everywhere confronted by this system in one form or another; for though Babylon as a city had long been but a memory, her mysteries had not died with her.

When the city and temples were destroyed, the high-priest fled with a company of initiates and their sacred vessels and images to Pergamos, where the symbol of the serpent was set up as the emblem of the hidden wisdom. From there, they afterwards crossed the sea and emigrated to Italy, where they settled in the Etruscan plain. There the ancient cult was propagated under the name of the Etruscan Mysteries, and eventually Rome became the headquarters of Babylonianism.

The chief priests wore mitres shaped like the head of a fish, in honor of Dagon, the fish-god, the Lord of life - another form of the Tammuz mystery, as developed among Israel's old enemies, the Philistines. The chief priest when established in Rome took the title Pontifex Maximus, and this was imprinted on his mitre.

When Julius Cesar (who, like all young Romans of good family, was an initiate) had become the head of the State, he was elected Pontifex Maximus, and this title was held henceforth by all the Roman emperors down to Constantine the Great, who was, at one and the same time, head of the church and high priest of the heathen! The title was afterwards conferred upon the bishops of Rome, and is borne by the pope to-day, who is thus declared to be, not the successor of the fisherman-apostle Peter, but the direct successor of the high priest of the Babylonian mysteries, and the servant of the fish god Dagon, for whom he wears, like his idolatrous predecessors, the fisherman's ring.

During the early centuries of the church's history, the mystery of iniquity had wrought with such astounding effect, and Babylonian practices and teachings had been so largely absorbed by that which bore the name of the church of Christ, that the truth of the Holy Scriptures on many points had been wholly obscured, while idolatrous practices had been foisted upon the people as Christian sacraments, and heathen philosophies took the place of gospel instruction. Thus was developed that amazing system which for a thousand years dominated Europe and trafficked in the bodies and souls of men, until the great Reformation of the 16th century brought in a measure of deliverance.

It was this that filled the apostle with such amazement. It seemed incredible that the glorious movement with which he had been identified for a generation should ever become so perverted as to become the mother of harlots and of every abomination, and should even become the slaughterer of the saints of God and the martyrs of Jesus.

But her bloody history during the dark days of persecution bears awful witness to the truth of the vision. The angel, however, goes on to show that the future has more marvellous things in store than we should otherwise have dared to imagine; for no past period of Rome's history fully answers to what is brought before us in the rest of the chapter.

We hear a great deal about the desirability of church-federation at the present time, but men seem to forget, or never to have known, that it is God Himself who has rent Christendom asunder because of her unfaithfulness and apostasy.

We are told that it would be a most excellent thing if the different denominations of Protestants could be united in one great body, and then join hands with the three so-called Catholic churches - Anglican, Greek and Roman. It is pointed out that such a vast union church could dominate the world, and besides it would make for such increased efficiency, and would simplify the financial problems which have so troubled and perplexed our boards and officials for so long. But we need to remember that such a union as this would not be the body of Christ at all. It would simply be a worldly confederacy of saved and unsaved - just great Babylon over again.

The body of Christ remains undivided in spite of Christendom's unhappy schisms, for it is composed of all truly saved people who have by the Spirit's baptism been made one in Christ. While outward unity is desirable, it would not be a blessing if at the expense of the truth.

But we must now consider the angel's interpretation of the vision. He said to John,

“Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns. The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell upon the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is” (vers. 7, 8).

We have already seen in our study of the 13th chapter that this Beast sets forth the Roman Empire as revived in a Satan-inspired league of nations after the church dispensation is over.

This will be a very different thing to any league that may be formed in our times, and which may result from the recent war, while the church is still here. The federation of the future will be utterly godless and God-defiant. When that league is formed it will be but natural that a confederacy of all religious systems be wrought out, and this too will be satanic in character.

It will be a union of Christless professors, inheriting all the human and demoniacal mysteries of Babylon.

In other words all sects will be swallowed up in the one distinctively Babylonish system that has ever maintained the cult of the mother and the child. This system will for the first part of the tribulation period dominate the civil power. Thus the woman will be in the saddle again and ride the beast! He who has eyes to see and a heart to understand can readily discern the preparations now in progress, with this very end in view.

From verses 9 to 11 we learn the identity of the city where Babylon has her seat, and also that it is when the final form of the empire appears that she will attain the position of pre-eminence that she has sought so long. Rome alone answers to the description given. On a previous occasion we saw that the eighth head, who is of the seven, is the last great world-ruler who will dominate the League of Nations in the time of the end, and whose capital will be the so-called eternal city.

It would seem however from verses 12 to 14 that the other ten kings act in fullest harmony with the Beast; and this completely nullifies the theory that the vision refers to any past history of the nations into which the Roman Empire was divided. Never have they thus acted in unison, but Europe has ever been a scene of conflicting nations and warring powers since the break-up of the Empire itself. It is to the future we must look for a time when the ten kings shall receive power one hour with the Beast. Then they will impiously make war with the Lamb only to be overcome by Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

The similitude of the waters is explained for us in verse 15: **“The waters which thou sawest, where the harlot sitteth, are peoples and multitudes, and nations and tongues.”** Over all nations has Babylon borne sway in the past, deceiving them with the wine of her fornication. Over all nations will she again bear rule, until wearied with her blandishments, the world, whose favor she courted, will spurn her at last. For the angel continues his explanation of the mystery by saying,

“And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked. and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (vers. 16-18).

There is no mistaking her identity. Pagan Rome was the lineal successor of Babylon. Papal Rome absorbed the Babylonian mysteries; and the Rome of the Beast in the last days will be the seat of the revived satanic system that began with Nimrod and his infamous consort Semiramis, which has from that day to this been opposed to everything that is of God; and which changed the truth of God into a lie, worshiping and serving the creature more than the Creator.

Babylon of old, as we have seen, was the mother of idolatry. In Jeremiah 50:38 we read, **“It is the land of graven images; they are mad upon their idols.”** It was she who taught the nations to substitute idolatry for spiritual worship, and to-day one-third of Christendom has followed her in the adoration of images, and another third worships icons, or pictures. There can be no question as to the Babylonish origin of these abominations. Nothing of the kind was known in the churches of God until the heathen mysteries were grafted unto Christianity. The images of the mother and child that are enshrined in Rome’s temples are only different in name to the images worshiped in the groves and temples of Semiramis, Ashtoreth, Isis, and other so-called “queens of heaven.” In many instances the old idols were simply re-named and adored as before. There is in one place in southern Europe a statue of Apollo, the sun-god, identical with Tammuz and Baal, which is worshiped by deluded Romanists as St. Apollos; and the S is carved upon the pedestal by a later hand than the original name!

The mother of the Lord Jesus Christ assumed no such place among the early Christians as she has now been given in Rome's mysteries. She is seen as a lowly worshiper, and as joining with others in prayer, in Acts 2; and this is the last mention of her in Scripture. Of the fable of her assumption and crowning as Queen of Heaven the Bible gives no hint. It is Babylonianism pure and simple.

The word of the Lord to His people of old is most instructive for us now in the light of all we have been going over. **“Flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul; be not cut off in her iniquity; for this is the time of the Lord’s vengeance; He will render unto her a recompense. Babylon hath been a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad. Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed: howl for her; take balm for her pain. if so be she may be healed. We would have healed Babylon. but she is not healed: forsake her, and let us go everyone to his own country; for her judgment reacheth unto heaven, and is lifted up even to the skies”** (Jeremiah 51:6-9).

It is a lamentable fact that Babylon's principles and practices are rapidly but surely pervading the churches that escaped from Rome at the time of the Reformation.

We may see evidences of it in the wide use of high-sounding ecclesiastical titles, once unknown in the reformed churches, in the revival of holy days and church feasts such as Lent, Good Friday, Easter and Christ' Mass, or, as it is generally written, Christmas. I quite admit that some of these festivals if divested of any ecclesiastical character may be observed in innocence in the home, but when they are turned into church festivals they certainly come under the condemnation of Galatians 4:9-11, where the Holy Spirit warns against the observance of days and months and times and seasons. All of them, and many more that might be added are Babylonish in their origin, and were at one time linked with the Ashtoreth and Tammuz mystery-worship. It is through Rome that they have come down to us; and we do well to remember that Babylon is a mother, with daughters who are likely to partake of their mother's characteristics, for is it not written, **“As is the mother so is the daughter”**? Therefore it behooves all who love the Lord and desire His approbation to **“depart from iniquity,”** and seek to **“follow righteousness, faith, love and peace with them that call upon Him out of a pure heart.”**

We shall have a fuller account of Babylon's doom in our next study, and shall perhaps see some things more clearly which we could not well go into in detail to-night.

Note: To those who desire to make a fuller investigation of Babylonianism, I commend Alexander Hislop's monumental work, *“The Two Babylons,”* to which I am indebted for many of the above facts.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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