Much controversy surrounds the identification of Babylon in Revelation 17–18. This paper will survey the four most prominent approaches for identifying Babylon in Revelation 17–18. These approaches include viewing Babylon as Jerusalem, Rome, an end time religious system, and futuristic, literal, rebuilt Babylon. I lean toward the last option. For each option, I will follow a two-fold approach. First, I will allow each view to speak for itself by presenting the methodology embraced by its proponents. Second, I will raise objections and potential weaknesses.

**Jerusalem**

The first option involves identifying Babylon in Revelation 17–18 as the city of Jerusalem. Most of the proponents of the Babylon = Jerusalem position are either full or partial preterists who see the events described in Revelation 4–22 as predicting the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70 as well as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

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2. Full preterism sees Revelation 4–22 as finding a total A.D. 70 fulfillment. Russell is a representative of the full preterist camp. On the other hand, partial preterism understands most of the contents of Revelation 4–22 as finding an A.D. 70 realization while allowing for some of these prophecies, such as Revelation 20, to receive a futuristic fulfillment. Gentry is an advocate of partial preterism.

3. However, not all advocates of the Jerusalem view are of this mindset. Some advocating this position hold to a late date of the book and view the imagery of the harlot in Revelation 17–18 to be merely reminiscent of the A.D. 70 events. Thus they understand these chapters as an *ex eventu* prophecy. Provan is a proponent of this position. See Iain Provan, "Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 64 (December 1996): 81-100.
Methodology

General Arguments

The first piece of evidence used in support of this view is Revelation’s predictions that its prophecies will come to pass “shortly” or “quickly” (Rev 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 12, 20) and are “near” or “at hand” (Rev 1:3; 22:10) or are “about to” take place (Rev 1:19; 3:10). These “timing texts” prevent Babylon from being interpreted as referring to something centuries after the date of the original writing. Advocates say such a limitation at least narrows the possibilities of the identity of Babylon so that the interpreter must consider Jerusalem, which was an immediate oppressor of God’s people at the time John wrote the Apocalypse.⁴

Jerusalem advocates also note that many commentators have observed that Revelation appears to be a reworking of the Olivet Discourse.⁵ This allows them to conclude that Revelation is about the approaching judgment upon Israel and Jerusalem because Christ’s prophecy on the Mount of Olives is concerned with this same subject (Matt 24:15, 20, 34).⁶ Thus, Jerusalem advocates maintain that it should come as no surprise that the harlot of Revelation 17–18 is identified with Jerusalem because the Olivet Discourse and its fuller exposition in Revelation concerns the imminent destruction upon Israel and Jerusalem.

A stronger argument used by Jerusalem proponents involves the identification of the phrase “the great city” as used in Revelation 17:18. Jerusalem advocates contend that the only way to properly identify this city is to observe how the phrase “the great city” appears earlier in Revelation. The first reference is in Revelation 11:8, which says, “And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” Here, the city of

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⁴ Chilton, 421.
⁵ Gentry, 52-53. Russell observes numerous parallels between Revelation and the Olivet Discourse such as the Parousia, wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes, false prophets, deceivers, signs and wonders, the darkening of the sun and moon, stars falling from heaven, angels, trumpets, eagles, carcasses, great tribulation, woe, convulsions of nature, the treading down of Jerusalem, the gathering of the elect, the reward of the faithful, and the judgment of the wicked. These similarities allow Russell to conclude that the same events that are predicted in the Olivet Discourse are also predicted in Revelation but only in “a more figurative and symbolical dress.” Russell, 375-76.
⁶ Ibid., 485.
Jerusalem is in view because it refers to the city where Christ was crucified. Thus, Revelation 11:8 applies the phrase “the great city” to Jerusalem. Therefore, Revelation 17:18 must refer to Jerusalem as well.⁷

**Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17–18**

Jerusalem advocates also point out numerous descriptors of Babylon that could only apply to Jerusalem. For example, the harlot imagery (Rev 17:1-2) was used most frequently of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness in the Old Testament (Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20-24, 30-33; 3:1-3, 8; Ezek 16; 23; Hos 9:1). Gentry points out that the color and adornment of the harlot in Revelation 17:4 reflects the Jewish priestly colors of scarlet, purple, and gold (Exod 28:33). These same colors were also found in the tapestry of the temple.⁸

**Weaknesses**

**General Problems**

To begin with, to refer Jerusalem to Babylon is “unprecedented.”⁹ While Scripture typically relates Jerusalem to the people of God, it relates Babylon to the world.¹⁰ Although Sodom and Egypt have precedent for being used as a metaphor for Jerusalem (11:8), Babylon is never used in this way.¹¹ Also, there is no example in Jewish literature of the name “Babylon” being used for Jerusalem.¹²

Moreover, if the Babylon = Jerusalem hypothesis is correct then Jerusalem will never be rebuilt again. Revelation 18:21 describes the permanent destruction of Babylon when it says, “…Thus with

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⁷ Jerusalem advocates believe that because the three references to the “Great City” prior to Revelation 17–18 refer to Jerusalem, the references to the “Great City” in Revelation 17–18 refers to Jerusalem as well. In addition to 11:8, Jerusalem advocates also point to Revelation 14:20 (which supposedly refers to Jerusalem because the grapes/vine imagery is commonly associated with Israel throughout the Old Testament) and Revelation 16:19 (which supposedly refers to Jerusalem because the imagery of the city’s three fold division is found in Ezekiel 5:1-5). See Russell, 486-88.

⁸ Gentry, 76. Beale notes that the combination of the words in the Greek that describe the harlot’s garb is identical to the LXX description of the Jewish high priest’s garments. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 886.


¹⁰ Ibid., 206.

¹¹ Beale, 25.

¹² Ibid.
violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore.” Thus, according to the Babylon = Jerusalem view, Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and will never be rebuilt again. Yet, how can this be a description of Jerusalem when Scripture repeatedly speaks of its return to prominence during the millennial reign (Isa 2:3; Zech 14:16; Rev 20:9)? Scripture is plain that God still has a future plan for Jerusalem and yet this view seems to teach the opposite.\(^\text{13}\)

Furthermore, the description of the harlot in Revelation 17–18 seems to communicate her heavy involvement with idolatry.\(^\text{14}\) This seems to be communicated by terms such as “spiritual adultery,” “unclean things,” and “abominations.” This is an odd description of first century Jerusalem in light of the fact that the city of that era was strictly monotheistic and never compromised with the idolatry of their pagan neighbors.\(^\text{15}\) In addition, while idealist, historicist, and futurist interpretations of Revelation can be sustained regardless of whether one assigns a Neronic or Domitianic date to John’s Apocalypse, the preterist interpretation advocated by Gentry, Chilton, and Russell does not enjoy the same luxury. Because Revelation 17–18 obviously cannot be a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 if these prophecies were written 25 years later, the Jerusalem view has a tendency to rise or fall depending on whether one assigns an early or late date to the book.

It is interesting to observe Jerusalem advocates either expressly or tacitly admitting their dependence upon an early date. Upon reviewing the Revelation commentary called *Days of Vengeance* of fellow preterist David Chilton, Gentry noted, “If it could be demonstrated that Revelation were written 25 years after the Fall of Jerusalem, Chilton’s entire labor goes up in smoke.”\(^\text{16}\) Needless to say, Jerusalem advocates must go out of their way to demonstrate Revelation’s early date. This

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\(^{14}\) Beale, 885.

\(^{15}\) First century Jews recognized idolatry had caused the Babylonian captivity. This recognition had the effect of curing the nation of that particular sin. Ibid., 887.

explains why Gentry devoted his doctoral dissertation to the subject of Revelation’s early date.\textsuperscript{17} The problem with the Jerusalem view’s dependence upon assigning an early date to Revelation is that most modern New Testament scholars will not date the book that early.\textsuperscript{18} Most of the external and internal arguments for Revelation’s early date have already been successfully rebutted.\textsuperscript{19} Therefore, the Jerusalem view’s dependence upon an early date places it in a precarious situation.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, the Jerusalem view has problems handling the global language found in Revelation 17–18 and Matthew 24. For example, the waters on which the woman sits (Rev 17:1) are later defined as peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (Rev 17:15). Except for the replacement of tribes with multitudes, these are the same categories that are mentioned in Revelation 5:9 regarding those for whom Christ died.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, viewing the categories of Revelation 17:15 as pertaining to the local situation of A.D. 70 logically leads to the conclusion that Christ only died for those within the same localized sphere rather than the whole world. Because of their prior understanding that Revelation pertains to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jerusalem advocates are forced to allegorize Revelation’s global language into local language. Because they see Revelation as a fuller exposition of the Olivet Discourse, Jerusalem advocates also face the problem of handling global and futuristic language in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:15, 21-22, 27, 29, 30-31).\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} The content of this dissertation was later published in his book Before Jerusalem Fell Kenneth L. Gentry, Before Jerusalem Fell (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Gentry is candid in his admission that his assignment of an early date for the book has caused him to swim against the tide of contemporary opinion. Kenneth L. Gentry, The Beast of Revelation (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2002), 109.

\textsuperscript{19} J. Ritchie Smith, "The Date of the Apocalypse," Bibliotheca Sacra 45 (April-June 1888). For a more recent work specifically critiquing the early date arguments raised by Gentry, see 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.

\textsuperscript{20} D. A. Carson echoes such a sentiment when issuing the following critique of Chilton’s commentary: “...Chilton ties his interpretation of the entire book to a dogmatic insistence that it was written before A.D. 70, and that its predictions are focused on the destruction of Jerusalem. Although there are some excellent theological links crafted in this book, the central setting and argument are so weak and open to criticism that I cannot recommend the work very warmly.” D.A. Carson, New Testament Commentary Survey, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 129.

\textsuperscript{21} Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 303.

Response to the Jerusalem View’s Specific Arguments

Revelation’s so-called “timing texts” do not limit the scope of its fulfillment to the first century. It is possible to understand the “timing texts” qualitatively rather than chronologically. In other words, these texts could indicate the manner of Christ’s return rather than when He will return. Thus, when the action comes, it will come suddenly with great rapidity.23 Moreover, the action is to be regarded as impending as if it could be fulfilled at any moment.24 The New Testament allows for such a usage. For example, while it is true that Scripture often uses “shortly” or “quickly” (tacos) in a chronological sense to indicate “when” (1 Timothy 3:14), Scripture also uses the same word in a qualitative sense to indicate “how.” For instance, Acts 22:18 uses tacos to indicate manner when it says, “Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” In addition, the Septuagint often uses tavcos qualitatively in prophetic passages.25

Finally, the argument that “the great city” of Revelation 17–18 is identical to “the great city” of Jerusalem found earlier in Revelation 11:8 represents a hermeneutical error known as “illegitimate totality transfer.” This error arises when the meaning of a word or phrase as derived from its use elsewhere is then automatically read into the same word or phrase in a foreign context.26 Jerusalem advocates commit such an error when they define “the great city” in Revelation 17–18 from how the same phrase is used in totally different contexts elsewhere in Revelation. Such a hermeneutical approach neglects the possibility that Revelation could be highlighting two “great cities,” both Jerusalem and Babylon.

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24 Ibid., 333.
25 It is obvious that the use of tavcos in the following passages cannot be chronological and therefore must be qualitative because contextually these prophetic passages would not find their fulfillment for hundreds and even thousands of years after they were written. For example, Isaiah 13:22 says, “…Her (Israel) fateful time will soon come…” This verse was written around 700 B.C. and predicted Israel’s destruction under Babylon that did not occur until 539 B.C. Isaiah 51:5 says, My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust.” Many scholars believe that this passage will not be fulfilled until the millennium. Similar Septuagint uses of the timing phrases utilized in Revelation can be found in Isaiah 5:26; 13:6; 58:8; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14. See Thomas Ice, “Has Bible Prophecy Already Been Fulfilled? (Part 2),” Conservative Theological Journal 4 (December 2000): 306.
Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17–18

A scrutiny of some of the parallels between Revelation 17–18 and Old Testament Jerusalem used by Jerusalem advocates demonstrates that they are not as convincing as perhaps they initially appear. For example, the harlot imagery (Rev 17:1, 5) need not automatically refer back to God’s accusations of Israel as an unfaithful harlot. Thomas notes that the angel describing the woman uses the term pornh (harlotry) rather than moicheia (adultery). The latter word is more restrictive “implying a previous marital relationship.” Although pornh can include adultery, it is broader. Thus, it is possible that the “woman represents all false religions of all time” rather than just the spiritual unfaithfulness of God’s covenant people Israel.27 Also, harlot imagery is often used to depict Gentile cites and therefore need not uniquely identify Jerusalem (Isa 23:16-17; Nah 3:4).

Rome

The most common approach among New Testament scholarship is to identify Babylon of Revelation 17–18 as Rome. Both historicists28 and futurists employ this approach.29

Methodology

The Babylon = Rome view is largely built upon the presupposition that the name Babylon was a common way that early Christians had of disguising their mention of Rome in order to insulate

27 Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 283. The Jerusalem view is further weakened to the extent that it appears to come on the scene rather late in church history. Frost explains, “The postmillennialism and partial preterism of Gentry and Seraiah is not of the fathers. It hardly bears resemblance. Gentry borrowing from late nineteenth century theologian Milton Terry interprets the Babylonian whore in Revelation 17:1-ff to be Jerusalem in the age of Paul. This is brand new. No father taught this that we are aware of. For nearly two thousand years this view never breathed, if and only if we are to maintain that all eschatology can be found in these writings.” Samuel M. Frost, Misplaced Hope: The Origins of First and Second Century Eschatology (Colorado Springs: Bimillennial Press, 2002), 154.

28 Historicists are those who see Revelation’s prophecies regarding Babylon as finding their fulfillment in the life and destruction of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476.

themselves from Roman persecution. Babylon and Rome are comparable in a variety of ways. For example, both were centers for world empires. Moreover, both captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.\(^{30}\)

**General Arguments**

Rome advocates rely upon the symbolic nature of the Book of Revelation. Rome proponents Pate and Hays explain:

The extensive use of symbolism and figurative language by the apostle John to convey specific statements at least opens the door to the possibility that the terms *Babylon* may be symbolic as well. In fact, since practically all other terms in Revelation 17–18 are symbols (harlot, beast, horns, etc.), understanding the term Babylon in a symbolic sense would reflect a more consistent interpretation of this passage than that of interpreting this term alone as literal reference.\(^{31}\)

Rome proponents further point out that Babylon should be understood in more of a symbolic rather than literal way based upon the use of the word “mystery” (musthrion) in Revelation 17:5. Robertson believes that musthrion is part of the woman’s full name “Mystery Babylon the Great.” He also believes that the word “mystery” connotes the notion of mysticism or symbolism. Thus, he concludes, “…the name Babylon is to be interpreted mystically or spiritually (cf. pneumatikws 11:8) for Rome.”\(^{32}\)

The assumption that the early Christians commonly used the name Babylon for Rome is built around two pieces of evidence. These two pieces of evidence include Peter’s mention of Babylon as his place of writing in 1 Peter 5:13 and references in extra biblical literature equating Rome with Babylon. Regarding 1 Peter 5:13, because tradition places Peter in Rome at the end of his life, Rome advocates believe that Peter was speaking of Rome rather than literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13.\(^{33}\) Regarding the

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\(^{33}\) Thiessen lists the following ancient sources placing Peter in Rome toward the end of his life: Ignatius, Papias, First Clement, Hegesippus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysius of Carthage, Tertullian and Jerome. See Henry Clarence
references in extra biblical literature equating Babylon and Rome, both the *Sibylline Oracles* (V. 143, 159-60, 434) and the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7) use Babylon as a code name for Rome. Because Rome advocates believe that these Christian writings were composed during the same general time period as John’s composition of the Apocalypse, it is likely that John was also drawing from the common Christian understanding that Babylon was a code word for Rome when writing Revelation 17–18.34

It is also assumed that the seven hills of Revelation 17:9 identify the topography of the ancient city of Rome. Because literature of the ancient world contains dozens of references to the seven hills of Rome,35 the ancient city of Rome was universally known as the city of the seven hills.36 Thus, such a topographical reference would immediately suggest Rome in the minds of John’s original audience.37 In addition, the notion that John’s audience would have understood the imagery of Revelation 17 as referring to the topography of Rome seems strengthened by the discovery of the *Dea Roma* Coin minted in A.D. 71 in Asia Minor. The Roman goddess *Roma* featured on the coin contains many

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34 Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 285. Rome advocates cite other reasons in support of this view. Most of these reasons were taken from Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 351. First, according to 1 Peter 5:13, one of Peter’s companions was Mark. Mark was with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (Col 4:10; Phlm 22-23) and may have accompanied Timothy to Rome for the second incarceration (2 Tim 4:11). Second, nowhere in Scripture or in extra biblical Christian material does one find a reference to Peter or Mark visiting Babylon. See Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 108. Third, a consultation with a map demonstrates that the letter must have been sent from the West or Rome because of the order in which the names or provinces appear. Fourth, Scripture depicts Peter’s ministry moving northward from Canaan to Syrian Antioch (Gal 2:11) and then Westward to Corinth (1 Cor 1:12) in the direction of Rome. Fifth, there was no reason for Peter to visit Babylon. Because of the Babylonian Captivity, a large number of Jews continued to reside in the East. However, in the last years of Caligula’s life (Caligula died in A.D. 41), there was a persecution of the Jews in Babylon. Consequently, many of these Jews migrated to Selucia. Five years later a plague diminished their number further. See Thiessen, 285. Thus, historians of the day referred to Babylon as uninhabited, declining, and deserted. Russell, 347. Sixth, because Peter uses figurative language elsewhere (1 Peter 1:2, 13; 2:4), it is likely that he is also employing figurative language in 1 Peter 5:13. Perhaps Peter refers to Babylon figuratively in this verse in order to build upon the exile motif that he has been using throughout the epistle. Seventh, because other cities are used in a figurative sense elsewhere in Scripture (Gal 4:25; Rev 11:8), Peter is probably referring to the city of Babylon figuratively here as well. Thus, Peter was obviously speaking figuratively of Rome through his use of the term Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13.

35 Pate and Hays buttress their position by noting the many parallels between Revelation 17–18 and the *Sibylline Oracles*. In both writings, Rome is called Babylon, Rome is portrayed as an immoral woman, and this immoral woman sits by the banks of the Tiber River. See Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 109.

36 The names of the seven hills are Capitol, Aventine, Caelin, Esquiline, Quirinal, Viminal, and Palestine.

37 Cicero *Letters to Atticus* 6.5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.13.2-3; Horace *Carmen Saeculare* 7; Juvenal *Satires* 9.130; Ovid *Trista* 1.5.69; Pliny *Natural History* 3.66-67; Varro *On the Latin Language* 5.7.41; Virgil *Georgics* 2.535; Virgil *Aenid* 6.782-83.

38 Mounce, 313-14. This suggestion is especially true given the fact that the seven hills were the nucleus of the city on the left bank of the Tiber River and given the fact that an unusual festival called the *septimontium* received its name because of this topographical feature. See Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 295; Suetonious *Domitian* 4.
striking similarities to the woman portrayed in Revelation 17. Rome proponents also build their case upon Revelation 17:18, which says, “And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.” Rome advocates maintain that such a description would have been immediately identifiable as Rome to John’s original audience because it was the city ruling the known world at the time John wrote.

Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17–18

Rome advocates also point out descriptions of Babylon that apply to Rome. For example, the water imagery (Rev 17:1) is reminiscent of the goddess on the Dea Roma Coin who was seated by the rivers of the Tiber River. Aune sees the reference to the woman’s drunkenness with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6; 18:24) as descriptive of the numerous Christian martyrdoms perpetrated at the hands of the Roman Empire.  

Weaknesses

General Problems

Most interpreters who identify the harlot as Rome also identify the beast as Rome. This identification is due to the dependence of the image of the beast of Revelation upon Daniel 7. The beast of Revelation and the fourth beast of Daniel 7 are both noted for their blasphemies and protruding ten horns. Thus, to the extent that many commentators identify the fourth beast of Daniel 7

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38 One side of the coin contains the portrait of the emperor. The reverse side of the coin depicts Roma, a Roman pagan goddess, sitting on seven hills seated by the waters of the Tiber River. See Aune, Revelation 17–22, 919-28. There are obvious similarities between the Dea Roma Coin and the imagery of Revelation 17. In both cases, the goddess and the harlot are seated on seven hills and are seated either on or by the waters (Rev 17:1). In addition, the name of the goddess was thought by many Romans to be Amor, which is Roma spelled backwards. Amor was the goddess of love and sexuality. Thus, both the woman on the coin and the woman in Revelation 17 represent harlotry (Rev 17:5). Furthermore, the coin equates Roma with the power of the Roman Empire, which was active in persecuting Christians of John’s day. The placement of Vespasian on one side of the coin and Roma on the other makes this connection. Interestingly, Augustus initiated the custom of dedicating temples to both Caesar and Roma. The goddess is also pictured as holding a sword, which may depict Rome’s imperial power. This imagery parallels with the woman in Revelation 17 who is said to be drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6). Pate, Iraq-Babylon of the End Times, 104-107; Harold Mattingly, Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum, 6 vols. (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1930), 2: pl. 34. 5.

39 Aune, Revelation 17–22, 929.

40 Aune, Revelation 17–22, 960, 1011.

41 Gregg remarks, “That the beast from the sea is closely identified with Rome will scarcely be disputed by members of most interpretive schools.” Steve Gregg, ed., Revelation: Four Views, a Parallel Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 276.
with Rome, the beast of Revelation must be identified with Rome as well. Therefore, the identification of the harlot as Rome is problematic because one ends up with two images for Rome: the beast and the harlot. If these two characters represent the same entity, why are they depicted as two separate entities in verse 11 and 18 of chapter 17? Why is the beast punished in chapter 19 after the harlot has already been destroyed in chapter 18? If these two characters represent the same entity, how are they able to interact with one another? Revelation 17:3 depicts the woman as riding on the beast. How can Rome ride upon Rome? Revelation 17:16-17 depicts the beast destroying the woman. How can Rome destroy Rome?

Moreover, because at the time of writing Babylon remained a viable city, “it would be confusing to John’s first century readers, as well as to later generations, for him to write so much about Babylon when he really meant Rome.” In addition, the geographic situation depicted in Revelation 18 has made some commentators reluctant to identify Babylon as Rome. Some commentaries observe that Rome was not a major seaport or trading city.

**Response to the Rome View’s Specific Arguments**

To begin with, it is odd for Pate and Hays to contend that their approach of identifying Babylon as Rome takes into consideration Revelation’s symbolic character while they simultaneously interpret other aspects of Revelation 17–18 with extreme literalness. For example, Rome advocates interpret the seven hills (Rev 17:9) literally. It is interesting to note that although the Babylon view is typically labeled as “overly literalistic,” most Babylon proponents do not take the seven hills literally. Thus, at least on this point, it seems that the Babylon interpretation rather than the Rome interpretation better takes into account Revelation’s symbolic character. Rome proponents also interpret the word “city” (Rev 17:18) literally. Despite the fact that some Rome advocates believe that their approach best takes

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42 Beasley-Murray embraces the notion that both entities represent Rome when he says, “The two figures of monster and woman are really alternative representations of a single entity.” Beasley-Murray, 249.
43 Beagley, 92-93.
into account Revelation’s symbolic character, it appears that these same interpreters have no problem vacillating toward literalism when they find it necessary to furnish further support for their view.

Moreover, it is debatable whether musthrión in Revelation 17:5 has the nuance that A.T. Robertson attaches to it. Several issues seem to be at stake. The first question is whether musthrión should be interpreted as being in apposition with ovnoma? If not, John would be saying that the name on the woman’s forehead is “Mystery Babylon the Great.” If so, John would be saying that the name “Babylon the Great” written upon the woman’s forehead is a mystery. Although most Rome proponents prefer viewing musthrión as not being in apposition to ovnoma, the evidence seems to favor the second option. Walvoord observes:

The word mystery is a descriptive reference to the title, not part of the title itself as implied by the capitalization in the Authorized Version. This can be seen by comparing the name given to the woman in 16:19 and 18:2.

Thus, the repetition of the woman’s title as “Babylon the Great” (14:8; 16:19; 18:2) rather than “Mystery Babylon the Great” favors the appositional relationship. The appositional view is strengthened upon recognizing that the gender of musthrión and ovnoma are neuter and the gender of “Babylon” is feminine.

Second, does musthrión refer to mysticism or simply new revelation? Although most Rome proponents take the word in the first sense, the New Testament evidence seems to support the latter sense. According to Vine

In the N.T, it [musthrión] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by

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47 This translation is found in the KJV and the NIV.
48 Walvoord, 246.
49 Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 289. Of all the references to Babylon in Revelation (14:8, 16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 10, 21), “only in 17:5 is she called ‘Mystery, Babylon the Great.’” Morris, The Revelation Record, 324.
50 The NET Bible, (Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 2336, n. 2.
Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit.\(^{51}\)

Third, can musthrion of Revelation 17:5 be equated with “spiritually” (pneumatikws) of Revelation 11:8 to support the notion that Babylon of Revelation 17:5 deserves the same type of spiritual interpretation that is given to Jerusalem in Revelation 11:8? Thomas believes that such a comparison is inappropriate. “Musthrion is a noun, not an adverb like pneumatikws.” In addition, musthrion comes from a different root than pneumatikws.\(^{52}\) Therefore, John, in Revelation 17:5, does not seem to be saying that the woman’s name is to be understood mystically or symbolically. Rather, he seems to be simply saying that the revelation of Babylon’s dominant role in the end times is a previously unknown truth now revealed.

Furthermore, it is also debatable that the Christians of John’s day commonly used Rome as a code for Babylon. The evidence favoring such a code is built upon uncertain assumptions. For example, it is possible that Peter is referring to literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 rather than Rome. According to Alford, “…we are not to find an allegorical meaning in a proper name thus simply used in the midst of simple and matter-of-fact sayings.”\(^{53}\) According to Gromacki:

There is no reason to suspect that Peter asserted a symbolic name into a non-symbolic context. The normal reading of the passage would cause the reader to think of the literal reading on the Euphrates.\(^{54}\)

In addition, if one interprets the geographic areas in the greeting section of the letter literally (1:1), then consistency seems to dictate that the geographic area mentioned in the conclusion of the epistle (5:13) deserves the same literal interpretation.\(^{55}\)

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\(^{52}\) Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 288-89.


\(^{55}\) A literal interpretation of Babylon becomes even more compelling to the extent that it is recognized that 1 Peter was written to a predominantly Jewish audience. His use of the word “diaspora” in 1:1 always refers to Jews in all of its New Testament (John 7:35; James 1:1), LXX (Deut 28:25; 30:4; Isa 49:6; Jer 41:17; Ps 174:2; 2 Macc 1:27; Judt 5:19), and Pseudepigraphical (Pss. Sol. 8:28; T. Asher 7:2) uses. If Babylon refers to Babylon in all of its Old Testament uses, why would 1
While it is true that there is no evidence outside of the epistle of Peter’s visit to Babylon, there is no evidence to contradict it either. Because of the Babylonian Captivity, a large number of Jews continued to reside in that area. Not only did the Magi come from that region (Matt 2:2), but pilgrims from Mesopotamia also came to hear Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). Fruchtenbaum argues that at the time Peter’s epistle was written, Babylonia had the largest concentration of Jews living outside the land and was also the center of Judaism outside the land. The Babylonian Talmud would later be developed from this area. Because Peter was the apostle to the circumcised (Gal 2:8), it would have been a logical place for him to travel. Understanding Babylon as the place of writing of Peter’s epistle might also explain the heavy Jewishness of the letter.

The notion that early Christians used “Babylon” to disguise their reference to Rome is built also upon the *Sibylline Oracles* (V. 143, 159-60, 434) and the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7), which both use Babylon as a code name for Rome. However, the hypothesis that such a practice was common in John’s day is only workable to the extent that these writings were composed during the time period when John wrote. This assumption is not necessarily true. Klijn dates the *Apocalypse of Peter* 5:13 be the exception considering Peter’s Jewish audience? Although Peter does use figurative language in other sections of his letter, this fact does not automatically lead to the conclusion that Peter is employing figurative language in 5:13. Each use of figurative language must be proven from its immediate context rather than how the author employs figurative meaning in a remote context. In addition, it is difficult to argue that 1 Peter 5:13 is describing a figurative city just as cities are used in a non-literal fashion in Galatians 4:24-25 and Revelation 11:8. In Galatians 4:24-25, the text itself uses the word “allegorically” to explain that the city of Jerusalem is being figuratively used of Hagar, Mount Sinai, and the Old Covenant. Similarly, Revelation 11:8 uses the word “spiritually” to demonstrate that Jerusalem is being used figuratively of Sodom and Egypt. However, no similar designations are specified regarding the city of Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13. Although the majority of scholars believe that Peter was referring to Rome in 1 Peter 5:13 rather than literal Babylon, it is interesting to note that many prominent interpreters throughout church history have held to the literal Babylon interpretation. These prominent interpreters include Erasmus, Calvin, Hort, Gregory, Alford, Mayor, Moorehead, and Thiessen. The persecution of the Jews in Babylon and subsequent plague does not preclude their increase in number and return to Babylon during the twenty years that intervened in between these events and the writing of Peter’s epistle. See Thiessen, 285. Other scholars holding to a similar interpretation include Moule, Fruchtenbaum, Gromacki, English, and Thomas. See Moule, “The Nature and Purpose of 1 Peter,” 157; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 1003; Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, 351; E. Schuyler English, “Was St. Peter Ever in Rome?,” *Bibliothea Sacra* 124 (October-December 1967): 317; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 37, n. 121; idem, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206.

56 Thiessen, 285.
57 The Magi may have had an awareness of the messianic significance of the star as well as the timing of messiah’s birth because of their familiarity with various Old Testament prophecies (Num 24:17; Dan 9:25). Both prophecies would have been familiar to those in Babylon. Balaam was a resident of Babylon (Num 22:5; Deut 23:4). Daniel gave his prophecies during the Babylonian captivity. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998), 144-45.
58 Gromacki, 352.
**Baruch** in the second century. Although Collins appears to lean towards a first century dating of Book 5 of the *Sibylline Oracles*, he remains open to the suggestion that the *Sibylline Oracles* as a whole can be dated in the early years of the second century. Kreitzer accepts the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) as a date for the composition of *Sibylline Oracles* 5. Thomas dates both the *Apocalypse of Baruch* and the *Sibylline Oracles* in the second century. Interestingly, Thomas also indicates “Tertullian late in the second century is the first church father to use ‘Babylon’ as a name for Rome.” In sum, given the notions that Peter could have been referring to literal Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 and that the extra biblical Christian writings using Babylon as a code word for Rome may have been composed after John wrote the Apocalypse, it is difficult to dogmatically assert that John was employing the well entrenched practice of his day that Babylon refers to Rome.

Rome advocates also appeal to the seven hills (Rev 17:9) as descriptive of Rome’s topography, the “great city which reigns over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18) as a descriptive phrase for Rome that any first century person would recognize, and similarities between the *Dea Roma* Coin and Revelation 17–18. Rome advocates use these items to support the assertion that John’s description of Babylon would be understood as Rome by John’s original audience. However, the assumption that John’s apocalypse was written exclusively for the purpose of being understood by the people of his day is open to question. Walvoord explains:

One of the common assumptions of those who reject the futurist position is that the Apocalypse is the creation of John’s thinking and was understandable by him in his

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63 Thomas, *Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 206. Sometimes 4 Ezra 3:1-2, 28-31 is cited as another example of a source that uses Babylon as a code word for Rome. Although 4 Ezra may have been composed about A.D. 100, it should be observed that Metzger remains at least open to a date for 4 Ezra as late as A.D. 120. B. M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1. (Garden City: NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:520
65 Morris asks, if “Paul was not afraid to speak directly about Rome in his writings, so why should John be?” Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 323.
66 Dyer., 438.
generation...The difficulty with this point of view is twofold: (1) Prophecy, as given in the Scripture, was not necessarily understandable by the writer or his generation, as illustrated in the case of Daniel (Dan 12:4, 9). It is questionable whether the great prophets of the Old Testament always understood what they were writing (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-11). (2) It is of the nature of prophecy that often it cannot be understood until the time of the generation which achieves fulfillment. The assumption, therefore, that the book of Revelation was understandable in the first generation or that it was intended to be understood by that generation is without real basis.\(^67\)

Even if Revelation was intended to be understood by John’s original audience, it is doubtful that the seven hills of Revelation 17:9 are descriptive of Rome’s topography. First, the identification of the hills calls for special wisdom (17:9). Why should such a well-known geographical locale require special theological and symbolic insight for proper identification?\(^68\) Second, it is unclear that John’s audience would have automatically understood the reference in 17:9 to the seven hills of Rome. Because every other occurrence to ovros in Revelation refers to a mountain rather than a “hill,”\(^69\) Ewing advises caution before automatically viewing 17:9 as a reference to the seven “hills” of Rome.\(^70\) Had John wanted to communicate “hill” instead of using oros he could have used the word bounos, which means “hill.”\(^71\) Furthermore, Beagley observes that the historical evidence only places the “seven hills” language in the Western Mediterranean area. Thus, it may be unwarranted to presume that Rome as “the city of the seven hills” would be the shared understanding in Asia Minor.\(^72\) Third, if the reference to the city on the seven hills was universally well known in John’s day as a reference to Rome, how would the use of this reference insulate John or his readers from Roman persecution?\(^73\)

Fourth, the seven mountains (17:9) are seven heads (17:7) that belong to the beast (17:3, 7; 13:1) and not the woman named Babylon. Thus, these seven heads or mountains really have nothing to do with the entity Babylon at all. It is possible to argue that the woman is still associated with the seven

\(^{67}\) Walvoord, 22-23.
\(^{68}\) Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 295-96.
\(^{69}\) Beale, 868.
\(^{71}\) Morris, The Revelation Record, 336.
\(^{72}\) Beagley, 103, n. 343.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 103.
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. Revelation 17:1 portrays the woman sitting on many waters. Verse 15 explains that the waters represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. Thus, Revelation 17:1, 15 show the harlot’s control over the entire world. Furthermore, Revelation 17:3 depicts the woman as sitting on the beast, which again indicates control rather than location. Thus, if the harlot’s sitting indicates control rather than location twice in chapter 17, then consistency would seem to dictate that the harlot sitting on the seven hills in 17:9 would also indicate control rather than location.74

Fifth, the reference to the seven hills is better understood as referring to seven kingdoms. In order to correctly understand the symbolism of the seven mountains, it is best to look to John’s Jewish heritage rather than the Gentile culture of his day. Thus, Revelation must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament.75 Such an approach makes sense because 278 of Revelation’s 404 verses allude to the Old Testament.76 The Old Testament frequently uses the term “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).77

This type of imagery seems to be employed in Revelation 17:9 because verse 10 explains that the seven mountains are a metaphor for seven kings. This symbolic understanding of the seven mountains seems buttressed by the fact that the harlot sits on or beside seven mountains (17:9) just as she sits on or beside the many waters (17:1). Since the waters are symbolic of peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (17:15), consistency seems to dictate that the seven mountains are symbolic as well.78 This non-literal interpretation of the seven hills is also strengthened by the fact that the other references to ovros in Revelation are sometimes to be understood non-literally as well (Rev 8:8).

74 Dyer., 437-38.
75 Ibid., 438.
76 Thomas, Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary, 40.
78 Robert L. Thomas, Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 458. Zuck notes, “A prostitute obviously cannot sit on seven hills at once (17:9) and so we conclude that the hills are symbols.” Roy B. Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 244.
Although Revelation 17:10 uses the word “kings,” kingdoms or national entities opposing God’s people throughout world history is probably the intended meaning. Expositors face numerous difficulties when they interpret the content of Revelation 17:10 as seven kings of Roman history. A lack of consensus exists concerning whether to include in the count those kings that reigned a brief time and where the count should begin. Consequently, Aune enumerates nine different schemes for counting the kings. These interpretive problems are avoided when the seven kings of Revelation 17:10 are understood as kingdoms opposing God’s people throughout world history. In the book of Daniel, the terms kings and kingdoms are used interchangeably (Dan 2:37-39; 7:17, 23). Because Revelation draws heavily from Daniel, it is likely that John in Revelation 17:10 is employing this same practice.

Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17–18

The parallels between Revelation 17–18 and Rome are not as convincing as they first appear. For example, the water imagery of 17:1 seems inapplicable to Rome since Rome had no seaport and more applicable to Babylon which was located on the bank of the Euphrates. Furthermore, the Christian martyrdoms supposedly alluded to in Revelation 17:6 and 18:24 do not uniquely identify

81 In Daniel 2:37-38, Daniel wrote that the head of gold is a king. In Daniel 2:39, Daniel wrote that the breast and arms of silver were another kingdom. Dyer., 440. Similarly, in 7:17, Daniel describes the four beasts as kings. In Daniel 7:23, he describes the fourth beast as a kingdom. 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), 203. Thus, Daniel obviously uses kings and kingdoms interchangeably.

82 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. See Walvoord, 251-54.
Rome due to the fact that Israel (Matt 23:35; Acts 7:52) and historical Babylon (Jer 51:35, 36, 49) were also causes of such martyrdoms.

**End Time Religious System**

**Methodology**

Yet another approach to identifying Babylon of Revelation 17–18 is to view Babylon as an end time religious system that will dominate the world during the coming tribulation period. While this coming religious system may include prominent religious institutions, its scope will go far beyond particular religious institutions and instead encompass the ecumenical movement thus forming an all inclusive world religion. This religious system is called Babylon because it opposes God’s purposes and people as did ancient Babylon in Old Testament times.

Proponents of this position also seem to advocate a well-defined eschatological scenario. On the one hand, the Babylon of Revelation 17 is the religious system that the antichrist destroys mid-way through the tribulation period. On the other hand, the Babylon of Revelation 18 is distinct from the Babylon of chapter 17 because it is commercial and political in scope and will be destroyed toward the end of the tribulation.

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83 This position is the one adopted by most classical and revised dispensational scholars.
84 Ryrie best summarizes the position when he notes, “The harlot is also the mother of harlots. In other words, many groups will join together under the one harlot, in a kind of federated church. With the identification in Revelation 17:9 and with the interrelation of Babylon and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Roman church is the harlot. But this is not the whole picture, for the apostate church is not merely the Roman Church. It will include other groups in a family relationship with their mother. The tie that will bind them will be their harlotry.” Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 101-2.
85 Walvoord explains, “Babylon, ecclesiastically symbolized by the woman in Revelation 17, proposes a common worship and a common religion through uniting in a world church. This is destroyed by the beast in Revelation 17:16 who thus fulfills the will of God (Rev 17:17). Babylon, politically symbolized by the great city of Revelation 18, attempts to achieve its domination of the world by a world common market and a world government. These are destroyed by Christ at His second coming.” Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 267.
Weaknesses

Despite the widespread acceptance of this view at the popular level, it has deficiencies. First, the harlot imagery of Revelation 17:1-5, which is so frequently employed throughout Scripture to depict man’s infidelity to God, convinces Walvoord that the city in 17:18 is not a literal city but rather a religious system. However, this assumption seems unfounded. The Old Testament uses 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. Similarly, the harlot imagery in Revelation 17 should not deter interpreters from understanding the city in Revelation 17:18 literally as well.

Second, the same phrase “great city” that is used in Revelation 17:18 to depict Babylon is also repeatedly used in chapter 18 (vv. 10, 16, 18, 19, 21). Moreover, the same sort of harlot imagery that describes the city in chapter 17 is also employed in chapter 18 (vv. 3, 9). Yet, despite these similarities, Walvoord interprets the city in Revelation 17 non-literally while simultaneously interpreting the city in Revelation 18 literally.

Third, a strong exegetical case can be made to support the proposition that Revelation 17 and 18 should be viewed as a unit speaking of one Babylon rather than two separate units speaking of two Babylons. The notion of viewing Revelation 17 and 18 as a unit is buttressed by noting the similarities between the chapters. Both chapters refer to Babylon as having the same name (17:5; 18:2), being a city (17:18; 18:10), wearing the same clothing (17:4; 18:6), holding a cup (17:4; 18:6), fornicating with kings (17:2; 18:3), being drunk with wine of immorality (17:2; 18:3), persecuting believers (17:6;

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86 Ibid., 243-48.
87 Ibid., 257.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 263. Such inconsistent exegesis can only be explained in terms of a presuppositional bias that sees Revelation 17 as religious and Revelation 18 as political. Perhaps the source of this presupposition is the Scofield Reference Bible, which contains an explanatory note advocating the religious Babylon and political Babylon distinction. C. I. Scofield, ed., The New Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1369-70.
18:24), experiencing destruction by fire (17:16; 18:8), and experiencing destruction by God (17:17; 18:5, 8).

**Babylon**

A final option involves interpreting Babylon of Revelation 17–18 as the futuristic literal city of Babylon on the Euphrates. Proponents of this position believe that because the Old Testament and New Testament prophecies regarding Babylon remain largely unfulfilled, the world’s center of power must once again return to the ancient city of Babylon in order for biblical prophecies to be fulfilled.

**Methodology**

**General Arguments**

A key ingredient of the literal approach is the recognition that the harlot of Revelation 17 represents a city. This identification becomes obvious upon observing Revelation 17:18, which says, “And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.” Thus, Dyer correctly observes, “Whatever else is said about the harlot, she is first a city, not an ecclesiastical system.” Although the recurring harlot imagery (Rev 17:1, 2, 4, 15, 16; 18:3, 7) has led many interpreters to the conclusion that Babylon is a false religious system because infidelity is frequently used in Scripture to depict man’s rebellion against God (Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; Ezekiel 16; 23), harlotry is

91 Furthermore, most of the arguments used to prove two Babylons have been answered. For example, the phrase “after these things” (meta tauta) in Revelation 18:1 can simply indicate the time sequence in which the visions were revealed to John (chronological use) rather than something that must take place later chronologically (eschatological use) because the phrase is accompanied by a verb of perception “I saw.” Whenever a verb of perception accompanies “after these things” in Revelation, the phrase is used chronologically (4:1a; 7:1; 7:9; 15:5; 19:1) rather than eschatologically (1:19; 4:1b; 9:12; 20:3). In addition, it is claimed that Babylon in chapter 17 is destroyed in a different manner and by a different source than the Babylon in chapter 18. However, this contention is without merit because the Babylons in both chapters are both destroyed by fire (17:16; 18:9) and by God (17:17; 18:8). Moreover, it is claimed that the response to the destruction of the two Babylons is different because chapter 17 records the kings hating the harlot (17:16) and chapter 18 records the kings weeping over the harlot (18:9). However, this discrepancy can be explained. The kings in 17:16 are those who unite with the beast to defeat the harlot while the kings in 18:8 are those engaged in commerce with Babylon mourning over the loss of their source of revenue. Finally, it is claimed that the Babylon in chapter 17 is referred to as a woman while the Babylon in chapter 18 is referred to as a city. However, this argument collapses upon realizing that 17:18 explains that the woman represents a city. Ibid.: 305-11.


also used in Scripture to personify individual Gentile cites in rebellion against God. The Old Testament uses such imagery to portray the spiritual rebellion of Tyre (Isa 23:16-17) and Nineveh (Nah 3:4). A similar understanding of harlotry seems to be in operation in Revelation 17–18 because the harlot is also a city (17:18).

In addition to the fact that the woman is a city (17:18), she is also named Babylon (17:5). As already discussed, it is best to view the syntactical role of musthrion (17:5) as one of apposition to ovnoma rather than part of the harlot’s name. It was also mentioned earlier that it is best to understand musthrion as connoting the notion of revealing new truth rather than communicating the idea of mysticism, spiritualism, or symbolism. In sum, Revelation 17 teaches that the harlot is a city named Babylon.

Although not all names in Revelation are meant to be understood literally (Rev 2:20), it does seem to be a general rule that the names of cities and geographical regions are literal. 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), Laodicea (3:14), the Euphrates (Rev 9:14; 16:12) and Armageddon (16:16). 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 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. Morris observes, “that Revelation means ‘unveiling’ and not ‘veiling.’ In the absence of any statement in the context to

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94 Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18 (Part 2)," 434.
95 Armageddon is an actual geographic area located in Northern Israel.
96 A similar pattern is found in Galatians 4:24-25 where the text itself uses the word “allegorically” to explain that the city of Jerusalem is being figuratively used of Hagar, Mount Sinai, and the Old Covenant. These texts in no way deny Jerusalem as a literal city. Rather, they are simply saying that Jerusalem has a spiritual dimension in addition to being a literal city.
97 Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 206-207.
the contrary, therefore, we must assume that the term Babylon applies to the real city of Babylon, although it also may extend far beyond that to the whole system centered at Babylon as well."

A mention of the Euphrates at two places in the Apocalypse (9:14; 16:12; Gen 15:18) further confirms that assigning Babylon the literal significance of the city on the Euphrates is the most natural way of understanding Revelation 17–18. The view also seems bolstered by Revelation’s use of the Old Testament. Because the Old Testament only used Babylon in the literal sense, it is logical to assume that John, who is drawing so heavily from the Old Testament, would also use Babylon in the same literal manner. Understanding Revelation 17–18 as literal Babylon also seems most consistent with how these chapters describe the city’s geography. According to Thomas and Seiss, Babylon on the Euphrates has a location that fits the description of the city of Revelation 17–18 politically and geographically as well as in the areas of accessibility, commercial facilities, and centrality of world trade.

Another component of the literal Babylon view is the notion that the prophecies regarding Babylon’s destruction as recorded Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51 have never been satisfied as

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98 Morris, Revelation Record, 323. Just as Wall Street and Madison Avenue are literal cities and systems emanating from those literal cities, such will be the case for future Babylon. Charles Ryrie, Revelation, New Edition, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 116. Just as the Tower of Babel represented a religious system emanating from a literal city in Shinar, so will be future Babylon.

99 Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 207. 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. In Scripture, the designation “east” is typically used to describe the region of Babylon (Gen 2:8; Matt 2:2). These connections between the Euphrates and the anticipation of evil point to the fact that something evil is occurring eastward of 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. Mark Hitchcock, The Second Coming of Babylon (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 107-108.

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

101 Thomas, Revelation 8 to 22: An Exegetical Commentary, 307. Moreover, Revelation 18:17-18, which describes those who make their living from the sea standing a far off and wailing at the sight of Babylon’s destruction, fits well with the geography of Babylon on the Euphrates. In ancient times, the Euphrates was navigable for ships for some 500 miles from its mouth. Ibid., 316-17. 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!” Morris, The Revelation Record, 349.
demanded by the specific details of these passages and therefore await a future fulfillment.\textsuperscript{103} The prospect of such a future fulfillment gives interpreters more confidence in assigning a literal meaning to Babylon’s destruction in Revelation 17–18 since both the Old Testament and New Testament passages seem to be speaking of the same event. Dyer points to the many differences between Babylon’s historic defeat and how Jeremiah 50–51 describes Babylon’s ultimate destruction.\textsuperscript{104}

For example, Jeremiah predicts that an enemy from the north would destroy Babylon and yet the Persians came from the east. In addition, 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. Furthermore, 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). 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 may have been built have been used extensively in the building of many surrounding cities.\textsuperscript{105}

Also, 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). Finally, 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 never took place after Babylon fell. In fact, the post-exilic record evidences God’s continual rebuking of His people.

Others have noticed a similar pattern in Isaiah 13–14, which also is a prophecy of Babylon’s destruction. Chapter 13 equates Babylon’s destruction to the “Day of the Lord” (13:6-9), cosmic

\textsuperscript{103} These passages not only call attention to Babylon through unfulfilled prophecy, but they also do so by strategically placing their Babylon oracles first (Isa) and last (Jer) in their larger units dealing with the oracles against the nations and by devoting more space to Babylon than any other nation. Eugene H. Merrill and Charles H. Dyer, \textit{Old Testament Explorer}, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 538-39, 633-42.

\textsuperscript{104} Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18 (Part 2),” 443-49.

\textsuperscript{105} Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, \textit{Are We Living in the End Times?} (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1999), 135.
disturbances (13:10-13), the judgment of the world (13:11-12), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (13:19), and complete and final desolation (13:20-22). Chapter 14 indicates that the world’s universal rest and peace (14:5-8) and Israel’s restoration (14:1-4) will transpire immediately after Babylon’s destruction. Again, a comparison of these chapters with the historic defeat of Babylon in 539 B.C. makes it difficult to argue that they have already been fulfilled.

Another passage that seems to have some bearing on future Babylon is Zechariah 5:5-11. In these verses, Zechariah sees a woman named wickedness carried away in an ephah in the last days to the land Shinar where a temple will be built for her. An “Ephah” was used to measure flour and barley. “Temple” conjures up religious imagery. “Shinar” is the same geographic locale of the Tower of Babel (Gen 10:10; 11:2) as well as historic Babylon (Isa 11:11; Dan 1:2). Since the Babylonian Empire had already fallen (539 B.C.) at the time this vision was given (519 B.C.), this passage seems to indicate that wickedness, commerce, and religion will once again be centered in ancient Babylon. Moreover, the similarities depicted in Hitchcock’s chart seem to indicate that the women spoken of in Zechariah 5:5-11 and Revelation 17–18 are the same entity.

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106 The reference to the darkening of the sun and the moon (Isa 13:10) is identical to how the Second Coming is described (Matt 24:29).
107 The reference to mankind becoming scarcer than gold (Isa 13:12) is reminiscent of how the tribulation is described (Matt 24:21-22).
108 Babylon obviously did not experience a complete and final desolation following 539 B.C. Consider the following: Herodotus visited and wrote about Babylon, Alexander the Great visited and died in Babylons, 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.
109 Hitchcock, The Second Coming of Babylon, 79-91; Morris, Revelation Record, 348.
110 In sum, it is quite plain that the prophecies of Isa 13–14 and Jer 50–51 were not 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. Tony Garland, “Revelation Commentary,” online: www.spiritandtruth.org, accessed March 1 2004, 3.17.2.1. 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. Merrill F. Unger, Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2002), 1462. 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.” John F. Walvoord, The Nations in Prophecy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 63-64.
111 Merrill and Dyer, Old Testament Explorer, 825-26. Revelation 17–18 speaks of these same elements when it mentions wickedness (17:2), commerce (18:10-18), and religion (17:2) in the city of Babylon (Rev 17:18).
Table 1

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

In sum, Old Testament passages (Jer 50–51; Isa 13–14; Zech 5:5-11) predicting the future rise and destruction of Babylon give the interpreter further confidence in literally construing Revelation 17–18, which also speaks of Babylon’s future rise and fall.

**Descriptive Words and Phrases from Revelation 17–18**

John consistently employing Old Testament imagery of ancient Babylon strengthens the literal Babylon view. For example, the phrase “Babylon the Great” (16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21) seems to be drawn from Nebuchadnezzar’s description of the Babylonian Empire (Daniel 4:30). Furthermore, the imagery of the many waters (Rev 17:1, 15) is reminiscent of the waters of Babylon (Ps 137:1; Jer 51:13). Thus, such imagery seems intentionally selected in order to conjure up the memory of ancient Babylon, with its series of canals that straddled the Euphrates. In addition, the boast of Babylon, “I sit as queen and am no widow, and will not see sorrow” (18:7) is identical to that of ancient Babylon (Isa 47:7-9).

John also employs imagery from the Tower of Babel. The part of the woman’s title that reads “the mother of harlots” also uniquely identifies her as Babylon since it conveys the notion that she is the one who ultimately gave birth to all harlotry. Only the Tower of Babel fits this description. Because the Tower of Babel incident took place before God had established national divisions, it stands in its own unique category as the first and only collective rebellion by mankind against God that

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114 Gregg, ed., 431.
has ever occurred in past history. 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.” Because neither Jerusalem nor Rome spread their harlotry throughout the world in this manner, they constitute mere daughters of the harlot rather than the mother of harlots. In using the “mother of harlots” imagery, John skillfully connects future worldwide apostasy led from Babylon back to the first world apostasy that also began from Babylon. Thus, “the focus of world events is cycling back to where it all began.”

Revelation 17–18 also repeatedly draws imagery from the description of Babylon and its destruction given in Jeremiah 50–51. Both passages associate Babylon with a golden cup (Jer 51:7a; Rev 17:3-4; 18:6), dwelling on many waters (Jer 51:13; Rev 17:1), intoxicating the nations (Jer 51:7b; Rev 17:2), and having the same name (Jer 50:1; Rev 17:5; 18:10). Both passages analogize Babylon’s destruction to 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 50:29; Rev 18:6). Both passages describe the response to

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116 Garland, “Revelation Commentary,” 3.17.1. Fruchtenbaum similarly observes, “The headquarters of this one world religion will be the rebuilt city of Babylon, the mother of idolatry, for it was here that idolatry and false religion began (Genesis 11:1-9).” Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Footsteps of the Messiah (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1983), 237-38. Consequently, the Babylonian mystery religions were exported throughout all the nations of the earth. 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. See 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. 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.” See Hitchcock, The Second Coming of Babylon, 42.


118 Also, when Revelation 18:5 says, “her sins have piled up as high as heaven,” the allusion is possibly to the use of bricks in building the Tower of Babel. Walvoord, Revelation of Jesus Christ, 260.

119 Hitchcock, The Second Coming of Babylon, 37. 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.” Morris, The Revelation Record, 14. 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. 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 Bullinger, The Apocalypse or “The Day of the Lord,” 57-59.

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).

**Potential Weaknesses**

The most strenuous objection to this view is that it treats literally what should be treated symbolically given the fact that Revelation is identical to non-canonical apocalyptic literature.121

According to Gregg:

A failure to take into account this feature has led some to the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is ‘literal unless absurd.’ Though this is a good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception.122

However, Thomas counters the assumption that Revelation is part of the apocalyptic category by noting that any similarities it has with these other works are outweighed by notable differences between the two.123

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 2</strong>124</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apocalyptic Genre</strong></td>
<td><strong>Revelation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonymous</td>
<td>Not pseudonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pessimistic about the present</td>
<td>Not pessimistic about the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No epistolary framework</td>
<td>Epistolary frame work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited admonitions for moral compliance</td>
<td>Repeated admonitions for moral compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messiah’s coming exclusively future</td>
<td>Basis for Messiah’s future coming is past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not call itself a prophecy</td>
<td>Calls itself a prophecy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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121 Apocalyptic literature is an extra-biblical literary genre that flourished around the time of Revelation’s composition. The Book of Enoch, Apocalypse of Baruch, Book of Jubilees, Assumption of Moses, Psalms of Solomon, Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and Sibylline Oracles as well as Revelation are all considered to be part of this literary era. This genre is comprised of works sharing the following common cluster of characteristics: extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation (Rev 1:10-11), angelic guides (Rev 1:1), activity of angels and demons (Rev 12:7-8), focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come (Rev 1:3), urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future (Rev 21:1), the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisal in character (Rev 21–22), manifestation of the kingdom of God (Rev 11:15), a mediator with royal functions (Rev 3:7), dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about mans’ ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history (Rev 6:11), other worldly journeys (Rev 4:1-2), the catchword glory (Rev 4:11), and a final showdown between good and evil (Rev 19:11-21). The above citations from Revelation show that it has at least some affinities with these extra biblical works. This list was adapted from Frederick J. Murphy, Early Judaism: The Exile to the Time of Jesus (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 130-33.

122 Gregg, ed., 11.

123 Thomas, Revelation 1 to 7: An Exegetical Commentary, 23-28.

124 Thomas, Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old, 338. I took the liberty of slightly modifying the order of items in the chart in order to better harmonize them with the preceding discussion. Oepke similarly notes, “[Revelation] has many affinities with literature to which we now refer [i.e. apocalyptic], though it cannot be simply classified with it.” Albrecht Oepke, “Kalupto,” in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:578.
The literal Babylon view is also criticized on the grounds that Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51 were “essentially fulfilled” in 539 B.C. and therefore do not await a future fulfillment. Critics maintain that these prophetic texts should not be approached with a “wooden literalistic hermeneutic” that demands that every minute prophetic detail come to pass. For example, Heater points out that it is common for Old Testament passages as well as Ancient Near East treaties to describe the coming destruction of an enemy in hyperbolic, non-literal terms. Heater categorizes such language as “destruction genre.” However, this criticism fails to interact with Dyer’s argument that after Babylon’s destruction, the northern and southern kingdoms would be reunited and national repentance would result. Because these events await the future fulfillment of Israel’s covenants (Ezek 37; Rom 11:25-27), they have never happened in history and are yet to occur.

It is also possible to question whether the literal Babylon interpretation would have relevance to John’s original first century audience. However, such a criticism also questions numerous Old Testament prophecies predicting the ultimate triumph of God to be fulfilled in the distant future (Isa 40–66; Ezek 34–48; Amos 9:11-15). Finally, the Babylon view has been criticized as reading current events regarding the present Iraqi crisis back into the text rather than being the product of sound exegetical principles. However, this accusation seems unfair in light of the fact that numerous interpreters held the view long before Sadam Hussein rose to power. Such commentators include Newell (1935), Jennings (1937), Cooper (1942), and Lang (1948). Other commentators held the view

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125 Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 41.
127 In addition to failing to consider such language of restoration, Heater’s approach poses other problems. It 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. Even if these passages were essentially fulfilled in 539 B.C, Old Testament support for a revived Babylon can still be found in Zechariah 5:5-11.
128 Pate and Hays either expressly or tacitly level this charge in several instances. Pate, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times*, 40, 97, 100.
before Iraq became a nation in 1932. Such commentators include Seiss (1909) and Larkin (1919).\textsuperscript{129} It is true that Dyer released his book advocating his view on the eve of the Gulf War\textsuperscript{130} and recently on the eve of the present war with Iraq.\textsuperscript{131} However, it should be noted that the content of these books is based upon Dyer’s master’s thesis that was completed in 1979\textsuperscript{132} long before Hussein’s rise to power and escalating tensions between America and Iraq.

**Conclusion**

The four most prominent approaches for identifying Babylon in Revelation 17–18 are Jerusalem, Rome, an end time religious system, and futuristic, literal, rebuilt Babylon. Although this latter position is not without its weaknesses and is presently a minority position in the scholarly world, it seems to have fewer problems than the other views.


