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BABYLON IN BIBLE PROPHECY

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

> "Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come." —Revelation 18:3

By the time you read this piece, the United States will likely be at war with Iraq—the ancient people of Babylon. Is this war prophetically significant? Does the Bible have anything to say about Babylon's role in the future? Is Babylon in the Bible related to modern day Iraq?

These questions can be solved by answering the question of whether or not all biblical reference to Babylon should be understood literally? I believe that they are. Dr. Charles Dyer says, "The Bible mentions Babylon over two hundred and eighty times, and many of those references are to the future city of Babylon that is rising from the fine sands of the desert today."[1] In fact, next to Jerusalem, Babylon is the second most frequently mentioned city in the Bible. But, what is her prophetic destiny? To properly understand these matters we must first start our journey by exploring Babylon's past, since her nativity helps to explain her future role.

BABYLON PAST

The ancient city of Babylon began shortly after the Flood and is an expression of man's direct rebellion against God and His command to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1b). Thus, the kingdom of man began in Babylon as a direct act of rebellion against God. God intervenes and scatters rebellious mankind by confusing their languages and thus, the name of Babel was given to Nimrod's city because of God's judgment upon them (Gen. 11:1-9). Dr. Dyer explains: "Babel was humanity's first united attempt to short-circuit God's purpose. This first post-Flood city was designed expressly to thwart God's plan for humankind. The people wanted unity and power, and Babel was to be the seat of that power. Babylon, the city of man trying to rise to heaven, was built in direct opposition to God's plan."[2]

Babylon was again at the forefront[3] when God sent the Southern Kingdom of Israel (Judah) into the seventy-year captivity in the sixth century B.C. It was at this time that God gave Daniel many of His prophetic visions. Babylon is the first of four great kingdoms to arise during the "times of the Gentiles" (Dan. 2 and 7). History reveals that Babylon declined until it was abandoned about two centuries after Christ. Although the city of Babylon sunk beneath the sands of time during the past seventeen hundred years, it has begun to rise in this century. Watch for Babylon to become a dominant force in the world religiously, commercially and governmentally for Revelation 17-18 predicts the destruction of that city and, in order to be the city those prophecies require, it must be rebuilt on a grand scale like in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

BABYLON FUTURE

Just as Babylon has played an important role in past history, so she is scheduled by God—as revealed in prophecy—to play a central role in the future. Babylon will likely become the capital for the antichrist during the coming seven-year tribulation, as portrayed in the *Left Behind* novel series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

Babylon was the most important city in the world for about 2,000 years in the past and the Bible tells us that she will be revived and brought onto the end-time stage to play a leading role (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17—18). End-times prophecy demands that Babylon be rebuilt and become an important city in world affairs during the tribulation. Isaiah 13:19 says, "And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the Chaldeans' pride, will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah." The context of Isaiah 13 is "the day of the LORD," the most common Old Testament term for our more widely know term of the tribulation. Further, Babylon has indeed been conquered in the past, but never has she been destroyed cataclysmically (i.e., "as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah"). In fact there are said to be about 250,000 people living in Babylon today. Revelation 18:16, 19 echoes such a sudden destruction from the hand of God, "'Woe, woe, the great city, . . . for in one hour she has been laid waste!'" Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum declares, "the prophecies regarding the city of Babylon have never been fulfilled in the past, as any encyclopedia article on Babylon will make quite clear. In order for these prophecies to be fulfilled, it will require the rebuilding of the city of Babylon in the same general area. Ancient Babylon is in present day Iraq."[4] Thus, Babylon has a great future role in history, but will be utterly destroyed in a moment of future history.

Babylon is pictured in Revelation 17—18 as the source of ungodly religion, government, and economics. Virtually all unrighteous, end-time aspects of society are derived from a Babylonian source. The true character of Babylon is revealed to John in Revelation 17:5 as a mystery that is exposed as:

"BABYLON THE GREAT,
THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS
AND
ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH"

As the mother of all false religion, Babylon is the source from which arises false Christianity in our own day and certainly during the tribulation. All the streams of apostate Christianity—Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, and Liberal Protestantism—will converge into ecclesiastical Babylon (Revelation 17) during the tribulation. Dr. Dyer tells us, "In Revelation 17, John describes a vision with two parts. The first part of the vision is a woman identified as 'Babylon.' She is a city of extreme wealth that controls 'peoples, multitudes, nations and languages' (Revelation 17:5, 15). She is the literal rebuilt city of Babylon."[5] These will all continue their deceptive roles, but will experience God's judgment during and at the end of the tribulation. The same opinion and destiny is noted in Revelation 18 of commercial Babylon.

Literal Babylon

Down through church history most Bible interpreters have thought that Babylon was some kind of code word for some other entity, like the Roman Empire, Roman Catholicism, apostate Christianity, or even the United States or Great Britain. However, I believe that just like Israel always refers to Israel in the Bible, so also Babylon always refers to Babylon.

First of all, I believe that the Book of Revelation is a Grand Central Station into which all future Bible prophecy flows. Dr. Fruchtenbaum explains it as follows:

> The Old Testament prophecies are scattered throughout the books of Moses and the various prophets and writings. It would have been impossible to develop these prophecies into any chronological sequence of events. The value of the book of Revelation is not that it provides new information, but rather that it takes the scattered Old Testament prophecies and puts them in chronological order so that the sequence of events can be determined.[6]

When you study what God says about Babylon in the Book of Revelation, it is clear that those prophecies have not been fulfilled through past events, therefore, they must be fulfilled through future events as noted in Revelation. Revelation 17 and 18, which speak extensively about Babylon, have many allusions to such Old Testament prophecies about Babylon such as Isaiah 13 and 14, Jeremiah 50 and 51, and Zechariah 5:5-11.[7] The only reasonable interpretation for a literal interpreter to reach is "it is Babylon on the Euphrates."[8] Dr. Robert Thomas goes on to say, "In the future day anticipated in the pages of this prophecy, this city will become the focal point for a religious system staunchly opposed to the truth of Christianity. The system will thrive for a time in gaining influence over the commercial and political entities of its time, until the beast and the ten kings determine that it no longer has a usefulness for their purposed. They will then dismantle it."[9] The Babylon of Revelation is literal and therefore these prophecies about her will be fulfilled in the future, perhaps even the near future.

Newspaper Exegesis?

Preterists, like Gary DeMar, scoff at the prospects of a future rebuilt city of Babylon that plays a role in end-time prophecy. "Should we expect a reconstituted Babylon in the future based upon events described in the Book of Revelation," asks DeMar? "Is Revelation's Babylon the same as the Babylon of the Old Testament? . . . Not at all."[10] DeMar believes that those of us who see a correlation between current events and God's preparation for the coming tribulation period is "newspaper exegesis." He says that we are "reading the Bible through the lens of current events."[11] I contend that just the opposite is true.

For many years the literal interpreters of Bible prophecy have taught that Israel must return to the land before the tribulation, based up their understanding of the prophetic timetable. That has come to pass with the founding of the present state of Israel in 1948. There are back in their land and poised to fulfill their destiny when the tribulation

begins. Those in the past, before 1948, did not believe this based upon what the newspapers said. Instead, they believed it because the Bible said so. It just so happened that God is bringing this to pass before a watching world as the newspapers chronicle current events. If this belief had been a function of "newspaper exegesis" then we would not have begun proclaiming our view of a reconstituted Israel until that time. Instead, Bible students were proclaiming it as a future event for hundreds of years before it occurred.

In the same way, prophecy students have also taught for many years that there will be a Revived Roman Empire and the need for a rebuilding of the city of Babylon since these entities will play a specific role during the future time of great tribulation. Before Saddam Hussein rose to power, Charles Dyer completed his Th.M. thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary in May 1979, in which he argued for a future rebuilding of Babylon. Well before his time there was developing a loud chorus of Bible students who also contended that the Bible predicts a future rebuilding of the city of Babylon on the Euphrates River.

In my limited library, I have found a number of men who taught a future Babylon from Revelation 17—18. They include the following: B. W. Newton (1853),[12] Robert Govett (1861),[13] G. H. Pember (1888),[14] J. A. Seiss (1900),[15] Clarence Larkin (1918),[16] E. W. Bullinger (1930),[17] William R. Newell (1935),[18] F. C. Jennings (1937),[19] David L. Cooper (1942),[20] G. H. Lang (1945).[21] I am sure that more could be added to the list.

CONCLUSION

Since a literal Babylon will have a role in the coming tribulation, it makes sense that the current war with Iraq, while not a fulfillment of Bible prophecy, most certainly is posturing of Babylon for her impending role. It will be interesting to see what transpires during this war and what insights we can gain as to how it may or may not be a preparatory stage for the tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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[1] Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Is Iraq at the Center of the Final Drama?* revised edition, (Chicago: Moody Press, [1991], 2003), p. 16.
[2] Dyer, *Rise of Babylon*, p. 47.
[3] For an overview of Babylon see our chart "Babylon in History and Prophecy" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), pp. 104-06. See also, Joseph Chambers, *A Palace for the Antichrist: Saddam Hussein's Drive to Rebuild Babylon and Its Place in Bible Prophecy* (Green Forest, AR, 1996).
[4] Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, 1982), p. 192.
[5] Dyer, *Rise of Babylon*, p. 162.
[6] Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps*, p. 9.
[7] For a list of the 550 Old Testament allusions in Revelation see Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps*, pp. 454-59. For a defense of a literal Babylon and how the Old Testament references in Revelation support that view see Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17—18," two parts, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 144, No. 575 (July-September 1987), pp. 305-16, and No. 576 (October-December 1987), pp. 433-49. See also Charles Harry Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17—18," Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979.
[8] Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8—22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 307.
[9] Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 307-08.

[10] Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, (Power Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 358.
[11] DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 210.
[12] B. W. Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, and *Conversation on Revelation xvii*.
[13] Robert Govett, *The Apocalypse Expounded*., Vol. 4, pp. 4-7.
[14] G. H. Pember, *Mystery Babylon The Great*, pp. v, 22.
[15] J. A. Seiss, The Apocalypse: *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, p. 397.
[16] Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth*, pp. 140-44.
[17] E. W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation*, p. 530.
[18] William R. Newell, *Revelation: A Complete Commentary*, p. 268.
[19] F. C. Jennings, *Studies in Revelation*, p. 476.
[20] David L. Cooper, *World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated*, p. 100.
[21] G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 305.