

Babylon: the Great Unsolved Mystery of All Time

In the Book of Revelation, Babylon is described as both a person and a place: she is the 'great prostitute' (17,1.5.15; 19,2; cf. 14,8) and the 'great city' (Rev 17,18; 18,2.10.18.21). She is supported by the beast (17,3.7) until a short time before the end of history (17,9-18), when the beast rises from the abyss (11,7; 17,8), or sea (13,1), to reveal himself openly and begin his reign in Jerusalem (11,7-8). At this point, Jerusalem inherits the title 'great city' from Babylon (11,8). Soon after this, the beast and his allies destroy Babylon (17,16) and, by so doing, it is written that they fulfill God's will (17,17). Although Babylon's destruction is announced as an event that occurs during the beast's reign (14,8; 17,16), it is not described until later in the text (chs.17-18), where it is presented as one of the eschatological judgments of God on the world (16,19; 19,1-6).

Before going any further, I would like to give you a brief review of the current interpretations proposed by modern scholarship.

By far the majority of scholars argue from external historical evidence that Babylon should be identified with ancient Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. This is the standard Preterist interpretation, which is based on the assumption that the greater part of the text of Revelation refers to the Roman period. It goes together with the view that the beast, upon which Babylon is sitting (17,3), represents a succession of Roman Emperors, and that most, if not all, the prophecy of Revelation has already been fulfilled. In some ways this interpretation fits the text, but in other ways it certainly does not.

For example, the text describes the destruction of Babylon as eternal, yet Rome still exists. The destruction of Babylon is also said to be one of the divine judgments at the end of history, and yet these have not yet taken place. Finally Babylon's destruction is executed by the beast and his allies, and we know of no Roman Emperor who turned against his own capital city and reduced her to eternal ruins.

So it is not surprising that the above interpretation has been opposed by other scholars, who have been moved, especially by biblical and typological aspects of the description of Babylon, to identify her with Jerusalem of the second temple period, before her destruction in AD 70. However, this view is not very convincing either, since Jerusalem did not sit on seven hills, it never had 'a kingdom over the kings of the earth' (17,18), and had already lain in ruins for some 25 years when John wrote this prophecy about her destruction. Furthermore, as in the case of Rome, her destruction in AD 70 was not eternal.

Unresolved problems with both these positions have led other scholars to emphasize the universal language of the description, and ignore its particularity. They therefore adopt an idealist position, which is to say that Babylon does not represent any particular city in any particular epoch, but rather 'those political and religious powers in every age that oppose God even while sometimes appearing to serve Him'.¹ This position echoes the interpretation of Tychonius, re-proposed in the fifth century by St. Augustine, to the effect that Babylon is the *civitas diaboli* of every epoch of human history. This is a way of saying that any and every corrupt economic-religious system can be identified with Babylon. It is an interpretation that certainly helps to open our minds to other possible solutions, in time and place, but it does this at the

¹ Iain Provan "Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective", *JSNT* 64 (1996) 81-100 (quote from p.100).

cost of ignoring the very real specificity in the description of Babylon and her destruction. The text gives the very strong impression that a real city in a specific place will be destroyed at a certain time.

So, except for those incorrigible historians who ignore the limitations of the historical-critical method and champion ancient Rome at all costs, Babylon remains a mystery. In fact, the author speaks of a mystery with a double aspect: the mystery of the woman's name, or identity, "*Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and the abominations of the earth*" (17,5), and the mystery of her partnership with "*the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her*" (17,7).

If there is not to be more than one 'mystery of iniquity', then this is precisely the same *mysterium iniquitatis* that St. Paul described as follows, in his second letter to the Thessalonians: "*Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you all this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity is already at work; only he who restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed...*" (2Thess 2,1-8).

Since the second coming of the Lord has not yet happened, and the 'son of perdition' has not yet been fully revealed, we are clearly in the same position as St Paul when he wrote these lines in the first century AD. We can therefore take it from St Paul that the 'mystery of iniquity' is still secretly at work in our present world, and that this is the mystery described here in the book of Revelation. By secretly supporting Babylon, the beast (who is the embodiment of the devil) has been able to continue his evil work throughout history, without being detected or suspected. Babylon is a power that has been active in the past and, though still unidentified, continues to be active in the present. It should come as no surprise, then, that Babylon is so difficult to identify, for the concealment of her identity is an integral part of this mystery.

All this invests the exegesis of this part of the Book of Revelation with a particular gravity, for it contains a lot more information on the mystery of iniquity than anywhere else in the New Testament. This may explain why the author places this vision at the time of the sixth and penultimate head of the beast—because the information presented in this vision helps to identify Babylon, expose the working of evil and thereby bring about a change in its strategy at the start of the reign of eighth and last head of the beast. In response to the identification and incrimination of Babylon, the beast transfers his powerbase from Babylon to Jerusalem and fully reveals himself to rule over the world (Rev 17,10-11). If our interpretation is correct, the solution to the identity of Babylon should not only explain the author's great astonishment at the vision, but may also have profound repercussions.

We should take note, though, that the author was carried away in spirit into a desert in order to see the vision of Babylon sitting on many waters (17,3.15). She was not in the desert, but could best be seen from the desert. We can conclude from this that in order to see and understand the vision of Babylon, one must be spiritually in a desert, which is to say, purified of worldly desires and ambitions. The converse is

implied, that those immersed in the world, especially in the world inspired by Babylon, may find the whole subject incomprehensible and annoying, to say the least.

Now, let us consider in simple terms what St. John saw and described these chapters. He basically saw:

1. A woman lavishly dressed and described as a great prostitute, sitting on a beast with seven heads, and on seven hills or mountains (17,3.9).
2. She is *drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus* (17,6).
3. Her name is a mystery: *Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and abominations of the earth* (17,5).
4. She is holding a golden cup full of *the abominations and the filth of her fornication*, which she distributes. It makes the earth's inhabitants drunk (17,2), and corrupts the whole earth (19,2)
5. The rulers of the earth like to 'prostitute themselves' with her (17,2).
6. This woman represents a city "with a kingdom over the rulers of the world" and is called the 'great city' (17,18).
7. The fall of the Babylon the 'great city' is a divine judgment for an accumulation of historical sins (18,5). Her judgment is willed by God (17,17), according to the verdict of the martyrs and saints (18,20), and executed at the end of history by those who previously supported her—the beast and his allies (17,16-17). It is described in the form of a lament by those who profited from her wealth, by kings, merchants and seamen (18,9-19).
8. Her destruction is eternal and will be celebrated by the apostles, prophets and saints in heaven (18,20;19,1-5).

Two details in the description of Babylon give it an undeniable geographical specificity: the city sitting on seven hills is a widely known designation for Rome up to this day,² and Babylon was a code name for Rome among the Jewish and Christian communities contemporary with the author.³

Taking this information into account, we are talking about an immensely powerful international authority, which is still active today, and is identified, in some way, with the city of Rome. This powerful community is described as a drunken prostitute that forms immoral alliances with the world's rulers and spreads her corrupt practices to all the world's inhabitants. Furthermore, she is secretly supported by the beastly historical embodiment of the devil.

² The objection raised by E. Lupieri (in *L'Apocalisse di Giovanni*, Milano:1999; 271) that the expression ἐπτὰ ὄρη (seven mountains) is not found in Greek literature before the time of the book of Revelation, because Greek writers use a different term (λόφος or ἐπτάλοφος) to refer to the seven 'hills' of Rome, has been discounted conclusively by Biguzzi: "Even if the expression ἐπτὰ ὄρη is not found in Greek literature, the singular ὄρος is repeatedly employed for one or other of the seven Roman Hills by Strabo (64B.C.-21A.D.), Dionysius of Helicarnassus (30 A.D. circa), and Dio Cassius (II-III century A.D.), while Plutarch employs the term σεπτομόντιον, tracing on the Latin septimontium, the feast of the seven Roman "mountains" (not "hills")", "Is Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?" *Biblica*, 87 (2000), 384.

³ Cf. 1Pet 5,13; 2Baruch 11,1; 33,2; 67,7; 79,1; 4Ezra 3,2,31; *Sibylline Oracles* 5. 140-43.434; 4.119, 139-39; *Midr. Rab. Lev* 6.6. This was appropriate because, like the ancient Mesopotamian city, Rome had become the political and religious capital of a world empire, renowned for its luxury and idolatry. Furthermore, Rome destroyed the second temple and exiled the Jewish people, just as Babylon had destroyed the first Temple and sent the ancient Israelites into exile.

It is important to note that the language and imagery of this section (Rev 17) are very closely related to certain passages in the OT (especially Ezekiel 16 and 23), and so it is in the OT that we learn what is meant by the metaphor of prostitution. There we find that it is used primarily to describe the idolatry of the people of God. In a number of passages, their worship of false gods and abandonment of the true God is portrayed as the fornication of a prostitute.⁴ Since it is essentially a metaphor for infidelity to the Covenant with God, we should think of Babylon primarily as a religious community that knows God and his Laws. At the beginning of Revelation, we come across this metaphor in the description of Jezebel, a member of the church at Thyratira, who was teaching other Christians ‘to prostitute themselves and eat idol-sacrifices’, and she did not want to repent of her ‘prostitution’ (Rev 2,20-21). ‘Prostitution’ in this context clearly refers to a form of idolatry that was practiced by Christians as a compromise with the pagan customs of the surrounding society. We should expect something similar when applied to Babylon.⁵

Moving on to the next chapter in the text (Rev 18), in which the sudden destruction of Babylon and its economic fallout are described, we are left in no doubt that her idolatry is directed to Mammon, and is expressed as an inordinate attachment to wealth, riches and luxury (18,3.7.14; cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13; 1Tim 6,10; Heb 13,5). It is with her love of wealth and luxury that she has corrupted the entire world and seduced its rulers.

The final clue to the identity of this city is in the author’s conjunction of the metaphors of drunkenness and prostitution. We should therefore understand Babylon’s lust for luxury and wealth as being facilitated somehow by her state of intoxication “*with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus*” (Rev 17,6).

At this point, we differ from the many interpreters who explain Babylon’s drunkenness as related in some way to her slaughter of the saints and martyrs of Jesus.⁶ For a start, we must remember that, in contrast to the martyrs, saints are not killed, but die a natural death. Their inclusion here, along with martyrs, must point to another meaning. Secondly, nowhere else in the text is Babylon described as a killer or persecutor of the followers of Jesus; this is a function of the beast and his false prophet (cf. Rev 13). Thirdly, even if it were true that Babylon “gets high” on killing the faithful followers of Jesus, there is no apparent connection between this and Babylon’s lust for wealth and luxury. How can Babylon get rich by killing the poor of Christ? Furthermore, from a purely literary point of view, a murderer is unlikely to succeed as a prostitute. In brief, if the metaphor of drunkenness implies murder, it becomes totally incongruent with the metaphor of prostitution.

So we suggest that Babylon’s intoxication with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus refers to her assimilation of the self-sacrifices of these holy people, to the extent of appropriating their merit and glory to herself. This leads to a state of self-exaltation, or spiritual pride, that causes her to act in an irresponsible and disordered way like someone who is drunk.

This explanation of her ‘drunkenness’ then fits neatly with her prostitution: considering the merits of the saints and martyrs as her own (being drunk with their

⁴ Cf. Ben-Daniel, “The Metaphor of Prostitution in the Identification of Babylon in Rev 17-18” at www.newtorah.org.

⁵ For further links between Babylon (in the book of Revelation) and Jezebel (in the OT) see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC series, Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster 1999; 884.

⁶ “It should be noted that only Pliny the Elder (*Hist. Nat.* 14.22.28) speaks of becoming drunk with blood and not merely drinking blood”, Prigent, *Apocalypse of St. John*, 490.

blood), Babylon succeeds in satisfying her lust for riches and luxury (her passion for fornication). In a few words, Babylon “glorifies herself and lives luxuriously” (Rev 18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Allying herself in this way with the saints and the martyrs of Jesus, the religious community that is called Babylon cannot be anything else but Christian. Defined as a Christian community with international authority and based in the city of Rome, it is impossible to escape the identification of Babylon with the historical and administrative centre of the Catholic Church in Rome.

We seem to have arrived at an interpretation of Babylon that makes us recall the words of the author when he first beheld the vision: “*And seeing her I wondered with a great wonder*” (Rev 17,6b). But after reflecting on the long and sometimes scandalous history of the Roman Church, perhaps we should not be so stunned.

Before we go any further, I would like to remind you that we are loyal Roman Catholics who love the Church and pray daily for her leaders. We acknowledge the scriptural basis of, as well as the historical necessity for, the centralization of her authority in Rome, and we thank God for the positive aspects of her leadership. Nevertheless, like many other Catholics, we are acutely aware of those negative aspects of her history that continue to weigh heavily upon the Catholic conscience.⁷ Because of their gravity and depravity, and on the basis that “the corruption of the best is the worst”,⁸ we have no doubt that one day the accumulated historical sins of the Church will be judged by her Lord.

To put it in another way, if the church of Ephesus had her lampstand removed, and disappeared from the face of the earth, because she did not repent and do her first works (Rev 2,5), then how can we doubt that, for sins that are far worse than those of the Church of Ephesus, judgment will also fall on the Church’s central institution in Rome. If this judgment has not yet fallen, we can only suppose that the time for this has not yet arrived. But in the expectation of its future realization, we are better able to proceed with this part of St. John’s prophecy.

Firstly, we must ask ourselves what practice is meant when the text speaks of Babylon satisfying her passion for wealth and luxury by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. This happens to coincide precisely with the ‘cult of the saints and martyrs’ around which, the Second Vatican Council admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in her history, which have proved difficult to eradicate.⁹

St. Bernard of Clairvaux gives a particularly vivid historical illustration of the abuse of this practice in the 11th century, when he writes about the lavish decoration of the churches: “*Let me speak plainly. Cupidity, which is a form of idolatry, is the cause of all this. It is for no useful purpose that we do it, but to attract gifts. You want to know how? Listen to the marvels of it all. (...) The very sight of such sumptuous and exquisite decorations is sufficient to inspire men to make offerings, though not to say their prayers. In this way, riches attract riches, and money produces more money. For some unknown reason, the richer a place appears, the more freely do offerings*

⁷ E.g., “Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*” Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33.

⁸ “*Corruptio optimi pessima*” after Gregory the Great.

⁹ Cf. Conc. Vat. II, *Lumen Gentium*, 51.

pour in. Gold-cased relics catch the gaze and open the purses. If you show someone a beautiful picture of a saint, he comes to the conclusion that the saint is as holy as the picture is brightly coloured. When people rush up to kiss them, they are asked to donate. Beauty they admire, but they do no reverence to holiness. This is the reason the churches are decked out, not merely with a jeweled crown, but with a huge jeweled wheel, where circles of lamps compete in radiance with precious stones. (...) Do you think such appurtenances are meant to stir penitents to compunction, or rather to make sight-seers agog? Oh vanity of vanities, whose vanity is rivaled only by its insanity! The walls of the church are aglow, but the poor of the church go hungry. The stones of the church are covered with gold, while its children are left naked. The food of the poor is taken to feed the eyes of the rich, and amusement is provided for the curious, while the needy have not even the necessities of life.”¹⁰

By the late Middle Ages, corruption in the Church had become much more widespread and diverse. The following text-book account of the history of the Church during this period gives the broader picture: “Near the end of the Middle Ages, corruption in the Catholic Church was a serious dilemma. Members of the clergy were supposed to be well educated, but many priests were illiterate and barely knew how to perform common religious services. Also, priests and nuns in spite of taking vows of chastity engaged in sexual relationships. Even the popes, Innocent VIII and Alexander VI, fathered and raised children. Many of the abbots and bishops exploited their positions to lead lives of luxury and leisure. They resembled princes rather than humble servants of God. The cardinals of Rome lived in magnificent palaces and wore jewel-encrusted gold robes.

The Church came up with several corrupt methods to pay for these luxurious lifestyles. The church told its people that pilgrimages to sites of relics and holy places were suitable ways to repent for their sins. During the later years of the Middle Ages, some clergy took advantage of this tradition and charged people to see holy relics. Frederick I, a prince in northern Germany, had a compilation of over seventeen thousand relics that supposedly included a piece of Moses' burning bush, thirty three fragments of Jesus' cross, and some straw from Jesus' manger. The money from pilgrimages to these relics paid for the building of a cathedral, a castle, and a university in Frederick's kingdom. Simony (which is the practice of selling church items to the highest bidder regardless of the buyer's religious background or teachings) was another practice that earned money for the Church.

The most profitable and controversial of the corrupt practices used to raise money for the Church was the selling of indulgences. In the beginning, an indulgence was just a certificate given by the pope to a person whose sins had been forgiven. This certificate was intended to cancel some or all of the punishment a person would suffer after death for their sins. Though it was never officially stated by the church, many members of clergy taught that salvation was attained simply through the purchase of enough indulgences.”¹¹

This takes us on to consider the mysterious name: “*Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and abominations of the earth*” (17,5). As we said before, ‘prostitute’ is a metaphor used in the OT to describe the community of Israel in her infidelity to God on account of idolatry (cf. Dt 31,16; Hos 2,4-7; Is 1,21; Jer 2,20; 3,6-10; 13,27; Mic 1,7; Ezek 16,15; 23,7.19). In the NT context, then, the prostitutes

¹⁰ *The Works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, 1:63-66, “Apology to Abbot William”, ch. 12, para 28.*

¹¹ “Corruption of the Church in the Middle Ages”, Youth Bible Study at Home, by Max Walker Jr, 12.02.2008 and available at <http://ezinearticles.com/?Corruption-Of-The-Church-In-The-Middle-Ages&id=969734>

whose mother is Babylon can be identified with all those Christian communities that have indulged in the same passion for riches and luxury. These include communities, or sects, which in the course of history have separated themselves from the central authority of the Catholic Church. It may be of some small comfort to Roman Catholics that Babylon is by no means the only prostitute in this metaphorical sense, but her responsibility is the greatest since she is the mother of all the others.

What about Babylon's golden cup "*full of the abominations and the filth of her fornication*" (17,4), which is another way of describing "the wine of the passion of her fornication" that makes all the nations drunk (Rev 14,8; 17,2; 18,3)? The original purpose of this cup is revealed as the time for Babylon's destruction draws near, when it is commanded to those committed to destroy her "*mix her a double measure in the cup in which she mixed*" (18,6). The role of this cup changes from being an instrument in the corruption of the nations to being an instrument in the condemnation of Babylon herself. Finally, Babylon is forced to drink from the same cup, now precisely identified as "*the cup of the anger of God, full of the wine of his passion*" (16,9). Therefore the golden cup that Babylon holds in her hand is none other than the cup of God's anger, entrusted to her by the Lord to bring divine justice to the nations (cf. Jer 13,27). However, instead of distributing the 'wine of the passion of God', Babylon filled the cup with the "wine of the passion of her fornicating", and instead of bringing divine justice to the nations, she brought them corruption.

Even though it is bound to make Catholics shudder, the identification of this cup with the Eucharistic chalice is a simple step for many non-Catholics.¹² How could the Holy Eucharist ever have become the means by which Babylon disseminated her love of wealth and riches, instead of the Love of God in Christ? This is a question that goes to the heart of our belief in this Sacrament, whose validity, we are told, depends on four things: 1) a properly ordained priest, with 2) the correct intention, pronouncing 3) the authentic words of consecration over 4) the correctly-prepared materials. If any of these four components is defective, the consecration of the Eucharist is invalid and Christ cannot be said to be really present. The Church assures us that, in spite of these four conditions, the Mass is almost always valid and we clearly hope that this is true. But if the heart of the priest is turned towards Mammon instead of God, and we know that a man cannot have two masters (cf. Mt 7,24), how can we be so sure that his intention is correct? Is it possible for a priest whose god is really Mammon, to share the Church's intention of making Christ present at the Eucharist? By having this intention would he not be contradicting himself? When the celebrating priest lacks the correct intention, the authorities admit that the Mass is invalid, and Christ is not present.¹³ It is a small step from here to admit that when Christ is not present, the priest communicates his own idolatrous intentions and desires. This is a situation in which the celebration of the Eucharist could become the very opposite of what it should be—a situation that corresponds exactly with the spread of corruption by the golden chalice "*full of the abominations and filth of her fornication*".

Babylon's mentality, her inner attitude, is further revealed in the passage telling us what she says in her heart: "*I sit as queen and am not a widow and sorrow I certainly do not see*" (18,7). The fact that she says this 'in her heart', which is a Semitism for 'thinking to herself', implies that Babylon does not pronounce it

¹² E.g., by the Protestants, but for the wrong reasons: they dispute the theology of the Eucharistic Mass. This would certainly not explain why the cup is 'full of the abominations and filth of her fornication'.

¹³ From "*Is Your mass Valid? Liturgical Abuse*" by Bruce Sabalasky, 2001, at www.ourladyswarriors.org/articles/badliturgy.htm, section 4,2: 'Condition Two—Intent of the Priest'.

publicly. There is therefore a difference between what she expresses publicly and the way she thinks and acts privately (cf. Matt 23,1-4). Nevertheless, we must take this private opinion of herself seriously, for it seems to indicate her self-identification with the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which descends from heaven and is gloriously described as the wife, and therefore the queen, of the one whose title is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev 17,14; 19,7; 21,2.9). Thinking that she is “*not a widow and sorrow I certainly do not see*”, she is denying the suffering around her and confirming her identification with the eschatological city in which “*there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain*” (21,4). However, the New Jerusalem, will not be established on earth until after the final judgment at the end of history. The mentality of Babylon can therefore be recognized by the fact that she is not expecting a final judgment at the end of history. She privately thinks that the salvific plan of God has already been completely fulfilled and acts as if she herself represents that fulfillment.

This self-centred and triumphalist way of thinking leads Babylon to conduct herself as if the final Judgment will never take place. “Babylonian theology”, for want of better term, is a thoroughly realized eschatology, which is to say a theology whose cardinal feature is the denial of a future and final Judgment—the divine process by which the source of all evil will be confronted and eradicated from creation. Asserting that evil has already been judged, ‘Babylonian theology’ is tolerant of compromise with evil forces in the present world, and is thus a willing participant in the ‘mystery of iniquity’. It expresses itself as an attachment to the present world, support for the ‘status quo’, and a tendency to ignore or misinterpret the eschatological dimension of the Lord’s teaching. In this way, Babylon actually obstructs the eschatological transformation of creation and the materialization of the New Jerusalem at the end of history. This is reflected in the text by the close connection between the celebration over the destruction of Babylon (19,1-5) and the announcement of the readiness of Christ’s true Bride and Queen (19,6-10), signifying the prompt realization of the New Jerusalem (22,9-10).

To those who think that Babylon’s self-image as the fulfillment of God’s promises to mankind has no relation with the Roman Catholic Church, let me report at least one occasion in the past when this private thought became public. In the second session of the fifth Lateran council, in the year 1512, the most celebrated theologian of the Church at that time, a Dominican by the name of Cardinal Cajetan, affirmed that Rome was indeed the realization of the New Jerusalem.¹⁴ At the risk of sounding over-cautious, perhaps I can also say that the very terms Holy See and Eternal City, so commonly applied to the Papal ‘cathedra’ in Rome, yet so closely describing the Throne of God and his Holy City, both of which remain in heaven until the end of history, run the risk of reinforcing the totally realized eschatology that characterizes ‘Babylonian Theology’.

Finally, no other city has ruled over the kings of the earth as has Rome (17,16), which asserts a spiritual and ecclesiastical primacy over all nations, regardless of their temporal rank or role. This was authoritatively affirmed in the 19th century, by Pope Leo XII, in terms which again show self-identification with the New and ever-holy Jerusalem: “Come therefore to this holy Jerusalem, a priestly and royal city which the sacred seat of Peter has made the capital of the world. Truly it rules

¹⁴ Cf. n 56, ch. 8 (p. 367) ‘Wrestling with the Millennium’, by Bernard McGinn, in *Imagining the End*, Eds. Abbas Imanat, Magnus Berhardsson, London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002. Interestingly enough, a few years later, Cardinal Cajetan was given the task of investigating Martin Luther, who was one of the loudest exponents of the identification of the Roman Church with Babylon.

more widely by divine religion than by earthly domination” (*Quod Hoc Ineunte*, para 6, May 24th, 1824).

To most of you this historical interpretation may remind you of the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, many of whose descendents continue, to this day, to identify Babylon with the Roman Church. But in one very important respect, we are not re-proposing the interpretation of the 16th century Protestant Reformers, for tied to their view of Babylon as the Roman Church, they also insisted that the Pope was the beast, or Antichrist. Being a direct assault on the credibility of the Pope, not to mention his infallibility, this interpretation is not only intolerable to Catholic ears, but is also without any support in the text of Revelation.

This is especially apparent when, before she is going to be destroyed, the divine voice says: “Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and share in her plagues, for her sins have piled up to heaven and God has remembered her iniquities” (Rev 18,4-5). Since there is no mourning for the loss of human life after the downfall of Babylon, but only for the loss of wealth and trade (18,9-20), we can happily infer that all those who find themselves in that city, at the time of her destruction, obey the divine command to leave, indicating in this way that all are God’s people. Abandoning their city in obedience to the Lord, this faithful community demonstrates true repentance for the sins that led to Babylon’s condemnation—sins that, even though forgotten with the passing of time, God has remembered (16,19; 18,5).

The picture to emerge, then, is more nuanced than the stark denunciation of evil delivered by the reforming Protestants, almost 500 years ago. It is truly a mystery, that despite her many sins, all the personnel of this institution are God’s people, who respond to his call. The judgment prophesied so vividly in St. John’s vision falls only on the buildings of this institution, at a time at the end of history when there will be no further need for them. The wonderful buildings with their accumulated treasures can be abandoned to their fiery fate, for their destruction will indeed be a cogent sign of the proximity of the fullness of redemption (cf. Lk 21,28).

So although the Protestant Reformers erred gravely in identifying the Pope with the Antichrist, we propose that they were justified in seeing Babylon in the Church of Rome. This conclusion is not as strange or novel as it may seem, according to the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthazar: “When Luther dares to equate the Roman Church with the whore of Babylon, it strikes us as the height of blasphemy. But he was not the first to coin the phrase. Similar things can be found in Wycliffe and Hus, and their language was not a complete innovation but the violent simplification and coarsening of a very old *theologoumenon*. This in turn had its origins in the Old Testament, in the words of judgment spoken by God, the betrayed Husband, against the archwhore Jerusalem, and in the New Testament’s application of these texts, which are so fundamental to the Old.”¹⁵ In his treatise “Casta Meretrix”, von Balthasar shows how mainstream patristic and mediaeval theologians reapplied a variety of Old Testament models and figures of prostitution to describe the sins, past and present, of the Church and her members. Prominent among their reflections are the diatribes against faithless Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and 23, and the related figure of Babylon in Revelation 17-19.¹⁶ Von Balthazar commends us to take these reflections seriously: “Without endangering the immaculateness, holiness, and infallibility of the Church, one must look the other reality in the eye and not exclude it from

¹⁵ “Casta Meretrix” by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Eng. trans. in *Explorations in Theology Vol 2: Spouse of the Word*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991; 193-288; quote from 193.

¹⁶ *op. cit.* 193-8; 273-81.

consideration. Much would be gained if Christians learned more and more to realize at what price the holiness of the Church has been purchased.”¹⁷

For good or for bad, the identification of Babylon with the headquarters of the Catholic Church in Rome is undoubtedly the view that has had the greatest influence among Christians, if not in the whole history of this book’s interpretation, then certainly in the last millennium.¹⁸ Neither was it confined to theology or to sectarian polemics: in the prophecy of St. Malachy, which is said to have been written in 1139, it was surely no coincidence that the long list of Papal eponyms ends with the destruction of Rome and that Rome here is described in the same way as Babylon in the Book of Revelation, as the city on seven-hills (this incidentally is prophesied under this Pope, Pope Francis, who is also the last and whose eponym is *Petrus Romanus*). In one of her visions, St. Hildegard of Bingen saw the Church as a strange combination of the great prostitute and the woman clothed with the sun (Rev 12,1).¹⁹ In his Divine Comedy, Dante employs Babylonian imagery at least twice to refer to the contemporary leadership of the Church,²⁰ and this may have inspired the Florentine preacher, Savonarola, to lament the transformation of the Church at Rome into the whore of Babylon. In a lecture to priests and religious on the corruption in the Church, he is reported to have said: “Rome is a second Babel, the seat and centre of all vice...Rome is more godless than all the other cities and nations, more godless even than the Turks and the heathen; it is polluting the whole Church”.²¹ Only few weeks later, as if to confirm his bold accusation, he was hanged and burnt after a trial during which he was severely tortured.

The examples could go on. The point is that the identification of Babylon with the Roman Church has the weight of a long tradition behind it, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, and dates from a time when, by all accounts, the leadership of the Catholic Church at Rome truly merited the title. Even though this leadership has since reformed itself, the identification has stuck, precisely because the institution remains and ‘God has remembered her wicked deeds’ (18,5). Her sins have piled up to heaven (18,5), and even though we may have forgotten or overlooked them, the judgment she has merited during the course of her long history has been planned as one of the end-historical events. It is, so to speak, predetermined and inevitable.

What I am trying to say is very simple: difficult though it may be, we Catholics have to accept the end-historical destruction of the historical centre of our Church. If the saints in heaven are called to rejoice at this event, then we should also be able to rejoice with them (18,20; 19,1-4). Again and again in Scripture, including the Book of Revelation, we learn that the People of God are his temple. In the realization of the Holy City that we pray for every time we say “thy Kingdom Come”, there will be no sanctuary (21,22), which also means no Basilica and no Apostolic Palace and no Vatican Museum. The Judgment depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel will be behind us, and there will be no further need for these images or shadows of God’s presence, because the Creator and his Christ will be present in their incomparable and unimpeded Glory.

¹⁷ op. cit. 198.

¹⁸ Cf. Ian Boxall, “The Many Faces of Babylon the Great: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the Interpretation of Revelation 17”, in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Ed. Steve Moyse, Edinburgh/New York: T & T Clark 2001.

¹⁹ *Scivias* 3.11

²⁰ *Inferno*, Canto 19; *Purgatorio* Canto 32-33, 58 (cf. “Casta Meretrix” 194-5).

²¹ “Casta Meretrix”, 195, 280.

If you still find all this difficult to swallow, allow me to make one final point. The Jews have a tradition that their messiah, whenever he comes, will take revenge on Edom in the manner prophesied in Isaiah 34 and 63, which is to say extremely violently. From the Jewish point of view the Edomites deserve this revenge, because they united with the Babylonians to destroy the first temple in Jerusalem, in 586 BC. Following the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD by the Romans, Rome became identified with Edom. So naturally, when Rome became the capital of the Christian religion, the target for revenge was transferred to Christian Rome. And so one of the first tasks awaiting the person who proves himself to be a messiah for the Jews is the settling of this ancient score against Christian Rome. It fits perfectly with the interpretation we have just presented, in which the beast and his allies become the agents of Babylon's destruction (17,16-17).²²

According to a prophecy of Mohammed in a well-known Hadith, the Muslims are also expecting to celebrate victory over the fall of the centre of Christianity in Rome, which they refer to as Romiyya.²³ They see this as a gateway to the Islamic conquest of the entire continent of Europe. So, we have, here, a rare concordance between large sections of all three monotheistic religions: all could agree that when the angel announces "Fell, down fell Babylon the Great" he is referring to Christian Rome. It would be a little unwise to ignore a prophecy with such wide ecumenical acceptance!

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New Year's Day, 2016
Jerusalem

²² For the identification of the final reign of the beast with the messianic expectation of Orthodox Judaism, see the chapter entitled 'The Pseudo-messianic Reign' in Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, 146-153, also available on www.newtorah.org.

²³ <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=7DA702FA-28C0-4FE7-AD58-4ED9C5AFB460>