

The Metaphor of Prostitution in the Identification of Babylon in Revelation 17–18

Dedicated to all those who are “wondering with great wonder” (Rev 17,6) at the direction taken by the current leadership of the Catholic Church, and to Fr. Jesusmaria Missigbètò above all.

Abstract

There are good reasons for identifying Babylon in Rev 17–18 with Rome, but inconsistencies with the text arise if ancient Imperial Rome is intended. In this study, an important argument for identifying Babylon with ancient Rome is presented and examined. Its weaknesses include neglect of Ezek 16 and 23 as a background for Rev 17, and failure to grasp the full biblical significance of the metaphor of prostitution. It is then shown that in the Old Testament this metaphor refers exclusively to idolatry and/or practices associated with idolatry. Furthermore, apart from very few exceptions, it is always applied to the idolatry and infidelity of God’s people. The use of the metaphor in Rev 2 is consistent with this general rule. Moving on to Rev 17, Babylon’s prostitution is interpreted in line with Old Testament usage, as an idolatrous love of worldly riches and wealth. Textual evidence from Rev 17-18 is then presented to verify that Babylon does indeed represent a community of God’s own people.

Introduction

In one of the longest and most vivid sections of the Book of Revelation, the author narrates his vision of the judgment of Babylon as one of the eschatological judgments of God (Rev 17,1–19,5).¹ He describes how this judgment results in Babylon’s eternal destruction, and how this event makes way for the realization of the Holy City, New Jerusalem, at the centre of the “new heavens and the new earth”. In spite of its undeniable ‘end time’ context (cf. 14,6-11; 15,1), modern scholars are almost unanimous in their identification of Babylon with the ancient imperial capital of Rome. This is a cornerstone of the dominant preterist, or contemporary historical, interpretation.

Adopting this view, however, obliges us to identify the heads of the Beast, on which Babylon sits (17,9), with a series of contemporary Roman Emperors, whose identities have never been adequately determined, because no historical series of Emperors matches the indications given in the text: “five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he comes he must remain for just a short time. And the Beast which was, and is not, is also of the seven and goes to destruction” (17,10-11).² Furthermore, no Roman Emperor has ever turned against his own imperial capital and destroyed it, as the text describes: “And the ten horns that you saw and the Beast, these will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh, and will consume her with fire” (17,16). Finally, although Rome was sacked several times and depopulated by the Barbarian invasions of the fifth century, she was certainly never destroyed and left utterly

¹ About one tenth of the whole text is devoted to this subject. Some scholars have appropriately termed this section the ‘Babylon Appendix’ (after Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John’s Apocalypse*, Westminster: Dacre, 1949; 55-57 and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; 14-15; 221).

² “In a relentless effort to identify it with the pagan empire, many have attempted to line up its seven heads and seven (sic) horns with various Roman emperors. No one, however, has come up with a convincing match”, Rick Van De Water, ‘Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea (Rev 13.1)’, *New Testament Studies*, 46 (2000), 254. For a summary of these attempts, see “Excursus 17B” in David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Vol. 52a in the WBC series, Nashville: T. Nelson 1998; 946-48.

desolate in the manner expressed in the text: “Like this, with fury, Babylon the great city shall be thrown and never again be found” (18,21; cf. 18,2;17,19,22-23; 19,3).

On the contrary, by all accounts, the Barbarian invaders respected the churches and spared the Christian population sheltering in them. Far from obeying the divine command to “come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and so that you do not receive from her plagues” (18,4), God’s people remained in Rome, took control and eventually restored the power and prestige of this historical city. So Rome’s persistence and prosperity up to this day testify against the identification of ancient Rome with Babylon, for it is clear that ancient Rome never suffered the eternal judgment that the text predicts for Babylon.

Several scholars have identified Babylon with ancient Jerusalem, generating a rival version of the preterist interpretation.³ The proposal is interesting but unacceptable, primarily on the grounds that Jerusalem, like Rome, still exists up to the present day, and so it cannot be identified with a city that was supposed to have been totally depopulated and eternally destroyed in the distant past.⁴

Seeing that the historical facts concerning both ancient Rome and ancient Jerusalem do not correspond with the text at this most basic level, it is surprising that the majority of biblical scholars continue to cling to, and promote, their preterist interpretation.⁵

This is no small point. One of these scholars perceptively writes: “The interpretation of the Babylon spoken of in Rev 16-18 conditions the reading of the whole Book of Revelation itself, since Babylon, along with the Beast rising from the sea, is the target of John’s attacks”.⁶ The main purpose of the present work, then, is to examine the arguments for the identification of Babylon with ancient Rome and to propose some modifications based on the biblical use of the metaphor of prostitution. It is hoped that this will lead to a re-evaluation of the dominant preterist reading of Revelation, if indeed the identification of Babylon with ancient Rome is one its main props.

Revelation’s Babylon as Rome

Most commentators base their interpretation of Babylon as ancient Rome on the assumption that this is what the earliest readers would have understood.⁷ This is, in fact, a reasonable assumption to make, in the light of two unusually specific details in the text having an undeniable connection with Rome:

³ The more recent proponents of this version are: J. Massyngberde Ford (1975), E. Corsini (1980), A.J. Beagley (1987), E. Lupieri (1999), R. Van De Water (2000). For the originators and the various configurations of this interpretation, see G. Biguzzi, ‘Is Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?’, *Biblica*, 87 (2000), 375, 378-80.

⁴ In this version, Babylon’s eternal destruction in Rev 17-18 is said to have been fulfilled by the Roman siege and sack of Jerusalem in 66-70 CE. For other arguments against this view, see Biguzzi, ‘Is Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?’, 380-83.

⁵ “But this version does encounter the difficulty of understanding many of the apparent prophecies of final judgment as being already fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire during the fifth century A.D.”, G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC series, Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster 1999; 45.

⁶ Biguzzi, ‘Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?’, 371. Alan F. Johnson is of a similar mind: “In an important sense, the interpretation of this chapter controls the interpretation of the whole Book of Revelation” *Revelation*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, rev. ed., vol. 13, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006; 736.

⁷ E.g., “It is therefore probable that this symbolism was entirely transparent for the first readers of the Book of Revelation” Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Eng. trans., Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 441; “For the early church the city of Rome was a contemporary Babylon”, Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., Grand Rapids/Eerdmans, 1998; 271.

1. The name ‘Babylon’ (Rev 14,8;16,19;17,5;18,2.10.21) was a code name for Rome among Jewish and Christian communities contemporary with the author of Revelation (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). The origin and use of this name relate to the events of 70 CE, when Rome repeated what Babylon had done in 586 BCE by destroying the temple and exiling the Jewish people. Rome also resembled the ancient city of Babylon by becoming the political and religious capital of a vast empire (cf. Rev 17,18).
2. The city on seven hills, or mountains (ἑπτὰ ὄρη in Rev 17,9),⁸ was a universally known and instantly recognizable designation for Rome at the time the Book of Revelation was written, in the first century CE.⁹

It needs to be said that although the first readers of the Book of Revelation may have understood Babylon as a reference to Rome, and some may even have identified it specifically with this ancient imperial capital,¹⁰ there is no reason to believe that the author was referring specifically to the ancient city. Seeing that the city has been continuously inhabited since ancient times, and continues to rest on the same seven hills, the author’s designation can apply to Rome at any or every period in her long history, even up to the present day.

However, there are other scholarly arguments identifying Babylon specifically with ancient Rome. One of the most compelling examples, in recent times, is a work by Richard Bauckham, called ‘The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18’.¹¹ As representative of the interpretations that equate Babylon with ancient Rome, no challenge to this approach can hope to be successful without first confronting this carefully crafted and influential study.

‘The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18’

In this work, Bauckham uses classical and Old Testament sources to interpret Rev 17–18, focusing on the lament for the destruction of Babylon (Rev 18,9-19) and showing how it accurately reflects, and simultaneously criticizes, the economic life of Imperial Rome.

The centre piece of this study is a historical examination of each of the 28 items in the cargo list (18,12-13),¹² and the demonstration that it is “very representative of Rome’s

⁸ “Roman writers often used the terms *mons*, “mountain,” and *collis*, “hill,” interchangeably when referring to the Seven Hills of Rome”, Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 945.

⁹ The objection raised by E. Lupieri (in *L’Apocalisse di Giovanni*, Milano:1999; 271) that the expression ἑπτὰ 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 ἑπτάλοφος) to refer to the seven ‘hills’ of Rome, has been discounted conclusively by Biguzzi: “Even if the expression ἑπτὰ 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 the Babylon Rome or Jerusalem?’, 384.

¹⁰ As did, for example, Victorinus of Pettau in his commentary on the Apocalypse (written around 258-260 CE).

¹¹ This constitutes ch. 10 in Richard Bauckham’s *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993.

¹² There are actually 29, but like many other commentators, Bauckham combines the last two (literally: “bodies and souls of men”) by considering the conjunction ‘and’ to be exegetical: “slaves, that is, human persons” (*Climax*, 370), since he interprets both terms to refer to slaves.

more expensive imports”.¹³ The author notes that about half of these (13) are mentioned in Pliny’s list of the most costly products of nature (*Hist. Nat.* 37.204); the others on the list were cheaper but were imported in such vast quantities that they can also be ranked among the most expensive imports. Not included are any of the exotic foodstuffs eaten at the banquets of the rich, but instead there seems to be a disproportionately large number of costly products from Arabia and beyond. Nevertheless, “many of the items in the list are specifically mentioned as prime examples of luxury and extravagance by Roman writers critical of the decadence, as they saw it, of the wealthy families of Rome in the early imperial period”.¹⁴

However, even though John mentions some of the most luxurious items known to his contemporary world, as a way of emphasizing the extravagant wealth of Babylon, it does not necessarily follow that he intends us also to identify the consumer of these products, Babylon, with ancient Imperial Rome. One hardly needs to consult the classical sources cited by Bauckham to know that St. John’s main purpose in adding this list to the merchant’s lament is to draw attention to the immense wealth and economic power of this city at the dramatic moment of its swift downfall and utter destruction. For this purpose, he is closely following his source material in the Old Testament: a lament for the downfall of the ancient seaport of Tyre (Ezek 27,12-25), which includes a list of trading partners and cargo, with at least 18 of the items in St. John’s list.¹⁵ If, by adapting the trading list in Ezekiel 27, John had wished us to identify Babylon with ancient Rome, he would surely have followed this Old Testament source even more closely by replacing the names of Tyre’s trading partners with those of ancient Rome, but instead he omits these entirely. In this passage, at least, John is not concerned with recording precise historical details.

In his thorough study of this passage and its OT background, J.-P. Ruiz concludes: “Thus, Rev 18,12-13 is *not* principally “ein kleines kulturgeschichtliches Bild.” It binds the metaphors of Prostitute and Babylon together by mediating between 17,4 and 18,16, where Woman and City are decked out identically. Whether or not the goods listed were part of the Roman commerce of John’s time is not especially important. Without expressing the geographical extent of “Babylon’s” commerce, these exotic items describe immense luxury, ὁ τοσοῦτος πλοῦτος (18,17a)”.¹⁶ The trade list in the merchant’s lament for Babylon cannot therefore be taken as a basis for identifying Babylon with ancient Rome.¹⁷

In the light of this and other internal evidence against identifying Babylon with ancient Rome,¹⁸ it is necessary to go on and question Bauckham’s assertion that this part

¹³ Bauckham, *Climax*, 366.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁵ “Probably, this is an authentic old trade list, which Ezekiel or his editors used here to emphasize the picture of Tyre’s wealth and influence in the poetry of verses 3-11”, Steven Tuell, *Ezekiel: New International Biblical Commentary*; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2009; 183. For a comparison with Ezekiel’s list and the changes in Revelation, cf. Prigent, *Apocalypse of St. John*, 506-9.

¹⁶ J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: the Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17–19,10*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Lang, 1989; 440.

¹⁷ Though supporting the identification of Babylon with ancient Rome, Pierre Prigent offers a more pungent critique of Bauckham’s attempt to show how “the book of Revelation has re-read Ezekiel in the light of the registers of the Chamber of Commerce of the port of Rome”. He writes “The book of Revelation does of course condemn the luxury of Rome... But the point of view is not that of an economist, or even less that of a privileged and attentive witness of the specific features of Roman commerce. One must carefully avoid transposing onto the Book of Revelation the socio-political categories that underlie our modern judgments on the economic sphere, its activity and presuppositions”, *Apocalypse of St. John*, 55.

¹⁸ As presented above, in the introduction.

of the Book of Revelation (chs. 17–18) represents “a condemnation of Rome’s economic exploitation of her empire”.¹⁹

He draws this conclusion from the two associated figures in chapter 17: Babylon depicted as a lavishly dressed prostitute and the Beast of seven heads with ten horns, on which she sits (Rev 17,3). For Bauckham, as for many other modern scholars and commentators, this image represents “Roman civilization, as a corrupting influence, rid(ing) on the back of Roman military power”.²⁰ He explains this further as a double act, in which Rome advances to promote her idolatrous religion among the territories conquered by the imperial armies. In return for Roman colonization and the establishment of *Pax Romana*, Rome then economically exploits these territories to maintain her wealthy and luxurious lifestyle. So “the wealth Rome squanders on luxuries from all over the world was obtained by conquest, plunder and taxation of the provinces”.²¹ This may be a fair summary of Roman imperial decadence, but it deviates in important respects from the imagery and text of Revelation. Here is a short-list of objections:

1. If the prostitute is Rome and the Beast is Roman military might, then the destruction of the prostitute by the Beast and his allies (17,16) represents the Roman military forces destroying their own imperial capital. The history of the Roman Empire knows of no such crisis, and certainly never in the definitive way described in the text (18,21; 19,3). Scholars like to point out that this strange scenario corresponds to the popular first century prediction of the Emperor Nero’s revengeful return to Rome from the East, but this expectation never materialized in ancient times.²² So, either their interpretation is incorrect, or the Book of Revelation contains a prophecy that turned out to be false.

2. Bauckham more precisely defines Rome’s corrupting and idolatrous religion as the imperial cult, in which her conquered subjects show gratitude to the Roman Emperor and worship him “as a divine Saviour for the blessings he had brought”.²³ Rome is able to promote this deluded attitude among her subject peoples, and conceal her economic exploitation of them, by means of the intoxicating wine in her golden cup, which represents the ‘peace’ she offers them under the name of *Pax Romana*. Interesting though it may be, this exposition also deviates from the text of Revelation, because it is not Babylon who causes people to worship the Beast, but the false prophet—the Beast from the land (13,12); furthermore, he does not achieve this by seductive allurements, but by coercion and the threat of death (13,15-17). There appears to be confusion between Babylon’s iniquitous role and that of the false prophet.

3. Bauckham also insists that the “primary meaning of the harlot image in Revelation 17–18 is economic”.²⁴ Leaving aside for a moment the identification of Babylon and the Beast, one wonders whether ‘economic exploitation’ is indeed the primary meaning of Babylon’s prostitution. From a purely literary point of view, the metaphor of prostitution is not adequately explained as economic exploitation, since a prostitute remains a prostitute whether she asks for a large recompense or a small one. Conversely, one can think of many other metaphors that would better convey the sense of economic

¹⁹ Bauckham, *Climax*, 338.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 343.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 370.

²² Cf. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 174-90; also Hans-Josef Klauck, ‘Do They Never Come Back? Nero Redivivus and the Apocalypse of John’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 63 (2001); 683-98.

²³ Bauckham, *Climax*, 348.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

exploitation. From a survey of OT parallels, however, Bauckham bases himself on the observation that “it is probably Tyre that supplied the image of the harlot for Rome”.²⁵ His authority is a study by Jan Fekkes deriving Rev 17,2a, 18,3b and 18,9b from Isaiah 23,17b, where it is written that Tyre “will return to her ‘hire’ and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth”.²⁶ So the view that Tyre’s harlotry in Isa 23,17 signifies her promiscuous commercial relationships with other nations has given rise, by typology, to the purely economic interpretation of Babylon’s prostitution. This is the line taken by many other scholars, but it is not satisfactory for two main reasons: firstly because the prostitute metaphor in Revelation extends far beyond the verses (Rev 17,2a;18,3b.9b) which are said to be derived from Isa 23,17 (Tyre’s harlotry), and secondly because there is good evidence for idolatry being a major factor in Isaiah’s use of the harlot metaphor for Tyre. This will be taken up again in the next section.

4. Bauckham seems to have overlooked the full significance of the metaphor of prostitution in Revelation because he has limited its OT background to the oracles against Babylon and Tyre.²⁷ He can therefore say: “So the Babylon of Revelation 17-18 combines in itself the evils of the two great evil cities of the Old Testament prophetic oracles: Babylon and Tyre”.²⁸ This may indeed be true for the description of Babylon in Rev 18, but it is incomplete for understanding Rev 17.²⁹ In this chapter, Babylon’s prostitution is presented in language and imagery that strongly evoke Ezekiel’s diatribes against Jerusalem (Ezek 16 and 23).³⁰ No explanation of Babylon’s prostitution is complete until the contribution of these shocking passages has been considered and given its rightful place.

What emerges from this review of Bauckham’s study, then, is that there is no obligation to identify Babylon with ancient Rome on the basis of the merchant’s lament and cargo list of Rev 18,12-13. Furthermore, the interpretation he has proposed is impoverished by its failure to consider the full OT background of Rev 17 and by examining, for this task, only those OT sources that are relevant to Rev 18. His view of Babylon’s prostitution in Rev 17, as narrowly referring to ‘economic exploitation of the

²⁵ Ibid., 346.

²⁶ Jan Fekkes III, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development*, JSNTsupp. 93, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994; 211-212. Fekkes himself (op. cit. 211, esp. n. 49) finds support from K.G. Kuhn, who comments as follows on Isa 23,17 and Nah 3,4: “In these two passages the harlotry does not denote idolatry, as normally in the Old Testament, but the trading activity of the city” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1, 515, n.11)—a view opposed by John M. Court, because “The use of trading imagery appropriate for the subject does not preclude an understanding of harlotry in the sense of idolatry, or rejection of the Lord” *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, London: SPCK 1979; 140. This particular debate will be taken up again in the next section of this study.

²⁷ Mainly Jer 50–51 (for Babylon) and Ezek 26-28 (for Tyre), but including Isa 13,1–14,23; 21,1-10; 47; Jer 25,12-38 (Babylon) and Isa 23 (Tyre); cf. Bauckham, *Climax*, 345.

²⁸ Bauckham, *Climax*, 345.

²⁹ There is a consensus among scholars that these two chapters must be considered as a unity, despite evident literary differences: in Rev 17, Babylon is presented as a drunken woman prostitute, whereas in Rev 18 she is described as ‘the great city’. Not only is there an ancient Semitic tradition identifying cities as women (as Queens, see “The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the OT” by Aloysius Fitzgerald, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 34 [1972], 403-416), but also there are enough verbal and thematic links between the two chapters to demonstrate the identity of these two representations of Babylon (cf. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 255-57; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-Song or Dirge?”, *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, J. Lambrecht (ed), Leuven: University Press, 1980; 198).

³⁰ Cf. Albert Vanhoye, ‘L’Utilisation du Livre D’Ézéchiél dans L’Apocalypse’, *Biblica*, 43 (1962) 436-76 ; esp. 441-2.

empire’, has allowed him to accommodate the text of Revelation to ancient Roman history, but not without creating some obvious inconsistencies with the text.

These observations extend to all those interpretations that overlook the full significance of the metaphor of Babylon’s prostitution, of which Bauckham’s work is only one, albeit influential, example. The narrow economic, or commercial, explanation of the prostitution metaphor, combined with disregard for its almost exclusive application to the people of God in the OT, may explain why some scholars have felt the need to propose a rival preterist interpretation that identifies Babylon with ancient Jerusalem.³¹ Although this view has never enjoyed much support, it does at least signal dissatisfaction with the identification of the ‘great prostitute’ of Rev 17 with the ancient pagan city of Rome.³²

The Metaphor of Prostitution—Old Testament Background

The comparison of certain passages or themes in the Book of Revelation with related passages in the Old Testament is much more than an ‘academic’ exercise. It can be regarded as an essential step in the interpretation of this work. This is not only an observation born from experience, but is also the interpretative method indicated by the author, whose writing is replete with allusions to the OT scriptures.³³ “The place of the OT in the formation of the thought of the Apocalypse,” writes Gregory Beale, “is that of both a servant and a guide: for John the Christ-event is the key to understanding the OT, and yet reflection on the OT context leads the way to further comprehension of this event and provides the redemptive-historical background against which the apocalyptic visions are better understood; the New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New”.³⁴ The importance of the OT in fully understanding the NT is emphasized also by the Catholic Church: “Conversely, the New Testament cannot be fully understood except in the light of the Old Testament”.³⁵

Nowhere else in the New Testament is a city described as a prostitute, and so when confronted with this description of Babylon in the Book of Revelation, repeated over and over again in varying ways and forms (πόρνη and its derivatives occur at Rev 14,8;17,1-2.4.5.15; 18,3.9; 19,2), the author is directing us to those parts of the OT where the equivalent Hebrew term and its derivatives (זנה, זנונים, זנות, תזנות) are applied metaphorically to cities and peoples. Out of a total of 134 occurrences of this word or its derivatives in the OT, the lexicon³⁶ defines metaphorical usage for 91 (68%) of these. In the majority of these cases (59), it refers to “intercourse with other deities considered as harlotry”; in some cases (11) it refers to “improper intercourse with foreign nations”; and in the rest (20) it refers to an unspecified combination of these, i.e. improper intercourse with other deities and/or foreign nations. In one case (1) it is said to have a general

³¹ See note 3 above.

³² “What I think Ford and Beagley have done is to remind us that it is far from self-evident that reference merely to Rome is intended in the language of Rev 18”, Iain Provan, ‘Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 64 (1996), 96.

³³ “That the Book of Revelation as a whole has been composed in intimate conversation with the Old Testament is widely acknowledged. It is a book which can scarcely be understood at all without reference to the Old Testament texts to which it constantly and variously alludes.” I. Provan, ‘Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance’, 81.

³⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 97; this is strongly reminiscent of St. Augustine’s dictum “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New” (*Quaest. in Hept.* 2,73; PL 34,623).

³⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002; II A 6; 49.

³⁶ *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, 8th reprint of 1906 ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.

reference to “moral defection”, although a closer look at the text shows that “intercourse with other deities” also explains its use here.³⁷

Of the 91 metaphorical applications of this word or its derivatives, 43 are to be found in Ezekiel (38 of these in Ezekiel 16 and 23 alone). In numerical order, the other authors using this metaphor are Hosea (14), Jeremiah (8), Leviticus (4), 1 and 2 Chronicles (4), Judges (3), Isaiah (3), Nahum (3), Exodus (3), Psalms (2), Numbers (2), Deuteronomy (1), 2 Kings (1). One can see, from these numbers alone, that the prostitute metaphor was adopted and elaborated mainly by the prophets, starting with Hosea’s preaching in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (786-746 BCE). A century and a half later, it was taken up by Jeremiah (Jer 3–4) in his prophecies against Jerusalem (around 609-587 BCE), but it found its most intensive application in the preaching of his contemporary Ezekiel (around 597-587 BCE). Ezekiel’s use of the metaphor (Ezek 16; 23) partly reflects Jeremiah’s use and shows familiarity with his text, but greatly elaborates and intensifies its imagery to warn of the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

Most significant of all is the fact that, in the OT, almost all the occurrences of the prostitution metaphor (86/91) apply to the people of the Covenant (Israel, Judah or Jerusalem). Once (1/91) it applies to the original ‘inhabitants of the land’ (Exod 34,15) and in the remaining few occurrences (4/91) it is used for Nineveh (Nah 3,4.4.4) and Tyre (Isa 23,17).

The metaphor of prostitution therefore appears to have a particular significance for the people of God, for reasons that are well-known: the Covenant between God and the people of Israel was conceived metaphorically as a marriage, so the idolatrous worship of other gods represented infidelity to that marriage and was therefore described in terms of sexual misconduct. The establishment of defensive alliances with foreign kings was also, at times, considered as infidelity and described in similar terms.³⁸ Although OT authors sometimes report this sexual misconduct as adultery (Hebrew root נאִו), since it is the most suitable term for sexual infidelity in the context of marriage, the term most frequently used in practice is ‘prostitution’ (Hebrew root זָנָה). In some OT texts, in fact, both terms are used together and interchangeably (e.g., Jer 3,8.9; 13,27; Ezek 23,37.43), although ‘prostitution’ is clearly the more dominant.³⁹

Elaine Adler Goodfriend lists the following factors to account for this: prostitution implies habitual and repeated sexual misconduct, whereas adultery does not; it also implies personal gain, worldly advancement or enrichment, as a motive; it indicates a multiplicity of partners accepted indiscriminately, and as a predominantly female occupation, it is a more appropriate term for the female role of Israel in the Covenant relationship.⁴⁰

More important than all these factors, however, is the fact that the religious infidelity, in which Israel indulged, often involved actual prostitution. This ‘cult’, or

³⁷ The reason that Jerusalem is called a prostitute in this context (Isa 1,21) is not limited to the loss of her former faithfulness and righteousness (‘moral defection’), for a few lines later there is an explicit reference to her idolatry (1,29). Since this is the primary meaning of the metaphor, its use here is probably meant to link Jerusalem’s ‘moral defection’ with her idolatry, indicating this as the principal cause.

³⁸ John Court explains these different aspects of the metaphor as follows: “The harlotry of Israel as described in the Old Testament is twofold: it is a vivid expression for idolatry, involving the desertion of Yahweh and the true sanctuary; it is also a political disloyalty to Yahweh, when the nation fails to trust in his providence but looks for support to Egypt, Assyria and other nations. Because of the close connection of politics and religion in Old Testament theology, these are but two aspects of a single attitude, a failure of wholehearted trust in the one God who controls all” (*Myth and History*, 140). See also the final paragraph of Elaine Adler Goodfriend’s article, ‘Prostitution as a Metaphor’, in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V.509.

³⁹ Cf. Adler Goodfriend, ‘Prostitution as a Metaphor’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V.509.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

‘sacred’, prostitution was all too common in the Ancient Near East and employed cult prostitutes, or hierodules, whose revenue flowed into the temple of the particular god or goddess. The adoption of this practice by the Israelites and the Jerusalemites, at various times in their history, gives this metaphor a scathing double meaning, with both a theological and a literal aspect. As noted by John Day, in an excellent review of the subject, “It seems likely, in fact, that the Old Testament’s use of the harlotry imagery to describe religious apostasy was encouraged by the existence of rites of sacred prostitution within the Israelite cult, and even when the harlotry imagery is used metaphorically there could sometimes be a *double entendre*”.⁴¹

Only three times in the Old Testament is the metaphor of prostitution applied to non-Israelite peoples: once to the Canaanite ‘inhabitants of the land’ (Exod 34,15), once to the city of Tyre (Isa 23,17) and once to the city of Nineveh (Nah 3,4.4.4). In the first of these instances, prostitution refers to the idolatrous practices of the local Canaanite population, since the object of this activity is ‘their gods’ (Exod 34,15-16). In this text, the Israelites are prohibited from making alliances with the ‘inhabitants of the land’, in order to avoid adopting their idolatrous practices. The need for this law was evidently the increasingly close association, and intermarriage, between the Israelites and the local people. It is, then, conceivable that the idolatry of the local people was termed ‘prostitution’ because it was already causing idolatry among the Israelites and so became identified by the same term. This projection of the metaphor of prostitution on to the non-Israelite source of the idolatry corrupting the Israelites may also explain its use in the cases of Tyre and Nineveh.

Before considering this, however, it is necessary to confirm that the use of the prostitute metaphor for Tyre and Nineveh actually refers to idolatry, and not merely to ‘commercial relationships’, as argued by a number of modern scholars.⁴² Their arguments, however, are not convincing: it is difficult to believe that Isaiah called Tyre a prostitute simply because she was a thriving commercial centre and the prophet had “a negative view of commerce” (Isa 23,17).⁴³ It is also hard to accept that Nahum accused Nineveh of prostitution because she had ‘multiplied her merchants more than the stars of heaven’ (Nah 3,16),⁴⁴ or because “she charms nations and leads them to their downfall”, alluring them by her “physical splendor (...) or military might” (Nah 3,4).⁴⁵ It is much more likely that these two cities, Tyre and Nineveh, were called prostitutes because they were both centres of idolatry and ‘sacred’ prostitution, disseminating their cults among the Israelites, through their commercial, cultural or military activities.

In regard to Tyre, the prostitute metaphor is used in the context of a prophecy about her future, which also recalls her past: “At the end of seventy years the Lord shall visit Tyre. She shall return to her ‘hire’ and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of

⁴¹ ‘Does the Old Testament Refer to Sacred Prostitution and did it Actually Exist in Ancient Israel?’, John Day, *Biblical and Near Eastern Essays: Studies in Honour of Kevin J. Cathcart*, Eds. Carmel McCarthy; John F. Healey, JSOTSupp. Series 375; London T&T Clark, 2004; 8. The same observation was made by J. M. Court: “For in the Old Testament the literal sense of the term ‘harlotry’ is developed into a figurative expression for Israel’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh. The use of this imagery is often coupled with an emphatic rejection of the literal practice of cultic prostitution (e.g., Jer. 2.20; 3.6; Hos. 4.12-14). This could be an explanation for the growth of the metaphor, if very frequently the unfaithfulness to Yahweh involved the practice of, or condoning of, sexual rites in the worship of other deities” (*Myth and History*, 140).

⁴² Cf. note 26 above.

⁴³ Goodfriend, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V.509.

⁴⁴ Klaus Wengst, “Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem: the Visionary View of Political Reality in the Revelation of John”, in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, eds. Reventlow, Hoffman and Uffenheimer, JSOTsupp. series 171, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994; 192.

⁴⁵ Goodfriend, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V.509.

the world on the face of the earth” (Isa 23,17). Although the figure of a prostitute going from place to place selling her services may suggest a purely commercial activity, it should not be forgotten that having “improper intercourse with foreign nations” was also recognized as a mark of idolatry and was therefore called ‘prostitution’ (cf. Ezek 16,26.28.28; 23,30.43). Therefore, in the case of Tyre, the prostitute metaphor has more than a single sense: firstly, it represents her promiscuous international trade, and secondly it speaks of her idolatrous lifestyle. Confirmation that idolatry is an important element in the use of the metaphor here is the ensuing prediction that, in the future, Tyre’s “merchandise and her hire shall be sacred to the Lord” (Isa 23,18). The implication is, of course, that the prostitute’s ‘hire’ (Hebrew אַתְּנָה: a technical word meaning ‘fee’) is presently being given to some other deity or false object of worship.

In the case of Nineveh, the text implicates her idolatry (cf. Nah 1,14; 2,8) before confirming that it is, in fact, one of the main reasons for her judgment. This will come upon her “because of the many harlotries of the seductive prostitute, mistress of sorceries, enslaving nations with her harlotries and families with her sorceries” (Nah 3,4). Idolatry is signified by the use of the prostitute metaphor in parallel with ‘sorcery’, for the spirits that were invoked through sorcery were the same as those that were idolatrously worshipped (cf. Lev 20,6). Idolatry and sorcery were so interrelated that they are often found together in lists of the cultic practices forbidden by Israel’s God (e.g., 2Kgs 9,22; 2Chron 33,6-7; Mic 5,11-12).

Having established that idolatry does lie behind the use of the prostitute metaphor for both Tyre and Nineveh, the question remains as to why these were the only places outside Israel, to whom the prostitute metaphor was applied. This could be explained by the fact that they were close to the God of Israel, as suggested by Gregory Beale: “Perhaps part of the reason that Tyre and Nineveh are the only two cities outside Israel referred to as harlots in the OT is that at one time they were in a covenant relationship with God and subsequently became faithless toward God by returning to idol worship (1Kgs. 5:1-12; Amos 1:9; Jonah 3:5-10)”.⁴⁶

Although it may be going too far to say that these two cities once had a covenant relationship with God, the biblical texts do indicate a particularly close relationship based on mutual respect and concern. Apart from providing the materials and craftsmen for building the first temple at Jerusalem (1Kgs 5,1-7,51), King Hiram of Tyre is described as entering a pact of brotherhood with King Solomon (1 Kgs 5,26; Amos 1,9), calling him brother and receiving 20 cities in the land of Galilee (1Kgs 9,11-13). By reporting Hiram’s blessing of the Lord (1Kgs 5,21), the biblical historian was clearly calling attention to the closeness of King Hiram’s relationship with the God of Israel. Similarly, the prompt repentance of Nineveh in response to the preaching of Jonah, and God’s evident concern for this city, indicate an unusually close relationship between the God of Israel and the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3-4).⁴⁷

So the OT authors may have reckoned that, although Tyre and Nineveh were not being unfaithful to any covenant, their familiar relationship with God meant that they were, at the least, behaving shamefully by worshiping other gods, and that prostitution was

⁴⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 850.

⁴⁷ It is conceivable that this portrayal of divine concern for Nineveh was related to the deportations of many tens of thousands of Israelites (almost the entire population) to this city and its environs, following the Assyrian annexation of the Kingdom of Israel, in the decade from 732-722 BCE (cf. 2Kgs 15,29; 17,6; 1Chron 5,26; the book of Tobit). In Nahum’s prophecy, there is an expectation that Nineveh’s destruction will bring about their return (Nah 2,2).

an appropriate term of criticism for their idolatry.⁴⁸ Though possible, this explanation for the use of the prostitution metaphor for Tyre and Nineveh is improbable, because it seems to expect the same standard of faithfulness from the non-Israelites as from Israelites, who even with their Covenant and their centralized cult were still deeply immersed in idolatry. Furthermore it does not account for the use of this metaphor for the local Canaanite population (Exod 34,15).

So, if the use of the prostitute metaphor for Tyre and Nineveh is not explained by their closeness to the God of Israel, then it may perhaps be explained by their closeness to people of Israel. This is indeed endorsed by the use of this metaphor for the idolatry of the local Canaanites, at the time when their idolatry was starting to corrupt the Israelites (Exod 34,15). This idolatry was called ‘prostitution’, because it was the origin of the prostitution among the Israelites and therefore became identified with it. It was prostitution by association. In a similar way, the prostitution metaphor would have been appropriate for Tyre and Nineveh, because their idolatrous practices were also causing prostitution among the Israelites, and therefore became identified with it.

Substantial confirmation for this suggestion comes from the biblical text and historical context. Alliances and commerce with Tyre had helped to establish the worship of the main Phoenician deities, Baal and Asherah, among the Israelites. At a later stage, the regional dominance of the neo-Assyrian empire, with Nineveh as its capital, introduced a whole range of idolatrous Mesopotamian cults into Israelite (Judaean) society, such as the astral cult, horse dedications to the sun god, worship of the ‘Queen of Heaven’ (Ashtoreth/Astarte), child sacrifice to the underworld god Molech, necromancy, sorcery, augury and other forms of divination (e.g., 2Kgs 16,10-18; 21,3-7; 23,4-15.24). Furthermore, the worship of the female deities Asherah and Ashtoreth, which involved ‘sacred’ prostitution, was ultimately derived, with considerable local modification, from the cult of the goddess Ishtar, the patroness of Nineveh.⁴⁹

In summary, the significance of the metaphor of prostitution is remarkably consistent throughout the Old Testament: it is used, without exception, to signify either idolatry *per se*, or the specific practices that came to be associated with idolatry,⁵⁰ or both. With regard to whom it was applied, though, there are rare exceptions: although it almost always refers to the people of God’s Covenant, it was also used once for the local Canaanites, once for the maritime city of Tyre and once for the ‘great city’ of Nineveh. These exceptions are best explained by association: the idolatrous practices of the local Canaanites, of Tyre and of Nineveh were called ‘prostitution’ because they were identified with the idolatries most widely adopted by the Israelites, for whom the metaphor was principally reserved.

The Metaphor of Prostitution in the Book of Revelation

In the Book of Revelation, the Greek word for ‘prostitution’ (πορνεία) and its derivatives (πόρνη, πόρνος, πορνεύειν)⁵¹ are used in a literal sense only in the context of

⁴⁸ Especially since this often involved cult prostitution, and ‘Prostitution’ can refer to sexual misconduct both in and out of a marriage covenant.

⁴⁹ This stands out as the main reason for Nahum’s use of the prostitution metaphor to describe Nineveh. As the patroness of Nineveh, and one of her main deities, Ishtar was the powerful female goddess of love, fertility and war, whose worship is known to have involved cult prostitution on a large scale (Nah 2,8 may be an allusion to her image and devotees). It was also widely disseminated throughout the Ancient Near East, including Israel (e.g., Am 5,26; Jer 7,18; 44,15-25).

⁵⁰ Such as ‘improper intercourse with foreign nations’, cult prostitution, etc.

⁵¹ Since ‘prostitution’ has no simple active verbal form in English, and the reflexive form must be used (‘to prostitute oneself’), we often employ, instead, the verb ‘to fornicate’, where the verbal form is required.

the vice lists (Rev 9,21; 21,8; 22,15). In all the other 15 occurrences, they are used in the metaphorical sense familiar from the OT and referring to idolatrous behaviour. In this sense, there are two main areas of use: the first is in the letters to the churches, in relation to the teaching and practices of the Nicolaitans, of whom Jezebel, the false prophetess, was evidently a prominent member (2,14.20.21). This forms the immediate background for understanding its second, and main, application in Revelation, which is in reference to the character and activities of Babylon, the great city (14,8; 17,1-2.4.5.15.16; 18,3.9; 19,2).

The Nicolaitans are first mentioned in the letter to Ephesus, but little information is given about them, except that their practices are detestable to Christ and to the community (2,6). In the letter to Pergamum, they are accused of teaching others in the churches “to eat idol sacrifices and to prostitute themselves”, just as Balaam taught Balak “to throw a stumbling block before the Sons of Israel” (2,14-15). On that occasion, the Israelites proceeded to fornicate with Moabite women and sacrifice to Baal of Peor, before eating the sacrifices and worshipping this local god (cf. Num 25,2-3). Finally, in the letter to Thyratira, there is a warning for the self-proclaimed prophetess called Jezebel, who teaches and practices the same doctrine (Rev 2,20-21). Her activities are described as prostitution and those who take an interest in her teachings, ‘the deep things of Satan’ (2,24), are said to be committing adultery with her (2,23). For ignoring previous warnings to repent, Jezebel and her disciples will die and her attendants will suffer.

Although there are no historical records about the Nicolaitans, the comparison of their teacher with Jezebel and their teaching with that of Balaam indicates the nature of their offence. Both Balaam and Jezebel were pagans who led the Israelites astray with their idolatrous teaching and example (cf. Num 25,1-3; 31,16; 1Kgs 16,31-33; 1Kgs 18-21; 2Kgs 9,22). However, neither Balaam nor Jezebel was an ordinary pagan, ignorant of Israel’s God. Balaam had found himself speaking as God’s prophet, blessing the House of Israel (Num 22,4–24,25), and Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, the King of Israel, and daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians (1Kgs 16,31). The fact that both, in their own ways, were close to the God of Israel and his people makes their promotion of idolatry a strictly internal affair, directly affecting the people of God.

In the same way, Jezebel and the Nicolaitans were clearly members of the churches in Asia and their teaching also led fellow members astray, by inviting them to participate in local pagan customs. “To eat meat sacrificed to idols” refers to the consumption of pagan cultic meals and “to prostitute oneself” here, as in the OT, is a metaphor for idolatrous worship that may, or may not, have included immoral sexual activity.⁵² In practice, these acts constituted a seductive compromise with the prevailing pagan society, imparting social, economic and political benefits to Christians, as well as removing the threat of persecution from the Roman imperial cult, where such acts were sometimes enforced as a test of loyalty to the ruling power. For these reasons, participation must have been attractive to many Christians, despite having been specifically forbidden by the Church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15,20.29; 21,5).

In this context, then, the metaphor of prostitution signifies ungodly compromise with the pagan world, through participation in idolatrous customs taught and practiced by

However, the meaning is exactly the same. In both the Hebrew and Greek originals, this inconsistency does not exist, because the same root can be used in all the different word forms.

⁵² At these meals, there may have been occasion for immoral sexual activity involving private courtesans (*hetairai*), but this is unlikely to have been formally linked to cult prostitution, seeing that evidence for this practice in New Testament times is scanty and questionable; cf. S.M. Baugh, ‘Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 42/3 (September 1999), 443-60.

members of the Christian household. It does not refer to the Romans or to the local pagan population. A consistent aspect to the use of this metaphor here, as in the OT, is its application to the religious infidelity of the people of God, who are now identified with the people in the churches addressed by the risen Christ.

This background is of fundamental importance when considering the second instance of the use of this metaphor in the text of Revelation, the description of the great city of Babylon, for this metaphor and its elaboration define her very existence and identity. Her identity is termed a mystery and a great part of this mystery is tied to the meaning of the metaphor of prostitution: “on her forehead was written a name, a mystery, ‘Babylon the great, the mother of the prostitutes and abominations of the earth’” (Rev 17,5). So, in order to probe this mystery, it is necessary to unpack the meaning of this extended metaphor in a way that is consistent with the background examined above.⁵³

In all, the term ‘prostitute’ is used 5 times in relation to Babylon (17,1.5.15.16; 19,2); on three of these occasions it is used to emphasize primacy in this activity: twice she is called ‘the great prostitute’ (17,1; 19,2) and once “the mother of the prostitutes and the abominations of the earth” (17,5). This last expression links up with other statements affirming that she has spread corruption throughout the world (19,2) in two main ways: by inviting the kings of the earth to ‘fornicate’ with her (17,2; 18,3; 18,9) and by causing the nations to drink “the wine of the passion of her prostitution” (14,8; 17,2; 18,2), which she distributes from “a golden cup full of the abominations and filth of her prostitution” (17,4).

In what, though, does the prostitution of Babylon primarily and essentially consist? Before going on to consider this, it is important to refute the view that Babylon’s prostitution primarily consists in, and is limited to, her intimate association with kings and rulers:⁵⁴

1. If Babylon’s prostitution consisted in her association with kings or rulers, then the corruption that she spreads throughout the world (19,2), by means of “the wine of the passion of her prostitution” (14,8; 17,2; 18,2) should induce the same behavior in those who become drunk with her wine. But it makes little sense to think that the nations and individuals who become drunk on Babylon’s wine are craving to have intimate or immoral relations with kings, or rulers. And if this is not the form of corruption that Babylon disseminates to others, it cannot be considered as a true reflection of her own. Her intimacy with kings is not, therefore, the primary element of her prostitution, but at most a secondary effect. There are OT precedents for this, as mentioned above. Alliances between God’s people and foreign kings were indeed termed ‘prostitution’, but these were always considered a by-product of their primary idolatry and infidelity to God.⁵⁵

2. The text gives the impression that it is not Babylon who goes out in search of the kings, but the reverse: it is the kings who are attracted to Babylon for her luxury and her strength (cf. 18,9-10). This is endorsed by the careful use of the word ‘fornicate’ in the context of the kings: it is always the kings who ‘fornicate’, or ‘prostitute themselves’ with Babylon

⁵³ I.e., as a metaphor that is 1) used exclusively and without exception to denote idolatry and/or practices considered to be idolatrous, 2) used almost always to denote the idolatry of God’s people. 3) In exceptional cases it may be applied, by association, to those whose idolatrous practices have directly corrupted God’s people.

⁵⁴ As proposed by Bauckham in the study examined above. This is also the opinion of most preterist interpreters of Revelation and is supported by Jan Fekkes (see note 26 above).

⁵⁵ See note 38.

(17,2; 18,3.9), and not, as one would expect, Babylon who fornicates, or prostitutes herself, with them. The application of this metaphor to the kings suggests they have each become ‘prostitutes’ by drinking ‘the wine of Babylon’s passion for prostitution’. Drunk with this wine, the kings are intoxicated by Babylon’s love of wealth and luxury, and admire her style of life. They are thus attracted to unite themselves intimately with her and, in this way, Babylon comes to have “a kingdom over the kings of the earth” (17,18).

3. As an argument from silence, there is no indication in the text that Babylon’s great wealth is, in any way, derived from her intimacy with the kings, or given by them as a kind of tribute or recompense.⁵⁶ On the contrary, it is she, the great prostitute, who makes others rich from her wealth (18.3.15.19).⁵⁷ Babylon would seem to have other sources of income.

Returning to the main question, further examination of the text leaves no doubt that the primary element in Babylon’s prostitution is her idolatrous attachment to riches and wealth (cf. Rev 18,3.14), recognized in the New Testament as a pernicious form of idolatry in itself (cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13; 1Tim 6,10; Heb 13,5). It is this form of idolatry that has separated Babylon from her God and spread throughout the world. The ‘wine of the passion of Babylon’s prostitution’ therefore refers to her inordinate desire for luxury and wealth—a desire that corrupts kings, nations and peoples with the same idolatrous love of wealth.

Understanding Babylon’s prostitution in this way, as a form of idolatry and a cause of separation from God, is not only entirely consistent with the use of this metaphor in the OT and Rev 2, but is also verifiable. If, as previous use of this metaphor suggests, Babylon is a city that has a close relationship with God, but has been unfaithful through her idolatrous love of wealth, then signs of her original relationship with God should be evident in the text. May the following examples suffice to verify this interpretation:

1. The text of Rev 17 in the light of Ezekiel 16 and 23

While Rev 18 is clearly based on the OT prophetic oracles against ancient Babylon (mainly Jer 50–51) and Tyre (Ezek 26-28; Isa 23), the previous chapter, Rev 17, has much more affinity with Ezek 16 and 23. Although verbal parallels are limited to mainly one verse (Rev 17,16), these chapters are profoundly united by their overall theme, which concerns the history and judgment of the prostitute-city: Babylon in the case of Rev 17 and Jerusalem in the case of Ezekiel 16 and 23. This thematic correspondence has been explored and documented by some scholars,⁵⁸ but ignored by many others. Its importance

⁵⁶ In particular, there is no mention of the receipt of any taxes, which was historically the main source of Imperial Rome’s wealth, and amounted to about a tenth of the gross national product of the empire (cf. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 989).

⁵⁷ This is the reverse of the situation proposed by Bauckham in the study examined above.

⁵⁸ Cf. Albert Vanhoye “En fait, ce qu’il importe de noter, c’est que non seulement le sens général du passage, mais tout son vocabulaire correspond à celui d’Ézéchiél 16 et 23. C’est de là que vient l’idée d’un jugement de la prostituée ; aussi bien Ez. 16 qu’Ez. 23 est bâti en forme de jugement : d’abord les considérants, puis la formule de verdict (16,35 ; 23,22s)... Le mots de « prostituée », « se prostituer » « prostitution », « impureté », « abominations », rassemblés en Ap 17,1 et 4, sont tous caractéristiques du vocabulaire d’Ézéchiél... Il est donc hors de conteste que l’influence prépondérante dans ce passage est celle d’Ézéchiél, malgré l’absence de citations » ‘L’Utilisation du Livre D’Ézéchiél dans L’Apocalypse’, *Biblica*, vol. 43, no. 3 (1962), 441-2. These findings are confirmed by Ruiz: “A number of elements come together in Ezek 16 and 23 to support Vanhoye’s allegation concerning the influence of these chapters on Rev 17”, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 364. It was noticed also by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his “Casta Meretrix” (Eng. trans. in *Explorations in Theology Vol 2: Spouse of the Word*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991; 193-288): “In contrast, Ezekiel, with his vivid depiction of Israel’s shameless adultery, exploits the image to an almost

lies in recognizing the 'new' Babylon of Rev 17-18 as a city, like Jerusalem, that knows God and his Laws, but has reverted to idolatrous ways. The OT background to the Babylon of Rev 17-18 includes not only the oracles against ancient Babylon and Tyre, but also the powerful prophetic diatribes of Ezekiel against ancient Jerusalem (Ezek 16 and 23).

Of particular relevance in Ezekiel 16 is the emphasis on Jerusalem's pagan origins (Ezek 16,3), especially as an explanation for the infidelities for which she will be duly punished (Ezek 16,44-45). A similar pattern would explain how the Babylon of Rev 17-18 came to be described in terms of such diverse OT cities as Babylon, Tyre and Jerusalem. Interpreted in the light of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16, this 'new' Babylon was originally a pagan city, which later converted to God. At some point, however, she became unfaithful by succumbing to the temptation of wealth and she is about to be judged by God for the corruption she spread throughout the world (14,8; 17,2; 19,2). Interpreted in this way, the Babylon of Rev 17-18 is not, and cannot be, pagan Rome *simpliciter*, but Rome which converted to God in the past, but then, at some stage, reverted back to idolatrous habits.

The allegorical history of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 may also help to explain Babylon's relationship with the kings of the earth. As noted above, there is no suggestion in the text that Babylon prostitutes herself to the kings in return for payment (the usual form of prostitution), but rather the text repeatedly states that it is the kings who prostitute themselves with her (17,2; 18,3.9). The text gives the impression that it is the kings who, through their relationship with the Babylon, derive some payment or benefit, in terms of prestige, power or luxurious living (cf. 18.3.15.19). This unusual and inverted behaviour of the prostitute is also foreshadowed in the description of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16: "All harlots receive gifts. But you rather bestowed your gifts on all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from all sides for your harlotry" (Ezek 16,33; cf. 16,30-34).

Furthermore, the fate of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and 23 provides the closest OT parallel for Babylon's fateful betrayal and destruction.⁵⁹ Just as Jerusalem's former lovers were to betray her out of hatred, strip her naked and destroy her with fire (Ezek 16,37-41; 23,22-30), so ten of the kings that previously fornicated with her, and the Beast that used to support her, "will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will consume her with fire" (Rev 17,16).

Finally, the image of Jerusalem drinking the cup of destruction as penalty for her "lewdness and harlotry" (Ezek 23,31-35) has been taken up in Revelation and applied to the punishment of the great prostitute: "Even Babylon the great had been remembered before God, to give her the cup with wine of the passion of his anger" (Rev 16,19).

The author's evident desire to link Babylon of Revelation with faithless Jerusalem, on the basis of Ezekiel's prophecies, fundamentally determines the character of the city he is describing. It is not just a dominant and wealthy world power. It is primarily a religious centre that knows the God of Israel and has seriously deviated from his ways, because of her love of wealth and luxury.⁶⁰

unbearable degree. In a first chapter (16), he tells the whole story from Israel's first election. In a second chapter, he describes the infidelity of the two separated halves of the kingdom: Samaria under the name of Oholah ("her own tent") and Jerusalem under the name Oholibah ("my tent in her"). In both descriptions the imagery has been so intensified that the characteristics of the archwhore Jerusalem merge with those of the archwhore Babylon" (op. cit. 200).

⁵⁹ Cf. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 364-66.

⁶⁰ At the end of the next part, ("Drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus"), we tentatively propose one further point of contact between Rev 17 and Ezek 16 and 23.

2. “Drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus”

Most commentators and scholars start from the assumption, based upon a single classical source,⁶¹ that Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus (17,6) because she killed them.⁶² However, this assumption is flawed because the saints generally die a natural death, and are not killed for witnessing their faith like martyrs. Neither is there any convincing evidence in the text that Babylon persecutes or kills God’s people: in contrast to the prophecies against Jerusalem, Babylon is never called a murderess (cf. Ezek 16,21.36.38; Mt 23, 35.37), and although “in her was found the blood of prophets and saints and of all those who have been slain on the earth” (Rev 18,24), there is surely no city on earth to which this statement could literally apply.⁶³

So, another explanation must be provided for the metaphor of Babylon’s intoxication⁶⁴—an explanation that should also account for the author’s utter amazement on seeing this particular part of his vision (17,6). At this point, it should be recalled that Babylon is not only drunk, but that she is also a prostitute, and that it appears that these two metaphors should be understood together: Babylon’s drunkenness is related in some way to her prostitution.⁶⁵ As we saw above, her prostitution is best understood as an idolatrous attachment to wealth and luxuries.

To be drunk means to be in a state of elation and celebration combined with moral laxity and abandonment. Babylon experiences this state as a result of her assimilation of the life-blood, which is to say the self-sacrifice, of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. The metaphor seems to suggest that Babylon’s appropriation of the sacrifice of these holy followers of Jesus leads her into a state of elation, celebration, and moral relaxation, which helps her to acquire wealth and live a life of luxury. Unpacking the metaphors further, Babylon “glorifies herself and lives luxuriously” (18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus Christ.⁶⁶ Allying herself in this way with the saints and martyrs of Jesus, the religious community that is called Babylon in the Book of Revelation cannot be anything else than Christian in origin.

Furthermore, Babylon’s financial exploitation of the saints and martyrs accounts for the observation, noted above, that she has an income that is not derived from the kings who fornicate with her (17,2; 18,3.9). It would also explain why the servants of God, whose sacrifices are fuelling Babylon’s wealthy lifestyle, are invited to rejoice at her destruction (18,20), and why her eternal destruction is understood as avenging the shedding of their blood (19,2; cf. 6,10).

Babylon’s exaltation in, and exploitation of, the sacrifices of the saints (being drunk), in combination with her idolatry (prostitution), can tentatively be proposed as an

⁶¹ “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.

⁶² E.g., Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 937–38; Beale, *Revelation*, 860.

⁶³ A metaphorical interpretation is clearly intended, to the effect that Babylon is held responsible, before God, for the death of all those slain on the earth. The reason for her responsibility will become clearer in the later section “In her hand a golden cup” (cf. Ezek 33,1-9).

⁶⁴ Note that Babylon’s intoxication with blood differs totally from the intoxication of those she corrupts with her wine.

⁶⁵ The combination of these two metaphors makes it even more improbable that Babylon is a murderer, because murdering and prostitution are not in the least compatible from a literary point of view: a known murderer would find it very hard to attract clients as a prostitute.

⁶⁶ Although this study does not aim to take the final step, or ‘actualization’, in the identification of Babylon, it is opportune to note the close correspondence between the activity mentioned here and the ‘cult of the saints and martyrs’ around which, it must be admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in the history of the Catholic Church, and have proved to be difficult to eradicate (cf. Lumen Gentium, 51, *Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1, ed. Austin Flannery, New York: Costello, 1987).

allusion to the most serious crime attributed to faithless Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and 23: “Then make known to them their abominations... They committed adultery with their idols; to feed them they immolated the children they had borne me” (Ezek 23,36-37; cf. Ezek 16,20-22). With the difference that Jerusalem actually sacrificed her own children to feed her idolatry, and so merited the accusation of murderess (Ezek 16,38; 23,45), Babylon merely exploits the self-sacrifices of her holiest people, in order to feed her idolatrous love of riches. In both cases, the pattern is similar: the accused has harnessed the sacrifice of God’s own people to her practice of idolatry. The term employed for this travesty is ‘abomination’ (cf. Rev 17,4.5).

3. “I am enthroned queen and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see”

Bauckham and many other scholars have observed the parallel structure of the texts describing Babylon the great prostitute (17,1–19,10) and the contrasting city called the New Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb (21,9–22,9). Each of these sections of text have very similar introductions (17,1-3 and 21,9-10) and conclusions (19,9-10 and 22,6-9). At the end of the section on Babylon (17,1–19,10), the reference to the New Jerusalem (19,7-8) serves as a link between the descriptions of the two contrasting cities, and “indicates the relation between the two: that Babylon the harlot must fall in order to make way for the arrival of the New Jerusalem”.⁶⁷

It is also evident from the wording of the text that Babylon sets herself up as a rival to the New Jerusalem. “For she says in her heart: I am enthroned queen and am not a widow, and sorrow I certainly do not see” (18,7; cf. Is 47,7-8).⁶⁸ Leaving aside the function of this statement as “the arrogant disposition of the defendant” to the “accusations of the plaintiff”,⁶⁹ it is clear that Babylon is persuaded that she is a queen, who knows nothing of death or suffering. Not only is the absence of death and suffering a defining characteristic of life with God in the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21,3-4), but also the New Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb, or in other words, the queen of the King of kings (cf. 17,14). So thinking herself queen, and knowing nothing of death or suffering, it would appear that Babylon wishes to identify herself as the New Jerusalem, where God dwells among his peoples, in the consummate fulfillment of his promises for mankind (cf. 21,3-4). Denying the future and final judgment, she thinks the salvific plan of God has already been completely fulfilled, and acts as if she herself represented that fulfillment. Although deeply mistaken, such a mentality is profoundly theological, and betrays a privileged, not to say presumptive, interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures. Such a perspective is entirely consistent with, and supportive of, the view that Babylon is fundamentally a religious community that has deviated from her true vocation.

4. “Come out of her my people”

Just before Babylon is to be totally destroyed, “because God has remembered her wicked deeds” (Rev 18,5a), the author hears the voice of God from heaven saying: “Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and so that you do not receive from her plagues” (18,4), indicating that God’s people are residing within this city. In this context, it is highly significant that there is no mourning for the loss of human life after the downfall of Babylon, but only for the loss of trade and precious articles (18,9–19). It is evident 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 they are all God’s people.

⁶⁷ Bauckham, *Climax*, 339.

⁶⁸ For a comparison with the OT background, see Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 218-221.

⁶⁹ As proposed by Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 221.

5. “In her hand a golden cup”

Babylon has a golden cup in her hand, which is “full of the abominations and the filth of her prostitution” (17,4), another way of describing the wine that makes all the nations drunk (14,8; 17,2; 18,3), filling the earth with corruption (19,2). However, as the time for the Babylon’s judgment draws near, the role of the cup changes: instead of being instrumental in the corruption of the nations, it becomes an instrument in the condemnation of Babylon. It is said to those who have the task of destroying her: “mix her a double measure in the cup in which she mixed” (18,6). 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’ (16,19). Therefore, the golden cup which Babylon holds in her hand is none other than the cup of the anger of God. The implication is that this sacred vessel was entrusted to Babylon by God in order to bring divine justice to the nations (cf. Jer 25,15; 51,7). However, Babylon fell for the temptation of wealth and abandoned the mission entrusted to her, so instead of distributing the ‘wine of the passion of God’, she filled the cup with the ‘wine of the passion of her prostitution’. In giving this intoxicating wine to the nations, she brought them corruption, instead of divine justice. For abandoning her original mission from God, and for spreading her corruption throughout the world, she is held responsible for “the blood of prophets and of saints and of all those slain on the earth” (Rev 18,24).

Conclusion

The representation of Babylon in the likeness of Ezekiel’s faithless Jerusalem, her financial exploitation of the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, her self-identification with the new Jerusalem, her inhabitation exclusively by God’s people, and her divine mission indicated by possession of the golden cup of God’s anger, all amount to a considerable body of evidence confirming that the significance of prostitution in Rev 17 is no different from its general meaning in the OT, as a metaphor to describe the idolatry and infidelity of God’s own people.⁷⁰ Difficult as it to accept and digest, the final step in the identification of Babylon should take account of this important aspect of the mystery of Babylon’s iniquity.

John Ben-Daniel,
Old City, Jerusalem,
Sts. Peter and Paul, 2022

⁷⁰ The treatise ‘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) proves that this conclusion is not as strange or novel as it may seem: “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 is 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” (op. cit. 193). Von Balthasar’s study 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. Not by any means lacking from their reflections are the diatribes against faithless Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and 23, and the figure of Babylon in Revelation 17-19 (op. cit. 193-8; 273-81). “Without endangering the immaculateness, holiness, and infallibility of the Church, one must look the other reality in the eye and not exclude it from consideration. Much would be gained if Christians learned more and more to realize at what price the holiness of the Church has been purchased” (op. cit. 198).