

Read aloud Revelation 18:1-13

John is writing about Rome when he is writing about Babylon, but instead of seeing Rome as the center of life and livelihood, John views it as the source of death. Read Wright, starting at the very bottom of 160 with the sentence “No, John’s version...” and read to the end of the section.

Read aloud from Wright:

But the giveaway point comes at the end of verse 13. John has built up a marvelous catalogue of luxury goods as well as the basics of trade – flour, wheat, cattle and so on. But then, right at the end, we find the horror. Among the goods are bodies – yes, human lives. When you worship idols, the idols demand sacrifices. When you worship Mammon the money-god (or Mars the war-god; or Aphrodite the sex-goddess), they will demand sacrifices all right. And some of those sacrifices will be human. Here, in the middle of this lament over Babylon, we find one of the many places in the New Testament where a small but significant note of implacable protest is raised against the entire system upon which the ancient world was built. Slavery – the buying, selling, using and abusing of human beings as though they were on a par with gold and silver, ivory and marble (except that you could ill-treat them in a way you would never do with your luxury jewels and furnishings!) – was the dark thread that ran through everything else. Slavery was to the ancient world, more or less, what steam, oil, gas, electricity and nuclear power are to the modern world. Slavery was how things got done. Life was almost literally unthinkable without it.

And yet John believed in the God of the Exodus, the God who sets slaves free. A huge amount of his book, as we have seen, was built up on the basis that what God did in Egypt he will do again, this time on a cosmic scale – and that the basic act of slave-freeing has already taken place with the sacrificial death of Jesus. ‘With your own blood you purchased a people for God’ (5.9). That’s Exodus-language, buying-slaves-to-set-them-free language. Now John looks at Rome/Babylon and sees, with his mind’s eye, the slave-market. He sees, perhaps, families: captured far away and now auctioned off, the husband to this person, the wife to that, the beautiful daughter to a seedy, smirking old man, the strong son to a mine-owner. The system is rotten, and its rottenness infects everything else that happens in such a city.

John can clearly understand the shock and bemusement of the merchants and mariners, can hear their cries of dismay echoing out across the countryside as they see the plume of smoke and smell the acrid, bitter smell. He can appreciate how great this ruin is. He has written a beautiful and haunting lament over it. But he has no sympathy for Babylon. Babylon, after all, has accused and condemned God’s people, and now God is passing that same sentence on her (verse 20). God is (in other words) allowing the ancient law of Deuteronomy 19.16 –20 to come into force in this particular case. The false accuser must suffer the penalty he intended to inflict on his victim.

For Babylon has gained her power from the monster, and the monster from the accuser, the satan, the old dragon who, though out of sight for the moment, is remembered from chapter 12 and will shortly reappear. The whole system is built on lies, on false accusations and false claims. So much of Revelation is about being able to tell the difference between the lie and the truth; and so many of the lies appear as accusations. That is why it is so difficult to overthrow the Babylons of this world, unless it is simply by the force of the new Babylon, whatever that may be. In fact, it is impossible – except through the blood of the lamb, and the faithful witness of his followers (164 -165).

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. What cities in our day benefit from the labor of slaves?
2. What organizations are working today to set slaves free?
3. How do we contribute to or work against modern-day slavery?