

THE LAMENT OVER BABYLON

REVELATION 18

Daniel and Revelation Series

OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, open our hearts to your Spirit of Truth, so that through these texts, our discussion and our prayer, we will hear the voice of your living Word. Through this Bible study, may our minds be renewed and our desire for your Kingdom quickened. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

EXEGESIS

Babylon, once the centre of an ancient empire, is here used as a code word for another imperial capital – Rome. In the book of Revelation, Babylon, Rome and all other such forces of domination, are pronounced fallen. Even while it appears glorious and powerful, Rome is revealed as both defiled and defeated. It is filled with unclean things, and the ‘kings of the earth’ – the ruling classes of subjugated nations – collude with the powers of oppression to further their own position.

Communities faithful to Jesus are called to ‘come out’ of Babylon, literally referring to coitus interruptus. It is not possible to both follow Jesus and collude with imperial power, power that has its foundations in violence.

It is useful to understand a little of Roman economics at this point. The list of luxury goods, food staples, armaments and slaves presented in this chapter is a very accurate description of 1st century Roman commodities. Latifundia – the policy of removing land ownership from farm workers and into the hands of wealthy, city-based landowners – created a market dictated by the demand for, and export of, luxury goods rather than producing to meet local need. The export of food staples to large cities saw food shortages and rising food prices in the countryside. (Howard-Brook and Gwyther, 1999, p.96). In the book of Revelation, trade is a moral issue. The unjust economics is condemned to destruction, and those who benefit from them will grieve for their lost livelihood.

To its admirers, the Roman Empire was durable and secure – the myth of Roma aeterna. Its pride is ill-founded. Revelation proclaims that Rome’s downfall will come. A civilization built on such cruelty and neglect of the poor cannot stand. An Empire that puts its faith in violence for its security will be violently destroyed.

REFLECTION

If the Ancient Romans could see Rome now, they’d see seagulls nesting in the ruins of the Forum. Time has shown Roma aeterna to be a lie. Rome thought it would last forever, but it fell. Do we have reason to believe that our civilisation will fare differently? How durable is our way of life

today? A lifestyle dependent on cheap (or even slave) labour, unsustainable farming methods and finite resources such as oil, requiring nuclear weapons for protection, contains the seeds of its own destruction.

We must find new ways of doing things. If our comfort and material wellbeing is bound up with unjust practices and industries, then the coming of the kingdom of God is not good news for us. For those of us whose lifestyle depends on the oppression of others and domination of the natural world, we will have to relinquish our privileges before God's Kingdom can come in fullness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of our society do you consider 'fallen'?
2. In what ways does your lifestyle depend on things that are not of God's Kingdom? In which ways do you need to 'come out' of Babylon?
3. Do you find Revelation's use of female imagery problematic? What do you think of the portrayal of Babylon as a 'whore'?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, you call us to come out of Babylon. Embolden us with your Spirit, so that we may courageously, wisely and imaginatively act upon that call. In the name of the Resurrected Jesus, Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Michael J. Gorman, 'Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation Paperback' (2011)
- Walter Wink, 'The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium' (1999)
- Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, 'Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now' (1999)
- Shane Claiborne, 'The Irresistible Revolution' (2006)