OF SUNS AND SCARLET

The great controversy theme is summarized in Revelation using the symbolism of two women, one clothed with the sun (Rev. 12) and one dressed in scarlet (Rev. 17).

The striking symbol of the woman clothed with the sun, the dazzling glory of Christ, is found in Revelation 12. She is faithful to Jesus. She is not defiled by the corruption of false doctrines. Throughout the Bible a pure woman symbolizes the bride of Jesus, or the true church. In Jeremiah 6:2 the prophet says, “I have likened the daughter of Zion to a lovely and delicate woman.” The prophet uses the expression “daughter of Zion,” meaning a faithful woman, to describe God’s people (see also Eph. 5:25–32 and Hos. 2:20).

In contrast, the Bible likens apostasy to harlotry or adultery (James 4:4). Speaking of Israel’s rebellion and unfaithfulness, Ezekiel laments, “You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband” (Ezek. 16:32).

In this week’s lesson we will study these two women of Revelation and probe deeper into the conflict between truth and error.
Write out Revelation 17:14–18 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
DUSTY, DEADLY, AND DECEPTIVE

Down through the centuries God has always had a people who have been faithful to Him. Revelation 12:17 describes their faithfulness as those who “keep the commandments of God,” and also who are elsewhere depicted as “called, and chosen, and faithful” (Rev. 17:14). John wrote the book of Revelation at the end of the first century. By that time, the ancient city of Babylon was a dust heap, having been destroyed more than a century earlier.

In Revelation the ancient city of Babylon is taken to be a type, or symbol, of the end-time Babylon. In the prophecies of Revelation, Babylon represents a false religious system that will have similar characteristics to Old Testament Babylon, a place of extreme moral depravity. The principles that guided ancient Babylon will be the undergirding structure of the modern spiritual Babylon.

In Revelation 17:1–6, a woman dressed in purple and scarlet rides across the landscape of time on a scarlet-colored beast. The Bible calls her a harlot. She has left Jesus Christ. Here the apostle John gives us a graphic portrayal of an apostate system of religion that has powerful influence in the world. Look at the wording: this power was one with “whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication” (Rev. 17:2). Drunkenness is always a negative in the Bible, and fornication is symbolic of the false teachings, false doctrine, and immoral practices that characterize wicked societies.

The fallen church system has an international reach, influencing people in every corner of the world with her deceptions. Satan is enraged that the gospel will be proclaimed to every “nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6), that this “gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world” (Matt. 24:14), so he employs every possible deception to captivate the minds of the “inhabitants of the earth” (Rev. 17:2).

Revelation 17:2 also declares that she has “committed fornication” with the kings of the earth. Fornication in this context is an illicit union—in the fallen church system, uniting with the state. In the true church system, the church is united with Jesus Christ. The fallen church looks to the political leaders of the earth for power and authority. It seeks the state to enforce its decrees rather than drawing its strength from Jesus as its true head.

Revelation 17:2 continues its dramatic portrayal: “And the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.” The symbolism of the pure juice of the grape is used throughout the New Testament to represent the untainted, pure blood of Christ poured out for our salvation on the cross (Matt. 26:27–29). In Luke 22:20 Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood.” When the pure, new wine of the gospel is distorted and the teachings of the Word of God are substituted for the teachings of human religious leaders, it becomes the “wine of Babylon” (see Matt. 15:9).

Notice, too, that God calls His people out of Babylon. In other words, no matter how corrupt and evil the system is, its reach is so wide that it encompasses, at least for a certain time, His faithful ones, whom He calls “my people” (Rev. 18:4). Yet the time is coming when God will call them out of that corrupt and evil system, which is about to fall because of its corrupt and evil nature. It is described as the “dwelling place of demons” and the “cage for every unclean and hated bird” (verse 2).
WHO IS BABYLON?

As we have seen, Revelation 17 describes an apostate religious system that introduces many of the teachings of Old Testament Babylon into Christianity. To better understand the nature of this ancient civilization, Ángel Manuel Rodríguez says, “we need to go back to its first reference in the biblical record, in Genesis. It all began on the plain of the land of Shinar, a region in the southern part of Mesopotamia, today south Iraq, called Babylonia. It is there that the Tower of Babel was built, a symbol of human self-sufficiency, self-preservation, and independence from God ([Gen.] 11:1–4)” (“The Closing of the Cosmic Conflict: Role of the Three Angels’ Messages,” unpublished paper, 43).

The Tower of Babel, the site of ancient Babylon, was built in direct defiance to the Word of God. The people built this monument for their own glory, and God consequently confused their languages. The Genesis account puts it this way: “Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth” (Gen. 11:9). “Babylon” means “confusion.” This system is so evil that it is depicted as being “drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6)—horrific images of just how corrupt Babylon is (see also Isa. 49:26).

In essence, spiritual Babylon represents a religion based on human teachings, established on human ideas, and supported by human traditions. It is a form of human-made religion built by perhaps brilliant human religious leaders, but it stands in direct opposition to the power of the gospel and the church that Jesus built—a church built on love, not violence.

The book of Revelation describes these two opposing systems of religion. The first reveals total trust in Jesus and dependence on His Word. The second reveals trust in human authority and dependence of human religious teachers. One is a Christ-centered faith built on total dependence on Christ’s grace, sacrifice, and atonement for salvation, while the other is a humanistic approach to faith that replaces the total dependence on Christ for salvation with a dependence on the traditions of the church.

Jeremiah 50 and 51 predict Babylon’s destruction by the Medes and Persians. One of the reasons for Babylon’s demise was their idolatry. The Babylonians believed these images to be representations of their deities. In Babylonian religion the ritual care and worship of the statues of deities was considered sacred, as the gods lived simultaneously in their statues and in the natural forces they embodied. The pillaging or destruction of idols was considered to be loss of divine patronage, exemplified by the story of the Chaldean prince Marduk-apla-iddina II, who, during the Neo-Babylonian period, fled into the southern marshes of Mesopotamia with the statues of Babylon’s gods to save them from the armies of Sennacherib of Assyria (Jane R. McIntosh, Ancient Mesopotamia: New Perspectives [Santa Barbara, Calif.:ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005], 35–43). The prophets of the Bible contrasted the worship of these lifeless images with the Creator God, who was both alive and lifegiving (Jer. 51:15, 16, 19).

Though the issues of spiritual Babylon’s idolatry go deeper than just bowing before images of wood and stone, spiritual Babylon does parallel ancient Babylon in the sense that images were introduced into both of their worship services. The use of images as objects of worship, or “veneration,” is a clear violation of the (cont. on p. 77)
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What relationship do the following verses have with Babylon?

Matthew 16:18
Jeremiah 50:33–38
Psalm 115:4–8
Jeremiah 51:17, 47
Exodus 20:4–6

What other verses come to mind in connection with Revelation 17?

Matthew 16:18
Jeremiah 50:33–38
Psalm 115:4–8
Jeremiah 51:17, 47
Exodus 20:4–6

Review your memorized verse from Revelation 17.

(Cont. from InT erpret, p. 76):

second commandment not only because the Bible decisively commands us not to engage in idol worship but also because it limits the ability of the Holy Spirit to impress upon our minds the things of eternity and reduces the majesty of God to a lifeless statue. These images were introduced into Christianity in the fourth century to make Christianity more acceptable to the pagan populace. Unfortunately, these images are often given the sacredness and homage that belong to God alone, which makes the whole thing spiritually degrading.

(Cont. from inSight, p. 79):

From age to age the Lord has made known the manner of His working. When a crisis has come, He has revealed Himself, and has interposed to hinder the working out of Satan’s plans. With nations, with families, and with individuals, He has often permitted matters to come to a crisis, that His interference might become marked. Then He has made manifest that there is a God in Israel who will maintain His law and vindicate His people.

In this time of prevailing iniquity we may know that the last great crisis is at hand. When the defiance of God’s law is almost universal, when His people are oppressed and afflicted by their fellow men, the Lord will interpose.

The time is near when He will say, “Come, My people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast. For, behold, the Lord cometh out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.” Isaiah 26:20, 21. Men who claim to be Christians may now defraud and oppress the poor; they may rob the widow and fatherless; they may indulge their Satanic hatred because they cannot control the consciences of God’s people; but for all this God will bring them into judgment. They “shall have judgment without mercy” that have “showed no mercy.” James 2:13. Not long hence they will stand before the Judge of all the earth, to render an account for the pain they have caused to the bodies and souls of His heritage. They may now indulge in false accusations, they may deride those whom God has appointed to do His work, they may consign His believing ones to prison, to the chain gang, to banishment, to death; but for every pang of anguish, every tear shed, they must answer. God will reward them double for their sins. Concerning Babylon, the symbol of the apostate church, He says to His ministers of judgment, “Her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled fill to her double.” Revelation 18:5, 6. (Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1900, 1941], 178, 179.)
A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Revelation’s appeal is an urgent call to commitment, summarized in the symbolism of the two women in Revelation. Although at times it will appear that God’s people have been defeated in the cosmic controversy between truth and falsity, God promises that His church will triumph in the end.

Christ is the solid foundation His church is built upon. His church is based on the teachings of His Word and is guided by His Spirit. On the contrary, Babylon, as we have seen, is rooted in human-made teachings and traditions. Any religious leader who substitutes human opinions or traditions in place of or above the revealed will of God in the Scriptures is simply fostering Babylonian ideology.

In the days of ancient Babylon, church and state were one and the same. When King Nebuchadnezzar sat in his temple on his royal throne, he supposedly spoke for the gods. On one occasion, as an act of defiance against the true God, the Babylonian king passed a universal decree that commanded all his subjects to bow to his image, a powerful foreshadowing of what God’s faithful people, those who refuse to worship the false image, will face in the last days (see Dan. 3).

A church-state system, spiritual Babylon, will arise in the final days of earth’s history and will have a spiritual leader who claims to speak as God. His word will be declared as the very word of God, and his commands the commands of God. Throughout the centuries the Roman popes have declared that they stand in the place of God on earth, summarized in the encyclical letter of June 20, 1894, written by Pope Leo XIII: “We hold upon this earth the place of Almighty God.” The Ferraris Ecclesiastical Dictionary adds, “The Pope is of so great dignity and so exalted that he is not a mere man, but as it were God and the vicar of God.” The apostle Paul says these words to expose this kind of power: “the man of sin . . . opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4). Though many may not realize it, this church-state system is in direct contradiction to the Word of God.

Daniel 3—the story of the three Hebrews who had been ordered to “worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up” (verse 5) in ancient Babylon—stands as a symbol, a model, of what will happen when spiritual Babylon, in the last days, will enforce worship of a false “image,” as well (see Rev. 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; Rev. 20:4). How interesting that the commandment that the three Hebrews would have violated, the second commandment (Exod. 20:4, 5), was one of the two commandments that this power, depicted in another place as seeking “to change times and laws” (Dan. 7:25), had tampered with.

What was the other commandment it tampered with? Of course, the fourth commandment, which, as we have seen and will see again, sits at the heart of the whole question of worship and will be central in the final crisis when we face the question of whether we will worship the One who “made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day” (Exod. 20:11; see also Rev. 14:7), or the beast and his image.
PUNISHING FALSE RELIGION

The woman (Babylon) of Revelation 17 is described as “arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness: . . . and upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots.” Says the prophet: “I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” Babylon is further declared to be “that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.” Revelation 17:4-6, 18.

The power that for so many centuries maintained despotic sway over the monarchs of Christendom is Rome. The purple and scarlet color, the gold and precious stones and pearls, vividly picture the magnificence and more than kingly pomp affected by the haughty see of Rome. And no other power could be so truly declared “drunken with the blood of the saints” as that church which has so cruelly persecuted the followers of Christ. Babylon is also charged with the sin of unlawful connection with “the kings of the earth.” It was by departure from the Lord, and alliance with the heathen, that the Jewish church became a harlot; and Rome, corrupting herself in like manner by seeking the support of worldly powers, receives a like condemnation.

Babylon is said to be “the mother of harlots.” By her daughters must be symbolized churches that cling to her doctrines and traditions, and follow her example of sacrificing the truth and the approval of God, in order to form an unlawful alliance with the world. The message of Revelation 14, announcing the fall of Babylon must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. Since this message follows the warning of the judgment, it must be given in the last days; therefore it cannot refer to the Roman Church alone, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries. Furthermore, in the eighteenth chapter of the Revelation the people of God are called upon to come out of Babylon. According to this scripture, many of God's people must still be in Babylon. And in what religious bodies are the greater part of the followers of Christ now to be found? Without doubt, in the various churches professing the Protestant faith. At the time of their rise these churches took a noble stand for God and the truth, and His blessing was with them. Even the unbelieving world was constrained to acknowledge the beneficent results that followed an acceptance of the principles of the gospel. In the words of the prophet to Israel: “Thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.” But they fell by the same desire which was the curse and ruin of Israel—the desire of imitating the practices and courting the friendship of the ungodly. “Thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown.” Ezekiel 16:14, 15.

Many of the Protestant churches are following Rome's example of iniquitous connection with “the kings of the earth”—the state churches, by their relation to secular governments; and other denominations, by seeking the favor of the world. And the term “Babylon”—confusion—may be appropriately applied to these bodies, all professing to derive their doctrines from the Bible, yet divided into almost innumerable sects, with widely conflicting creeds and theories.

Besides a sinful union with the world, the churches that separated from Rome present other of her characteristics. (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 382, 383.)

(Cont. on p. 77.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why must we be careful not to judge people as individuals, as opposed to the Babylonian system itself?

What relationship does the Tower of Babel have with modern spiritual Babylon? What are some similarities between the two?

How do you harmonize the two contrasting ideas that Jesus has given authority to His church, but it is dangerous to place our religious experience in the hands of any spiritual leader?

How do we know that idolatry, one of the sins of Babylon, isn’t just bowing down to statues?

In what ways have you fallen into idolatry?

What warnings about the last days have gone silent in your own ears? Why?