

## BABYLON: ECCLESIASTICAL, POLITICAL, OR WHAT?

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As the Church moves closer and closer to the end times it behooves believers to observe any signs of the approaching end of the age. One of the signs often referred to is the world church movement, which is identified with the present ecumenical thrust. The basis for the belief in a world church or "super-church" as a sign of the end is a specific interpretation of Revelation 17. The "great harlot" is considered to be an ecclesiastical system in chap. 17, and the entity in chap. 18 is considered to be the final world governmental system. Chapter 17 is "ecclesiastical Babylon" whereas chap. 18 is "political Babylon." In other words Revelation 17 and 18 are believed to discuss two separate entities.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is held by many well-known expositors including Pentecost<sup>2</sup> and Walvoord (who entitles his remarks on chap. 17 "The Destruction of Ecclesiastical Babylon").<sup>3</sup> Smith believes that chaps. 17-18 refer to one entity and that this is ecclesiastical.<sup>4</sup> The idea that Revelation 17 refers to an ecclesiastical system should be examined in the Biblical text to see if it is valid.

### I. CHAPTERS 17 AND 18 CONCERN ONE ENTITY

One of the clearest facts regarding these chapters is that they concern one and the same entity. There is in fact no exegetical basis of any sort upon which to differentiate them. The passage deals with one subject from Rev 16:19 to 19:3. This subject is the destruction of Babylon, the great city, by the beast.

1. The context, beginning with Rev 16:19 and extending to 19:3, uses the terms for this entity interchangeably: 16:19, great city; 16:19, Babylon the great; 17:1, great harlot; 17:5, Babylon the great; 17:16, the harlot; 17:18, the great city; 18:2, Babylon the great; 18:10, the great city, Babylon; 18:16, 18, 19, 21, the great city; 19:2, the great harlot.

Notice that the context begins with introductory announcements regarding the judgment of Babylon the great (16:19) and proceeds to a description of the harlot and her destruction, describing the harlot as "Babylon the great" and "the great city." Certainly the statements of 16:19 must refer to the harlot since the

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<sup>1</sup>J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958) 368.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 364-368.

<sup>3</sup>J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 243-267.

<sup>4</sup>J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961) 250.

same terminology is used. The terms "Babylon" and "Babylon the great" are used to describe the entity judged in chap. 18. In addition there are numerous repetitions of the term "the great city" in chap. 18. After this entire section, introduced as the judgment of Babylon the great (16:19), is discussed, then the rejoicing of the heavenly multitude is described as rejoicing over the judgment of the "great harlot." This is one context, using the same terminology interchangeably, from 16:19 to 19:3.

2. Revelation 17:18 states very specifically that "the woman whom thou sawest is the great city." This is a direct statement that the woman (clearly the great harlot) is the great city. The statement is a literal interpretation of the figure, not part of the figure. She is a city, not an ecclesiastical system. She is a city—in fact, the "great city." This is the exact terminology used at least five times to describe the entity in chap. 18.

3. The description of the entity in chap. 17 is the same as the description of the entity in chap. 18. Both are called "the great city" (17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21). Both are destroyed and burned by fire (the harlot: 17:16; 19:2; the city: 18:2, 8, 9, 18; note that both are *utterly* burned by fire: 17:16; 18:8). Both persecute believers (17:6; 18:24). Both are rich and described in similar terms (17:4; 18:7, 10-16, 19; note that in 17:4 and 18:16 this entity is clothed in "purple and scarlet and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls"; the same terms are used in both passages as is the same verb, *kechrysōmenē*). Both are called "Babylon the great" (17:5; 18:2). Both exercise control in all the earth (17:15; 18:23). Both exercise this universal control through political rulers rather than directly (17:2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 18; 18:3, 9). The kings of earth are stated to commit fornication with both (17:2; 18:3, 9). Both are said to have a cup that is connected with their evil works (17:4; 18:6). Both are described as feminine (17:1, 3, 6, etc.; 18:7), although admittedly this parallel carries little weight except as indication of further consistency in the description.

The passage does not give the slightest indication that two separate entities are in view. Not one word indicates a difference. On the contrary, the passage is introduced as the judgment of Babylon the great in 16:19 and, using similar terminology and description throughout, culminates in heavenly praise that the judgment is accomplished in 19:2. It describes one single momentous event: the judgment of the great city called Babylon the great and described as a harlot. There is a direct statement that the woman is the city (17:18), which should be sufficient in itself to solve this problem.

The beast and the ten kings with him who have been controlled and used by the harlot hate this entity that keeps them from complete freedom to carry out their own plans. In chap. 17 they overthrow the harlot by force and burn her. The burning and the reaction of those living on the earth is described in more detail in chap. 18.

Some may object to the equation of chaps. 17 and 18 due to the fact that the beast and the ten kings hate and destroy the harlot in chap. 17 and yet the kings of earth mourn the downfall of Babylon in chap. 18. This objection, however, is based on the invalid equation of the ten kings, confederate with the beast, with the kings of the earth. This is only true if there are no other kings on earth than

the ten kings of Rev 17:16. However, this is clearly not so. The man of sin encounters opposition from many areas and their rulers until the very end (Dan 11:40-45), which indicates that there are many kings in addition to the ten kings confederate with the beast. The "kings of the earth" is a general term referring to the rulers of the earth as a whole. The ten kings with the beast are only one part of this whole, who are in this passage separate from the other rulers in that they are with the beast.

The expression "kings of the earth" is used in chap. 17 on at least two occasions (17:2, 18). The ten kings are also mentioned several times (17:12-16), and yet the impression is given that they do not refer to the same specific group. Therefore the beast and his confederates destroy the harlot who has exercised control over them. By contrast the remaining rulers (kings) of the earth mourn the loss of the harlot, who has benefited them materially.

Walvoord argues for a difference between the two chapters based on the fact that "the merchants mourn the fall of Babylon in chapter 18, but there is no mourning in chapter 17."<sup>5</sup> This is merely an argument from silence. Every item mentioned in one chapter does not need to be repeated in the other. This argument also fails to recognize that chap. 17 describes the harlot from a heavenly perspective and briefly describes her destruction. The description is figurative (the city is a harlot, the world ruler is a beast, etc.). Chapter 18 describes the destruction in literal terms and in more detail, including a lengthy description of the reaction of sinful men on earth who have profited from their illicit relationship with the entity involved and therefore mourn her destruction.

An additional argument by Walvoord is based on the expression "after these things" (*meta tauta*) in 18:1 and the fact that a different angel is mentioned.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean, however, that a different subject is discussed. It merely states that "after this" John saw another vision. The same phrase occurs in 19:1, where rejoicing over the great harlot is announced. The subject is the great harlot, who is the same as the harlot in chap. 17, but 19:1 introduces another vision. John saw a vision of a city, the harlot, "Babylon the great," and her destruction in chap. 17. "After this" he saw another vision of the destruction of the city "Babylon the great" from another perspective in chap. 18. "After this" he heard the angelic announcement of the destruction of the harlot (19:1-3) described in terms appropriate to both chaps. 17 and 18. As for the difference in angels, this indicates nothing as to a different subject in view. It only means that a different angel made the pronouncement in chap. 18.

## II. BABYLON THE GREAT (THE HARLOT) IS NOT A RELIGIOUS SYSTEM OR ECCLESIASTICAL ENTITY

There is no statement in either chapter that a religious or ecclesiastical entity is in view. Ecclesiastical or religious entity, in this study, means some type of formal and primarily religious system. The statement that this passage does not describe an ecclesiastical entity does not preclude the fact that the entity herein

<sup>5</sup>Walvoord, *Revelation* 259.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 258.

does demonstrate the spiritual enmity and opposition of the world to spiritual truth.

1. The only implications of any spiritual aspect in chap. 18 are opposition to the saints and deception by sorcery. Opposition to the saints has been characterized by the world in general (including governments) and does not indicate a religious entity. In Gal 5:20 sorcery is described as one of the works of the flesh that apparently is common to man. Rev 9:21 indicates that sorcery is an item common to mankind in the tribulation period. Therefore these two items indicate nothing more than the normal spiritual opposition of the world and do not imply an ecclesiastical entity.

2. There is no direct statement of any kind in chap. 17 that indicates that the harlot is an ecclesiastical entity. Commentators have given no valid proof that the harlot is ecclesiastical. Several figurative statements, however, have been interpreted by some to require such a view.

Some state that the figure of a woman calls for an ecclesiastical entity. This cannot be demonstrated, however. There are surprisingly few uses in Scripture of the figure of a woman to stand for an entity, and they are not enough on which to base universal conclusions. For example, the woman in chap. 12 clearly stands for Israel. While some may argue that Israel is an ecclesiastical entity the emphasis in chap. 12 seems to be on national and physical rather than ecclesiastical aspects. Certainly Israel is not a religious or ecclesiastical system. In this context (Revelation 17-18) the figure of a woman is appropriate to a city (which is feminine). Note that the feminine idea is emphasized for the city in 18:7 where the city is described by the terms "queen" and "widow."

The argument for an ecclesiastical entity based on the fact that a woman is in the figure is weak indeed. If the "figure" of a woman did sometimes refer to an ecclesiastical system, it can at best indicate the possibility of a religious system and certainly does not require it.

It is sometimes claimed that the term "fornication" is used figuratively of spiritual fornication and therefore demands a religious or ecclesiastical entity. If this assumption were true the conclusion would not follow. Spiritual fornication may be committed by individuals (Matt 15:19; Rev 9:21) and various groups or organizations. Entities other than religious or ecclesiastical may commit spiritual fornication. A governmentally enforced worship of the final world ruler would classify as spiritual fornication but would not necessarily be an ecclesiastical entity. It is obvious, however, that this worship of the beast does not fit the harlot since the beast hates her and destroys her. If this passage is demonstrated to refer to spiritual fornication it is still not evidence that the woman must be an ecclesiastical system. In addition it is not clear that spiritual fornication is meant in this section. Fornication as it is used in the Bible may refer to many types of illicit relations, including immorality, dishonesty, idolatry, improper foreign alliances, etc. The statement that the "kings of earth committed fornication" with the harlot (17:2) may imply that the "harlot" and the kings carried on an illicit relationship. This most naturally fits the context, where it is clear that the harlot entity exerts an improper, behind-the-scenes influence on the political heads of government. This is based on mutual aggrandizement rather than on a proper sphere of

influence. On the other hand there is no emphasis, in this context, on a religious connection with the rulers.

A simple and invincible argument will suffice for those who argue on the basis of the term "fornication" that chap. 17 refers to an ecclesiastical system and that chap. 18 refers to other than an ecclesiastical entity. "Fornication" is used to describe the entity in chap. 18 also. Therefore anyone who believes that chap. 18 refers to a city or a political entity cannot argue that "fornication" requires an ecclesiastical entity in chap. 17 since it is admittedly not so in chap. 18.

It is also claimed that the term "abominations" must describe religious or spiritual aspects and therefore requires an ecclesiastical entity.<sup>7</sup> Many of the arguments above apply here. If "abominations" refers to spiritual abominations it does not follow that this demands any formal religious system or ecclesiastical entity. Spiritual abominations may be carried out by individuals or governments due to the normal spiritual opposition of the world. Luke 16:15 indicates that "that which is exalted among men is an abomination to God." This certainly cannot be restricted to religious or ecclesiastical abominations but includes materialism, etc. In addition it is not certain that religious abominations are meant in this context, since the Bible uses the term "abominations" to describe immorality, dishonesty, women wearing men's clothing, etc. (as well as idolatry).

It is most probable that the "cup of abominations" (17:4) is the same as the "cup that she mingled" (18:6). If this is true, any attempt to differentiate the harlot of chap. 17 as ecclesiastical from the entity in chap. 18 on the basis of "abominations" must fail, since the idea is common to both.

It is also claimed that the phrase "mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth" requires that this refer to an ecclesiastical entity.<sup>8</sup> This of course is only valid if it can be proved that "harlot" must refer to a religious system or ecclesiastical entity. However, there is no other passage in the NT where "harlot" (*pornē*) is used in a figurative sense. In the LXX *pornē* is used over thirty times. The only figurative uses refer either to Israel (Jer 3:1, 3; Ezek 16:30; 23:43) or to certain cities (Isa 1:21; 23:15; Nah 3:4). There is not one instance in Scripture where *pornē* refers to an ecclesiastical entity or religious system. Therefore the argument that "mother of harlots" refers to an ecclesiastical entity is invalid.

Some take this expression even further and, emphasizing the term "mother," attempt to connect the harlot of chap. 17 with the old Babylonian religion. Not only does the term "harlot" fail to support this idea, but this use of "mother" would be strange. How can the *descendant* of an ancient religion be termed the *mother*?

Some may argue that the term "mystery Babylon" refers to an ecclesiastical entity.<sup>9</sup> This argument also is invalid, however. The term "mystery" refers to a secret or previously unrevealed truth. It does not indicate an ecclesiastical entity.

<sup>7</sup>W. Kelly, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (London: Rouse, 1903) 360.

<sup>8</sup>J. A. Seiss (*The Apocalypse* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprinted 1962] 387) is typical of this view when he states: "Harlotry is the standing symbol in the Word of God for a debauched worship, idolatry and false devotion." Kelly (*Lectures* 358) states it even more definitely: "I suppose no dispassionate person would doubt that this term is used in special reference to religious corruption." The discussion of the term "harlot" in this article shows that these statements are without any Biblical foundation.

<sup>9</sup>Seiss, *Apocalypse* 388-390.

It is also possible that "mystery" applies to the designation Babylon and is not part of the name itself.

Another possible argument is that the harlot exercises her control indirectly and therefore cannot be political. However, there are other entities than the ecclesiastical and political. The harlot may be any one of these. She is specifically said to be the "city."

3. The figurative use of "harlot" is found in Scripture to refer to a city but not to a religious system or ecclesiastical entity. "Harlot" (*pornē*), as previously mentioned, is used in the NT in the figurative sense only in this passage in Revelation. In the OT it is used figuratively in Isa 1:21; 23:15; Jer 3:1, 3; Ezek 16:30; 23:43; Nah 3:4. Three of the uses (Jer 3:1, 3; Ezek 16:30; 23:43) refer to Israel as a people or national entity. The usage to describe Israel is not a figure in the same sense as Revelation 17. Israel's actions are described as those of a harlot, but she is not figuratively and directly stated to be a harlot. In other words the use of "harlot" in Jeremiah and Ezekiel to describe Israel is a comparison such as a simile or metaphor while in Revelation the harlot is a symbol for another entity. In addition the emphasis in the passages, although idolatry is involved, is not ecclesiastical but national and political in that the problem is trusting in foreign alliances rather than God.

The other figurative use of *pornē* in the OT refers to cities. This is especially enlightening since the harlot is stated to be a city in Rev 17:18 and several times in chap. 18. Isaiah 1:21, referring to Jerusalem, states: "How is the faithful city become a harlot!" This figure is more direct than those previously discussed regarding Israel but still tends to be a comparison rather than a symbol. The term does refer to a city, however, and not to ecclesiastical aspects but to injustice, murder, bribery, unrighteous rulers, etc., as well as spiritual declension. Isaiah 23:15-17 refers to Tyre in the sense of a comparison rather than a symbol. It refers to a city, however, not to an ecclesiastical entity. There are parallels in the situation in this passage and the passage in Revelation. Tyre is an international commercial center, especially for sea-borne merchandise. Tyre is said to "play the harlot with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth" (Isa 23:17). She is not an ecclesiastical entity but a commercial city described in a manner similar to Babylon in Revelation 18. The final passage is Nah 3:4, where Nineveh is directly stated to be "the well-favored harlot." This is not a comparison but a direct statement similar to Revelation 17. Note that the ecclesiastical aspect is not in view. Nineveh the harlot is described in terms of power, violence and international influence. There are several parallels with the passage in Revelation. Nineveh is symbolized as a harlot, her whoredoms (fornication) extend internationally, and she exercises her power not only through violence but through witchcraft (cf. sorcery).

There is no instance in Scripture where "harlot" is used to describe an ecclesiastical entity or religious system. When this fact is joined with the direct statement of Rev 17:18 that the "woman is the great city" and with the exact similarities of the subject in Revelation 17-18, together with the obvious fact that Rev 16:19-19:3 deals with one event, it is impossible on any exegetical basis to regard

the two chapters as describing either separate entities or an ecclesiastical entity.<sup>10</sup> The harlot of chap. 17 is the city of chap. 18.

The only religious system tolerated by the man of sin is the worship of himself. This does not appear to be a formal ecclesiastical system and is not based on any previous church or religious movement such as the ecumenical movement. This should be clear from such passages as Dan 11:37: "Neither shall he regard the gods of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god; for he shall magnify himself above all" and 2 Thess 2:4: "He that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God." This world ruler tolerates no worship, no god and no religious system except worship of himself. It is difficult to see how he could need any previously existing religious systems to help him in his endeavor, since they are all based on some concept of God or gods. It is doubtful that they could ever be in a position to ride or control the beast, who does not need such previously existing religions (the world church movement). They could not be in a position to control a man who makes such public pronouncements against previous religious ideas. The worship of the beast is under his control rather than vice versa. The description of the final religion of beast worship indicates that it and the false prophet are under the control of the beast. Revelation 13:12 states that the false prophet "exerciseth all the authority of the first beast in his sight."

Furthermore, the beast and the ten kings hate the harlot and destroy her (17:16). It is difficult to believe that the beast will hate and destroy a religion that he set up and that brings worship to himself. Therefore the harlot cannot refer to

<sup>10</sup>Most commentators who believe that Revelation 17 refers to an ecclesiastical entity and Revelation 18 to a political entity give no evidence for this position. Those factors normally stated as reasons for this view have been discussed. Walvoord (*Revelation* 259), arguing for such a position, states: "The woman who is destroyed in chapter 17 is made desolate, naked, and burned with fire by the beast with the ten horns. From this it may be concluded that the destruction of the harlot in chapter 17 is the fall of Babylon in its ecclesiastical or religious sense and that it probably occurs when the beast assumes the role of God." But there is nothing in the mere fact that the woman is made desolate and burned with fire from which to conclude anything regarding the nature of the woman or the time of destruction. Much less does it provide any indication that she is ecclesiastical. As a matter of fact the entity in chap. 18 is described in the same terms—i.e., *utterly* burned with fire (Rev 17:16; 19:2; 18:2, 8, 9, 18). The same terminology describing both can hardly prove that they are different. On the same page Walvoord also states: "In chapter 18 the context seems to indicate that Babylon is viewed in its political and economic character rather than its religious aspect." This argument proves nothing since the same item may be considered from different aspects. A more basic fallacy is that it assumes the point it claims to prove. It assumes without any evidence that chap. 17 refers to an ecclesiastical entity. Chapter 18 may well refer to political and economic aspects, but unless we assume that Revelation 17 is different and ecclesiastical it proves nothing. A final argument by Walvoord is the statement that the destruction of chap. 18 is late in the tribulation but that chap. 17 seems to precede the tribulation and paves the way for worship of the beast. But there is no evidence that the events in chap. 17 come before the tribulation. Rather, the evidence and order of events in the book of Revelation indicate the opposite. Neither is there anything in the context to indicate that this paves the way for worship of the beast.

If Walvoord's view is correct, the ecclesiastical system is destroyed in chap. 17 and then three-and-a-half years (or more) later the beast's political empire is destroyed. When this occurs the angels announce the destruction of the defunct religious system destroyed three-and-a-half years earlier. But this is chronologically awkward and is much less likely than the obvious fact that the destruction of one entity is announced in Rev 16:19, viewed from the heavenly perspective in chap. 17, from the perspective of earth in chap. 18, and rejoiced over in heaven in 19:1-3. This provides a smooth and natural chronological flow of events. The evidence supports the view that only one entity is involved.

the only religion of the end time, which is the worship of the beast. It is also highly improbable that one with the beast's attitude and pronouncements could or would work with and come under the influence or control of existing religious systems.

It is improbable, for these reasons, that the harlot is ecclesiastical in any sense, although this does not preclude a nonecclesiastical harlot that is opposed to spiritual truth.

In conclusion to this section, the harlot is not an ecclesiastical entity, nor is the entity in chap. 18. They are one and the same but not ecclesiastical. The term "harlot" (*pornē*) is not used in Scripture to refer to an ecclesiastical entity, but it is used to refer to actual cities similar to that in chap. 18. There is thus no Biblical evidence for a world church movement culminating in the religious system of the beast. The world church movement, at the most, merely indicates a trend and receptivity for such a system, but is not a "sign" of the times. Some may argue from such passages as Matthew 13 and Rev 3:14-22 that a final world church is prophesied. Neither of these passages, however, can demonstrate such. It has yet to be demonstrated that the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 refer to successive periods of history.

### III. BABYLON THE GREAT (THE HARLOT) IS NEITHER ECCLESIASTICAL NOR POLITICAL BUT ECONOMIC

The harlot of chap. 17 and the entity of chap. 18 are one and the same. Now it will be shown that this entity is predominantly economic or commercial rather than political or governmental.

1. The dominant influence of this city is economic or commercial (18:3, 11-13, 15, 19, 23). Although there are statements indicating a position of influence and leadership, such as 17:18 ("the great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth"), this leadership is not stated to be political. Chapter 18 describes the details regarding the city, but the bulk of the chapter deals directly with commercial or economic aspects. There is no verse clearly political in the sense of governmental control.

2. The control of the city is indirect rather than political. The kings of the earth commit fornication with her—that is, they are involved in an illicit rather than governmental connection. Her merchants (not kings) are the princes of the earth (18:23). Commercial control by indirect means rather than by direct power implies that the city is dominant as other than a political entity. The kings of earth are sad at her demise, but apparently neither they nor she have the power to avert the destruction. Therefore her power over the earth must be other than by force.

3. The beast is involved with the harlot until he destroys her. Revelation 13 indicates that although the beast does have political power, one of the forces that enables him to control is economic power (Rev 13:16-17). Although the economic control in Rev 13:16-17 is complete and extends to all men, Dan 11:40-44 indicates that the beast never exercises complete political power. Apparently the harlot exercises some control and influence over the political rulers (kings), including the beast, and this control is not by force but by her merchants.



4. This economic system is international and evil, influencing governments by financial control. It is powerful, rich and worldwide (17:4, 15; 18:3, 19, 23). It is evil and deceptive (17:3, 5, 6; 18:4-7, 13, 23, 24; 19:2). It controls the political rulers (17:3, 7, 9, 18; 18:23). It collaborates with the political rulers behind the scenes (17:2, 16; 18:3, 9; etc.). Without collaboration the city is powerless since the beast destroys her at will.

5. There are additional statements in the Bible indicating that there will be worldwide economic control at the time of the end (Rev 13:16-17). The woman and the ephah in Zechariah 5 may indicate a commercial system.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This passage describes one of the momentous events of the tribulation period. It is the destruction of a system of international economic or commercial interests that has its headquarters in a major city. This economic entity has exercised influence or control over all the political rulers and governments of the earth. As the "mother of harlots" it apparently controls local economic and commercial systems from a world center. It has enslaved and deceived mankind and is extremely evil. It has also been ferocious in its opposition to the saints, being a leader in the persecution of them (17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:2). This system may or may not help the beast rise to power, but it certainly helps maintain him in power and dominates him. The beast and his confederates, however, chafe under the restricting influence and control of this economic entity and eventually throw off her dominion by military (political) force.

Any movement toward international economic or monetary control, any evidence of international economic interests and financiers is more indicative of the great harlot, the evil entity described herein, than a world religious movement. As one sees signs of international economic collusion on every hand, this should awaken interest in the coming of the Lord.

The judgment of this horrible economic entity is of such momentous importance that a major section of the book of Revelation is devoted to it (Rev 14:8; 16:19-19:3). Heaven and believers are instructed to rejoice over her destruction (18:20), and a great multitude in heaven praises God when this economic oppressor of all men is destroyed (19:2-3).

<sup>11</sup>D. Baron, *The Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah* (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth, 1918) 155-170.