

The Great City

In the Apocalypse this title is applied mainly to Babylon (Rev 17,18; 18,9.16; 18,18.19.21) but, curiously, it is applied also to the city 'where indeed their Lord was crucified' (11,8). It is also used of that city which is split into three parts by an earthquake (16,19), where it is carefully distinguished from the cities of the 'nations'.

The wide use of this title has caused problems of interpretation. In many commentaries we find that Rome is identified as the city where the two witnesses are put to death – the city which is referred to in the text as the place 'where indeed their Lord was crucified' (11,8). It seems that the title 'Great City' has come to be uniquely identified with Babylon, and Babylon with Rome.

The way out of this problem is to consider 'Great City' as a title which not only applies to Babylon for a certain period, but also to any other city which has an important and intimate connection with the 'beast from the sea'. Viewed in this way, the transfer of the title 'Great City' from Babylon to the city 'where indeed their Lord was crucified' (which can be no other than Jerusalem) carries a very important meaning: the beast which was happy to support Babylon while he was submerged under many waters, turns to Jerusalem for his base when he rises from the abyss and reveals himself fully – the event which is precipitated by his desire to fight the two witnesses and kill them.

From the time of his ascent from the abyss until the end of his allotted period of 42 months, the city which was once the Holy City (11,2) becomes the 'Great City' of the beast and the false prophet. It follows that this city, Jerusalem, is also the one which is finally split into three parts (16,9) not only because it is here carefully distinguished from the cities of the 'nations', but also because of the allusion to the prophecy of Zechariah (Zech 14,4-5) about Jerusalem on the Day of the Lord.

It is interesting to reflect on why the city 'where indeed their Lord was crucified' is never called Jerusalem by name: Instead, we are told she is 'spiritually' called Sodom and Egypt. We understand this omission to be important for the following reasons:

1. On the spiritual level, this city—historical Jerusalem—ranks with Sodom and Egypt during the period of 42 months indicated by this prophecy. It follows that it can no longer be considered synonymous with the dwelling place of the living God, referred to as Mount Zion or the 'Beloved City' (14,1; 20,8) in former times. So to avoid this confusion it is not mentioned by name.
2. Historical Jerusalem is called the Holy City up until the time it is trampled (profaned) by the nations for 42 months (11,2), and for this reason it must not be confused with the Holy City, the New Jerusalem

(21,2.10), by the use of the same name. The New Jerusalem is an entirely new creation coming down out of heaven from God (21,5), and she will never be profaned (21,27). She is not, therefore, a renovated form of the historical Jerusalem.