

Who or What is the Babylon of the Apocalypse?

Babylon is a symbolic name for a specific place, whose character and destiny were described in great detail by St. John in the Apocalypse. In fact, the vision of Babylon and of her destruction occupy not less than a tenth of the text (Rev 17,1- 19,4).

From the context in which it is described, the destruction of Babylon can be identified as one of the eschatological judgements of God on the earth (cf. 3,10; 14,6-7) - the first, in fact, because it takes place before the main group of these judgements, represented by the outpouring of the bowls full of 'the wine of God's passion' (15,5-16,21). The destruction of Babylon stands out, therefore, as an important anticipatory sign of the judgements of God on the earth at the end of time, a sign which is not described in any other part of the New Testament.

In order that this sign may be recognized, it is obviously necessary to identify Babylon, but none of the various places suggested by biblical scholars agrees with all the information handed down to us in the Apocalypse. The ancient cities of Rome and Jerusalem have been proposed, but both were rebuilt and repopulated after their destruction in ancient times. In contrast, the destruction of Babylon will be complete and eternal according to what is written in the Apocalypse (18,2.21 -24). Furthermore, given that the destruction of Babylon takes place just before the divine judgements at the end of time, and these have not yet occurred, it follows that far from being an ancient city, Babylon is a historical reality that currently exists, even though it is difficult to identify her.

The difficulty in identifying Babylon derives from the fact that she takes part in a mystery (17,7) which involves the beast to whom the devil gave 'his power, his throne and great authority' (13,2), that is to say the historical incarnation of evil. Since, in the Apocalypse, this mystery is presented as the evil counterpart of the mystery of God (cf. 10,7), it can be considered identical to 'the mystery of iniquity' which was described briefly by St. Paul (2 Thess 2,1-11).

It is not surprising, therefore, that it is difficult to identify Babylon: the concealment of her identity is indeed an integral part of the mystery which, according to St. Paul, is impeding the eschatological manifestation of evil (2 Thess 2,6-7). The definitive identification of Babylon, then, has the effect of unmasking the 'mystery of iniquity', so preparing the way for the full manifestation of evil that will precede the return of the Lord at the end of time (2 Thess 2,1-11). In brief, the identification of Babylon is of considerable importance in the initiation of the events which lead to the fulfilment of the mystery of God at the end of time.

In order to receive the vision of Babylon, St. John was transported 'in spirit' to the desert (Rev 17,3), but not because Babylon is situated in the desert, since she is in fact seen to be sitting on many waters (17,1). Instead, it seems

that St. John was transported to the desert because Babylon can only be revealed to the one who is purified of worldly desires and lives spiritually, as if he were in the desert.

Contemplating the mystery of Babylon and the beast, St. John was deeply astonished (17,6-7). It seems that he did not by any means expect to see what was revealed to him. The correct solution to the identity of Babylon, therefore, should explain the prophet's astonishment and may even arouse the same reaction in us.

In the vision granted to St. John, Babylon was revealed as a woman who represents a city: "The woman who you saw is the great city, the one which has a kingdom over the rulers of the earth" (17,18). We know therefore that Babylon is, above-all, a great power; she has an international authority which is greater than that of any nation or state, and her base is described as a city.

The geographical location of this city is not declared explicitly in the text, but is indicated as follows by the angel-interpreter of the vision: "the seven heads are the seven hills on which the woman is sitting" (17,9). Even though Babylon can not be precisely identified with the ancient city of Rome, for the reasons given above, it is nevertheless difficult to deny some connection with the actual city of Rome, given that this city continues to be one of the few cities in the world associated with seven hills. In order to clarify the connection between the international power called Babylon in the Apocalypse, and the actual city of Rome, it is necessary to interpret other aspects of the vision.

The woman who represents Babylon is also a great prostitute (17,1). By means of her splendid appearance (17,4) she seduces the rulers of the earth to 'fornicate' with her (17,2; 18,3.9). The metaphorical use of 'fornicate' in this context, draws attention to the immorality of the relations that are established between the rulers of the earth and the international power called Babylon.

Regarding Babylon it is written in the text that all the inhabitants of the earth get drunk on the 'wine of her passion for fornication' (14,8; 17,2; 18,3). To determine the metaphorical meaning of 'fornication', it is important to note that Babylon's passion for 'fornication' is essentially the same as the lust of her soul for riches and luxury (18,3.7.14). Filled with this 'passion for fornication', then, the inhabitants of the earth preoccupy themselves with the accumulation of riches and articles of luxury. In this way, under the influence of Babylon, the whole world becomes corrupted (19,2).

Understood in exactly the same way, the concept of 'fornication' was used frequently in the Old Testament to describe the idolatry of the people of Israel, because it represented the height of infidelity to their Covenant with God (e.g.: I Chr 5,25; Ps 73,27; Jer 3,6; Ezek 16,17; 23,19; Hos 9,1). The use of this metaphor with respect to Babylon, therefore, indicates that this power is fundamentally a religious, or spiritual, power which has been unfaithful in its relationship to God, on account of an idolatrous love for riches and luxury (cf.

Matt 6,24).

There is even an indication in the text as to the specific religious character of this power: it is written that Babylon is "drunk with the blood of the saints and of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev 17,6). Since the saints experience a natural death, and are not killed like the martyrs, it would be wrong to interpret the preceding statement as meaning that Babylon is guilty of the deaths of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. To be 'drunk' with their blood has a different meaning: assimilating the lives and deaths of the saints and the martyrs, Babylon appropriates their glory and merit and exalts herself. This self-exaltation, or spiritual pride, causes her to act in an irresponsible and disordered way, like a woman who is 'drunk'.

Moreover, knowing that the irresponsible and disordered way in which Babylon acts is described as 'fornication', it is not difficult to recognize her state of 'drunkenness' as an important condition for her 'fornication'. In fact, it seems to be the intention of the Author that these two negative aspects of her behaviour are interpreted together: considering the merits of the saints and martyrs as her own (being 'drunk' with their blood), Babylon succeeds in satisfying her lust for riches and luxury (her passion for 'fornication'). In a few words, Babylon 'glorifies herself and lives luxuriously' (cf. 18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Allying herself in this way with the saints and the martyrs of Jesus, the religious power which is called Babylon in the Apocalypse can not be anything else but Christian.

It is not surprising, therefore, that at this point in the revelation St. John is struck with astonishment (17,6). It is no wonder either, that there is a great celebration in heaven when Babylon is finally destroyed (18,20; 19,1-4), or that the Lord considers it just and right to avenge the blood of the martyrs by destroying her (cf. 6,10; 19,2-3).

The practice by means of which Babylon exploits the merits of the saints and martyrs in order to satisfy her passion for riches, coincides exactly with the 'cult of the saints and martyrs' around which, it must be admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in the history of the Catholic Church, and have proved to be difficult to eradicate (cf. Cone. Vat. II, Lumen Gentium, 51).

However, according to the information that we have examined so far, it would be wrong to identify Babylon precisely with the Catholic Church. Defined as a Christian power with "a kingdom over the rulers of the earth" (17,18), and having its base in a city which lies on seven hills (17,9), it is difficult to escape the identification of Babylon with the central Authority of the Church at Rome, or more specifically with the place that is presently called Vatican City. This unique and privileged Authority is held responsible for the financial exploitation of the 'cult of the saints and martyrs of Jesus', and for the corruption which has sprung from this in all the world.

The gravity of the accusation against the highest Authority of the Church,

implied in the identification of Babylon with the Vatican, obviously demands further confirmation and clarification on the basis of the remaining information given in the Apocalypse.

Babylon has "a name, a mystery: mother of the prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth" (Rev 17,5). Just as 'fornication' (Greek: *porneia*, *porneuo*; Hebrew: *zenunim*, *zanah*) is a biblical metaphor to indicate the idolatry of the people of God, so also 'prostitute' (Greek: *porne*; Hebrew: *zonah*) is the metaphor used in the Old Testament in reference to the community that was unfaithful to God on account of idolatry (e.g.: Deut 31,16; Is 1,21; Jer 3,6-10; Ezek 16,15; 23,7.19; Hos 2,7). In the New Testament context, then, the prostitutes of whom Babylon is said to be the mother, can be identified with any Christian community that has indulged in the same passion for riches and luxury, including those communities, or sects, which in the course of history have separated themselves from the central Authority of the Catholic Church. Babylon is by no means the only 'prostitute', but her responsibility is the greatest because she is the mother of all the others.

Babylon has a golden cup in her hand which is "full of the abominations and the filth of her fornication" (Rev 17,4), another way of describing the wine that makes all the nations drunk (14,8; 17,2; 18,3). However, as the time for the destruction of Babylon draws near, the role of the cup changes: instead of being instrumental in the corruption of the nations, it becomes an instrument in the condemnation of Babylon; it is said to those who have the task of destroying her: "mix her a double measure in the cup in which she mixed" (18,6). Finally, Babylon is forced to drink from the same cup, now identified precisely as "the cup of the anger of God, full of the wine of his passion" (16,9). Therefore, the golden cup which Babylon holds in her hand is no other than the cup of the anger of God, entrusted to her by the Lord with a single purpose, that of bringing divine justice to the nations (cf. Jer 13,27). However, instead of distributing the 'wine of the passion of God', Babylon filled the cup with the 'wine of the passion of her fornication' and gave it to the nations, so that instead of bringing them divine justice, she brought them corruption.

Babylon says in her heart: "I sit as queen and am not a widow and sorrow I certainly do not see" (Rev 18,7). The fact that she says this 'in her heart', that is to say to herself, implies that Babylon does not pronounce it publicly. We should therefore bear in mind a possible difference between that which Babylon expresses publicly and the way in which she thinks and acts privately (cf. Matt 23,1-4).

Believing herself to be queen, it is probable that Babylon wishes to identify herself with the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, which descends from heaven and is gloriously described as the wife of the one whose title is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev 17,14; 19,7; 21,2.9). Her refusal to participate in, or even recognize, situations of affliction and suffering ("I am not a widow and

sorrow I certainly do not see"), seems to confirm this self-identification with the City in which "there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain" (21,4). However, the new Jerusalem will not be established on earth until after the final Judgement at the end of time. The mentality of Babylon can therefore be recognized by the fact that she is not expecting this event, but thinks and acts as if the salvific plan of God had already been completely fulfilled, and as if she herself represented that fulfilment.

This analysis of the remaining information in the text concerning Babylon, does not by any means contradict her identification with the central Authority of the Church at Rome, that is to say with City of the Vatican. It is extremely significant, therefore, that in reality the condemnation of Babylon does not fall on the persons of that Authority, but only on the buildings that they occupy; immediately before the Vatican is destroyed, the Lord says: "come out of her, *my people*, so that you do not take part in her sins and share in her plagues, for her sins have piled up to heaven and God has remembered her iniquities" (18,4-5).

From the fact that after the destruction of Babylon there is no mourning for the loss of human life, but only for the loss of trade or of extremely precious articles (18,9-20), it is evident that all those who find themselves in the Vatican in those days obey the divine command to leave, indicating in this way that all are God's people. Abandoning their city in obedience to the Lord, these people demonstrate true repentance for the sins which lead to Babylon's condemnation and which, even though they may have forgotten with the passing of time, God has remembered.

The identification of Babylon with the City of the Vatican adds considerable emphasis and direction to the proposal recently advanced by His Holiness Pope John Paul II: "Whilst the second millennium of Christianity is coming to a close, it is right that the Church assumes responsibility for the sins of her children with greater awareness, remembering all those circumstances in which, during the course of history, they have distanced themselves from the Spirit of Christ and from his Gospel, offering to the world - instead of the testimony of a life inspired by the values of the Faith - the spectacle of ways of thinking and acting which were really forms of anti-testimony and of scandal" ('Tertio Millennio Adveniente', 33).