

Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?

The interpretation of the Babylon spoken of in Rev 16–18 conditions the reading of the whole book of Revelation itself, since Babylon, along with the Beast rising from the sea, is the target of John's attacks. The interpretations given so far through the centuries are reducible to five:

- (1) Babylon is the historical city situated on the river Euphrates in Mesopotamia⁽¹⁾,
- (2) Babylon is the *civitas diaboli* of every epoch of human history⁽²⁾,
- (3) Babylon is the city of the Antichrist in the eschatological crisis⁽³⁾,

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⁽¹⁾ K.M. ALLEN, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon", *BibSac* 133 (1976) 19-20: "The city of Babylon will be rebuilt, will become one of the centers of operation of the coming Antichrist, and will be destroyed during the day of the Lord (...). This doctrine honors the literal method of interpretation (...) against (...) the non-literal method of interpretation"; C.H. DYER, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18", *BibSac* 144 (1987) 449: "The identity of Babylon in Revelation 17–18 is the future rebuilt city of Babylon on the Euphrates. It will once again be restored and will achieve a place of worldwide influence only to be destroyed by the Antichrist in his thirst for power".

⁽²⁾ Tychonius and Augustine of Hippo spread this interpretation in antiquity. For modern times cf. M. RISSI, *Die Hure Babylon und die Verführung der Heiligen. Eine Studie zur Apokalypse des Johannes* (Stuttgart – Berlin – Köln 1995) 58: "[Babylon is] die weltumfassende Gemeinde der Verführten und Verführer, das Kontrastbild zur Gemeinde der Heiligen, des Neuen Jerusalem"; G.K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999) 885-886: "'Babylon the Great' is the entire corrupt economic-religious system (...). Though most past commentators have tended to identify Babylon solely with ungodly Roman culture, or the apostate church, or apostate Israel, it is better to see these identifications as not mutually exclusive".

⁽³⁾ Th. ZAHN, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Leipzig – Erlangen 1926) II, 450: "... die aus dem Meer aufsteigende erste Bestie der Antichrist der Endzeit ist"; J. SICKENBERGER, "Die Johannesapokalypse und Rom", *BibZeit* 17 (1925-1926) 280: "Die Hauptfeindin Israels, das alte Babylon, lebt in den Hauptstädten der folgenden gottfeindlichen Reiche weiter und kommt am Ende der Zeiten zu besonderer Blüte"; E. LOHMEYER, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Tübingen

(4) Babylon is the Rome of the seven hills, the imperial cult and anti-Christian persecution (see below);

(5) Babylon is the Jerusalem which killed the Messiah and, at the time of John, was interpreting the messianic prophecies in a political perspective (see below).

Rev 17,10, that states “One (of the seven kings of Babylon, presently) is / ἔστιν”, seems to demand a *zeitgeschichtlich* interpretation and so excludes almost automatically the first three interpretations listed above⁽⁴⁾. Only Babylon-Rome and Babylon-Jerusalem are left, and, consequently, only the alternative between Rev as an anti-Roman or anti-Jewish libel remains.

1. “Babylon” in the history of the research

The history of the research on Rev begins for us with Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 5, 28-30) who reports three names — ΕΥΑΝΘΑΣ, ΛΑΤΕΙΝΟΣ, ΤΕΙΤΑΝ — as interpretations, current in his time, of the famous number 666, the number of the Beast’s name⁽⁵⁾. Already before Irenaeus, therefore, the Beast was interpreted as: (i) Gessius Florus, procurator in Judaea from A.D. 64-66: (*[eu-]anth[os]*, “flower”, lt. *flos -ris*)⁽⁶⁾, (ii) the Latin (empire), or (iii) the Roman-

1926) 112: “So ist der Sinn (...) dieser Tiere, der endzeitliche Erzfeind Gottes und des Lammes zu sein”; W. FOERSTER, “θηρίον”, *TDNT* (Grand Rapids, MI 1967) III, 135: “... θηρίον denotes the Antichrist (...). The other beast (...) is the false prophet of the last time”.

⁽⁴⁾ Attention to the statement “One presently is” has been drawn by L. BRUN, “Die römischen Kaiser in der Apokalypse”, *ZNW* 26 (1927) 129 (“... durch Ernstnehmen der Versicherung des Verfassers: ‘der eine ist’”); H. RONGY, “L’explication eschatologique de l’Apocalypse”, *Revue Eccl. de Liège* 23 (1931-1932) 161, 164 (and *passim*): “Si S. Jean parlait uniquement de l’avenir éloigné, pourquoi distinguerait-il dans les têtes de la bête le passé, le présent et le future?”, “Si les sept têtes appartenaient toutes à l’avenir éloigné, pourquoi S. Jean se placerait-il au moment de la sixième qui n’a aucune importance spéciale? Au chapitre XVII, S. Jean explique lui-même la bête aux sept têtes comme une réalité existant à son époque, et il exclut ainsi l’explication eschatologique de sa prophétie”; J.J. COLLINS, “Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews and the Genre of the Revelation of John”, *CBQ* 39 (1977) 339: “We must take the author at his word when he tells us that he is contemporary with the sixth king”.

⁽⁵⁾ It is an interpretation based on gematry, that is on the counting and summing of the numerical value of the letters of the name.

⁽⁶⁾ Thus F.H. COLSON, “Euanthas”, *JThSt* 17 (1916) 100, who writes: “It seems to me incredible that the suggestion when first put forward should have been meaningless (...). The governor [i.e. Gessius Florus] whose barbarities are

Hellenistic idolatry (the “Titans”, and the sun-god called also “Titan”)(⁷). The three interpretations are all anti-Roman, though in different ways and measures.

The anti-Roman interpretation took its classical shape in the most ancient commentary of Rev that survives, the commentary of Victorinus, Bishop of Poetovio, in ancient Pannonia, present day Slovenia(⁸). Victorinus in fact:

(i) gives the circumlocution, «city of Rome», as the equivalent of Babylon: ... *ruina Babylonis, id est civitatis Romanae*,

(ii) identifies the seven mountains of Rev 17,9, on which the Harlot is seated, with the seven hills of Rome: *Capita septem [sunt] septem montes, super quos mulier sedet: id est civitas Romana, et reges septem sunt*, and

(iii) interprets the mortally wounded head of the Beast, as an allusion to the legend of the Nero restored to life (*redivivus*) and returning from the East against Rome as his enemy (*redux*): *Unum autem de capitibus quasi occisum in mortem et plagam mortis eius curatam, Neronem dicit. Constat enim, dum insequeretur eum equitatus missus a senatu, ipsum sibi gulam succidisse. Hunc ergo suscitatum Deus mittet...* (⁹).

described at length by Josephus, (...) whose oppression brought on the fatal war, perhaps according to his deliberate intention, of whom Tacitus says ‘*duravit tamen patientia Iudaeis usque ad Florum procuratorem*’, must long have been a name of horror to every Jew”. J. BONSRIVEN, *L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (Paris 1951) 235-236, footnote 1, follows the same line of Colson. — According to several authors Εὐανθάς is a name without any meaning: H.B. SWETE, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London ¹1906, ²1907) 175 (“the impossible word Euanthas”); W. BARCLAY, “Revelation XIII”, in *ExpT* 70 (1959) 295 (“Euanthas is itself meaningless”); J. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary (AB 38; Garden City, NY ⁴1980) 226 (“Euantas [sic] [...] is meaningless”).

(⁷) In fact Irenaeus writes: “... et divinum putatur apud multos esse hoc nomen, ut etiam sol Titan vocetur ab his qui nunc tenent”. Cf. then also the *recensio Victorini*: “*Teitan, quem gentiles Solem Phoebumque appellant...*” (*PL Suppl. I*, 157).

(⁸) *Poetovio*, of which Victorinus was bishop, is today Ptuj, on the river Drave, in Slovenia. Ptuj was part of Austria during the Austro-Hungarian empire. From that time, when the German name of Ptuj was Pettau, remained the use (by now out of place) of writing “Victorinus ‘of Pettau’ ”.

(⁹) *PL Suppl. I*, 140 (first quotation), 155 (second quotation), 155-156 (third and fourth quotation). — It is possible that Victorinus proposes a traditional interpretation since sometimes he makes reference to interpreters of past times: cf. the “*Veteres nostri tradiderunt etc.*” of *PL Suppl. I*, 146.

According to Victorinus, then, Rev is written against the Rome of the seven hills, the seven emperors, and the *Nero redivivus* and *redux*. For Victorinus, who died as a martyr in the persecution of Diocletian († 304)⁽¹⁰⁾, Rev's Babylon was the Rome which persecuted the Christians.

After Victorinus, the anti-Roman interpretation is documented both in the East⁽¹¹⁾, and in the West⁽¹²⁾. It was, however, little by little, substituted by the moralistic, ahistorical interpretation spread by Tychonius and Augustine (see above interpretation of "Babylon" n. 2), that largely inspired the reading of Rev until Joachim of Fiore († 1202). The Calabrian abbot saw in Rev the chronological prophecy of the various epochs of the Church and such *kirchengeschichtlich* interpretation was used and abused in the epoch of the confessional controversies, as is well known⁽¹³⁾. The number of the Beast was

⁽¹⁰⁾ This is the traditional date of the death of Victorinus but according to M. Dulaey (*Victorin de Poetovio. Sur l'Apocalypse* [SC 423; Paris 1997] 15-16), his commentary on Revelation seems to have been written around 258-260 A.D., under Gallienus, such that his martyrdom may be related to some persecution of M. Aurelius Numerianus, associate emperor in the years 283-284 a. C., and predecessor of Diocletian. The hypothesis was accepted for example by R. GRAYSON, "Les commentaires patristiques latins de l'Apocalypse", *RTLouv* 28 (1997) 485.

⁽¹¹⁾ Cf. the authors hinted at by Andrew bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (VI-VII century, PG 106, 373.D), who writes: "Hanc meretricem quidam veterem Romam (εις πολλὰν Ρώμην) designare putant, ut quae super septem colles exaedificata tradatur".

⁽¹²⁾ Cf. the authors hinted at by Cassiodorus of Vivarium († 580 circa; *PL* 70, 1414.A). Cassiodorus writes: "... meretrix illa (...), quam nonnulli de Romana volunt intelligere civitate quae supra septem montes sedet, et mundum singulari ditione possidet..." (*PL* 70, 1414.A). The anti-Roman interpretation is also found for example in Primasius of Hadrumetum (*scripsit* around 540): "Romam quae super septem montes praesidet significans..." (*PL* 68, 899.C.), in Berengaudus (IX or better XII century): "... fornicariam Romam vocat" (*PL* 17, 1.000.D), and in the poet Commodianus (of a difficult dating between III century and V century): "Ex infero redit, qui fuerat regno praeceptus / Et diu servatus cum pristino corpore notus. / Dicimus hunc autem Neronem esse uetustum / Qui Petrum et Paulum prius puniuit in urbem. / ... Urbis perditio Nero est, hic terrae totius..." (*Carmen* 825-828. 935; *PL Suppl.* I, 95. 98; *CCL* 128, 103. 107); "Cum fuerit autem Nero de inferno leuatus / ... Tunc Babillon meretrix erit incinefacta fauilla" (*Instructiones* 41, 6.11; *PL* 5, 231; *CCL* 128, 33-34).

⁽¹³⁾ About this way of interpretation cf. the severe judgment of E.-B. ALLO, *Saint Jean. L'Apocalypse* (Paris 1921) CCXXXII: "De tous les systèmes exégétiques, c'est celui dont nous parlons qui méconnaît au plus haut degré le but et l'esprit de saint Jean".

interpreted for example as ΙΤΑΛΙΚΗ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ, ΠΑΠΕΙΣΚΟΣ etc. by one side, or as ΛΟΥΘΕΡΑΝΑ by the other⁽¹⁴⁾.

In this same epoch, however, some interpreters went back to the anti-Roman interpretation (Bibliander, † 1564; J. de Mariana, † 1624; J.S. Semler, 1766; H. Corrodi, 1783; J.G. Eichhorn, 1791), that became a quasi-dogma in XIX century (F. Lücke, 1832; W.M.L. de Wette, 1848; H. Ewald, 1862; E. Renan, 1873 etc.)⁽¹⁵⁾.

Other interpreters, on the contrary, inaugurated the anti-Jewish interpretation. The Belgian Jeronimite J. Henten (*scripsit* 1545) spoke of *synagogae abrogatio* for Rev 1–11 (and *excidium gentilismi* for Rev 12–22). The first to see Jerusalem in Rev's Babylon were the French Jesuit J. Hardouin (1646-1729) and the French Calvinist F. Abauzit (1679-1767). According to the former the seven messages of Rev 2–3 are addressed to the Jewish-Christians of Jerusalem, and according to the latter the Beast is the Jewish Sanhedrin, the seven mountains of Rev 17,9 are the seven hills on which Jerusalem stands, and the fall of Babylon is the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.⁽¹⁶⁾

Some twenty scholars have held this interpretation in the last century based on the following arguments against the anti-Roman one, and variously configuring the new solution.

2. Anti-Jewish interpretation versus anti-Roman interpretation

a) Reasons against the anti-Roman hypothesis

The objections against the anti-Roman interpretation can be summarised in four groups.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Cf. BARCLAY, "Revelation XIII", 295-296.

⁽¹⁵⁾ For the authors of this period, whose works are usually not easily available, cf. the historical reviews in the commentaries of W. Bousset and E.-B. Allo, from which all draw information.

⁽¹⁶⁾ J. Hardouin was an encyclopaedic man but rather bizarre, convinced for example that, except for some works of Cicero, Virgil and Horace, all the other writings considered old are rather XIII century falsifications. About him G. SOMMERVOGEL, *Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris 1910) III, 427, writes: "... fut le savant plus paradoxal, non seulement de son époque, mais peut-être de tous les temps. Son imagination ardente lui fit concevoir en différentes branches des sciences les systèmes les plus extravagants". — The essay of Abauzit, which was published after his death by J.B. de Mirabau at Geneva in the year 1770, was entitled "Essai sur l'Apocalypse". — About F. Abauzit cf. BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 102; E. LEVESQUE, "Abauzit, Firmin", *Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris 1894) I, 17-18, and Y. DE LA BRIÈRE, "Le professeur de théologie du 'vicaire savoyarde' de Rousseau: Firmin Abauzit, de Genève"¹⁴, *RechSR* 14 (1924) 447-453 ("... l'Apocalypse, appliquée à la ruine de Jérusalem sous Titus", p. 452).

A first group of objections is derived from the historical situation:

(1) The alleged anti-Roman attitude of Rev is belied by the pro-Roman stance of all other political NT statements (Rm 13,1; 1Pt 2,13-14; 1Tm 2,1-4 etc.)⁽¹⁷⁾. In the case that Rev was an anti-Roman libel, no historical 1st century event could explain such a change of attitude towards Rome from the Christian side⁽¹⁸⁾.

(2) The anti-Roman interpretation is based on the alleged anti-Christian persecution of Domitian and his alleged promotion of the emperor cult, but the only persecution of Christians in the 1st century was that unleashed by Nero in the city of Rome alone⁽¹⁹⁾, while the number of temples dedicated to the imperial cult was no higher under Domitian than under both his predecessors and successors⁽²⁰⁾.

A second group of objections is deduced from the titles given to Babylon in Rev:

(3) Babylon is labelled as “harlot”, but only (Israel or) Jerusalem, who is the bride of Yhwh, can become a harlot, as attested in the OT⁽²¹⁾, not Rome⁽²²⁾.

(4) Babylon is “drunk with the blood of the saints etc.” according

⁽¹⁷⁾ Cf. R. DE WATER, “Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea (Rev. 13,1)”, *NTS* 46 (2000) 246: “Other NT writings do not support the idea of the Roman empire as the persecutor ‘beast’”.

⁽¹⁸⁾ SICKENBERGER, “Die Johannesapokalypse und Rom”, 275: “Es musste (...) ein großer Umschwung in der Stimmung gegen Rom eingetreten sein (...). Es gibt (...) keine ausreichende Erklärung eines solchen Abscheus vor Rom”.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cf. DE WATER, “Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea”, 250.

⁽²⁰⁾ Cf. L.L. THOMPSON, *The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire* (New York – Oxford 1990) 104-107: “There is no indication that Domitian modified the imperial cult by demanding greater divine honors than either his predecessors or successors” (p. 107); D. WARDEN, “Imperial Persecution and the Dating of 1 Peter and Revelation”, *JETS* 34 (1991) 207, 208: “There is no evidence that the emperor worship was promoted with any particular fervor during the time of Domitian”, “There is no indication that Domitian himself affected the practice of ruler worship in Asia to any significant degree”; DE WATER, “Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea”, 246: “There is no evidence that social pressure imposed by Domitian’s imperial cult was any greater than in the period preceding him”.

⁽²¹⁾ Five texts refer to Jerusalem or Israel using the image of the “harlot”: Hos 2,5; Is 1,21; Jer 2,20; Mic 1,7; Ez 16 and 23. Yet Is 23,15-17 and Nah 3,4 call the cities of Tyre and Niniveh “harlot”.

⁽²²⁾ MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*, 285: “If it is the covenant relationship with Yahweh which makes Israel his special people, his bride, how could a non-Israelite nation be called “harlot” except in a much less precise sense? It is the covenant which makes the bride, the breaking of it which makes the adulteress”.

to Rev 17,6, and Jerusalem, not Rome, persecuted the OT prophets and Jesus' disciples⁽²³⁾.

(5) The perfect symmetry between Rev 17-18 and Rev 21 suggests that Babylon (Rev 17-18) is the symmetrical opposite of the holy Jerusalem (Rev 21) and, as such, is the terrestrial and corrupt Jerusalem⁽²⁴⁾.

A third group of objections comes from the details of Rev 17:

(6) The head wounded by the sword (13,14) or the Beast that "was, but is not" (17,8) cannot be identified with the *Nero redivivus* and *redux*, because such legend is posterior to the emperor Trajan⁽²⁵⁾.

(7) The seven mountains (ἑπτὰ ὄρη) of Rev 17,9 cannot be interpreted as the seven hills of Rome, because Rome's hills are called λόφοι by Greek writers, not ὄρη, and Rome is always called ἑπτάλοφος, never ἑπτάορος⁽²⁶⁾.

(8) The seven kings of Rev 17,9-10 cannot be interpreted as seven of the Roman emperors, because the counting is unsuccessful, either beginning from Julius Caesar, or Augustus, or Caligula, or Nero etc., and even omitting one, or two, or all the three emperors of the year 69 A.D., Galba, Otho and Vitellius⁽²⁷⁾.

⁽²³⁾ Cf. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*, 286, 288 ("It was Jerusalem, not Rome, who slew the prophets", "Jerusalem was traditionally the murderer of the prophets; cf. Matt 23,29-39"); A.J. BEAGLEY, *The 'Sitz im Leben' of the Apocalypse with Particular Reference to the Role of Church's Enemies* (Berlin – New York 1987) 94: "[Rev 17,16 and 18,14] apply[] to Jerusalem more than to Rome... owe much to (...) Jesus' denunciation of scribes and Pharisees and of Jerusalem which murders the prophets (Matt 23,29-38)".

⁽²⁴⁾ MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*, 286.

⁽²⁵⁾ BEAGLEY, *The 'Sitz im Leben' of the Apocalypse*, 74: "The view that Nero would actually return from the dead is of later origin, from the period following the death of Trajan, when Nero would have been close to 80 years old and could no longer easily be believed to be still alive". It must be said, however, that a self-styled *Nero redux* appeared exactly in Asia Minor in 69 A.D., according to Tacitus, *Hist.* 2,1.

⁽²⁶⁾ E. LUPIERI, *L'Apocalisse di Giovanni* (Milano 1999) 271: "Il termine ὄρος non è mai usato, nella letteratura greca anteriore a Giovanni, per indicare i 'colli' di Roma, per i quali è di solito usato il termine λόφος, anche nel composto ἑπτάλοφος, tipico della propaganda di età imperiale per definire appunto la Roma dai sette colli. Negli autori latini, accanto a *colles*, troviamo anche *montes* e, nei poeti, *arces*, ma il fenomeno non sembra avere parallelo in greco".

⁽²⁷⁾ DE WATER, "Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea", 254: "In a relentless effort to identify it with the pagan empire, many have attempted to line up its seven heads and seven horns with various Roman emperors. No one, however, has come up with a convincing match".

Finally, the major argument against the anti-Roman interpretation is the one taken from Rev 11:

(9) Rev 11 speaks of “the Great City” (v. 8), exactly as Rev 17-18 does for Babylon. But the Great City in Rev 11 is without any doubt Jerusalem, since it is also called “the holy city” (v. 2), since its sanctuary (ὁ ναός) and “courtyard of the Gentiles” (ἡ αὐλή ἡ ἔξωθεν) are mentioned (vv. 1-2), and since in that Great City “their Lord was crucified”. As an inevitable consequence, Babylon/“the Great City” is the same as Jerusalem/“the Great City”⁽²⁸⁾.

b) Various configurations of the anti-Jerusalem hypothesis

Limiting the review of supporters of this interpretation to the last few decades, one may start with Josephine Massyngberde Ford (1975)⁽²⁹⁾.

⁽²⁸⁾ MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*, 180, 286: “The great city in v. 8 cannot be other than Jerusalem”, “The phrase ‘The great city’ first found in 11,8 appears to refer to Jerusalem, not Rome, and one would expect the same identity when the phrase recurs in Rev. 18,16”; BEAGLEY, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse*, 28, 93: “... no room for doubt that [in Rev 11,8] the author has in mind the city of Jerusalem”, “11,8 (...) must refer to Jerusalem”.

⁽²⁹⁾ MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation*, 286-289; 227-230. — To be mentioned the former contributions of Ph. Carrington (*The Meaning of Revelation* [London 1931]: not Rome, but Jerusalem had persecuted the prophets), W.R. Beeson (*The Revelation* [Little Rock 1956]: the Great Harlot is Jerusalem and with her the dissident Jews), N. Turner (*Revelation* [Peake’s Commentary on the Bible; London – New York 1962]: Rev is directed against Judaism which attempted to hinder the expansion of Christianity), F.E. Wallace (*The Book of Revelation* [Nashville 1966]: the Harlot may be the unfaithful Jerusalem, but not Rome which was not the bride of God), P.S. Minear (*I Saw a New Earth* [Washington 1969]: interpreting Babylon as Rome is “literalism and historicism of the worst sort”, and a “vast distortion and reduction of meaning”). — The most influential author of the past, however, was J. Stuart Russell, who devoted thirty pages (482-504; 563-569) to the question in his *The Parousia. The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999; originally published in London by T. Fisher Unwin, 1887). Josephine Massyngberde Ford herself drew from Russell at least three proofs: (i) Since “the Great City” is Jerusalem in Rev 11,8, it must be the same in Rev 18; (ii) Rome could not be an “adulteress” since she was never the wife of the Lord through any marriage covenant; (iii) Jerusalem was the murderer of the prophets and saints, exactly according to Jesus’ words. — Later contributions are those of C. van der Waal (*Neotestamentica* [1978] 111-132); D.C. Chilton (*Days of Vengeance* [Fort Worth 1987] — quoted by G.K. Beale, 44-45); D. Holwerda (*EstBib* [1995] 387-396), and Deborah Furlan Taylor (Ph. D. delivered at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 2005).

She holds that Babylon is Jerusalem since it became a prostitute in its political alliance with the Romans, represented as “the many waters” (the *Kittim* of Qumran literature) upon which the Harlot is sitting (17,1.15). The Beast from the sea is Vespasian, who “was”, when was standing high in Nero’s favour; “is not”, when he loses his favour; and “is to come”, when he will be sent by him to quell the Jewish revolt in A.D. 67. The Beast from the land, instead, is Flavius Josephus, since he greeted Vespasian “prophetically” as the future emperor (cf. the epithet, “pseudo-prophet” given to the second Beast in Rev), and because he accepted the mark and the name of the “Beast” when he accepted the *nomen* “Flavius” from the imperial family.

The anti-Jerusalem interpretation was supported subsequently by E. Corsini in 1980 and by his disciple E. Lupieri in 1999. According to Corsini, the Beast from the Sea is Rome and/or the Roman empire, which is a symbol of every corrupt centre of political power. The Beast from the land is Jerusalem and/or the Jewish world, which had become a “Synagogue of Satan”. The two horns of the Beast are the Law and the Prophets, interpreted in a material and mundane sense by the corrupted Jerusalem. The two powers, the political one of Rome and the religious of Jerusalem, are by now allied, and such a “monstrous alliance”, according to Corsini, is paradigmatically represented in the allegory of the Harlot sitting on the Beast (Rev 17,3). Finally, the rebellion of the Beast against Babylon and the destruction of it (Rev 17,16) are the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in the years 66-70 A.D., when the two allies separate and then clash in a mortal duel.

In 1983 A.J. Beagley dedicated his doctoral dissertation, published in 1987, to the Church’s enemies in Rev⁽³⁰⁾. Although Rev possibly alludes also to the Roman persecution, according to Beagley, Rev 2,9 and 3,9 say clearly that the persecution that worried John of Patmos was the Jewish persecution. Accordingly, the Great Harlot sitting on the Beast is an image of the alliance between Jerusalem and Rome, where Rome is the secular executive arm for the attacks of Judaism against Jesus’ disciples.

A further supporter of the anti-Jewish interpretation is R. de Water (2000)⁽³¹⁾. In his interpretation, the Beast from the sea and the seven

⁽³⁰⁾ BEAGLEY, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse*, 31, 110, 112.

⁽³¹⁾ DE WATER, “Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea”, 245-261.

kings are the Herodian dynasty, since the land spoken of in Rev is the “land of Israel” of the OT. The Beast from the land is the Jewish Diaspora, spread, in fact, over “the whole earth”, with its politically interpreted messianism. The Great Harlot, sitting on the Beast, is the Jewish high priesthood or Jerusalem itself, allied with the Herodian political power. According to de Water, Jerusalem shall be destroyed not by the Romans but by the Jews themselves, as Josephus says in his aversion for the Jewish pro-war party. Finally, de Water dates Rev to the years 44-48 A.D., i.e. the years when the first five Herodian kings were already “fallen” and the Romans administered directly Judaea through their procurators, before the seventh Herodian king, i.e. Agrippa II, son of Agrippa I, succeeded them in 48 A.D. The sixth Herod (the one “who is now”) is Herod of Chalcis, brother of Agrippa I, and king of the Chalcis from 41 A.D. to 48⁽³²⁾.

3. *The two interpretations discussed*

a) Evaluation of the anti-Jerusalem hypothesis

Six major difficulties can be raised against the anti-Jewish interpretation of Babylon.

(1) Persecution⁽³³⁾. — The Jewish persecution of Rev 2,9 is out of the question (not the same can be said of 3,9). Yet, one cannot attribute to the Jews the forced sojourn of John on Patmos (1,9)⁽³⁴⁾, the prison foreseen for some members of the Church of Smyrna (2,10), the death

⁽³²⁾ R. de Water takes his interpretation from C.F.J. Züllig (*Die Offenbarung Johannis erklärt* [Stuttgart 1834]), of whom news is given by BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 104. The first five Herodian kings would be Herod the Great, Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Philip the Tetrarch, and Herod Agrippa I. — About Herod, king of Chalcis by the will of the emperor Claudius, cf. Flavius Josephus, *Ant. iud.* 20, 10-15.

⁽³³⁾ It should be remembered that “persecution” is a subjective concept: Repressive measures taken according to the law in force are felt as persecution under particular circumstances by those who are affected; yet authorities do not feel themselves persecutors when applying laws and sanctions. The same has to be said of people responsible for generalized hostility, such as that experienced by minorities; cf. G. BIGUZZI, “John on Patmos and the ‘Persecution’ in the Apocalypse”, *EstBib* 56 (1998) 201-202, footnote 1.

⁽³⁴⁾ Cf. D. SAFFREY, “Relire l’Apocalypse à Patmos”, *RB* 82 (1975) 385-417 (the measure against John was taken by municipal authorities, probably those of Miletus), and BIGUZZI, “John on Patmos”, 209-211 (the juridical position of John was probably that of a *πλάνης-vagus*, i.e. of one “without a country and law”, and not of a *peregrinus*, or, even less, of a Roman citizen, *πολίτης-cives*).

penalty by sword (13,10b) or by axe (πεπελεκισμένοι, 20,4), since the Jewish death penalty was by stoning⁽³⁵⁾.

(2) Prostitution. — It is of course true that Israel in the OT is represented as Adonay's bride and is charged with harlotry, but prostitution (πορνεία) is not to be hurriedly identified with adultery (μοιχεία), because an unmarried woman can also be a harlot. Furthermore, Tyre (Is 23,17) and Nineveh (Nah 3,4) are accused of harlotry as well. Finally, whereas in the OT Jerusalem is accused of letting itself be corrupted by the idolatry of the nations, in Rev, on the contrary, Babylon is corrupting them with its own idolatry⁽³⁶⁾.

(3) Physical and political geography supposed in Rev 13 and 18. - The Beast of Rev 13, which rises from the sea (v. 1), has authority over, or is adored by "all the earth" (v. 3), "every tribe and people and tongue and nation" (v. 7), and "all the inhabitants of the earth" (v. 8)⁽³⁷⁾. The Babylon of Rev 17-18 has corrupted, or has enriched, or is mourned by "all the nations" (18,3), "the kings and merchants of the earth" (18,3b.9.11.17), and "all those who had ships at sea" (18,19). Such a sea, that bathes many regions with their many peoples of different languages and cultures, is recognisable as the Mediterranean sea, whereas the multi-ethnic reign and its capital city, are recognisable as the Roman empire and Rome, much more conveniently than as Jerusalem⁽³⁸⁾.

⁽³⁵⁾ The root πελεκ- is found around 1,050 times in the Greek literature from the VIII century B.C. to the XV century A.D. Among the Jewish writers, Philo of Alexandria makes use of it only once (*Prov.* 2,29,6), and Flavius Josephus eighteen times, but mentioning the axe only three times in "Jewish" episodes: two times to say that the golden eagle which Herod placed on the temple was demolished with the strokes of an axe (*Ant. iud.* 17,155; *Bell. iud.* 1, 651) and another to say that with an axe a chain was broken. Elsewhere, for Josephus, the axe is the weapon of the bodyguards of the king Artaxerxes in *Ant. iud.* 11,205, and, in all the remaining occurrences, is always a weapon used by the Romans to put people to death.

⁽³⁶⁾ It is sufficient, for example, to say that one of the texts quoted for the "harlotry" of Jerusalem by Beagley (p. 67) and Lupieri (p. 249) is Ez 23,27 where it is spoken of as a harlotry "which [comes] from the land of Egypt - *m'ry misrym*".

⁽³⁷⁾ Cf. the chapter on the political geography presupposed in Rev 13 and Rev 18, in G. BIGUZZI, *L'Apocalisse e i suoi enigmi* (Brescia 2004) 47-62.

⁽³⁸⁾ Cf. W. HADORN, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Leipzig 1928), 139 ("['sea' in Rev 13,1, being contrasted with 'land'] wohl geographisch zu verstehen ist und das im Westen befindliche Meer bedeutet"); D. GEORGI, "Die Visionen vom himmlischen Jerusalem in Apok 21 und 22", *Kirche. Fs G. Bornkamm* (eds. D. LÜHRMANN ET ALII) (Tübingen 1980) 353 ("seebezogen", "Welthandelshafen"); H. CONZELMANN – A. LINDEMANN, *Arbeitsbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen 1995¹¹) 393.

(4) The two different idolatries. — Rev 9,20-21 speaks of the idolatry of the (many) idols and demons, and Rev 13ff speaks of the particular idolatry of the Beast (with only one cultic image, the εἰκόων of the Beast; 13,14 and *passim*). The first idolatry is struck by the plagues of the trumpets and the second by the plagues of the bowls⁽³⁹⁾. While two such distinguishable idolatries would hardly correspond to any historic or even symbolic datum in the Jerusalem of the 1st century A.D., they are easily identified with the traditional idolatry of the Roman-Hellenistic pantheon, which was present in every town and village, and the emperor cult, whose native land and actual centre was exactly in Asia Minor.

(5) The time of composition. — The major difficulty against the anti-Jewish interpretation comes from the dating of Rev. According to Corsini, Beagley (hesitatingly) and Lupieri, Rev was written after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.)⁽⁴⁰⁾ and, according to Josephine Massyngberde Ford, after 66 A.D. Yet, both during the revolt and after its destruction, Jerusalem was furiously fighting or enraged against Rome. Consequently it is inconceivable that its religious power was in “monstrous alliance” with the Roman political establishment.

(6) «The Great City ... where their Lord was crucified». — Even the major argument of the anti-Jewish interpretation is not invincible. In fact the Great City spoken of in Rev 11 is divided into two fronts. On one side there is the sanctuary, the worshipers in it, and the two Witnesses of the Crucified Lord, who all without any doubt are to be interpreted as the Christians⁽⁴¹⁾. On the other, there are the “pagans”,

⁽³⁹⁾ On the two idolatries of which Revelation speaks cf. G. BIGUZZI, *I settenari nella struttura dell'Apocalisse*. Analisi, storia della ricerca, interpretazione (Bologna 1996) 172-176; ID., “Ephesus, its Artemision, its Temple to the Flavian Emperors, and Idolatry in Revelation”, *NovT* 40 (1998) 276-290; ID., *L'Apocalisse e i suoi enigmi*, 63-78.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Cf. E. CORSINI, *The Apocalypse*. The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ (Dublin, Ireland 1983) 329: “If the destruction to which the passage alludes is to be understood in a literal and material sense, it can only refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A. D. Only then, in fact, after the slaying of Jesus Christ, did Jerusalem become, in the eyes of John and the early Christians, the definitive ‘prostitute’, the opposite of the ‘holy city’ which it had once been”; BEAGLEY, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse*, 112; LUPIERI, *L'Apocalisse di Giovanni*, LXVI-LXVII.

⁽⁴¹⁾ BEAGLEY, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse*, 61, writes: “These [i.e. the ναός, the altar and the adorers] are the Christians” (cf. the numerous authors quoted in footnote 135), but cf. already Cassiodorus: “... per quam [arundinem Johannes] visus est metiri loca quae Christianus populus obtinebat; alia vero relinquere quae infideles poterunt [sic] obtinere” (PL 70, 1411.A).

who will trample over the holy city (v. 2) and rejoice for the murder of the two Witnesses (vv. 9-10). As a consequence Jerusalem in Rev 11 is a symbol partly of the Christians⁽⁴²⁾ and partly of the nations, but never and nowhere of the Jews. — Secondly, the city trampled on by the pagans, and scenario of the story of the two Witnesses, oscillates from urban (vv. 1-2) to universal dimension (“men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations gaze etc.”, v. 9; “all the inhabitants of the earth rejoice etc.”, v. 10*bis*), and back again to urban (v. 13). All this entails that the Jerusalem of Rev 11 is a symbol of the whole world, where the messianic and anti-messianic forces come to collide⁽⁴³⁾.

b) Evaluation of the anti-Roman hypothesis

If so many difficulties oppose the anti-Jewish interpretation, it remains, then, to prove, or disprove, the soundness of the traditional, anti-Roman interpretation.

Some proofs have already been presented along with the criticism of the anti-Jewish interpretation.

(1) The physical and political geography supposed by Rev fits Rome and its empire more than Jerusalem.

⁽⁴²⁾ Cf. H. RONGY, “Le seconde septénaire de l’Apocalypse ou les sept trompettes”, *Revue Eccl. de Liège* 23 (1931-1932) 365, who writes: “Le temple, c’est l’église. (...) Puisque le temple de Jérusalem a été choisi comme premier symbole, la scène sera censée se passer à Jérusalem”. — Since the temple was never in Christian hands and Rev 11,1-2 refers to Christians, really Jerusalem in Rev 11 is purely a symbol, and not the historical Jewish Jerusalem which one may have assumed.

⁽⁴³⁾ The Jerusalem of Rev 11 is interpreted as the whole world by commentators like M. Kiddle, M. Bachmann, G.K. Beale, E.-B. Allo and J. Roloff. M. KIDDLE, *The Revelation of St. John* (London 1940, republished 1947) 184-185: “The great City is neither Jerusalem nor Rome — and yet, in a sense it is both Jerusalem and Rome. It is the city of this world order, the Earthly City, which included all peoples and tribes and tongues and nations. It is (...) the city utterly alien to the will of God”; M. BACHMANN, “Himmlisch: der ‘Tempel Gottes’ von Apk 11,1”, *NTS* 40 (1994) 477: “Die ‘heilige Stadt’ (v. 2) bzw. ‘die große Stadt’, (...) wo auch ihr Herr gekreuzigt wurde (v. 8), irgendwie auf die ganze Erde (s. bes. v. 6) und ihre Bevölkerung (s. bes. vv. 9-10) bezogen ist”; BEALE, *The Book of Revelation*, 591: “... the ungodly world”. But cf. especially ALLO, *L’Apocalypse*, 135: “Jérusalem représente le monde entier. (...) Toute la terre est en quelque sorte la Cité de Dieu, corrompue et profanée par les ennemis du ciel, le paganisme persécuteur”; and J. ROLOFF, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Zürich 1984) 117: “Hier wird also gleichsam [as for “Sodoma” and “Egypt”] Jerusalem über das rein Geographische hinaus ausgeweitet zum Bild der gottfeindlichen Welt, ja letztlich verschwimmt das Bild Jerusalems hier geradezu mit dem Bild Roms! Dieser Ineinanderfließen der Konturen setzt voraus etc.”.

(2) The two idolatries fit Rome and its empire more than Jerusalem.

(3) The Babylon which corrupts the nations (Rev) fits Rome more than the Jerusalem, which, instead, was corrupted by them (OT).

(4) As far as the dating of Rev is concerned, the anti-Roman interpretation is altogether reconcilable with the post-70 dating, while the anti-Jewish one meets insurmountable difficulties with it⁽⁴⁴⁾.

(5) Imprisonment at Smyrna, forced sojourn on Patmos, and death penalty by sword or axe lead to the Imperial penal law, and exclude the Jewish one.

The objections against the anti-Roman interpretation listed above can be answered as follows⁽⁴⁵⁾:

(6) Even if the expression ἑπτὰ ὄρη is not found in Greek literature, the singular ὄρος is repeatedly employed for one or other of the seven Roman hills by Strabo (64 B.C. - 21 A.D.), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (30 A.D. circa), and Dio Cassius (II-III century A.D.), while Plutarch employs the term σεπτομόντιον, tracing on the Latin *septimontium*, the feast of the seven Roman “mountains” (not “hills”)⁽⁴⁶⁾.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ As a confirmation cf. G.R. BEASLEY-MURRAY, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI – London 1987) 249, who writes: “After the terrible Jewish war, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews would have looked for just such a judgment of God on Rome as this chapter [i.e. Rev 17] delineates”.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Among the many authors who interpret the seven hills of Rev 17,9 as the seven hills of Rome, one can mention B. REICKE, “Die jüdische Apokalypitik und die johanneische Tiervision”, *RechSR* 60 (1972) 174 (“unmissverständlich”); S. GAROFALO, “‘Sette monti, su cui siede la donna’ (Apoc. 17,9)”, *Kirche und Bibel*. Festgabe E. Schick (Paderborn – München – Wien – Zürich 1979) 97-104; K. GENTRY, *Before Jerusalem fell. Dating the Book of Revelation* (San Francisco – London – Bethesda 1997) 149, 150, 151 (“Rome is the one city in history that has been distinguished for and universally recognizable by its seven hills”, “Everywhere throughout the empire Rome was known as the city on seven hills. When John wrote Revelation there was no other city conceivable that was so universally noted for its seven hills”, “... there was no other city conceivable that was so universally noted for its seven hills”).

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Listing the seven hills in his historical-topographical treatise of Rome, Strabo of Amaseia Pontica (64 B.C. – 21 A.D.) employs ὄρος for the Hills Caelian and Aventine (5,3,7). Likewise the rhetorician and historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, active in Rome in the thirties of 1st century B.C., employs ὄρος for the Palatinus and the Caelius (*Antiq. Rom.* 2,50,1), and Dio Cassius (II and III century A.D.) uses ὄρος in *Hist. Rom.* 53,27,5 and 62,182,2 for the Palatinus, and in 30,15; 44,25,3 for the Capitolinus. The term σεπτομόντιον is found in Plutarch, *Aetia Romana et Graeca* 280.C.10, and D.2. – On the contrary, the adjective *septicollis* is found in Latin literature only in the work of the late

(7) The counting of the seven Roman emperors of Rev 17,9-10 is probably a false problem. First of all, John speaks of seven kings not because he feels bound to historical exactness, but for the sake of the number seven, in the same way he speaks of seven Asian Churches in Rev 1-3, even though he certainly knew other Churches in Asia. If he knows Laodicea, certainly he knew also Colossae and Hierapolis, because, for example, Laodicea and Colossae exchanged apostolic letters, as attested in Col 4,16. Second, John is interested in only one of the seven kings, the one who is also the eighth. The counting of the seven kings, therefore, is of no use, because it is outside of John's perspective and interest.

(8) The *Nero Redivivus* legend is the better explanation available for: (i) the mortal wound of the Beast, (ii) the change of stance by the Beast, at first at the side of, and then against Babylon, (iii) the otherwise insoluble enigma of the Beast who "was, is not, and is to come".

(9) The destruction of Jerusalem is better attributed to such *Nero redivivus*, rather than to the "kings of the land of Israel" (cf. de Water). Furthermore, after A.D. 70, Jewish apocalypses (4Ezra and 2Baruch), Christian writings (1Pt), and some interpolations in the *Oracula Sibyllina* call Rome with the epithet of "Babylon" because it had destroyed Jerusalem and burnt its temple, as the ancient Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar did in 586 B.C.

(10) As far as the imperial cult is concerned, Domitian built a temple dedicated to his father Vespasian, to his brother Titus and to himself in Ephesus in circa 90 A.D.⁽⁴⁷⁾, with the economical and political support of the whole Asian province, placing it between the political and the commercial *agora*; and built an enormous sports ground in the lively harbour area, for the games to be periodically celebrated in honour of the emperor⁽⁴⁸⁾. It is possible and also probable

Christian poet (348-405 A.D.) Prudentius (*Peristefanon, Romanus*, 412-413: "... cum puer Mavortius / Fundaret arcem septicollem Romulus" (PL 60, 479.A).

⁽⁴⁷⁾ The date is deducible from the names of the proconsuls L. Mestrius Florus, M. Fulvius Gillo, L. Luscius Ocrea who were in charge in Asia around the years 88 and 91 A.D. Such names appear in thirteen surviving inscriptions erected in Ephesus by the cities of Asia Minor for the occasion of the inauguration of the temple. Cf. S.J. FRIESEN, *Twice Neokoros*. Ephesos, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family (RGRW 116; Leiden – New York – Köln 1993) 159.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ According to E. AKURGAL, *Ancient Civilizations and Ruins of Turkey* (Istanbul 1985) 157, the sports ground of Ephesus was "the most imposing project during the reign of Domitian". The gymnasium on its own measured 240 x 200 metres, while the length of the whole complex was 360 metres.

that two such interventions in two such strategic spots of the Ephesian urban structure provoked the writing of Rev. The composition of the Johannine Apocalypse can be historically explained, even if Domitian did not increase significantly the emperor cult in Asia or elsewhere. Experiencing the imperial “idolatry” in Ephesus with his own eyes and ears, and without being intimidated by the most powerful man on earth, John dared to define him as “the Beast”, and directed against him one of the most aggressive books ever written⁽⁴⁹⁾.

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In conclusion, the hypothesis that Rev’s Babylon is Jerusalem is not free from difficulties, while, on the contrary, the traditional interpretation of Babylon as Rome explains, as no other is able to do, both the details of Rev and its narrative plot. The third Evangelist, then, was right when he wrote: “No one after drinking old wine desires new. For he says, ‘The old is good’ ” (Lk 5,39). The old wine, in our case, is that one of Victorinus of Poetovio.

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SUMMARY

The Babylon of Revelation 17–18 has been interpreted as imperial Rome since antiquity, but some twenty interpreters have rejected such a solution in recent centuries and have held that Babylon instead should be Jerusalem. This is not a minor question since it changes the interpretation of the whole book, because Rev would become all of a sudden an anti-Jewish libel, after having been an anti-Roman one. This article discusses the pros and cons of the two interpretations and concludes that the traditional one matches both the details and the plot of the book much more than any other.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ On the Ephesian temple and sports complex cf. especially FRIESEN, *Twice Neokoros*; ID., “Ephesus, Key to a Vision in Revelation”, *BAR* 19 (3, 1993) 24-37; ID., “The Cult of the Roman Emperors in Ephesus. Temple Wardens, City Titles, and the Interpretation of the Revelation of John”, *Ephesos, Metropolis of Asia. An Interdisciplinary Approach to its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture* (ed. H. KOESTER) (Harvard Theological Studies 41; Valley Forge, PA 1995) 229-236; and BIGUZZI, “Ephesus, its Artemision, its Temple to the Flavian Emperors, and Idolatry in Revelation”, 283-284.