

Value Creation Versus Self Indulgence

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Revelation

The most important insights into the big picture of work come in the concluding chapters of Revelation, where the worldly city Babylon is set against God's city, the New Jerusalem. The introductions of the cities in Revelation 17 verse 1 and Revelation 21 verse 9 are set in clear parallel:

“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters.” And “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.”

Babylon represents the dead-end street of humanity's attempt to build their culture apart from God. It has every appearance of being the paradise for which humanity has always longed. It is no coincidence that its gold and jewels recall those of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 17 verse 4). Like the New Jerusalem, Babylon exercises authority over the nations and receives their wealth.

But it is in fact a counterfeit, doomed to be exposed by God in the final judgment. Especially instructive is the cargo list, modeled on Ezekiel 27 verses 12–22 and the fall of Tyre, but updated to include the luxury goods popular in Rome in John's day. “And the merchants of the earth weep and

mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore—cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.” (Revelation 18 verses 11–13)

The final note about *human lives* likely relates to the slave trade, and it is the final nail in the coffin of Babylon’s exploitative empire: she will stop at nothing, not even trafficking in human flesh, in pursuit of sensual self-indulgence.

The lesson that God would judge a city for its economic practices is a sobering thought. Economics is clearly a moral issue in the book of Revelation. The fact that much of the condemnation appears to stem from its self-indulgence should hit with particular force at modern consumer culture, where the constant search for more and better can lead to a myopic focus on satisfying real or imagined material needs. But the most worrisome thing of all is that Babylon looks so close to the New Jerusalem. God did create a good world; we are meant to enjoy life; God does delight in the beautiful things of earth.

If the world system were a self-evident cesspool, the temptation for Christians to fall to its allures would be small. It is precisely the genuine benefits of technological advance and extensive trading networks that constitute the danger. Babylon promises all the glories of Eden, without the intrusive presence of God. It slowly but inexorably twists the good gifts of God—economic interchange, agricultural abundance, diligent craftsmanship—into the service of false gods.

At this point, one might feel that any participation in the world economy—or even any local economy—must be so fraught with idolatry that the only solution is to withdraw completely and live alone in the wilderness. But Revelation offers an alternative vision of life together: the New Jerusalem. This is the city that John sees “coming down out of heaven” (Revelation 21 verse 2), and as such it is the consummate representation of God’s grace. It stands in stark contrast to the self-made monstrosity that is Babylon.

At one level, the New Jerusalem is a return to Eden—there is a river flowing through its midst, with the tree of life standing by with fruit-laden branches and leaves for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22 verse 2). Humanity can once again walk in peace with God. Indeed, it outstrips

Eden, since the glory of the Lord itself provides the illumination for the city (Revelation 22 verse 5).

But the New Jerusalem is not simply a new and better garden: it is a garden-city, the urban ideal that forms the counterweight to Babylon. There is, for instance, still meaningful human participation in the life of the celestial city come to earth. Central to this, of course, is the worship people bring to God and the Lamb. But there seems to be more than this in the note that “people will bring it the glory and honor of the nations” (Revelation 21 verses 24–26).

In the ancient world, it was desirable to build a temple with the best materials from all over the world; this is what Solomon did for the temple in Jerusalem. More than that, people would bring gifts from far and wide to adorn the temple after its completion. It is probable that the image of kings bringing their gifts to the New Jerusalem flows from this background. It does not seem too much of a stretch to imagine that these gifts are the products of human culture, devoted now to the glory of God.

We must also consider the implications of Old Testament visions of the future, which see it in meaningful continuity with present-day life. Isaiah 65, for example, is a critical background text for Revelation 21-22 and provides its foundational teaching, “I am about to create new heavens and

a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isaiah 65 verse 17). Yet this same chapter says of the future blessings of God’s people, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands” (Isaiah 65 verses 21–22). We can certainly argue that Isaiah is pointing, in ways suitable to his times, to something much greater than mere agricultural abundance—but he can hardly be pointing to less. Yet less is precisely what is typically offered in a vision of heaven consisting of nothing more than clouds, harps, and white robes.

Parsing out precisely how this works is not easy. Will there still be farming in the new heavens and new earth? Will a godly computer programmer’s 1.0 software be consigned to the flames while version 2.0 enters the heavenly city? The Bible does not answer these types of questions directly, but we may once more look at the big picture. God created humans to exercise dominion over the earth, which entails creativity. Would it be sensible for such a God to then turn and regard work done in faith as

useless and cast it aside? On balance, it seems far more likely that he would raise it up and perfect all that is done for his glory.

Likewise, the prophetic vision of the future envisions people engaged in meaningful activity in the creation. Since God does not go into detail as to how this transfer of products from the now-world to the new-world works, or what exact things we might be doing in the future state, we can only guess at what this means concretely. But it does mean that we can confidently follow the advice in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 58: “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”