

Babylon, the Rudiments of the World, and the Glory of Christ: A Theological-Historical and Psychological Interpretation of Revelation 17 and Colossians 2

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Abstract

This article offers an interdisciplinary theological-historical and psychological interpretation of Revelation 17 and Colossians 2. It argues that Revelation's "Babylon the Great" has a strong first-century Roman referent while also functioning typologically as a recurring religious-political configuration in which power, prestige, wealth, sacred legitimacy, and imperial authority shape human allegiance. Rather than claiming an unbroken migration of a Babylonian priesthood from ancient Babylon to Rome, the study explains cultural continuity through diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation across Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized Roman contexts. Psychologically, Babylon is interpreted as a symbolic representation of how systems of domination may form

identity, belonging, moral perception, conformity, trust, fear, desire, and collective memory. The study uses contemporary psychological constructs as analytic resources, not as claims about the original intention of the biblical writers or diagnoses of ancient or modern institutions. Colossians 2 is read as a complementary theological text in which the contested term *stoicheia tou kosmou* refers to elemental principles and/or cosmic powers associated with the present world order rather than merely “Greek philosophy.” Against Babylonian formation and subjection to the *stoicheia*, Christ is presented as the embodied fullness of God and the source of Spirit-mediated transformation. The glory of Christ is therefore understood as revealed, shared, ethical, participatory, and transformative, not as a transfer of divine essence or physical energy. The article concludes that the Christian alternative to Babylon is not domination but Christic counter-formation: moral agency, humility, service, truth, accountable community, freedom from coercive domination, and transformed identity in Christ.

Keywords: Babylon, Revelation 17, psychological formation, social identity, moral injury, Christic counter-formation

Introduction/Background to the Study

Few images in the Apocalypse have generated as much theological, historical, and social controversy as the woman of Revelation 17. John describes her as seated upon many waters, clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and precious stones, holding a golden cup, associated with kings, intoxicated with the blood of saints, and finally destroyed by the very powers with which she had been allied. The name on her forehead is “MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev. 17:5, KJV). The angel further explains: “The waters which thou sawest, where the whore

sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (Rev. 17:15, KJV).

This imagery is not merely decorative. It constructs a symbolic world in which religion, political sovereignty, wealth, violence, collective identity, and cultural desire converge. Modern interpretation has commonly recognized Rome as the strongest first-century referent of Babylon in Revelation. Bauckham (1993) argues that Babylon is Rome, yet also more than Rome insofar as Rome embodies a wider theological pattern of imperial corruption. Koester (2014) likewise treats the image as a symbolic critique of imperial power and its seductive cultural order. Oakes (2020) reads Revelation 17:1–19:10 as a prophetic vision of Rome’s destruction. This article accepts the Roman referent as historically central, while asking why John names Rome “Babylon.”

The answer is theological, historical, and psychological. Theologically, Babylon is a name drawn from Israel’s memory of empire, exile, idolatry, violence, and covenantal dislocation. Historically, Babylon functions as a typological name by which one empire is interpreted through another. Psychologically, the symbol can be interpreted as a representation of how systems of domination form persons and communities: how they shape identity, belonging, fear, trust, moral perception, conformity, collective memory, and agency. This psychological interpretation is not presented as a claim that John wrote modern psychology, nor as a diagnosis of Rome, Babylon, the papacy, ancient populations, contemporary churches, or individual readers. Rather, contemporary psychological theory provides a conceptual lens for reflecting on the human processes represented by the biblical symbol.

The present study therefore develops a sustained psychological undertone within the theological-historical argument. Revelation’s Babylon is read not only as a geopolitical and

religious image but also as a symbolic psychology of power and human formation. Babylonian formation, as interpreted here, involves identity capture, dependence on coercive or prestige-based systems, normalization of domination, externalized status, and the moral confusion that may arise when sacred language legitimates oppressive power. Christic formation, by contrast, involves moral agency, humility, service, compassion, truth, accountable community, and freedom from coercive domination through reoriented allegiance to God in Christ. The term “autonomy” is used in this qualified sense: not individualistic self-rule detached from community, but freedom from coercive domination and renewed capacity for faithful moral agency under God.

The article also brings Revelation 17 into conceptual conversation with Colossians 2. Paul warns the Colossians: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8, KJV). The phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou*, often translated “rudiments” or “elemental principles of the world,” is interpretively contested. It may refer to elementary principles, cosmic elements, spiritual powers, or the ordering structures of the present age. It should not be reduced simply to “Greek philosophy.” In Colossians, the *stoicheia* are connected with captivity, human tradition, worldly regulations, and subjection. Paul’s answer is Christ: “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9, KJV).

Revelation and Colossians are not being equated lexically. Revelation does not call Babylon the *stoicheia*, and Colossians does not mention the woman of Revelation 17. The relationship proposed here is conceptual and theological. Both texts ask, in different symbolic registers: What forms human beings when Christ is displaced? What powers, traditions, authorities, and

systems claim allegiance? How is identity shaped—by domination, prestige, fear, and human tradition, or by the revealed glory of Christ through the Spirit?

Statement of the Problem

The original theological-historical discussion of Babylon, the *stoicheia*, and Christ's glory is significant, but it requires a clearer psychological undertone to be appropriate for a psychological journal. A purely historical or doctrinal argument risks treating Babylon as an external institution to be identified rather than as a symbolic representation of formation, belonging, moral perception, trust, conformity, and agency. Such an approach may also encourage polemical readings in which particular contemporary religious bodies are simplistically equated with Babylon, without adequate historical caution or psychological responsibility.

Several related problems therefore require attention. First, popular “Babylon-to-Rome” arguments often claim an intact Babylonian priesthood migrated from Babylon to Pergamum and then to Rome. The available historical evidence does not justify that level of institutional certainty. A more responsible historical account should speak of diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation.

Second, discussions of Revelation 17 frequently focus on identifying Babylon while neglecting the psychological dynamics implied by the symbol. Revelation's imagery concerns peoples, nations, kings, wealth, violence, desire, fear, and allegiance. These are not only historical and theological themes; they also invite reflection on social identity, collective memory, authoritarian conformity, moral disengagement, moral injury, and institutional betrayal.

Third, discussions of Colossians 2 sometimes reduce *stoicheia* to “Greek philosophy,” thereby narrowing Paul’s concern. The term is better treated as contested and broad, referring to elemental principles and/or cosmic powers associated with the present world order to which people may become subject.

Fourth, theological discussions of divine glory may become metaphysically imprecise if they describe glory as though it were a transferable divine substance or physical energy. In the New Testament texts considered here, Christ’s glory is revealed, shared, Spirit-mediated, ethical, and transformative. It forms believers in Christlike character rather than transferring divine essence to them.

Finally, the problem is not religious authority as such. Religious identity can support belonging, meaning, moral orientation, and psychological well-being (Greenfield & Marks, 2007). However, religious or political systems may become coercive when they suppress moral agency, punish dissent, sanctify hierarchy, betray moral trust, or normalize domination. The task of this study is therefore to read Babylon responsibly as a theological-cultural symbol that also invites psychological reflection on power and formation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to reconstruct the theological-historical argument about Revelation 17 and Colossians 2 through a sustained psychological lens. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Clarify the historical claim that Revelation’s Babylon has a first-century Roman referent while functioning typologically as a recurring religious-political configuration.

2. Replace unsupported claims of an intact Babylonian priestly migration with historically defensible categories of cultural diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation.
3. Interpret Babylon as a symbolic psychology of power and human formation, especially in relation to identity, belonging, conformity, collective memory, moral perception, trust, desire, fear, and agency.
4. Relate Revelation 17 to contemporary psychological constructs such as social identity, collective trauma and memory, authoritarian conformity, moral injury, institutional betrayal, moral disengagement, meaning-making, and identity transformation.
5. Interpret Colossians 2 as a theological account of subjection to the *stoicheia* and liberation through Christ, without reducing *stoicheia* to Greek philosophy alone.
6. Develop a psychologically legible contrast between Babylonian formation and Christic counter-formation.
7. Frame Christ's glory as revealed, shared, Spirit-mediated, ethical, and transformative participation rather than transfer of divine essence or physical energy.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This article uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. It distinguishes among three levels of claim: theological, historical, and psychological.

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faith: that Babylon represents an order opposed to God, that Christ embodies divine fullness, and that believers are transformed by the Spirit into Christ's image. A historical claim concerns what can be responsibly argued about Babylonian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized Roman cultural continuities. A psychological interpretation uses contemporary constructs to reflect on the human processes represented by the biblical symbols. These constructs are not treated as the original intention of the ancient authors, nor are they used to diagnose any person, institution, church, or society.

Symbolic Meaning and Collective Memory

Revelation's use of "Babylon" is an act of symbolic memory. Babylon is not only a historical city; in biblical imagination it evokes exile, arrogance, idolatry, displacement, and imperial domination. Hirschberger (2018) argues that collective trauma is not merely an event but a social construction of meaning through which communities remember, negotiate identity, and interpret existential threat. This does not mean Revelation clinically describes trauma in the modern sense. Rather, Hirschberger's framework helps explain how a community under pressure may use a symbolic past to interpret present domination.

In this sense, Babylon functions as a "usable past." John's naming of Rome as Babylon interprets the present through remembered imperial violence. The psychological significance lies in collective meaning-making: communities construct narratives that help them understand suffering, maintain identity, and imagine hope. Revelation's Babylon can therefore be read as a symbolic container for communal memory, moral outrage, and eschatological hope.

Social Identity, Belonging, and Boundary-Making

Social identity theory proposes that people derive part of their self-understanding from group membership and that group boundaries influence perception, loyalty, and intergroup evaluation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Religious identity can be psychologically beneficial. Greenfield and Marks (2007), using data from 3,032 adults, found that religious social identity helped explain associations between formal religious participation and subjective psychological well-being. This finding should not be generalized to all religious settings, but it supports the point that religious belonging may provide meaning, support, and identity coherence.

Revelation's language of "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues" (Rev. 17:15, KJV) concerns collective life. Babylon sits upon humanity in its social and civilizational form. Psychologically, the symbol invites reflection on how large systems organize belonging and allegiance. Religious identity can foster resilience and prosocial community; however, identity processes can also become coercive when belonging depends on unquestioning loyalty, exclusion of dissenters, or fusion of sacred identity with political power. Ysseldyk et al. (2010) similarly describe religion as a distinctive social identity anchored in sacred beliefs and symbols: it may support well-being through belonging and worldview, but threatened religious identities can also intensify intergroup conflict, prejudice, and psychological strain.

Authoritarianism, Conformity, and Moral Agency

Osborne et al. (2023) describe authoritarianism as involving conformity to group norms at the expense of autonomy, deference to in-group authorities, and punitive attitudes toward norm violators, often intensified by threat and insecurity. This framework should not be used to label Rome, Babylon, the papacy, or any contemporary institution as inherently authoritarian. It can,

however, illuminate a pattern: systems may cultivate conformity by presenting hierarchy as sacred, suppressing dissent, and making obedience to power appear identical with moral faithfulness.

Revelation's Babylon rides the beast and is allied with kings. The image can be interpreted as a critique of authority that becomes coercive through alliance with domination. Colossians 2 similarly warns against being made captive by human tradition and the *stoicheia* of the world. The psychological issue is moral agency: whether persons are formed to discern truth and act responsibly before God, or whether their agency is absorbed by fear, prestige, ritual pressure, and institutional control.

Moral Injury, Betrayal, and Religious Trust

Moral injury refers to psychological, existential, and spiritual distress associated with profound moral transgression, betrayal, or participation in acts that violate one's moral framework. Litz et al. (2009) developed an early model of moral injury in relation to war veterans, while Kidwell and Kerig (2023) emphasize that moral injury is not identical to PTSD and may involve shame, guilt, anger, loss of trust, and spiritual struggle. These concepts must be used carefully. Revelation does not diagnose moral injury, and ancient communities cannot be clinically assessed through the text.

Nevertheless, Revelation's language of corruption, bloodshed, betrayal, and judgment is morally charged. The woman appears religiously coded, yet she is allied with rulers and drunk with the blood of saints. Psychologically, the symbol provides a conceptual lens for considering institutional betrayal: the distress that may occur when authorities expected to protect moral order instead sanctify or participate in harm. In religious contexts, betrayal by trusted leaders

or institutions may damage spiritual trust, communal belonging, and meaning.

Institutional Power, Moral Disengagement, and Dehumanization

Bandura (1999) describes moral disengagement as a set of cognitive and social mechanisms by which harmful conduct may be justified, responsibility diffused, victims dehumanized, and consequences minimized. Jost and Banaji (1994) argue that people may justify existing social arrangements even when those arrangements disadvantage them, a process related to system justification.

These constructs are useful for interpreting Babylon as a symbol of normalized domination. Revelation depicts a system that appears splendid, wealthy, and authoritative, yet is implicated in violence. The symbolic force of the image lies partly in exposing the moral contradiction between external magnificence and hidden bloodshed. Psychologically, domination often becomes stable not only through force but through legitimating narratives, prestige, ritual, wealth, and habituated perception. Babylon names the danger that a system may teach people to admire what harms them.

Meaning-Making, Spiritual Formation, and Resilience

Park (2010) argues that meaning-making is central to adjustment after stressful life events. People seek to integrate painful experiences into broader frameworks of significance. Religious meaning can be a source of resilience, coherence, and hope, but it can also become harmful when it sanctifies passivity under abuse, fear-based dependency, or unquestioned hierarchy.

Revelation and Colossians both address meaning-making. Revelation interprets imperial domination through apocalyptic symbolism, assuring communities that oppressive splendor is

not ultimate. Colossians interprets the believer's life through union with Christ: "Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3, KJV). Psychologically, such a claim reorients identity, agency, and hope. The Christian is not merely given information but invited into a new structure of meaning.

Christic Counter-Formation

The central psychological contrast in this article is between Babylonian formation and Christic counter-formation. Babylonian formation refers to identity capture by systems of domination, dependence on coercive or prestige-based authority, externalized status, moral disengagement, and the normalization of hierarchy without accountability. Christic formation refers to identity transformation through union with Christ, Spirit-mediated love, moral agency, humility, service, compassion, truth, accountable community, and freedom from coercive domination.

This is not a claim that all institutions are oppressive or that religious authority is intrinsically abusive. Rather, the contrast concerns modes of formation. Religious authority may support well-being when it nurtures belonging, meaning, moral responsibility, care, and hope (Greenfield & Marks, 2007). It becomes Babylon-like when it replaces Christic character with domination, prestige, fear, and betrayal.

Empirical Review

Although this is not an empirical human-subject study, it draws on empirical and conceptual psychological literature relevant to social identity, collective memory, authoritarianism, moral injury, moral disengagement, system justification, and meaning-making.

Greenfield and Marks (2007) provide empirical support for the importance of religious social

identity in psychological well-being. Their study suggests that formal religious participation may be associated with well-being partly because it provides identity and belonging. This is important for the present study because it prevents a one-sided interpretation in which religion is viewed only as coercive. Religious belonging can be psychologically supportive. The problem arises when identity is captured by coercive systems, when dissent is punished, or when sacred identity is fused with domination.

Hirschberger (2018) offers a conceptual review of collective trauma and meaning. Collective trauma may become collective memory and shape a transgenerational collective self. This is relevant to Revelation's use of Babylon as a remembered symbol of imperial violence. The text can be interpreted as an act of communal meaning-making in which past and present empires are brought into symbolic relation. Muldoon et al. (2019) add that trauma responses are influenced by whether valued social identities are threatened, maintained, or reconstructed; this helps explain why apocalyptic communities may experience symbolic memory as both a record of suffering and a resource for resilience and identity renewal.

Osborne et al. (2023) synthesize research on authoritarianism, highlighting conformity, threat, deference to authority, and punitive attitudes toward norm violators. This framework helps interpret the social-psychological dynamics represented by Babylon and the *stoicheia*, especially the relation between fear, hierarchy, obedience, and suppressed autonomy. Again, the framework is not used to diagnose ancient Rome or modern religious institutions.

Litz et al. (2009), Griffin et al. (2019), and Kidwell and Kerig (2023) clarify moral injury as a form of moral, spiritual, and relational distress associated with transgression or betrayal. Griffin et al. (2019) also caution that the construct lacks a single consensus definition or gold-standard

measure and has been studied disproportionately in military contexts. Revelation's image of a religiously coded figure allied with rulers and violence may be read, from a contemporary standpoint, as symbolically relevant to institutional betrayal and loss of trust. The text does not clinically assess moral injury, but it dramatizes the kind of moral world in which trust can be ruptured.

Bandura's (1999) account of moral disengagement and Jost and Banaji's (1994) theory of system justification help explain how harmful systems may become normalized. Achebe and Onyemaechi (2023) provide a relevant Nigerian empirical example: in a cross-sectional study of secondary-school students in Anambra State, moral disengagement was associated with a greater tendency toward crime. Their findings cannot be projected backward onto ancient Babylon or generalized to all populations, but they offer contemporary evidence that moral disengagement is a psychologically meaningful mechanism through which moral restraints may be weakened. Babylon's external splendor may therefore be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of legitimating power: the system appears glorious while concealing violence. Such symbols invite reflection on how people learn to admire, defend, or participate in systems that compromise moral agency.

Park's (2010) review of meaning-making is relevant to the article's theological conclusion. Christic formation is not merely a doctrinal alternative to Babylon. It is a reorganization of meaning, identity, and hope around Christ. Paul's language of transformation—"be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2, KJV)—can be read psychologically as a reorientation of perception, value, and agency, while remaining a theological claim about grace and the Spirit.

Historical and Biblical Scholarship

The historical argument of this article depends on caution. It does not claim that an intact Babylonian priesthood migrated institutionally from Babylon to Pergamum and later to Rome. Such a claim is not historically established. A more defensible account is that cultural, religious, intellectual, and political patterns survived through diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation.

The fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BCE did not erase Babylonian scholarly and priestly traditions. Under Persian and later Hellenistic rule, older traditions continued to be rearticulated. Stevens (2014) shows that the Antiochus Cylinder reflects interaction between Babylonian scholarship and Seleucid imperial ideology rather than simple cultural replacement. Stevens (2019) further demonstrates that Greek and Babylonian intellectual cultures interacted in complex ways across the Hellenistic world. De Breucker (2011) shows how Berossos combined Babylonian tradition with Greek scholarly forms. Harland (2023) likewise emphasizes competition and interaction among Babylonians, Egyptians, and Judeans under Hellenistic hegemony.

These studies support a model of cultural continuity through transformation. Religious continuity does not require an unchanged institution moving intact from one capital to another. It may occur through memory, translation, adaptation, hybridization, elite patronage, scholarly preservation, ritual reconfiguration, and ideological reuse.

Rome inherited and reorganized many elements of the Hellenistic Mediterranean world. Later, the Christianization of the Roman Empire produced another major transformation. Edwards (2006) describes the beginnings of Christianization in the age of Constantine, including new

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relationships between imperial policy, bishops, and Christian public life. Whelan (2018) shows how Christian identity and imperial service became increasingly compatible in the Theodosian period, as Christian political ideas diffused through the imperial administration. After the collapse of western imperial administration, the bishops of Rome assumed increasing political responsibilities. McKitterick (2018) argues that papal rule in Rome after 476 drew on imperial models of governance and self-presentation.

These historical developments make Rome and later Christianized Rome legitimate subjects for comparison with Revelation's religious-political imagery. However, comparison is not identification. This article does not claim that the papacy, any church, or any denomination is the sole or exhaustive fulfillment of Revelation 17. The more responsible claim is typological: Revelation's Babylon names a recurring pattern in which religious legitimacy and political power become fused in ways that threaten faithfulness, moral agency, and human flourishing.

Hypotheses and/or Research Questions

Because this study is an interdisciplinary interpretive review rather than a quantitative study, it does not propose statistical hypotheses. It is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can Revelation 17 be interpreted as referring to first-century Rome while also functioning typologically as a recurring religious-political configuration?
2. How can historical continuity from Babylonian to Hellenistic and Roman worlds be described responsibly without claiming an unbroken Babylonian priesthood?
3. How can Babylon be interpreted psychologically as a symbol of power,

identity formation, conformity, moral perception, collective memory, institutional betrayal, and meaning-making?

4. How does Colossians 2's contested language of the *stoicheia tou kosmou* contribute to an understanding of subjection, allegiance, and liberation in Christ?

5. How can the glory of Christ be understood as Spirit-mediated, ethical, transformative participation rather than a transfer of divine essence or physical energy?

6. What implications does this interdisciplinary reading have for psychological services, religious leadership, pastoral care, and communities concerned with moral agency and spiritual formation?

Method

This study is an interdisciplinary theological-historical and psychological interpretive review. It is not a new human-subject study, not a clinical study, and not a quantitative survey. It does not collect data from participants, administer instruments, report statistical findings, or claim ethics approval for empirical research. Its method is constructive hermeneutic analysis informed by biblical interpretation, historical scholarship, and contemporary psychological theory.

The study reads Revelation 17 and Colossians 2 as primary biblical texts, with supporting theological reflection from John 17:22, Romans 5:5, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Ephesians 2:6, Philippians 3:20, and related passages. KJV quotations are retained. The Bible is cited in the text by passage rather than included in the reference list.

The psychological literature is used as an interpretive framework rather than as evidence that the biblical authors intended modern psychological constructs. The historical literature is used to clarify continuity and transformation across ancient and late antique contexts. The study's interpretive posture is deliberately cautious: it distinguishes theological claim, historical claim, and psychological interpretation throughout.

Design

The design is an interdisciplinary, integrative narrative review and constructive hermeneutic analysis. It synthesizes selected verified psychological, biblical, and historical sources to develop a conceptual argument. The design is appropriate because the purpose is not to test a statistical relationship but to reinterpret a theological-historical manuscript for a psychological journal by integrating psychological constructs throughout the argument.

Participants

There were no human participants. No individuals, congregations, churches, denominations, institutions, or populations were recruited, observed, interviewed, surveyed, or assessed. Consequently, no demographic data are reported.

Instruments

No psychometric instruments, questionnaires, interview schedules, diagnostic tools, or clinical measures were used. The “instruments” of analysis were textual and conceptual: biblical passages, historical scholarship, and psychological theories relevant to social identity, collective memory, authoritarian conformity, moral injury, moral disengagement, system justification, and meaning-making.

Procedure

The procedure involved four stages. First, the central biblical texts were reread with attention to imagery of power, allegiance, formation, and transformation. Second, historical scholarship was reviewed to clarify the Roman referent of Revelation's Babylon and the nature of cultural continuity across Babylonian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized Roman contexts. Third, psychological constructs were selected from verified sources and integrated into the interpretation where they illuminated the human dynamics represented by the biblical symbols. Fourth, a constructive theological synthesis was developed contrasting Babylonian formation with Christic counter-formation.

No systematic-review protocol, database search strategy, coding procedure, or meta-analysis was conducted. The study should therefore be read as an integrative narrative review, not a systematic review.

Statistics

No statistical analyses were conducted. No numerical data, effect sizes, correlations, regressions, experimental comparisons, or psychometric results are reported. Empirical studies are discussed only as part of the literature review where they inform the conceptual interpretation.

Discussion

Revelation's Babylon as Rome and as Typological Pattern

Revelation 17 presents Babylon as religiously symbolic, politically connected, economically

magnificent, culturally influential, and morally implicated in violence. The woman is seated on many waters, which are interpreted as “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (Rev. 17:15, KJV). She is allied with kings, intoxicated with blood, and finally judged. The historical identification with Rome is strongly supported because Rome was the imperial city whose wealth, violence, and authority shaped the world of John’s audience (Bauckham, 1993; Koester, 2014; Oakes, 2020).

Yet the name “Babylon” does more than conceal Rome. It interprets Rome. Babylon is a symbolic memory of empire, exile, idolatry, and domination. By naming Rome as Babylon, Revelation portrays Rome as the contemporary manifestation of an older pattern. The symbol therefore operates at three levels. Theologically, Babylon represents an order opposed to God’s kingdom. Historically, Babylon refers to Rome for John’s first readers. Typologically, Babylon names a recurring configuration in which religious legitimacy, political power, wealth, cultural prestige, and influence over peoples become fused.

Psychologically, this typological reading is significant because it shifts interpretation from mere identification to formation. The central question is not only, “Which institution is Babylon?” but also, “What kind of human beings does Babylon form?” The symbol can be interpreted as a theological-cultural representation of systems that shape identity through prestige, fear, conformity, and dependence on external power.

Cultural Continuity Without an Unbroken Priesthood

A responsible historical account must reject unsupported certainty about an intact Babylonian priesthood migrating from Babylon to Pergamum and then to Rome. The evidence does not establish such a chain. However, the absence of an unbroken priestly institution does not

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eliminate cultural continuity. Historical continuity often occurs through transformation rather than preservation of identical institutional forms.

Babylonian traditions continued under Persian and Hellenistic rule. The Seleucid world did not simply erase Babylonian scholarship; it interacted with it. Stevens (2014) shows that the Antiochus Cylinder reflects a negotiation between Babylonian scholarly tradition and Seleucid imperial ideology. Stevens (2019) further demonstrates cross-cultural intellectual exchange between Greek and Babylonian worlds. De Breucker (2011) shows that Berossos preserved and rearticulated Babylonian tradition through Greek forms. Harland (2023) emphasizes that subject peoples in the Hellenistic world competed over civilizational priority, demonstrating continued agency among Babylonians, Egyptians, and Judeans.

The better historical model is therefore not institutional migration but cultural diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation. This model is also psychologically relevant. Collective symbols survive because communities reinterpret them. Cultural memory is reconstructed, negotiated, and mobilized for meaning (Hirschberger, 2018). Revelation's Babylon is one such reconstruction: an ancient imperial memory is reused to interpret a present imperial reality.

The Hellenistic and Roman Mediation of Cultural Forms

The Hellenistic world mediated interactions among Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Judean, Persian, and later Roman traditions. Rome did not emerge in isolation from this world. It inherited, appropriated, and reorganized Hellenistic cultural forms. Later, Christianized Rome reorganized imperial life again. Edwards (2006) notes that Constantine's reign initiated new relationships between imperial power and Christian leadership. Whelan (2018) shows that

Christian affiliation and public imperial service became increasingly compatible in the Theodosian period. McKitterick (2018) demonstrates that after 476, the bishops of Rome increasingly assumed political responsibilities and drew on imperial models of rule.

This does not prove that Christianized Rome became Babylon in an exhaustive sense. It does show that the fusion of religious and political authority is historically real and worthy of theological and psychological reflection. Religious institutions may provide stability, belonging, and meaning. Yet when religious authority becomes fused with coercive political power, a risk emerges: sacred identity may be used to legitimate hierarchy, suppress dissent, or externalize moral worth through status and institutional prestige.

Babylon as Symbolic Psychology of Power

Revelation's Babylon can be interpreted as a symbolic psychology of power. She is splendid, seductive, wealthy, and violent. The image dramatizes the power of external glory to shape desire and perception. Babylon is attractive because domination often presents itself as order, beauty, prosperity, and legitimacy. This is consistent with Bandura's (1999) account of moral disengagement: harmful conduct may be justified or obscured through language, hierarchy, diffusion of responsibility, and minimization of consequences. It is also consistent with Jost and Banaji's (1994) system-justification theory: people may come to defend existing arrangements even when such arrangements are morally compromised.

The woman's golden cup is especially psychologically suggestive. Externally, it is golden; internally, it contains abominations. The image exposes the gap between appearance and moral reality. Psychologically, systems of domination often work by training perception—teaching people what to admire, what to fear, whom to trust, and whom to blame. Babylonian formation

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therefore involves not only coercion but imagination. It shapes what people desire and what they consider normal.

Social Identity, Belonging, and the Waters

The waters upon which Babylon sits are “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (Rev. 17:15, KJV). The symbol is collective. It concerns human beings in social identity. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory helps explain why belonging is powerful: people derive self-understanding from group membership, and group identity shapes perception and loyalty. Greenfield and Marks (2007) show that religious social identity can contribute to well-being by providing belonging and meaning.

This is important because the critique of Babylon is not a critique of belonging itself. Human beings need community, identity, and shared meaning. Religious belonging may strengthen resilience, moral orientation, and psychological well-being. The danger arises when belonging becomes captivity—when group identity requires unquestioning loyalty to power, when dissent is framed as betrayal, or when institutional prestige replaces truth and compassion.

Babylon’s position over the waters can therefore be read as a warning about identity capture. When a system “sits upon” peoples, it may organize their identity around its own survival. In contrast, Christic formation reorients identity around union with Christ rather than dependence on imperial, institutional, or prestige-based recognition.

Authoritarian Conformity and the Loss of Moral Agency

The woman’s relationship with kings and the beast symbolizes alliance with coercive power. Osborne et al. (2023) describe authoritarianism in terms of conformity, deference to authority,

and punishment of norm violators, especially under perceived threat. Revelation's imagery can be interpreted through this lens as a warning about systems that demand conformity and punish faithful dissent.

This does not mean that all hierarchy is abusive or that all religious authority is authoritarian. Communities require leadership, teaching, accountability, and shared norms. The psychological issue is whether authority supports moral agency or suppresses it. Authority becomes coercive when it demands submission without accountability, treats questioning as rebellion, sanctifies hierarchy for its own sake, or uses fear to maintain loyalty.

Colossians 2 adds theological depth to this issue. Paul asks, "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" (Col. 2:20, KJV). The issue is subjection. The believer's death and resurrection with Christ represent a transfer of allegiance. Psychologically, this can be understood as liberation from identity systems that define worth, purity, and belonging through coercive external regulations rather than transformation in Christ.

The Stoicheia as Contested Powers and Principles

The term *stoicheia tou kosmou* in Colossians 2:8 and 2:20 should be treated as contested. It may refer to elemental principles, cosmic elements, spiritual powers, or the basic ordering structures of the present world. It should not be reduced simply to "Greek philosophy." Paul's warning includes philosophy, vain deceit, human tradition, regulations, ascetic practices, and subjection to worldly order.

The central theological issue is captivity: "Beware lest any man spoil you" (Col. 2:8, KJV). The

verb translated “spoil” suggests being carried off as prey or captive. Paul is concerned not merely with incorrect ideas but with a form of life governed by the wrong order. The *stoicheia* represent the structures, principles, or powers that organize life apart from Christ.

Psychologically, the *stoicheia* may be read as symbolic of external systems that define identity from outside: status, ritual performance, fear of exclusion, prestige, and conformity to human tradition. Paul’s answer is not another controlling system but Christ, in whom “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9, KJV). The fullness of God is not dispersed among rival powers; it is embodied in Christ.

Moral Injury, Institutional Betrayal, and Revelation’s Moral Language

Revelation’s Babylon is not merely politically wrong; she is morally treacherous. She is called a harlot, associated with kings, and drunk with the blood of saints. Such language should not be used to demonize contemporary religious groups. However, it can be interpreted as symbolic language about violated trust.

Moral injury literature is relevant here. Litz et al. (2009) describe moral injury as distress arising when persons perpetrate, witness, or fail to prevent acts that violate deeply held moral beliefs. Kidwell and Kerig (2023) emphasize betrayal, shame, guilt, anger, loss of trust, and spiritual struggle. Revelation’s image of a religiously charged figure allied with violence can be read as a symbolic representation of institutional betrayal: the collapse of trust when sacred authority participates in harm.

For psychological services, this is important. Clients may present with religious distress not because religion itself is harmful but because trusted communities or leaders may have violated

moral expectations. A psychologically responsible reading of Babylon helps practitioners distinguish between faith as a source of meaning and institutional betrayal as a source of distress.

Christ's Glory as Transformative Counter-Formation

Against Babylonian formation and subjection to the *stoicheia*, the New Testament presents Christ as the locus of divine fullness and transformative glory. Colossians declares: “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9, KJV). Second Corinthians adds: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6, KJV).

The glory of God is revealed “in the face of Jesus Christ.” It is not described as a transferable divine essence or measurable physical energy. It is revealed knowledge that enters the heart and transforms the person. Paul writes, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18, KJV). The movement is beholding, transformation, and conformity to Christ’s image.

Romans 5:5 adds that “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (KJV). The Spirit internalizes divine love. John 17:22 records Jesus’ prayer: “And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them” (KJV). Shared glory must be interpreted carefully. It does not mean believers receive God’s infinite essence. It means they participate in Christ’s relationship, mission, character, and life through the Spirit.

Psychologically, this is identity transformation. Christic counter-formation replaces externalized status with internal transformation, fear-based conformity with Spirit-enabled

moral agency, domination with service, prestige with humility, and coercive dependence with accountable freedom under God. The believer's autonomy is not self-sufficient individualism; it is freedom from coercive domination through reoriented allegiance to Christ.

Babylon's Glory and Christ's Glory

Babylon's glory is external, spectacular, economic, and political. She is clothed in splendor and adorned with wealth. Christ's glory is paradoxical: it is revealed in the crucified and risen Son. The Christian pattern of glory is therefore inseparable from humility, obedience, love, suffering, resurrection, and service.

This distinction is psychologically significant because humans are formed by what they behold and admire. If Babylon teaches admiration for domination, wealth, and prestige, Christ teaches admiration for truth, love, holiness, mercy, and self-giving service. Paul's command, "be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2, KJV), can be read as a theological and psychological call to re-formation of perception.

Babylon asks people to derive identity from proximity to power. Christ gives identity through participation in divine love. Babylon normalizes domination. Christ forms humility and service. Babylon externalizes worth through status. Christ internalizes love through the Spirit. Babylon sits upon peoples. Believers are "made" to "sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6, KJV), not to dominate peoples but to live from a different source of allegiance.

Authority Without Domination

The Christian alternative to Babylon is not the replacement of one domination system with another. The believer's participation in Christ's glory does not authorize control over the

“peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” of Revelation 17:15. It authorizes freedom from Babylon’s mode of formation. Christian authority is derivative, accountable, and cruciform. It is authority under Christ, shaped by service and love.

This distinction is crucial for religious communities. A church can proclaim Christ while imitating Babylon if it confuses spiritual authority with coercive control, treats institutional loyalty as the measure of faithfulness, uses fear to maintain compliance, or conceals harm to protect prestige. Conversely, religious authority can be psychologically and spiritually life-giving when it supports belonging, truth, repentance, care, justice, moral agency, and hope.

The Church’s Self-Examination

A typological reading of Babylon prevents the symbol from becoming merely a weapon against outsiders. If Babylon names a recurring configuration of religious-political domination, then every religious community must ask whether its practices form people in Christ or in the patterns of Babylon. The question is not only, “Where is Babylon?” but “How might Babylonian formation appear in us?”

Signs of Babylonian formation may include prestige without accountability, hierarchy without service, unity without truth, obedience without moral agency, wealth without compassion, tradition without Christ, and authority without humility. Signs of Christic formation include truthfulness, compassion, accountability, service, moral courage, repentance, freedom from coercive domination, and deepened capacity to love God and neighbor.

Implications of the Study

This study has implications for psychological services, pastoral care, theological education, and

religious leadership.

For psychological services, the article encourages practitioners to take religious symbols seriously as frameworks of meaning. Clients may use biblical language such as “Babylon,” “captivity,” “spiritual warfare,” or “glory” to describe experiences of domination, betrayal, liberation, or transformation. Clinicians should not automatically pathologize such language. Instead, they may explore how religious meaning functions in the client’s identity, coping, trust, and moral agency. This culturally responsive approach is consistent with Onyemaechi et al. (2025), who emphasize the possible contribution of family networks, religious institutions, age grades, and communal ties to mental-health resilience in Nigeria, while also supporting integration with formal psychological services.

For trauma-informed care, the study highlights the importance of moral injury and institutional betrayal. Some individuals experience distress when trusted religious or political authorities violate moral expectations. Practitioners should distinguish between faith as a source of resilience and institutions that may have become harmful in particular contexts.

For pastoral care, the study suggests that spiritual formation should strengthen moral agency rather than suppress it. Healthy religious community can support belonging, hope, repentance, compassion, and accountability. Coercive religious systems, by contrast, may intensify fear, dependency, shame, and loss of trust.

For theological education, the study recommends teaching Revelation 17 with historical caution and psychological responsibility. Students should understand the first-century Roman referent, the typological function of Babylon, and the dangers of polemical over-identification.

For church leadership, the article offers a criterion of self-examination: religious authority must be measured by Christic character. Authority that does not produce humility, service, truth, compassion, and accountability risks being formed by the very pattern Revelation condemns.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, it is not an empirical investigation. It does not measure religious identity, authoritarianism, moral injury, or well-being among participants. Its claims are interpretive and conceptual.

Second, the psychological constructs used here are contemporary analytic resources. They should not be read back into the ancient text as though John or Paul intended modern psychological theories.

Third, the historical reconstruction is necessarily selective. It draws on verified scholarship concerning Babylonian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized Roman contexts, but it does not provide a comprehensive history of ancient religion or late antique Christianity.

Fourth, the article does not identify any contemporary church, denomination, or institution as Babylon. Its typological argument is deliberately cautious and should not be used for polemical labeling.

Fifth, the interpretation of *stoicheia* remains contested. This study treats the term broadly as elemental principles and/or cosmic powers associated with the present world order, but it does not settle the lexical debate.

Finally, the theological account of glory is constructive. It is grounded in biblical texts, but

further work could engage patristic, systematic, and pneumatological scholarship in greater depth.

Recommendations

Future research may extend this study in several ways. Empirical researchers could examine how religious identity supports well-being while also exploring conditions under which religious belonging becomes coercive. Qualitative studies could investigate how individuals use biblical symbols to make meaning of institutional betrayal, moral injury, or spiritual recovery. Pastoral psychologists could develop trauma-informed frameworks for addressing religious harm without dismissing faith itself.

Biblical scholars could further examine Revelation's use of imperial memory and symbolic trauma language. Historians could continue refining accounts of cultural diffusion and adaptation across Babylonian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized contexts. Theologians could develop a fuller account of Christic counter-formation, especially the relation among glory, Spirit, moral agency, community, and service.

Religious leaders should cultivate accountable structures that protect conscience, welcome truthful questioning, resist coercive domination, and form communities in humility and compassion. Psychological service providers working with religious clients should assess not only beliefs but also power dynamics, trust, belonging, moral injury, and identity transformation.

Conclusion

Revelation 17 presents Babylon as a religiously charged, politically connected, culturally

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influential, and morally compromised system seated upon peoples, nations, and languages. For John's first-century audience, Rome provides the strongest historical referent. Yet the name "Babylon" indicates that John is doing more than naming Rome. He is interpreting Rome through Israel's memory of empire, exile, idolatry, and domination.

Theologically, Babylon represents an order opposed to God's kingdom. Historically, it refers to Rome while drawing on older imperial memory. Typologically, it names a recurring configuration in which religious legitimacy, political power, wealth, and cultural influence become fused. Psychologically, the symbol provides a conceptual lens for understanding how systems of domination may shape identity, belonging, conformity, moral perception, trust, desire, fear, collective memory, and agency.

The historical movement from Babylon through Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christianized Roman contexts should not be described as an unbroken priestly migration. A more responsible account is cultural continuity through diffusion, adaptation, syncretism, institutional continuity, and ideological transformation.

Colossians 2 provides a complementary theological framework. The *stoicheia tou kosmou* should be treated as a contested term referring to elemental principles and/or cosmic powers of the present world order, not merely Greek philosophy. Paul's concern is subjection. His answer is Christ, in whom "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9, KJV).

Christ's glory is the counter-formative reality. It is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, shared with believers, mediated by the Holy Spirit, and embodied ethically in love, humility, truth, service, and holiness. It is not the transfer of divine essence or physical energy. It is

transformative participation in Christ's life and character.

The final Christian answer to Babylon is therefore not domination, retaliation, or institutional triumphalism. It is Christic counter-formation: freedom from coercive domination, renewed moral agency, accountable community, transformed identity, and participation in the glory of Christ through the Spirit. The deepest conflict represented by Babylon is a conflict of formation and allegiance. The question remains: Who will shape the human heart—the systems of domination, or Christ?

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