

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 18: Some Notes

Chapter 18 sings, literally. It is a Lament or Doom Song for Rome. You can compare it with, for example, Isaiah 13 verses 19-22, Isaiah 34 verses 11-15, Jeremiah 50 verse 19 and 51 verse 37, and Zephaniah 2 verses 13-15. While there is a perhaps uncomfortable (for us) note of triumph over the old enemy, there is also sadness about the glory that might have been deeply as well as superficially glorious and has now passed away. (It is always interesting to ask why, at particular places in the Bible, prose breaks into poetry... though sometimes, as in Revelation 21 the prose itself sings. Why does poetry/song make the impression that it does? Am I right that 80% of what you remember to be able to quote is poetry? What line or lines from Chapter 18 are you going to remember? (We might want to start the session by asking that question.) P.S. Rome is, of course, still there in 2018, though maybe trading a bit on what it used to be rather than what it is? (I haven't been there.)

John's audience presumably knew just what John was condemning so forcefully. Essentially, it is extravagance which is done to impress those you see as in some sense your peers, which is possible because others have been exploited, which substitutes the selfishness of living it up for the charitable expenditure of giving to good causes; and which dominates someone's life and isn't just an occasional self-treat shared with friends. (Recent more modest modern examples: the Cambridge student in evening dress burning a #20 note in front of a homeless person.) Our personal perspectives on extravagance are probably shaped not just by personal beliefs, but by sex, age, history and circumstances. (Men bother less about fashion? If I am in the choir for a wedding, I tend to wear what I was wearing earlier on for gardening and to sit there thinking how much money has been "wasted" on clothes that might never be worn again and flowers that would have lasted much longer if they had been left in the ground, and on food and drink that I wouldn't touch. For me, a £500 wedding would be just about OK, and a £10,000 wedding is ridiculously extravagant. But I would spend money on a theatre ticket that others would regard as extravagant; and my adapted (disability) car is expensive to run.

The list of goods imported to Rome looks a bit "up market" – more Fortnum and Mason's than Tesco's – but (with one significant exception – at the end of the list) it doesn't look too shocking. Indeed, it looks rather similar to what the Bible Book of Kings says Solomon imported into Jerusalem; and the Temple was built and decorated with all sorts of very pricy building materials. To see what made John angry, you have both to think about the colonial exploitation that Rome (and later on Britain and other Western countries indulged in; and about what living it up in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome actually meant. Picture the wealthy Roman reclining on silver and sandalwood draped in silk, gulping down powdered pearl from a jewelled goblet, tucking into peacocks brains and nightingales tongues, wiping his hands on the heads of some of his 400 slaves, admiring the young male and female prostitutes used as decoration, and having his throat tickled with a peacock's feather to

make him sick and leave room for the next course. His chariot outside was coated with silver, and the horses has silver shoes. The word obscene comes to mind! (So does the statistical reality that this sort of person constituted about 2% of the Roman population.)

Random thought: Can a Church or church be extravagant?

At what point does wealth seem to you to be excessive, or is the only thing that matters how that wealth is used? Most things are relative: my favourite cartoon is still the two Indians in Calcutta – one holding a book, and explaining to the other that the book is about a rich English family that has a whole room to itself. If you inherited a fortune, what do you think you would do with it? What does it mean to “Live simply, so that others can simply live”?

