MISTAKE 33

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "MYSTERY BABYLON"

In the Book of Revelation we find passages that refer to a name, or a mark, that is placed upon a person or upon their forehead. These marks identify either the owner of that person or the one who rules them. For example the "mark of the beast" indicates that the beast is the ruler over them:

> He [the false prophet] also caused everyone (small and great, rich and poor, free and slave) to obtain a mark on their right hand or on their forehead. Thus no one was allowed to buy or sell things unless he bore the mark of the beast - that is, his name or his number (Revelation 13:16,17 NET)

However, in contrast to this, in Revelation 17:5 the mark on the forehead actually identifies the personage herself. We read the following translation from the King James Version of 1611:

> And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (Revelation 17:5 KJV 1611).

The name of the woman is placed upon her forehead. This has caused people to speak of her as "Mystery Babylon the Great" or simply "Mystery Babylon."

However, in other translations, such as the English Standard Version, her name is rendered as "Babylon the Great:"

> And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations" (English Standard Version)

The New English translation is similar:

> On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the Great, the Mother of prostitutes and of the detestable things of the earth (NET Bible)

The note from the NET Bible explains the difference:

> Some translations consider the word …(*musterion*, "mystery") a part of the name written ("Mystery Babylon the Great," so KJV, NIV), but the gender of both [the Greek words] *onoma*, "name") and *musterion* "mystery" are neuter, while the gender of "Babylon" is feminine. This strongly suggests that *musterion* should be understood as an appositive to *onoma* ("a name, i.e., a mystery").

Therefore, according to the rules of Greek grammar, the word translated "mystery" would *not* be connected with the word translated "name" in the sense that it is part of her name or title. Consequently, this is why we have such translations as we find in the ESV and NET Bible.

Interestingly, the NIV of 2011 has repunctuated the text to reflect the same rendering as most modern Bible translations:

> The name written on her forehead was a mystery: BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (NIV 2011 Edition)

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OTHER MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS RENDER THE NAME OF THE WOMAN IN A SIMILAR MANNER

The following is how this verse is rendered in other modern translations:

> and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." (NRSV Revised Edition)
>
> and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." (New American Standard Bible 1995 edition as well as the 2020 update)
>
> On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE DETESTABLE THINGS OF THE EARTH (Christian Standard Bible)
>
> A name—a mystery—was written on her forehead: "Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and the vile things of the earth." (Common English Bible)
>
> On her forehead was written a secret name: BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND DETESTABLE THINGS OF THE EARTH (International Standard Version)
>
> A mysterious name was written on her forehead: "Babylon the Great, Mother of All Prostitutes and Obscenities in the World. (New Living Translation)
>
> Written on her forehead was a name with a secret meaning: 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth.' (Revised English Bible)
>
> She had a title written on her forehead. This title has a hidden meaning. This is what was written: THE GREAT BABYLON MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND THE EVIL THINGS OF THE EARTH (Easy To Read Version)
>
> On her forehead a title was written that was secret. This is what was written: THE GREAT BABYLON MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE EVIL THINGS OF THE EARTH (New Century Version)
>
> On her forehead a ·title [name] was written that was ·secret [a mystery]. This is what was written: THE GREAT BABYLON MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES [whores] AND OF THE EVIL [abominable; detestable] THINGS OF THE EARTH (The Expanded Bible)
>
> On her forehead was written a name, which is a mystery, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." (New American Bible, Revised Edition)
>
> And on her forehead there was inscribed a name of mystery [with a secret symbolic meaning]: Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes (idolatresses) and of the filth and atrocities and abominations of the earth. (Amplified Bible, Classic Edition)
>
> On her forehead was written a name that has a secret meaning: "Great Babylon, the mother of all prostitutes and perverts in the world" (Good News Translation)
>
> And on her forehead a name was written, a mystery: "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES (false religions, heresies) AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Amplified Bible, Modern Edition)'

> On her forehead a mysterious name was written: I AM THE GREAT CITY OF BABYLON, THE MOTHER OF EVERY IMMORAL AND FILTHY THING ON EARTH (Contemporary English Version)

Therefore, as we have observed, most of the newer English translations do not see the word "mystery" as part of what was written on her forehead.

This punctuation is nothing new. Albert Barnes (1798-1870) wrote the following in his learned commentary on this passage:

> Our translators [King James Version] have printed and pointed the word mystery as if it were part of the inscription. It would probably be better to regard it as referring to the inscription thus: "a name was written—a mysterious name, to wit, Babylon," etc. Or "a name was written mysteriously" (Albert Barnes, Barnes Notes on Revelation 17:5)

WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE NAME SAY?

If "mystery" is not part of her name there still remains the question as to what the words on her forehead precisely say: "Babylon The Great" or "Babylon the Great Mother of Prostitutes and Abominations on the earth."

Is it the shorter name or the longer one that will be on her forehead?

A number of commentators believe the name is simply "Babylon the Great" with the remaining words being a description of this woman, not her name. Buist Fanning explains:

> Her primary name then is given as "Babylon the great" … Additional phrases describe her as "the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth," representing the widespread effect that her influence exerts. She is "the mother" in the sense that she produces others who engage in "prostitution" (i.e., misusing valuable or sacred things for personal gain; violating what is right and good for evil or self-centered purposes) as she herself does. So also she is the origin above all others of detestable, repulsive deeds — especially idolatrous acts … None of these names are likely to be what she would call herself (much like Jezebel in 2:20), especially not the additional phrases. These constitute the Spirit's characterization of her as given in John's vision (Buist Fanning, *Revelation*, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament*, 2020, p. 439).

DOES IT MATTER?

So does it matter whether we call this woman "Mystery Babylon the Great" or merely "Babylon the Great?"

Yes it does! Since the word "mystery" is not part of the name or title of the woman, there are basically two choices we have as how to understand the Greek term in this context.

OPTION 1 MYSTERY CAN MEAN A DIVINE SECRET REVEALED FOR THE FIRST TIME

The Greek word *musterion* is most-often used to denote a sacred secret that was formerly hidden but now has been revealed for the first time. In fact, this is the standard use of this Greek word in the New Testament. The Moody Bible Commentary concurs with this interpretation:

> It is not "mysterious," suggesting a symbolic interpretation, but rather is something that was not known previously (Daniel Green, *Moody Bible Commentary, Revelation,* Chicago, Moody Press).

Notice an example in Scripture of this use of the word "mystery:"

> Listen, I will tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51-53 NET).

Paul was revealing a "mystery," a new truth, namely something never before known.

In the same way, John is revealing something new about this last days anti-God system. It is described in detail by an angel using a figure of a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast (Revelation 17:1-4).

In addition, the mystery, or sacred secret, that is related to the woman is further explained by the angelic interpreter in verses 8–18. It is the longest explanation of anything in the Book of Revelation.

OPTION 2 IT CAN REFER TO SOMETHING PERPLEXING

There is also a secondary use of the word "mystery" in Scripture. The word can refer to something perplexing or puzzling, something that needs further explaining to be understood. We find this secondary use of the word earlier in the Book of Revelation:

> The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20 NET).

The meaning of the seven stars would not be known without this divine explanation.

Some Bible commentators contend that this secondary use of the word makes better sense in the context. Alan Johnson explains:

> John's use of mystērion [is] as a word denoting a divine mystery or allegory that is now revealed. Furthermore, his use of pneumatikōs ("figuratively,") before the words "Sodom and Egypt" in 11:8, by which the reader is alerted to a special symbolic significance in what follows, likewise supports this.
> No doubt that … the specific part of the title that is a divine mystery is that this prostitute is the mother of all the earth's idolatrous prostitutes. She is the fountainhead, the reservoir, the womb that bears all the individual cases of historical resistance to God's will on earth; she is the unholy antithesis to the woman who weds the Lamb (19:7–8) and to the new Jerusalem (21:2–3).
> Therefore, she cannot be merely ancient Babylon, Rome, or Jerusalem, because these are only her children — she is the mother of them all (Alan Johnson, *Revelation,* Expositors Bible Commentary).

This secondary understanding of *musterion* seems to be the best explanation in this context. Indeed, two verses down, the angel uses the word same Greek word, translated mystery, in this sense of something perplexing that needs to be explained:

> Then the angel said to me, "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast, with the seven heads and the ten horns, that carries her (Revelation 17:7 CSB).

In this instance, the angel promises to explain to John the meaning of the cryptic, or enigmatic, symbolism of both the woman as well as the beast.

All in all, these two options for the meaning of "mystery" in this context are basically saying the same thing, the woman called "Babylon the Great" needs further explanation as to her identity.

However, her exact identification continues to remain a matter of debate. Buist Fanning explains:

> But the enigmatic name "Babylon the Great" still leaves room for debate regarding who or what John and his readers would understand this woman to be, and the further details given in chapters 17–18 provide more information to consider. The name "Babylon" has occurred without much description earlier in the book (14:8; 16:19) (Buist Fanning, *Revelation*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament, 2020, p. 439).

The precise identification of the woman "Babylon the Great" is a topic for another day.

SUMMING UP

In sum, we should learn a valuable lesson from this example when we aim to properly teach or understand a portion of Scripture. The first thing we must do is to make certain that our translation is correct.

Indeed, if we begin with a translation that is questionable, then our conclusions may be questionable also. This is why we should never use the symbolic term "Mystery Babylon the Great" or "Mystery Babylon."

Instead we should understand what John has written as "a name of mystery, Babylon the Great."

With this as our starting point, we should then examine carefully what the Scripture says about this woman Babylon the Great, so that we can better comprehend what the Bible is telling us about her.

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