

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



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man character of God. For much of the period of the Hebrew Bible, images of a maternal YHWH helped people understand the intimate and abiding love, care, and compassion of their God.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part II: Woman (and Man) in the First Creation Story (Gen 1:26–28, etc.); Nurse (Num 11:12); Woman in Labor (Isa 13:8, etc.); Mother of the Servant (Isa 49:1, etc.); Nursing Mothers (Isa 49:15, etc.); Wife of One's Youth (Mal 2:14–16); Part III: Asherah/Asherim; Female Images of God in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books; Woman Wisdom.

FOR FURTHER READING: Benjamin, Don C. "Israel's God: Mother and Midwife."

Bronner, Leah. "Gynomorphic Imagery in Exilic Isaiah [40–66]."

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*.

Gruber, Mayer I. "The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah."

McFague, Sally. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*.

Meyers, Carol. "Gender and God in the Hebrew Bible — Some Reflections."

Trible, Phyllis. "God, Nature of, in the Old Testament."

Great Whore

(Rev 17:3–18:24)

The most notorious symbolic female in the New Testament is the great whore of Babylon, in the Book of Revelation. The whore is the symbol of the city and empire of Babylon; many scholars hold that this image represents the city of Rome and the Roman Empire in the late first century C.E. The whore symbolizes political power, and her reign is characterized by extreme political oppression, especially of the saints and believers in Jesus Christ. Thus her downfall and destruction are particularly graphic, and some scholars note the cathartic impact of this narrative for first-century Christians under Roman rule.

One of the seven angels with the seven bowls offers to show the narrator John "the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters" (Rev 17:1). As in the story of the woman prophet referred to as Jezebel in Rev 2:20, the accusations against the whore (*pornē*) include illicit sex or "fornication" (*porneia*), this time with the kings of the earth (17:2). The believers are warned against fornicating with her, and those who have are instructed to "come out of her" (18:4). The whore is also accused of being drunk with a wine that consists of the impurities of her fornication (17:2, 4) and also the blood of the saints and martyrs or witnesses of Jesus (17:6). She also associates with the beast/dragon/devil, which she rides (17:3).

The whore is simultaneously a beautiful and horrifying figure. She wears regal clothing of "purple and scarlet . . . with gold and jewels and pearls" (17:4). On her forehead (in the manner of marking slaves) is her name: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations" (17:5). The multiple characterizations of the whore have inspired much art; she is depicted as beautiful, drunk, seductive, and dangerous. The whore is evil incarnate, persecuting the saints and then drinking their blood from a golden cup. She is arrogant in her luxurious lifestyle and says to herself, "I will never see grief" (18:7).

John's response is one of great amazement (17:6). The powerful figure of the whore causes him to gaze at her wealth and oppressive actions. But the scene in Revelation is primarily one of judgment, and the whore is quickly brought down by the beast and its ten horns (kings), who turn on the whore with hate. The scene of her destruction is as follows: the ten horns and the beast "make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire" (17:16). The stripping, making desolate, eating, and burning of her flesh bring her to a grotesque, violent end. Her destruction is followed by rejoicing: "Hallelujah! / The smoke goes up from her forever and ever" (19:3). The scene of her death represents total vengeance on the ruling political power. As an angel throws a millstone into the sea, he says: "With such violence Babylon the great city

will be thrown down, / and will be found no more" (18:21). Although the destruction of the whore takes only one hour (18:10, 17), she will burn forever (19:3). Her connections, not only with the kings of the earth but also the merchants and sailors, mourn for her as she burns because her destruction signals the end of their trade and wealth. These followers of the whore are in turn eaten by the birds of mid-heaven (19:17–18).

The three major scenes related to the end time share a central theme of eating: the destruction and eating of the whore, the marriage supper of the Lamb, and the "great supper of God" (19:17), in which the birds eat the kings and other enemies. Thus two anti-eucharistic scenes frame a eucharistic one. Corporate judgment falls on the whore and her followers, just as it did on Jezebel and her "children" in Rev 2:22–23. The whore, her followers, and the earth are destroyed to purify the space for the new earth and the new city, the new Jerusalem, symbolized as the opposite of a whore — as a virginal bride.

Biblical prophets often characterize cities as female. This tendency continues in Revelation, in the symbols of the whore and the bride. The fallen city is depicted as the fallen woman; when she falls, an authoritative angel sings the famous funeral dirge for the whore: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! / It has become a dwelling place of demons . . ." (18:2). Many scholars focus on the downfall of the city as the destruction of an evil political power, ignoring the gender dimensions of the narrative. Some feminist scholars find a liberating message in this story of the destruction of the whore; the evil imperial system has fallen. Others note a more ambiguous reading by pointing out problems with symbolizing the evil political power as a woman and then destroying the woman.

TINA PIPPIN

SEE ALSO Part II: Woman Prophet Referred to as Jezebel (Rev 2:20); Part III: Bride of the Lamb; Woman in Labor, Clothed with the Sun.

FOR FURTHER READING: Carpenter, Mary Wilson. "Representing Apocalypse: Sexual Politics and the Violence of Revelation."

Hephzibah

Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse.*

Garrett, Susan R. "Revelation."

Pippin, Tina. *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John.*

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Hephzibah/My Delight Is in Her, Jerusalem

from Hebrew *ḥep̄sî*, "my delight," plus *bāh*, "in her"

(Isa 62:4)

In a text proclaiming how Jerusalem will be restored after being destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., the city is told that, although she has previously been known as Azubah, "Forsaken," and Shemamah, "Desolate," God will soon call her Hephzibah, meaning "My Delight is in Her," for "the Lord delights [*ḥāpēs*] in you" (Isa 62:4). Similar imagery describing Jerusalem as female is found elsewhere in Isaiah (1:21–23; 3:25–26; 51:17–52:2; 57:6–13; 66:7–13) and in Jeremiah (4:30–31; 6:2, 23; 13:20–27; 22:20–23), Lamentations (1:8–9), and Ezekiel (16:1–63; 23:1–4, 11–49). In almost all of these passages, however, the imagery is hostile, and Jerusalem is often equated with a female apostate or harlot who has strayed from the proper worship of YHWH. Yet in several other passages in Isaiah (49:7–26; 51:17–52:2; 54:1–10; 66:7–13), as in this one, the imagery is positive: Jerusalem is celebrated as both a loving mother and as God's beloved bride. Positive imagery is typical of the second half of the Book of Isaiah (chaps. 40–66), whose overall theme is to offer comfort to the people of Judah in the wake of the Babylonian exile. But even given the generally positive thrust of Isaiah 40–66, the positive female imagery of those chapters is remarkable, unparalleled elsewhere in the prophetic books and, indeed, almost anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

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