

WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

*Revised and
Expanded Edition*

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REVELATION/APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

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INTRODUCTION

The biblical end of the world appears throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, but this last book holds the longest vision dedicated to earth's last days. The book's title, from the Greek, means "revelation, a revealing, a taking the lid off" of the end-time chaos, like Pandora opening the box. As a bookend to the book of Genesis, the Apocalypse is about the total destruction of earth and the re-creation of a new heaven and earth (21:1-2) as part of God's divine plan. John takes the reader back to a garden paradise within an urban setting. The true believers (the 144,000 purified males) are the only ones definitely slated to return to the holy city of God. Perhaps women are included in the persecuted souls under the altar (6:9-11), but John never clearly states their inclusion, and these souls remain in a "not yet" waiting position. Some feminist biblical scholars celebrate and reclaim the hopefulness of John's end-time vision, while others decry John's controlling and exclusivist rhetoric.

The Apocalypse of John begins with John in a visionary state, receiving messages from an angel intermediary (1:1-2). His vision is full of symbols: numbers, colors, images, and references to other biblical texts (e.g., the plagues of Exodus). This book is loud and colorful, along with being quite violent and bloody. Jesus appears to John on the island of Patmos as the Son of Man, "clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters,"

and he had a two-edged sword in his mouth and a shining face (1:14-16). John addresses his dream of the end in the form of "letters" to the seven churches of western Anatolia (Asia Minor or current-day Turkey). In these letters the churches are judged individually, based on their faithfulness or lack of it (e.g., 3:7-13). He ends each letter with the admonition: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). There are letters to the seven churches of western Asia Minor that chastise, praise, and offer guidance for their individual and communal actions. A series of seven visions follows, with angel intermediaries as guides. John sees into the heavenly throne room, where the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and God on the throne reside.

This central, and highly desirable, space of the throne room of God is depicted as an all-male enclave, a portrayal that begs a queer reading. In this way the Apocalypse echoes the realm of God from Genesis on; there is God and other supernatural creatures, such as angels, and these are all male. Women remain on the outside, on the margins, and are either punished ("Jezebel" and the Whore of Babylon) or left behind (the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride). There are other female spaces in the abyss and the heavenly city: the earth goddess Gaia (12:16), the tree of life (if the tree is read as a symbol of some ancient goddesses), along with the gender-bending Lamb and other spaces yet to be discovered. Only the 144,000 purified men have spaces reserved for them in heaven. The duality of male-female is not

so clear in this book, even as the main female characters are under patriarchal control and ultimately erased from the end visions. Issues of gender and sexuality in this last book of the Bible are complex, and the play of these differences calls for the interpreter to enter this difficult journey with John, with no clear, definitive "meaning" at the end.

The book of Daniel, chapters 7–12, in which Daniel has visions of the Ancient One on the heavenly throne and of a terrifying judgment, heavily infects John's visions. John dreams of a Deity-led kingship and of two realms of heaven and earth. In the heavenly realm the twenty-four elders (along with the four living creatures) worship God and the Lamb on the throne. The heavenly throng sings songs as a prelude for the end-time pronouncements. There is a scroll of seven seals full of the secrets of God's plan for humans and the earth, which only the Lamb is worthy to open (4:1–5:14). The series of seven (a number signifying perfection in the ancient world) continues with the seven seals (Rev. 6–7). The seventh seal brings angels with trumpets (8:6–9:21) and bowls of wrath (16:1–21), and these announcements bring great destruction to the earth. After the defeat of the Whore of Babylon and her followers and the marriage of the Lamb and the Bride (Rev. 17–19), the New Jerusalem appears, and John ends his prophecy on an open note: "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy" (22:10–11). The end is always not yet, and the visions are in an eternal cycle.

The book of Revelation or the Apocalypse of John ends the official canon of the Christian Bible in some very challenging ways. This book has gripped readers' imaginations beyond its text into many spheres of influence, including

art, music, film, and social movements. Women readers of this text grapple with its violent imagery and marginalized women figures. As the visionary John had a difficult experience with what he heard and saw, so too do contemporary readers, who have to decide on the text's message and authority and whether or not this text is a liberating and hopeful one in their specific contexts.

Authorship and Social Setting

The tradition is that John of Patmos is the John of the Gospels, a disciple of Jesus, grown old in Ephesus (with Mary, mother of Jesus) and imprisoned for political activity by the Romans and eventually martyred by being boiled in oil. Most contemporary biblical scholars find the author John to be an itinerate preacher in western Anatolia, either right after the Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Palestine (66–73 CE) or, more likely, at the end of the first century immediately after the murder of the Roman emperor Domitian (81–95 CE).

John sets himself in prison on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). John refers to persecutions (e.g., his own in 1:9; of the souls under the altar in 6:9–11; by Antipas in 2:13; of the two witnesses in chap. 11), but even more to false teaching (2:14–16, 19–26). The author holds to a two-hundred-year-old tradition of extreme anti-Roman sentiment in western Anatolia. Roman rule is evil, and John's vision is heavily focused on the downfall of Rome (coded as "Babylon," from the memory of the Babylonian exile of the Jews beginning in 587 BCE). The faithful do not fight this bloody battle. In the ultimate colonized fantasy, God and God's army arrive to wipe out the colonizer, along with a fiery purification of the planet.

COMMENT

Biblical scholars offer several paths to interpretation. Mainstream feminist readings focus on reclaiming or recovering the text for women readers. These revisionist readings interpret the women characters as symbols, not to be read as literal female bodies. In other words, women represent false teachers (Jezebel), the mother of the Messiah (the Woman Clothed

with the Sun), the evil empire (the Whore of Babylon), and the companion of the Lamb of God (the Bride). These symbols are either oppressive or liberating. The positive view is of the mother who gives birth to the Messiah (Rev. 13) and the sacred marriage of the Bride with the Lamb (19:6–9). The "good" women triumph (the Woman Clothed with the Sun and

the Bride), while the "bad" women, who represent errant theology (Jezebel) or the Goddess Roma and Roman colonialism (the Whore of Babylon), receive the destruction they deserve. Some scholars point out that the main issue is the destruction of Rome/Babylon, and this is a liberating event for all. Does the author intend actual, real women? The debates center around this question, and how one answers it determines the authority of this book for the reader.

Other feminist scholars read the women characters and female imagery more literally. They find no liberating vision and no just relations in the text and focus on the violence against women who are either murdered (Jezebel and the Whore) or left in liminal space (the Sun Woman and the Bride). Other interpretive strategies are to reveal the ambiguity of the female imagery in the text and the limitation of the roles of women (as independent teacher and religious leader, reproductive mother, submissive bride, or sexually promiscuous prostitute). The choices are not just to read the text as symbolic or as literal. The text complicates any "straight" or even dualistic reading. What is revealed in these discussions is the history of women being taught to read as men, that is, to celebrate the centrality of the male in this text (in the throne room, the 144,000). This eschatological story is ultimately about the gynocide of the earth (Gaia), and extreme misogyny is the order of the end time.

Jezebel (Rev. 2:20–23)

In the letter to the church in Thyatira, John gives quick praise to the church for their faith, then launches into a critique of a false teacher in their midst: "But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (2:20). This "Jezebel" (as John names her, referring to King Ahab's queen) had a chance to repent but continued to teach or, in the words of the vision from the Son of Man, to "commit adultery" with members of the church (2:22). The warning comes to both the church members and to Jezebel: stop following these teachings ("the deep things of Satan," 2:24) or suffer the consequences: "Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will

strike her children dead" (2:22–23). Anyone who follows Jezebel will die.

The Apocalypse holds to a duality of true versus false teachings and the choice of "Christ or Caesar." Like the lukewarm water at Laodicea, God says, "So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit [i.e., forcefully vomit, in the Greek] you out of my mouth" (3:16). This prophetess—whatever her real name is—is never allowed to speak for herself; we know only one side of the story. For a book whose inclusion in the canon was hotly debated in the early church, the Apocalypse makes many absolute claims for its authority as a trailer for the last days.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:1–6, 13–17)

This mother of the Messiah is an image of the ancient goddess "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). She has been interpreted as many things: the image of Israel, of Mary, of Ishtar, of Inanna, of Isis, and more recently of Our Lady of Guadalupe (a merger of Mary with the Aztec goddess Coatlicue). The diversity of this goddess images fits easily into a variety of culture contexts as a symbol of power. The great red dragon threatens to devour the woman's child; after she gives birth, her child ("a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron," 12:5) "was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne" (12:5). The woman, with the dragon in hot pursuit, receives two great wings and flees to the wilderness, and when the dragon unleashes a great flood from his mouth, she is rescued by the earth (Gaia), who swallowed all the water. The woman remains in the wilderness for the duration of the narrative, while an angry dragon pursues her children. John fails to tell the end of her story. Does she remain stranded in the wilderness, and if so, could this be a liberating space for her? There are many unanswered questions in this text concerning the female characters. John's silence allows for feminist interpreters to fill in the gaps with a more hopeful ending, or not.

The 144,000 Who "Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women" (Rev. 14:1–5)

The angel Michael is joined in this holy war by the 144,000 purified men. They are slaves of

God, with the names of the Lamb and his father on their foreheads (14:1). They are the only ones who could learn the heavenly song of the harpists, and they perform before the throne (14:2-3). They have "been redeemed from the earth" and "have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes" and are "first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless" (14:3-5). These men keep the code of holy warriors (see Deut. 23:9-14) to the extreme and are the example of the redeemed. The mainstream interpretation of this group is that they represent not solely men but all believers who hold to God's truth, since the number is a multiple of twelve, a symbol for wholeness. For other interpreters, a more literal reading is in order. These men become the "queens of heaven," yet their place in the throne room is not a liberating one. In this story the desire of the male God for eternal companionship comes with strict entry standards and unclear responsibilities beyond this choir.

The Whore of Babylon (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:1-19:5)

This Rome is also the goddess Roma, a warrior goddess of the great city and empire. She is a female goddess but also a male warrior. The Whore is a performer; sitting on her great beast in her elegant garb, does she represent a male warrior in drag or a female queen with a male identity? Is she dressed as a prostitute? She sits in grand purple, bejeweled splendor on her scarlet beast with her eucharistic "cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" (17:4). On her forehead is written "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (17:5-6). The Whore speaks arrogantly—one of two women characters to speak (the other is the Bride). She says in her heart: "I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief" (18:7). The Whore is then destroyed by her followers: she is stripped naked, gang raped (by the kings, merchants, and sailors), cannibalized, and burned forever (17:16) with "pestilence and mourning and famine" (18:8). She and her wealth will be "laid to waste" in one hour (18:10, 17). "Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever" (19:3), the heavenly choir sings.

Is this Goddess Roma a male-warrior state in drag that is feminized and raped and murdered? Is this vision the ultimate dream of humiliating the colonizer?

Sex workers in the United States identify with the Whore of Babylon. In their reading, she is a prostitute like them and a victim of male violence. Groups of women victim-survivors often use these "texts of terror" in the Bible to name their own experiences with male violence. The violence done to the Whore is extreme; why does the demise of empire have to be symbolized by a sexually abused and devoured woman?

Abyss (Rev. 9:1-11; 11:7; 20:1-3)

The abyss or the bottomless pit houses all sorts of evil creatures, from locusts (9:1-11) who have golden crowns on their faces that were like "human faces, their hair like women's hair" with lion teeth (9:8). These big, noisy creatures sting like scorpions (9:5), torturing "those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (9:4). The fallen star/angel with the key to the pit (9:1) is called "in Hebrew . . . Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon" (9:11), which mean "Destruction" and "Destroyer," respectively. Beasts come out of the pit (11:7) and are thrown into it by "an angel coming down from heaven" (20:1) who also has a key on a great chain. The bottomless pit is a place of evil monsters and a place to be feared. The abyss is represented as a hell mouth in medieval theatre sets and art; it is a giant monster head with numerous sharp teeth.

It is not a big step to consider a Freudian analysis of this gaping hole in the text, a vagina with teeth, set to castrate any male who ventures too close to the edge. Yet this pit has power; is it a space of female power made evil by patriarchal interpretation? The abyss eventually becomes the opening to hell, under lock and key by a heavenly angel. As vaginal space, the lips are sealed, locked and controlled by God. For John the abyss is a vile space to be feared and avoided. In what ways can women readers reclaim this space?

Earth/Gaia (Rev. 12:16)

The earth comes to the rescue of the Woman Clothed with the Sun; she swallows the river the dragon spews to sweep her away. In one early

drawing, the earth is the upper torso and head of the goddess Gaia, who rises up to protect the flying woman. There is double female power here: the Sun Woman with "two wings of the great eagle" (12:14) and Gaia, earth goddess, who gets a good drink. As one of the powerful female characters in the Apocalypse, Gaia uses her small role to block the dragon and allow the Sun Woman to retreat to her wilderness escape. But it is also the earth that God and God's army destroy in the text and replace with a new earth and heaven.

The Bride/The New Jerusalem (Rev. 19:7; 21:1–22; 22:17)

The Bride is the most passive of female characters in the Apocalypse. But she is true beauty as opposed to the glamour of the Whore: "his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:7–8). The truly blessed are on the list for the wedding supper (19:9). This supper is eerily framed on one side by the feast on the Whore (18:16) and on the other by the subsequent feast ("the great supper of God" in 19:17) of the birds of midheaven on those who feasted on the Whore (19:17–18). Is the Bride to be envied because she gets to marry the Lamb? She soon becomes "the holy city Jerusalem" (21:9–10), where John measures and examines her wealth and adornments. She speaks only once: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'" (22:17) to gather the faithful who have come out of the Whore and into the city/bride. Is this scene another gang rape? True believers who reject the Whore are promised entry into the city/bride.

The Tree of Life (Rev. 2:7; 22:2)

The tree of life is mentioned twice in the Apocalypse; the first mention is in the letter to the church in Ephesus as a reward for faithfulness: "To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God." John describes the location of this tree in the New Jerusalem: "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:2). This tree is highly desirable, with its excess of fruit and promise of eternal life and world peace.

The Apocalypse echoes the first mention of the tree of life in Genesis 2:9. After an initial buildup, we learn of God's command not to eat of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). It is not until after Eve's discovery and enlightenment that God bars man (not woman Eve, "the mother of all living" in Gen. 3:20) from the tree of life: "Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'—therefore the LORD God . . . placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:22–24). The Apocalypse holds out the promise for fulfillment of the desire for this tree and its fruit. Whether one sees women as present or absent in this vision of the heavenly city determines who gets to eat of these most desirable and powerful fruits. Is this tree the ancient goddess in exile in the male God's heaven? There are many ways to question the reappearance of this tree at the end of the biblical story.

Conclusion

Goddesses roam (pun intended) the Apocalypse of John, sometimes in their supernatural selves and sometimes in the guise of human women: Asherah (represented by her priestess Jezebel), Roma (the Whore of Babylon), Isis, and others: the Woman Clothed with the Sun, Gaia (Greek goddess of Earth), the Deep or Chaos (Tehom in Gen. 1:1) and perhaps Tiamat, creatrix serpent goddess/dragon of the Babylonian creation story (*Enuma Elish*), or Eris (Greek goddess of chaos and discord). The end-time male fantasy is full of powerful females, and not all (or any?) of them are easily contained—by God or the reader.

Ultimately it is difficult to navigate the rugged and war-torn terrain of the last book of the Christian Bible. What is at issue in interpreting this text is how much one buys into and invests in John's apocalyptic vision. Regardless of how much hope and liberation or misogyny one finds in the portrayal of the female characters and the gender-bending characterizations of Serpent and Lamb, the destructive, genocidal violence leaves many ethical questions for those who accept this text as canonical and in any way authoritative. Is one to desire these apocalyptic endings of John's? Are readers called to

question the inevitability of this vision of "God's plan" and imagine a different, more peaceful and inclusive, ending?

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