

Female Figures and Symbols in the Book of Revelation



The Book of Revelation

- ▶ 'Apocalypse': visions from above that reveal the heavenly mysteries.
- ▶ Set within the framework of a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor.
- ▶ A period of crisis:
 - persecution by Domitian (81-96 CE)
 - split with local Jewish synagogue
 - rejection of Graeco-Roman life and culture
 - unequal distribution of wealth





Feminine Images in Revelation

Female figures are either aligned to God or Satan:

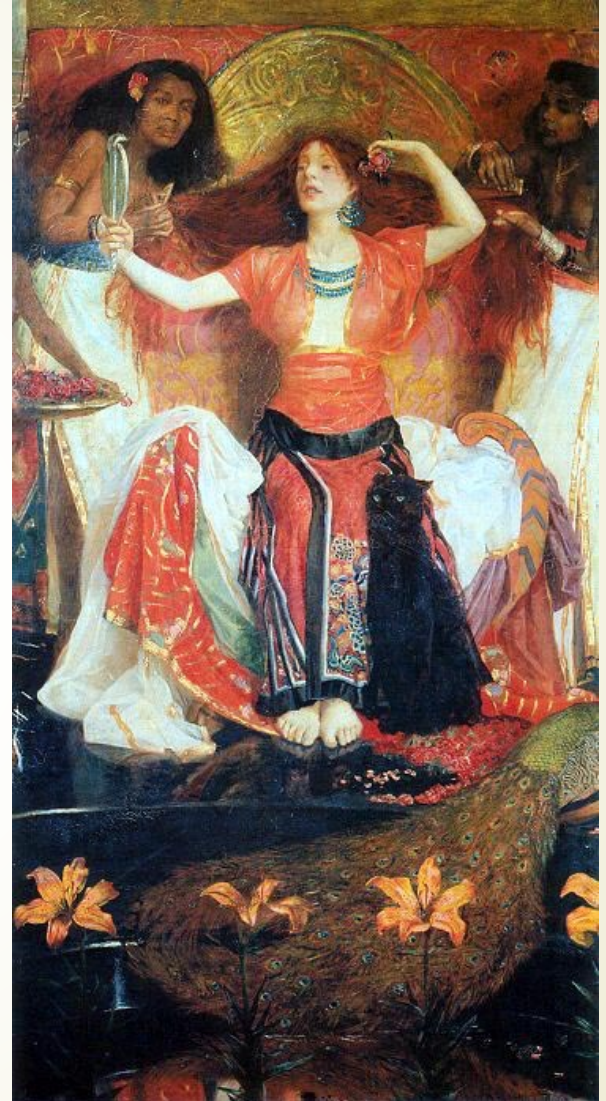
- ▶ Jezebel (2:20-23): a rival prophet who ‘refuses to repent of her fornication’.
- ▶ The woman clothed with the sun (12:1-6, 13-17) who gives birth to the Messiah.
- ▶ 144,000 men have not ‘defiled themselves with women’ (14:4).
- ▶ The whore of Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 17-19:5) ‘holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication’.
- ▶ The new Jerusalem comes down ‘from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (21:2).

Revelation 2:20-23

20. 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. **21.** I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. **22.** 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; **23.** and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

'Jezebel'

- Discrediting of a prophetic rival in the church of Thyatira.
- John links her to the Israelite queen who worshipped Baal
- (I Kings 16:31; 19:1-3).
- A false prophet and immoral woman who teaches her servants to 'practice fornication'.
- She 'beguiles' her servants -
- cf. the dragon (12:9), the beast (13:14), Babylon (18:23), Satan (20:8).



'Jezebel'

- ▶ 'Fornication' = idolatry; Jezebel's idolatry is described as 'many whoredoms and sorceries' (II Kings 9:22).
- ▶ She allows her followers to eat meat sacrificed to idols: a compromise to syncretism (cf. I Cor. 8-10).
- ▶ Importance of feasts in trade guilds.
- ▶ Her gathering place is a bed of seduction; all who follow her are adulterers (2:22) and will be struck dead (2:23).
- ▶ Is Jezebel in fact a successful itinerant prophet 'feared' by John?



Revelation 12:1-6



1. A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. **2.** She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. **3.** Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. **4.** His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. **5.** And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; **6.** and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

Revelation 12:13-17

13. So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. **14.** But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and a half time. **15.** Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. **16.** But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. **17.** Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun

- Conflict between a dragon and a woman.
- The dragon is demonic and powerful (cf. 12:3-4).
- God snatches the newborn child to heaven.
- Woman remains in danger, flees to the desert. She is saved by the earth.
- The dragon then seeks to make war on her offspring.

‘The Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Son’, William Blake, 1805.



The Woman of Light

Woman is clothed with light (sun, moon, stars); cf. 'queen of heaven' (Ephesian goddess Artemis and the Egyptian goddess Isis).

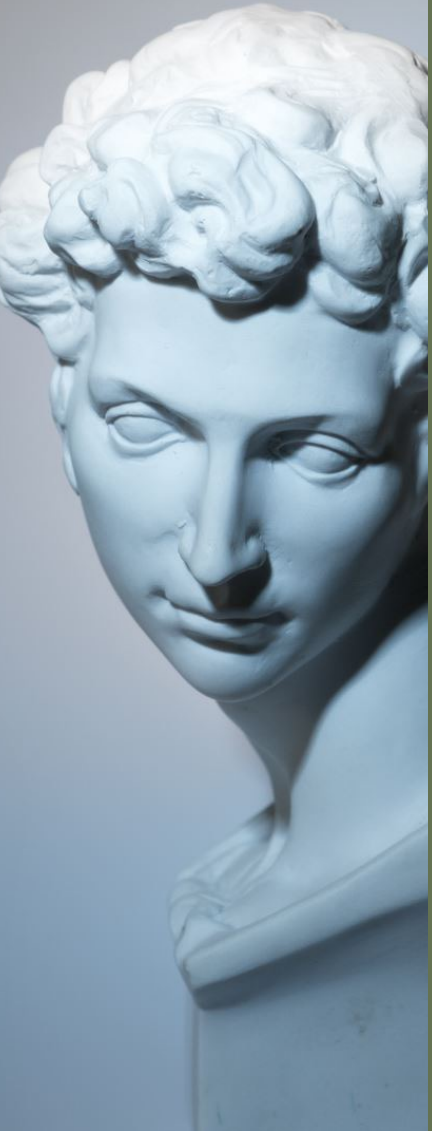
Combination of images from the Jewish Scriptures and ancient myths about the birth of gods and divine battles with monsters of chaos.



Mother, Child, and Monster of Chaos

- ▶ Common motif in antiquity: divine mother whose child is threatened by a monster or serpent.
- ▶ Egypt: Horus and her son Isis threatened by Seth-Typhon.
- ▶ Greece: Leto and her son Apollo (the sun god) threatened by the dragon Python.
- ▶ Mother flies through the air.
- ▶ The opponent seeks to prevent the child from gaining authority.
- ▶ Mother and child escape by divine intervention.





The Myth in the Context of First-Century CE Asia Minor

- ▶ Temple to the goddess Artemis in Ephesus, as well as a temple to the goddess Roma.
- ▶ The mother figure 'becomes' the goddess Roma.
- ▶ Her son is the Roman Empire (note that Nero is often depicted wearing a radiate crown on his coins > Apollo).
- ▶ Dragon represents the powers of evil.

Appropriation of Myth in Revelation 12

- ▶ Basic plot of ancient myth is adopted.
- ▶ Note distinctive ‘biblical features’ :
 - emphasis on the birth pangs of the woman (Israel-Zion as a woman in labour: Isa. 26:16-27; 54:1).
 - the child rules with a rod of iron (cf. Ps. 2:9)
- ▶ The ancient (Roman?) myth is parodied: reality belongs to God.

Identity of the Woman Clothed with the Sun

Mary, the mother of Jesus:

- parallels with the escape into Egypt (Matt. 2).
- offspring (the church?)
reminiscent of John 19:26-27:
Mary is 'the mother of the church'.

Rescue of the child probably alludes more to Jesus' resurrection as 'the firstborn from the dead' (in 19:11 the child appears as a grown man seated on a horse).



Eve

The dragon is 'the ancient serpent' (12:9; cf. Gen. 3) and makes war with the rest of her offspring (12:17; cf. Gen. 3:5).

The Church

The dragon will persecute the woman and make war on the rest of her children, 'those who keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus' (12:17).

Can the church be the mother of the Messiah?

Messianic Community: the Church in Continuity with Israel

The true people of Israel, who give birth to the Messiah (cf. Zion giving birth to the nation in Isa. 66:7-13).

Note Exodus imagery: experiences in the wilderness, threat of flood, eagles' wings (cf. Exod. 19:4); desert as sanctuary.

Woman remains in desert for 1260 days (cf. Dan. 7:25, where the saints of God = Israel are imprisoned).

Testament of Asher 7:3: God will save Israel when he 'crushes the dragon's head in the water'.



Identity
of the
Woman
Clothed
with the
Sun

Revelation

14:1-5

1. Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion. And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. **2.** And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, **3.** and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. **4.** It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, **5.** and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

144,000 Followers of the Lamb

- ▶ 12,000 persons from the 12 tribes (cf. 7:1-8).
- ▶ Antithesis of the followers of the beast (13:16; cf. 14:1).
- ▶ A group of the elect who would die rather than receive the mark of the beast (cf. 7:4-17; 14:1; 20:4).
- ▶ They are ‘unblemished’ (*amōmoi*), a term for sacrificial animals.
- ▶ They are the ‘first fruits’, the first martyrs who will enjoy the privileges of the first resurrection (20:4).

‘Not defiled by women....’ (14:4)

- ▶ They have kept themselves ‘virgins’.
- ▶ Female power can cause men to lose control.
- ▶ Influence of Holy War traditions: those who fight alongside Yahweh refrain from sexual relations in order to be ritually pure (cf. Deut. 23:9-14; Joshua 3:5; 7:13; I Sam. 21:5).
- ▶ The men in Revelation 14:1-5 are ritually pure and ‘virgins’ (going beyond the required standard for participation in the Holy War).
- ▶ The term could be metaphorical (and thus inclusive): abstinence from idolatry linked to the imperial cult.



The Whore of Babylon

14:18: Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication”.

16:19: The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath



17:1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, **2.** with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk'. **3.** So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and seven horns. **4.** The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; **5.** and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'. **6.** And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.



17:6 When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. **7.** But the angel said to me, 'Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.....

9. the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings'.

15. And he said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. **16.** And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.

17. For God has put into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. **18.** The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth'.



18:4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; **5.** for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. **6.** Render to her as she herself has rendered and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. **7.** As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, "I rule as a queen; I am no widow, I will never see grief", **8.** therefore her plagues will come in a single day - pestilence and mourning and famine - and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her'.

The Whore of Babylon

- Her seductive sexuality is a symbol of idolatry. Her attire is a sign of her opulence.
- She is seated on a scarlet beast (cf. 13:1-10).
- She commits fornication with the kings of the earth.
- She drinks the blood of the saints.
- The beast represents the power of the Empire, the whore represents Rome.



‘The Whore of Babylon’, William Blake, 1809.

A Counter-Image of Rome

- ▶ The glorious goddess is turned into an immoral prostitute: the true character of Rome is unveiled.
- ▶ 'Babylon the great': conquest of the Jerusalem temple.
 - ▶ 'But the king of Babylon will arise, the one who now has destroyed Zion, and he will boast over the people and speak haughtily in his heart before the Most High' (2 Baruch 10:1-3; 67:7).
 - ▶ 'A great star will come from heaven to the wondrous sea and will burn the deep sea and Babylon itself and the land of Italy, because of which many holy faithful Hebrews and a true people perished' (Sibylline Oracles 5:143).



Antitype of the Woman Clothed with the Son

- ▶ Babylon is worldly, the woman appears in heaven.
- ▶ The whore wears scarlet clothing, the woman is clothed with the sun, moon and stars.
- ▶ Babylon is the mother of harlots; the woman is the mother of the Messiah.
- ▶ The harlot is seated on many waters and rides the beast, the woman is attacked by the monster and threatened by a flood.

Bamberg Apocalypse, ca. 1020 CE



The Fate of Babylon

- ▶ The destruction of Babylon (images of rape, fire, cannibalism - 17:16).
- ▶ Three accusations are brought against her:
 - sorcery and idolatry (18:23)
 - violence (17:6; 18:24); she will drink the wine cup of the fury of God's wrath (16:19; 17:16; 18:6)
 - wealth and extravagance (18:3, 8, 9); critique of heavy Roman taxes and exploitation.





The New Jerusalem (19:6-8)

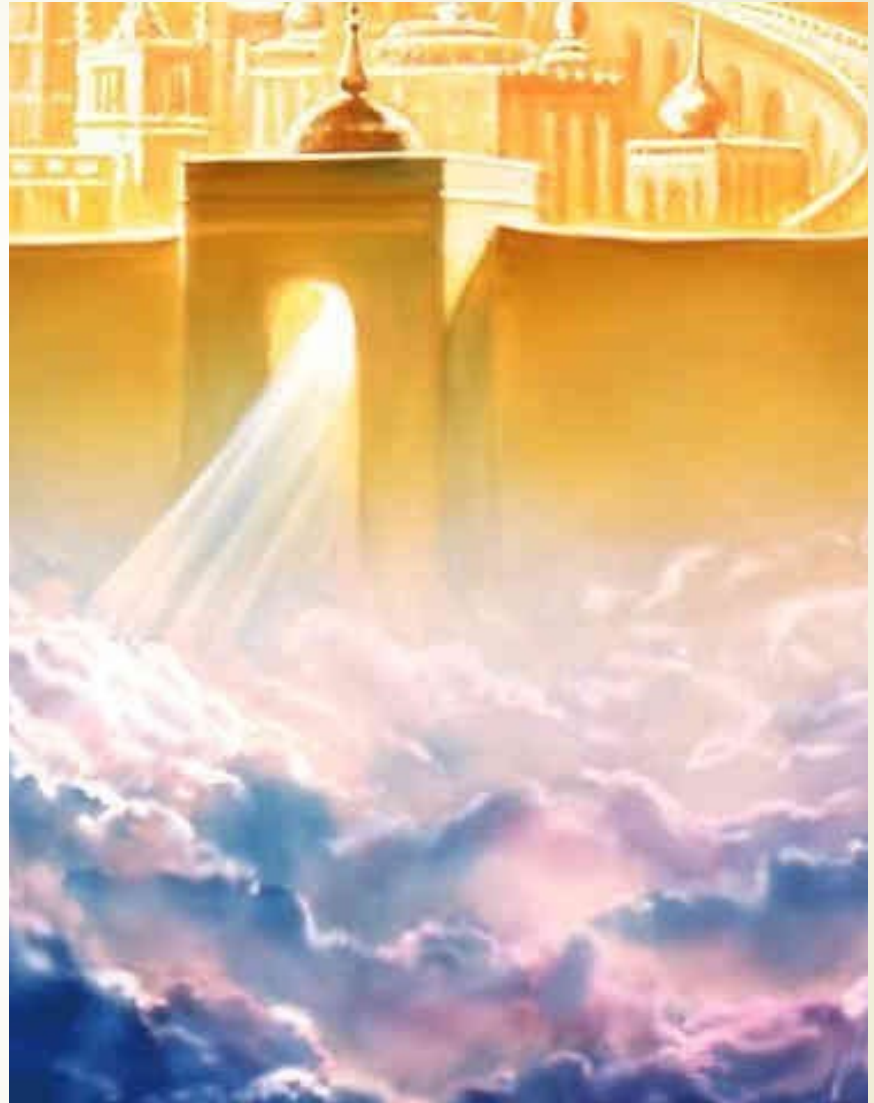
19:6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. **7.** Let us rejoice and exult, and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; **8.** 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

The New Jerusalem (21:1-2, 9-11)

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2.** And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **9.** Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb'. **10.** And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. **11.** It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

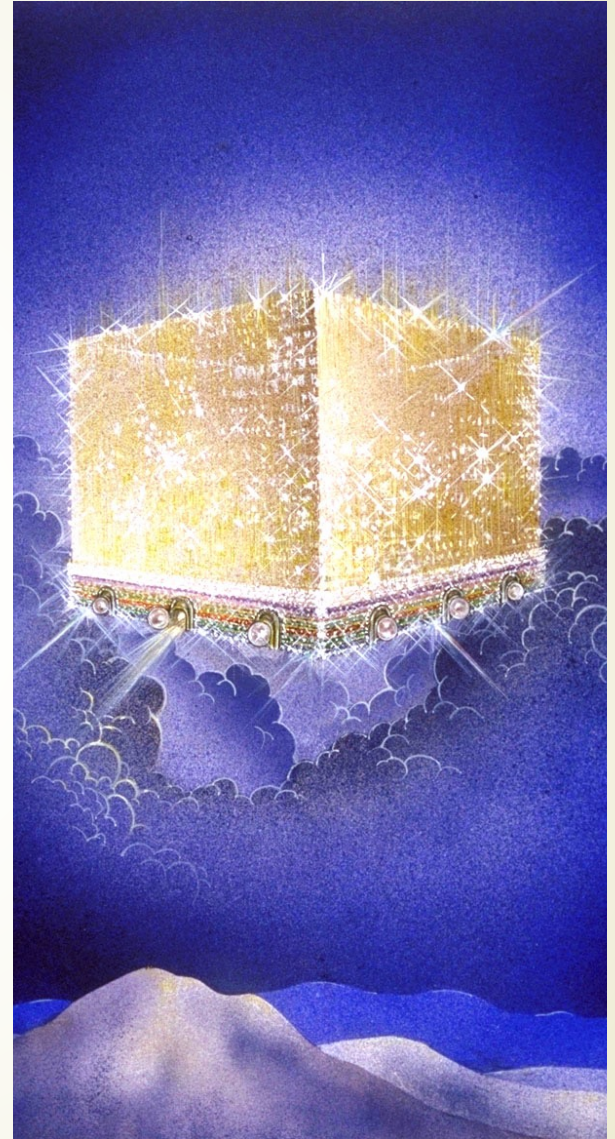
The Visions Draw to an End

- ▶ With the fall of Babylon, heaven rejoices and the vindication of the saints is announced (19:1-5).
- ▶ The imminent marriage of the Lamb and the bride is celebrated (19:6-8). She is said to be adorned with 'fine linen, bright and pure'. (19:8).
- ▶ This is followed by visions of the warrior messiah, the capture of the beasts, the resurrection, the reign of the martyred, the defeat of Satan, the second resurrection and judgment.
- ▶ After this the new Jerusalem appears coming down from heaven (19:9-20:15).



The New Jerusalem: Like an Adorned Bride

- The new Jerusalem is prepared 'as a bride adorned for her husband' (21:2).
- Note the use of bride imagery for the church (II Cor. 11:2; Ephesians 5:23-24).
- Is the new Jerusalem a metaphor for the new people of God?
- The fine linen is 'the righteous deeds of the saints' (19:8).
- The primary image is of the new Jerusalem, to be kept in heaven until the last days. It represents the renewed world of God.



Assessing the Female Images: Dichotomy of Good and Evil

- ▶ Virgin/harlot, white/scarlet, good/evil.
- ▶ Women are characterized as either wholly good or as wholly bad
- ▶ Reflection of a culture that focuses on male control over female sexuality:
 - ‘Good females’ - sexuality is controlled (motherhood, virginity).
 - ‘Bad females’ - sexuality escapes male control.
- ▶ Sexuality and control, over congregations (Jezebel) and empires (Babylon), go hand in hand.

Assessing
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Polarization of women into such categories is a feature of texts formed in a patriarchal society.

Women are placed on the margins (Toril Moi) in a 'symbolic order': women are the (necessary) frontier between man and chaos.

Because of their marginality they are neither 'in' nor 'out'.

Assessing the Female Images: Dichotomy of Good and Evil

- ▶ They sometimes represent darkness and chaos (harlots, temptresses > close to the outside).
- ▶ At other times they are idealized (virgins > close to the inside, shielding the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos).
- ▶ Enduring image for males and females in Revelation 12? The woman clothed with the sun represents the struggle of Christians to remain faithful to God. The symbol of 'woman' signifies the protection and salvation of the people of God and the future of a renewed world.

- Identifying with a good image: denial of female self-determination.
- Identifying with a bad image: feminine defiance is applauded.
- Metaphorical dimension is often highlighted:

The female imagery of Revelation, therefore, would be completely misconstrued if it were understood as referring to the actual behaviour of individual women Just as the image of the Lamb refers to an actual historical person and not to animals, so the images of the heavenly woman, the bride, or the harlot symbolize cities as the places of human culture and political institutions and do not tell us anything about the author's understanding of actual women' (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, page 96).

Translating Revelation's Images



Handling Symbols of Violence

Why is the positive message of Revelation (the downfall of evil earthly powers) expressed by negative images of the female?

‘The objection that “Babylon” is only a metaphor, a symbol, does not eliminate the problem that the text creates for women readers. The author’s exultation over the mutilation, burning and eating of a woman - even a figurative one - tragically implies that women are sometimes deserving of such violence’ (Susan Garrett).