

Lord has forgotten me" (49:1.4). She will not allow easy reconciliation. The resistant voice of the female immediately brings forth a rush of assurance, of evidence, and of promise from Yahweh. In the first Zion song Yahweh answers the complaint that he has forgotten ("Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" [Isa 49:14]). The final Zion song answers the second complaint that Yahweh has forsaken. "For a moment I abandoned [have forsaken] you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer" (54:7-8). Responses to the two concerns voiced by Zion bracket the songs; they provide the beginning and ending to Yahweh's words. But the balance in the relationship shifts. Zion, who has been accused of wrongdoing, is now the accuser. Following her accusation Yahweh is given new names; no longer is Yahweh the enemy. Yahweh is the comforter. Yahweh redeems.

Our contemporary minds are left thinking that Yahweh's words are too facile; they come too quickly. Yahweh claims to be the one who brings forth deliverance for the female. At the bidding of the onlooker, however, and through her own resistant voice, Zion has begun to usher in her own redemption. She is drawn out of the world of the silent and the powerless into the world of future, a world of agency. Yahweh offers not only apology but also a promise of everlasting commitment; even a cursory read of the Zion songs demonstrates that the words of Yahweh are profuse and extravagant. Zion is encouraged to rouse herself (51:17), to stand (51:17), to awaken (52:1), and to sing (54:1) in response to them. Yahweh anticipates a questioning response from her (49:21), but there is none. Daughter Zion becomes, once again, *silent*. Her few brief words in Second Isaiah ("The LORD has forsaken me, my LORD has forgotten me" [49:14]) are words of resistance, and since they are her last, they linger. And so, we are invited to wonder if she finds it difficult to understand how the perpetrator of the violence can be the one who redeems her from it. Is she unconvinced? The prophet, by leaving Zion silent, invites us also to ask the enduring questions about silence, epic suffering, violence, redemption, and God.

THE POWER AND PROBLEM OF REVELATION 18: THE RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF GENDER

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INTRODUCTION

The fall of the whore/Babylon in Rev 18 invites a discussion of gender, sex, violence, and the Bible. The writer presents the image of a woman, a whore, also identified as the city of Babylon in Rev 17, as an embodiment of the political power and violence of the Roman Empire. In Rev 18 there is a prophetic announcement of her downfall and the prediction of laments by the kings, merchants, and sailors who based their wealth and power upon her own. The sexual nature of the destruction of the whore is depicted in 17:16: "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." In some interpretations, the violence of Rev 17-18 is the culmination of the destructive power of Revelation,¹ that the force of this violence is directed toward one who is imaged in female and sexual terms is worthy of exploration.

A question then arises as to what sort of exploration this might be, for Rev 18 also serves as an example of a tension biblical scholars face when trying to determine what to do with images of sex, gender, and violence. The tendency of recent scholarship is to read the text as either all about gender or not about gender at all, leading the interpreter to see it as entirely oppressive or liberating. In either extreme, this tendency seeks to explain away the difficulties of the text—either to discard or redeem it.

One beauty of the book of Revelation is that it is not easily explained, let alone explained away. While scholars may resist the gender stereotypes and violence of the book, the text also resists our simplified readings of it. In this essay, I seek to hold on to the tension that the text

¹ See for example the interpretations of Boesak, Fernandez, Schüssler Fiorenza 1991.

creates—both liberating and oppressing, hopeful and destructive, violent yet eschewing violence—to offer a reading of Rev 18 that allows the symbol to remain multivalent. In opposition to scholars who advocate for the liberating message of the passage or against its sexist imagery, I argue that these features are intertwined. Both the violence and the gender of the image are troubling, yet both are an integral part of the liberating function of the metaphor.

After addressing the dominant opinions on the interpretation of gender regarding the woman/whore/Babylon/Rome,² I explore this image as a blended metaphor. By combining information from different input sources (woman, whore, Babylon, Rome, Israel), the author creates a complex image. In the new image, different aspects of the sources are blended together in such a way that they can no longer be separated from one another. Through this blending, the metaphor achieves its effect: it implicates the reader as a participant in the very evils that the passage condemns. Thus, the combination of the whore and city imagery actually helps to bring out the purpose of Rev 18: the author seeks to convict the reader of participation in systemic evil. Since this is a goal that can be helpful for both feminist and liberationist interpreters, it seems worthwhile to take a step back from the either-or approach and toward the multivalent metaphor.

1. GENDER OR IDOLATRY

Two opinions dominate in the discussion of the gender of the woman/whore/Babylon/Rome: those of Tina Pippin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. While each of these scholars recognizes in some way the multivalency of imagery in Revelation, her reading of this symbol refines the language and allows only one reading. I will argue that it is precisely because of the way the metaphor of the whore/Babylon functions in Rev 18 that we cannot and should not limit the reading of the metaphor to one meaning.

In Tina Pippin's reading of Revelation, the image of the woman/whore/Babylon is irredeemable. While she admits—at least in theory—to

the possibility of more than one reading (1992: 87), Pippin's writing leaves no room for outside interpretations on this matter. She sees the use of the whore image as fatally flawed due to its implicit sanctioning of violence against women. "Women in the Apocalypse are victims—victims of war and patriarchy. The Apocalypse is not a safe space for women" (1992: 80). Pippin translates the violence she perceives against the female image in the text into violence against modern women: "The Apocalypse is cathartic on many levels, but in terms of an ideology of gender, both women characters in the narrative and women readers are victimized." Pippin condemns the book with such vehemence—"the Apocalypse means death to women" (1992: 86)—that it is difficult to see any room left for a different interpretation of the metaphors.

Schüssler Fiorenza sees Pippin as "overinterpreting the text in gender terms" (1998a: 217). This, she argues, "negates the possibility of readers' ethical decision and resistance insofar as it does not leave a rhetorical space for wo/men who desire to read Revelation 'otherwise'" (1998a: 217). Schüssler Fiorenza has picked up on a problem in Pippin's analysis, namely, that although Pippin intends her work to "reveal the focus of fundamentalist and conservative Christian readings of the Apocalypse" (Pippin 1999: 98), in her criticism she essentially accepts their interpretation of Revelation and deconstructs what it means for women. Instead of asserting that the fundamentalist reading is a sexist one, Revelation itself is seen as a sexist text. "By establishing a one-to-one relationship between female/feminine language and symbol on the one hand and actual wo/men on the other, Pippin's reading does not destabilize but rather literalizes the gender inscriptions of the Apocalypse" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998b:100).

Schüssler Fiorenza, in turn, asserts that the harlot image has one meaning—that of its reference to idolatry. Her interpretation confirms what I will argue below, that the whore metaphor uses imagery from the Hebrew Bible "that indicts Jerusalem and the people of Israel for idolatry" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998a: 220). However, in order to read the text in this way, Schüssler Fiorenza also limits the whore/Babylon to refer only to idolatry and not to gender: "the sexual metaphor of 'whoring' does not speak about a female person and actual historical wo/man but must be read as a conventional metaphor for idolatry" (1998b: 101). Contrary to this view, I argue below that the gender of the whore metaphor and the multiple options for its interpretation are crucial aspects of its function in Revelation.

In limiting the metaphor of the whore/Babylon, both Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza are trying to weed out destructive uses of the image. Pippin's perspective is a corrective for readings of Revelation that have ignored and/or confirmed the negative and binary images of women,

² In this essay I alternate the designation of references to the woman/whore/Babylon/Rome, sometimes referring to the whore, harlot, Babylon, Babylon/Rome, etc. This is both for convenience and because the author of Rev also switches between the designations while evoking the same collection of images. I refer to this complex image as a metaphor because I take it to be one multivalent metaphor rather than a group of distinct and separate metaphors. Contemporary conceptual metaphor theorists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Mark Turner, and Raymond Gibbs shape my understanding of metaphor.

reinscribing these readings in their own context.³ Pippin points out how the image of the whore can have a powerful, negative effect on women. Schüssler Fiorenza's interpretation illustrates how the book of Revelation sides with the poor and oppressed. She sees the book not as vengeful but as hopeful (1998a: 100). This makes room for a liberating reading of the text that Pippin excludes. Schüssler Fiorenza sees the importance of reading the gendered language for messages other than the sexist coding of language. This opens the possibility that Revelation is not irredeemable but may still be useful for modern readers.

At the same time, these readings are unhelpful in that they limit the reading of the image of Babylon. Pippin's interpretation denies that some women might find a liberating reading in the text. She sees the dualistic image of women set up by the opposition of the whore and the bride (19:7-8) as necessarily negative for women, for it reasserts false cultural assumptions about women and sexual norms. Clearly, however, there are women who read Revelation differently, including Schüssler Fiorenza. But the liberating interpretation proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza is no less problematic. While she accuses Pippin of binary thinking, she also forces an either-or scenario onto the language of the text. The metaphor of the whore is not only about gender; however, neither is it valid to say that "the vision of Babylon does not tell us anything about the author's understanding of actual wo/men" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998a: 221) and to make the metaphor speak only of idolatry.

The disagreement expressed by Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza is also emblematic of a conflict that is often encountered when comparing feminist and liberationist perspectives. Concerns about gender often conflict with concerns about race and/or class. In this case, Pippin's reading leaves no room for other liberating interpretations; she claims the text does violence to women. Schüssler Fiorenza ignores the important functions of the gendered symbolism in order to read the text as liberating.

The tendency for one set of concerns to block an author's consideration of others is certainly not limited to these two feminist interpreters. Other studies of Revelation have read the whore/Babylon in a one-sided fashion—usually without any reference to gender. Bauckham, Fernandez, Rossing, and Christopher Smith all read the metaphor of Babylon as only economic. In doing so, their analyses implicitly render concerns about gender unimportant. For example, Bauckham states that "Rome is a harlot because her associations with the peoples of her empire are for her

own economic benefit" (347). Such a statement pays no attention to the problematic assumption that prostitutes really benefit from their activities or undertake them because of the economic benefits. Christopher Smith reads a message of economic liberation in the text, ignoring the possibility that the text sanctions violence against women. The analysis of the imagery that Pippin provides never enters into the conversation for most scholars.

Such authors work to limit ideas and behaviors that are destructive to a particular group; in the process, the interpreter may become blind to the ways his or her interpretation is a part of behaviors and attitudes that are destructive of others. (In the examples above, attention to economic concerns leads the author to ignore the impact of the imagery depicting violence against a woman.) Womanist scholars have been pointing out this process for some time. A helpful parallel is bell hooks's analysis of a well-publicized, interracial rape incident in Central Park in which hooks points out the tendency of commentators to choose sides, seeing the interpretive lens for the case as *either* sexism *or* racism. Both must be considered, hooks argues:

If one reads *The Demon Lover* and thinks again about this crime, one can see it as part of a continuum of male violence against women, of rape and terror as weapons of male domination—yet another horrific and brutal expression of patriarchal socialization. And if one considers this case by combining a feminist analysis of race and masculinity, one sees that since male power within patriarchy is relative, men from poorer groups and men of color are not able to reap the material and social rewards for their participation in patriarchy. In fact they often suffer from blindly and passively acting out a myth of masculinity that is life-threatening. Sexist thinking blinds them to this reality. They become victims of the patriarchy. No one can truly believe that the young black males involved in the Central Park incident were not engaged in a suicidal ritual enactment of a dangerous masculinity that will ultimately threaten their lives, their well-being. (63)

In hooks's description, patriarchy blinds people to consideration of racism and sexism that would ultimately be useful in dismantling both simultaneously. In the case of Rev 18, focusing on only one aspect of the whore metaphor blinds interpreters to the metaphor's full potential. Feminist and liberationist interpretations end up being pitted against one another.

2. BABYLON AS A BLENDED METAPHOR

Revelation 18 follows the initial vision of the woman/whore/Babylon/Rome of Rev 17. Building on some of the themes of 17, this chapter takes

³ A recent example of this type of interpretation is that of G.K. Beale, who attributes the destruction of Babylon to her "idolatrous seduction of people" (892).

the image of Babylon in a new direction. In Rev 18, Babylon/Rome is condemned for sins such as idolatry, violence, self-glorification, and wealth. Drawing on Hebrew Bible uses of the whore metaphor to refer to both foreign cities and to Israel, Rev 18 points out to the hearer both the evils of the political and economic world of the Roman Empire and their own complicity in this system. The language of the chapter functions to convince the hearer that God's power is greater than Babylon's and to convict hearers of the ways in which they have fallen under Babylon's power.

In the terminology of conceptual metaphor theorists, the woman/Rome/Babylon is a "blended metaphor" (M. Turner: 57-84). A blended metaphor uses information and logic from more than one source (called an "input source"). In the case of Rev 18, the multiple input sources include woman, whore, Babylon, Rome, Israel. Both abstract and specific information from the sources is projected into the blended space of the metaphor. One of the creative features of a blended metaphor is the ability to construct the inference of the metaphor according to the logic of a different frame of reference. In the case of the whore/Babylon, the blended space allows the reading community (which likely does not normally identify itself with the evils of Rome) to become embroiled in the sins of Rome.

There are multiple ways to describe the blending of the whore/Babylon metaphor. The metaphor itself is multiple. In Rev 17 an angel introduces the "great whore" (17:1), and when the Seer looks, he sees a "woman" (17:3) on whose forehead is written "Babylon the great" (17:5). The angel then explains this metaphor in 17:18: "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." Whore, woman, Babylon, Rome: this is neither one simple metaphor nor one in which the elements of the metaphor can easily be separated from one another. In the sections that follow I describe two specific aspects of the blending of this metaphor. First, the Babylon metaphor has multiple referents: Rome, for example, as well as Israel. The blending of Rome and Israel and the sins attributed to them is one crucial aspect of the metaphor's ability to implicate the reader in the sins of Babylon. Second, the fornication metaphor is blended with Babylon. This additional blending supplies the logic by which the whore/Babylon will be destroyed. Although I discuss these aspects of the metaphor separately, they are at times indistinguishable and have the same ultimate effect: to implicate the reading community in the sins of Rome/Babylon and to call the reader to "come out."

2.1. *Blending Babylon: Rome and Israel*

In Rev 17 the woman/whore/Babylon has been set up as a metaphor for Rome. While this remains the case in Rev 18, the image is used here to

implicate the reading community in the sins of Babylon/Rome. In the prophetic literature, the image of the whore has been applied not only to foreign cities but also to God's own people; thus, the metaphor easily takes on a blended character. This is especially useful in Rev 18; it convicts the reader of participation in Babylon's sin and thus encourages the reader to heed the call to "come out."

There are many indications in Rev 18 that the primary input source for the metaphor of Babylon is Rome. The author uses the language from prophetic literature dealing specifically with Babylon, although other cities (Tyre) or kingdoms (Edom) are also in the background.⁴

The connection of Babylon and Rome, already present in Jewish circles and implied in Rev 17, is reinforced by images here that paint a picture of Babylon in a way that looks strikingly like the contemporary power of the Roman Empire. Additionally, the plagues Babylon will receive are typical acts of retribution following the capture of a foreign city (Aune: 996). The description of the power and wealth of Rome expressed in 18:5-19 also expresses features of Roman life that were well known in the first century (Bauckham: 338-83). The whore/Babylon would thus have been recognizable to the first-century reader as Rome.

Conversely, some scholars have argued that the primary input source for Babylon is not Rome but Jerusalem (Ford: 285-86, 296-307; Provan: 91-97). The above references to Babylon as a foreign city work against this reading. What does happen in Rev 18 is that the input sources of Rome and Israel are blended in the metaphor Babylon. Because of this, Babylon is not a simple tool for the condemnation of Rome but becomes one that is used to implicate the reading community in the sins attributed to Rome. Some aspects of the text that have been used as evidence for identifying Babylon as Jerusalem may be seen in this light.

A few of the arguments have stemmed from features of the text that seem incongruous if Babylon is read simply as Rome. To say that Rome "has become a house of demons and a refuge of every unclean spirit" would imply that Rome was previously viewed as clean. This would make no sense from the Jewish-Christian milieu of Revelation. Likewise, the accusations of idolatry in the fornication theme are not sensibly applied to a foreign power that was never understood to worship the God of Israel.

⁴ A list of the most obvious references to the prophets' condemnation of foreign cities would include: v. 2 (Isa 21:9; Jer 51:8; Isa 13:21; Jer 51:37); v. 3 (Isa 13:21-22; Jer 51:7; 25:15); v. 4 (Jer 51:45, 6, 9); v. 5 (Jer 51:9); v. 6 (Jer 50:15, 29; 16:18; Isa 40:2); v. 7 (Isa 47:8; Exod 28:2); v. 8 (Isa 47:9).

In addition to these facets of the text, there are Hebrew Bible references that show that the language of Rev 18 could also apply to Israel. While some of the prophetic language points to a parallel between Babylon and foreign cities, some connects Babylon and Israel. The strange inhabitants of the city in 18:2 resemble statements in Amos 5:2 and Jer 9:11 that refer to Israel and Jerusalem. While less explicit, the wine imagery of 18:3 may also evoke the images of Israel as God's vineyard (Isa 5; 27:1-5; Jer 12:10). Verse 6 becomes especially interesting because of the language of doubling punishment. This more extreme punishment is an idea in the Hebrew Bible applied only to Israel/Jerusalem (Jer 16:18; Isa 40:2), while foreigners were depicted as receiving a punishment equal to their crime (Jer 50:29).

The harlot image itself is most commonly a reference to the faithlessness of God's people.⁵ Although foreign cities are described in the Hebrew Bible using the metaphor of the whore, the prophetic image of Israel as harlot is especially relevant in Rev 18, because here fornication is attributed not to Babylon but to her consorts. Revelation 18:3 contains three references to fornication using slightly different vocabulary. In all three of these, the subject of the verb is not Babylon but the nations, kings, and merchants who, in their various ways, fornicated with her. The implication is that these sins belong not only to Babylon but also to those who have participated with her in fornication.

Rather than shifting the weight of the evidence toward Babylon as Jerusalem, these factors point to a function of Rev 18, to implicate the reading community in the sins of Rome. While the metaphor of the whore/Babylon is initially identified as Rome, the blending of the image allows the additional assertion that the reading community participates in the sins of the empire. As part of a Jewish-Christian community, the reader is expected to identify with Israel as a character evoked through the prophetic texts. The readers thereby understand their participation in these sins and can see themselves as those who are called to "come out."

The metaphor also helps to indict the reading community because of the multiplicity of sins that are implied through the blended metaphor. The sins of Babylon/Rome—and the reading community—are numerous. There is a blanket condemnation of Babylon's sin in 18:5: "her sins have reached up to heaven and God has remembered her wrongs." Specific sins are somewhat difficult to identify. This is partly because they are

not listed but are spread throughout Rev 17 and 18. Some of these sins are explicit and directly attributed to the whore/Babylon: fornication (*πορνεία*, 17:4-5; 18:3), sorcery (*φαρμακεία*, 18:23), and the slaughter of the saints (17:6; 18:24). Other sins are implied through the language of the chapter. Arrogance is implied through the speech attributed to Babylon in 18:7, idolatry through the language of Babylon's self-glorification (18:7) and the harlot image, and wealth through its attribution to the merchants (18:3), listed as one of the reasons for Babylon's downfall.

The ample space allotted to economic sins in the lament portion of the chapter gives them special emphasis. The subjects of the laments—kings, merchants, and sailors—as well as their content (especially in the exhaustive list of goods of 18:11-13) point to the prominence of the economic critique. Adding to this is the nuance of meaning of the word *στóρνός* (*luxury*) and its cognates in 18:1-10. While usually translated "luxury" (NRSV), this word can also be translated as "sensuality," which retains its relationship to the idea of fornication. Thus the reference to luxury is not only present in more places than is readily apparent from many translations, but it is integrally tied to the fornication image.

The dual definition of *στóρνός* is important to remember in interpreting the meaning of wealth in the rest of Rev 18. Living sensually/luxuriously is indicated twice as reason for Babylon's condemnation (18:3, 6). Wealth, then, is probably not viewed ambiguously in this chapter, as Adela Yarbro Collins suggests (129). Equally unlikely is Provan's assertion that wealth is only important for what it symbolizes about religious commitment (88-89). The lengthy descriptions of finery (18:12-13, 16) not only suggest the gravity of the sin in the extent of wealth that is represented but also tie the criticism to actual practice familiar within the Roman Empire (Bauckham: 350-66). While a spiritual critique of wealth is possible (as seems to be present in 3:17), the concrete nature of the wealth described in this chapter seems to exclude a purely spiritual analysis. As a whole, Rev 18 depicts real criticism of the economic practices of the Roman Empire. However, it is not necessary to choose between economic and other types of sins. The multiplicity of sins is important to the interpretation of the chapter. As Bauckham notes,

John sees a connection between Rome's economic affluence, Rome's idolatrous self-deification, and Rome's military and political brutality. The power of his critique of Rome—perhaps the most thorough-going critique from the period of the early empire—lies in the connection it portrays between these various facets of Rome's evil. (349)

The connection between the sins heightens the awareness of Babylon's evils.

⁵ References to Israel/Judah as harlot include Lev 17:7; 20:5-6; Num 14:33; 15:39; Deut 1:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27; 1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 21:11; Ps 73:27; Hos 1:2; 2:4; 4:15; 9:1; Jer 2:20; 3:2; 9, 13; 5:7, 11; 13:27; Ezek 6:9; 16: 23; 43:7, 9.

The interrelatedness of various sins means that "coming out" of Babylon has more than one meaning, depending on the sin the reader has in view. The options in reading numerous sins give readers more opportunities to identify themselves as the recipients of this call. Bauckham has identified merchants as one component of John's audience for whom the author "has set a kind of hermeneutical trap. Any reader who finds himself [sic] sharing the perspective of Rome's mourners . . . should thereby discover, with a shock, where he stands, and the peril in which he stands" (376). While Bauckham has pointed to one of the important functions of Rev 18—that of the self-identification of the reader with the sins of the Roman system—it is not necessary for the reader to be a merchant in order for this identification to take place. The multiplicity and interconnectedness of the sins involved allow for anyone who participates in the Roman economy or cultic system to see himself or herself as implicated in the downfall of Babylon.

Revelation 18 convinces readers of Babylon's sins at the same time it convicts them of participation in that sin. If readers do not heed the call to "come out," they will "receive from her plagues" (18:4). The metaphor of Babylon is an important part of this function because of the way it allows the author to draw upon language that evokes the evils of an oppressive empire as well as the sins of God's own people. Through this blended metaphor, the agency of the readers becomes intertwined with that of the Roman Empire. The call to "come out" is not one for the reader to sit idly by and witness the destruction of evil but is a call to act.

The blending of Babylon, Rome, and Israel is a key to the metaphor's ability to implicate the reader in this multitude of sins. The gender of the metaphor is another key. This was implicit in the discussion of the whore and Israel above; I now turn to a more explicit discussion of this feature of the metaphor.

2.2. *Gender Blending: The Whore/Babylon*

The Babylon metaphor is also blended with the image of the woman/whore of Rev 17. This additional step of blending forms one complex metaphor. In the blending of the metaphor, the inference of the metaphor is created: the reading community is associated with the sins of Rome, whose immanent destruction is deserved. The inclusion of the woman/whore is crucial to the function of the metaphor.

The gender of the whore/Babylon plays an important role in the way the metaphor functions. Numerous features of the text point to the careful use of a gendered metaphor to achieve its effect. The fact that Rome is pictured as a woman is relevant in and of itself. There were certainly other possibilities available to the author, even though cities were

conventionally imaged as women. Consider, for example, the coin that Aune cites as an item that the author might have had in mind in creating the metaphor (920). The coin depicts the goddess Roma seated on seven hills. Yet in the image of the coin, the "goddess" is depicted as a *male* warrior. Even if this coin were not known to the author of Revelation, its image reminds us that the goddess Roma does not necessarily have to be imaged as a woman. This is a choice made by the author.

In Rev 18 Babylon is no longer pictured directly as a woman or a whore; the imagery is that of a city. However, the input source of the whore and the logic associated with fornication are blended with the city imagery of the Babylon metaphor in Rev 18. As I explain in the following paragraphs, the fornication theme establishes the logic through which it is understood that the hearer participates in the sins of Babylon/Rome and brings about her destruction. The gender of the whore/Babylon and the social conventions she evokes are an integral part of this logic.

One can see the usefulness of the whore image clearly in 18:2-3, where human responsibility for Babylon's downfall becomes apparent. Here Babylon is described as fallen, and the reason for her falling is given in 18:3: "Because all the nations have fallen down from the wine of the anger of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have fornicated with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her sensuality." From this statement, it is not Babylon's actions, but those of others, that are responsible for the city's destruction. The metaphor of fornication functions to associate the activities of the people with Babylon's sin and destruction. The fall of Babylon is described here as a result of the activity of humans who have fallen down, fornicated, and gotten rich.

The gender of the whore/Babylon is a critical aspect of its utility. The whore is an input source that contributes the logic that undergirds the destruction of Babylon. As Aune notes, a list of what others have done hardly qualifies as reason for destroying Babylon:

Who is to blame for committing fornication, the kings of the earth or Babylon? This can only be construed as a reason for Babylon's fall given the ancient and modern double standard that holds the woman rather than the man responsible for violating sexual mores. (988)

The metaphor functions as it does in part because of the background assumption of a double standard for women and men in their responsibility for sexual norms. This assumption is present in Rev 18 when the whore is described as fallen because others have fornicated with her. She is seen as being held responsible for their sins. This is possible because of cultural norms regarding gender, which were present at the time of the writing and are still largely active today. Were Babylon imaged as a man,

it would not make sense to the reader that Babylon is blamed for what others have done. The sexual nature of the actions would seem disconnected because men are generally not harshly judged for having multiple sexual partners. Since it is a woman who is blamed—and one who has already violated sexual mores, at that—her condemnation is not incongruous with what the reader already believes.

The image of the whore is useful to the author because of the social conventions it evokes. This point seems similar to what Schüssler Fiorenza has said of her own hermeneutic, which "understands language as a convention or tool that enables writers and readers to negotiate linguistic tensions and inscribed ambiguities and thereby to create meaning in specific contexts and sociopolitical locations" (1998b: 96). Because of the conventions associated with female prostitutes, the whore metaphor functions to imply that the actions of the nations contribute to the fall of Babylon. Thus the gender of the whore—and the unjust cultural assumptions that it implies—are not at all incidental to the vision of Rev 18. Rather than being an aspect of the passage that is easily treated separately, the gender of the metaphor must be considered as an aspect of its ability to convict the reader of participation in the sins of Babylon/Rome.

3. A READING OF THE BLENDED METAPHOR

Ironically, from a present-day feminist perspective the image of the whore not only functions to convince the reader of sin but also enacts the very dynamic it seeks to represent. As I have argued, one power of the whore/Babylon metaphor is in its ability to convince the reader of participation in systemic evil while at the same time convicting the reader of that activity. A feminist reading of Revelation would see the division of women into virgin/whore stereotypes and the blame and punishment of women for sexual acts as systemic evils themselves. The text, however, relies on this particular form of evil in its construction of the blended metaphor. Part of the metaphor rests on the logic of "whore" as an input source; the logic of this source includes the notion that the whore deserves punishment because of the actions of others. In order to understand and utilize the image of the whore, the reader buys into the logic of the metaphor and in so doing accepts the unjust social norms on which it rests.

In grasping this image, the reader reinforces harmful stereotypes of women and thus participates in human sin. The metaphor of fornication convinces the reader that humans are entangled in evil; the way the metaphor functions becomes an additional example of the reader's participation in this evil. The text does not itself reveal sexist stereotypes as a systemic evil; however, the message of the text and its rhetoric invites a

feminist interpretation that allows the text to critique its own perspective on gender norms.

In the metaphor of the whore/Babylon, the message of liberation is intertwined with the stereotyping and violence of the image. The feminist critique of the above paragraph depends upon the liberating message of the downfall of oppressive powers; this message in turn rests upon the use of the female as a symbol of evil. Rather than acting as a deterrent for feminist interpreters, this aspect of the text may invite further reflection upon the larger patterns of feminist response to texts like Rev 18.

CONCLUSION

Going back to the many meanings of the metaphor is helpful in analyzing the conversation between Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza, because each author attempts to limit the metaphor to one of its aspects. Pippin focuses on the whore as woman, Schüssler Fiorenza on the description of the sins of Rome and their implications. One might say Pippin limits the metaphor to the whore, Schüssler Fiorenza to Babylon. But the metaphor of Rev 18 blends both these concepts into one creative image. Keeping the blended nature of the metaphor in view reminds us of the function of the passage, to implicate human action in the many sins of the powerful Roman Empire. Focusing on only one aspect of sin should alert the reader to the possibility that the interpretation will be limited in important ways.

This is not an argument that the text has no limits. Rather, it is that the interpreter should try to discern the possibilities of the metaphor based on the language of the text and what is known of the culture in which it was formed. In this case, Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions regarding Babylon, Rome, and the whore may be explored as primary sources for the metaphor. The openness of the text comes in the blending of a variety of sources into a complex metaphor. Limitation of the metaphor to only one referent reads against the construction of the image as a blended metaphor.

The very openness of the metaphor is perhaps what leads interpreters to try to set such limits. Eugene Borling has noted the prevalence of indirect communication in the description of Babylon's destruction, which he says "has two advantages: (1) the hearer-readers cannot be passive but must in their imaginations construct the scene themselves from the spectators' laments; and, (2) it gives them the freedom to choose whether to identify with the speakers in the drama. John does not tell his congregations how they should respond" (186). The problem becomes that interpreters seem to *want* to know how to respond. Or at least, we want to limit the possible ways that others will respond. The potential use of the metaphors of Revelation for promoting violence against other

humans is one of the problems recognized by both Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza. Limiting the openness of the whore/Babylon metaphor, however, also limits the reader's ability to stand convicted of the multitude of Babylon's sins.

Feminist interpretations often present an either-or scenario through which a biblical text is either redeemed (seen as nonsexist) or denied (seen as entirely sexist and, therefore, not "scripture"). Schüssler Fiorenza and Pippin's analyses of Rev 18 are examples of this tendency. The reasons for this are understandable: after centuries of interpretations that have caused harm to women both individually and corporately, there has been a perceived need to gain clarity about whether a text is for or against the interests of women.

This approach creates its own problems, however. One problem, noted above, is that the structure and language of this passage resists such an approach. The liberating message of the text—the destruction of the forces of oppression—cannot be separated from its use of female metaphors, which reinforce the stereotypes of a patriarchal society. At the same time this liberating message is a powerful one, calling attention to economic and social forces that are both detrimental to people and widespread. The either-or approach flattens the language of the text by denying the blending of images and subsequently reducing the importance of the inferences accomplished through that blending.

Another problem is that the approach does not recognize fully that women have various interests. The reduction of the text to one reading bears with it the assumption that such a reading can speak for all women (and all people). This is not the case; even in the exchange between Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza it is clear that these two women have divergent interests and appreciate different aspects of the passage. Although the exchange is not unfriendly, there nevertheless remains little possibility that the two interests might be seen as compatible. The options that seem to be available in the Pippin-Schüssler Fiorenza debate are for one side to capitulate to the other or for the two interests to remain in opposition to one another. Yet it is such opposition between feminist and liberationist concerns—or between concerns of racism and sexism or classism and sexism—that have frequently been recognized as harmful to both positions. The possibility of affirming the importance of liberation for both economic and gender concerns is lost in the assertion that the metaphor bears only one meaning.

For scholars concerned to address both sexism and economic or other forms of oppression, the either-or approach fails because it requires that these interests become separated. The approach of this essay has been to recognize that gender oppression that is culturally embedded in a biblical text can be harmful, without denying that the text may still be useful.

Some texts that rely on negative stereotypes or violence against women may also bear a liberating message. This approach recognizes that the willingness to give up part of the text—either its liberating message or its gender coding—means that the interpreter must forfeit something important. If the interpreter emphasizes the gender stereotyping, then the text is only oppressive and sexist. If the interpreter emphasizes the message of liberation from economic oppression, then she loses the ability to say anything critical of the violence against the whore.

By embracing both the message of liberation and the sexist norms it employs, the interpretation is not fully satisfying; it is liberating and oppressive at the same time. Yet this complexity is helpful because it reflects the realities that forms of oppression are often intertwined and that humans can be blind to the way our own participation maintains these forms. The reader of Rev 18 is called to recognize complicity in systemic evils and to "come out." Even though the text itself is complicit in sexist stereotyping, the vision of the passage is one in which the sins of Babylon are always multifaceted and with which the reader is always involved. In a complex world, this way of seeing may be the most important message that Rev 18 offers.