

Reading the Book of Revelation

A RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS

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A Tale of Two Cities and (At Least) Three Women

TRANSFORMATION, CONTINUITY, AND CONTRAST
IN THE APOCALYPSE

Edith M. Humphrey

... there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever." (Rev 11:12)

"Behold, I am coming soon! . . . Behold, I am coming soon! . . . Surely, I am coming soon!" (22:7, 12, 20)

It may surprise students of the NT to learn that the Apocalypse is the most frequently read book of the Bible in North American correctional institutions. This fascination stems, no doubt, from the popular (mis)conception that the book makes pronouncements in the manner of a sacred medium, her gaze firmly fixed upon the future: surely *here* one may move, unlimited by prison bars, into the realm of a more promising, more interesting future! Yet, as the two short citations above show, the mysteries of Revelation are as much about the present and past as about the future.

Its name in Greek is *Apokalypse*, meaning "unveiling" or "uncovering," and the uncovering has to do with mysteries that encompass the whole scope of human time (imagine a horizontal time line), even pushing the limits of the beginning and the end. The unveiling also has a vertical (spatial) dimension, probing mysteries in the heavens above and in the abyss below,¹ although the lower regions are only intimated. (Some later Christian apocalypses will, however, feature vivid explorations of

¹ See *Semeia* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press) 14 (1979), an issue edited by John J. Collins with the theme "Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre."

hell.) So Revelation is not just about the future; its scope is both temporal (past, present, and future) and spatial (what takes place "up here," 4:1). The seer John—and so the reader—is invited to explore these mysteries through the mediation of heavenly voices and figures from that realm, and is especially addressed by the One who is named the "First and the Last."

Not surprisingly for a piece directed toward a relatively young community, and which eventually found itself within the NT collection of community writings, there is also a focus on the issue of identity. Even this concern for identity is presented as a mystery, or set of mysteries, to be revealed: Who are God's people, in relation to the world, in relation to their forbears, in relation to angelic beings, in relation to God? This theme is so insistently sounded, so integrally woven into the rich tapestry of symbols, actions, vision, and structures, that it appears to vie for attention alongside the temporal and cosmic mysteries vouchsafed to the reader(s). The book signals itself not only as a revelation of the mysteries of heaven, of past, present, and future, but as a mysterious retelling of the story of God's new humanity. In providing such a perspective, the Johannine Apocalypse answers not only to the *what* of this mysterious cosmos, and the *when* of these mysterious events, but also to the question of *who*—how God's people are to be understood. A significant aspect of this identity is made present in feminine imagery.

Intimations of the City and the Women

And so, we come to a tale of two cities and (at least) three women. Obviously, the Apocalypse is a complex book, and the city/women images are only one or, perhaps, two threads in the fabric. The purpose of this study is to follow this thread and to use it to consider the entire sweep of the Apocalypse. We will be tracing the descriptions and intertextual allusions, the locales and actions, associated with the city/women figures, and analyzing the manner in which these symbols are rendered effective within their immediate structural contexts (smaller units) and within the overall structure of the book.

In any reading, particularly a literary study, it is helpful to approach the book with some understanding of its overall plan. However, the intricate nature of the Apocalypse has made mapping a structure very difficult.² There is much to be said for considering the book, as has Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,³ as a series of inclusive brackets, comparable to the

² For a consideration of several representative structural suggestions, see Edith M. Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, The Apocalypse, and the Shepherd of Hermas* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 82–83.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation," CBQ 39 (1977): 344–66; idem, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 159–80.

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nesting dolls that come from Slavic countries. Thus the framework of the beginning and end mirror each other (A, 1:1–8 // A', 22:10–22:21), the promise of the seven letters mirrors the fulfillment of judgment and salvation (B, 1:9–3:22 // B', 19:11–22:9), the seven seals and trumpet events mirror the seven bowls, together comprising the contents of the “sealed scroll” (C, 4:1–9:21 // C', 15:5–19:10), and we find a central section, the “little prophetic scroll,” at exact center (D, 10:1–15:4). Moreover, there are a few bits that seem misplaced, which function to interlock the parts, binding them together rather than separating.⁴ But this picture is too static, for there is also a dynamic, forward movement, leading to the climax and conclusion. The interconnected women and city figures emerge with full force in the second half of the book, that is, from chapter 12 on. Attention to the structure of intercalated sections (ABCDC'B'A') suggested above gives these symbols even more prominence, with one female actor taking a prominent role in the very center of the Apocalypse (D) and both cities and women coming to the forefront of the action as the book moves toward its grand finale.

Some have assumed that these figures appear from nowhere, beginning at chapter 12, but there is in fact an intimation of them even during the first few chapters. It is as if the two great cities and femininely pictured actors are waiting in the wings, ready to emerge at the dramatic moment. In continuity with a long tradition of biblical and extrabiblical writings, the *polis* and the woman stand for human communities or groups, either in faithful relationship to God, or in rebellion and infidelity. The early description of the faithful community as the work of Jesus Christ (“he has made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father,” 1:6) and the initial vision of Jesus (in which he walks among the lampstands, speaking to his churches, 1:12–20) set the scene for a relationship later developed in masculine/feminine imagery. Among the promises in the letters to the seven churches (chs. 2–3), we catch a glimpse of the final city, the New Jerusalem, with which the Apocalypse will conclude in chapters 21–22. The letters offer tantalizing images of “the tree of life . . . in the paradise of God” (2:7b), “a new name” (2:17b), “walk[ing] with [him] in white” (3:4b), and “sit[ting] with [him] on [his] throne” (3:21)—all notes and chords that will be recapitulated in the final cadences of the book, when the New Jerusalem is described. In the letter to Philadelphia, the city is not merely suggested, but makes a brief cameo appearance: “I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (3:12). At this point the feminine imagery to be used later does not emerge. The individual believer is addressed by the masculine

⁴ For further details, see the references in n. 3 and Humphrey, *Ladies and the Cities*, 91–100.

pronoun (used inclusively, in the custom of the times, for female faithful, as well); it is the *city* of New Jerusalem (not yet the bride) who makes a debut: yet do we catch sight of her bridal skirts, so to speak, in the picture of one who "comes down from God," endowed "with a new name"? All is allusive and elusive: we are in the realm of promise at this point in the Apocalypse, not fulfillment.

More concrete—in fact, quite earthy!—is the description of "the woman Jezebel" in the letter to Thyatira (2:20). She finds her counterpart in the male figure of "Balaam," who is presented to the reader in the immediately preceding letter to Pergamum. Both churches have been infected with "immorality" and the eating of "food sacrificed to idols" (cf. Num 24 and 1 Kgs 16). Even more striking is the language used to describe "Jezebel" and her awaited judgment. If, at this point in his writing, the seer is content merely to intimate the glories of the bride, he is more willing to fill in a picture of present debauchery and fast-approaching judgment. It is, of course, not clear whether the infidelities of Jezebel—or for that matter, of those "holding to the teachings of Balaam"—are intended literally. Within the "grammar" of the imagery, "immorality" may be a figure for spiritual adultery, that is, infidelity to God. In this case, "immorality" would form a parallelism with the charge of idolatry, rather than a separate item.

At any rate, Jezebel, a self-styled prophet(ess), is presented as a leader of evil who has seduced the servants of God with promises of the "deep things of Satan." Her refusal to repent means that she will be forcibly removed from the bed of infidelity and "thrown on a sickbed," to receive, along with her co-adulterers, great tribulation and judgment at the hands of the One who rules with a rod of iron. Rather than treating her simply as an unknown prophetess, we should consider the network of imagery surrounding "Jezebel," whose very name is a cipher. This means that, alongside the more obvious symbolic female figures (New Jerusalem and the prostitute Babylon), the picture of Jezebel addresses the Christian community in general, and not merely the seven churches. The language used for her both echoes the Old Testament judgments of "the daughter of the Chaldeans" (Isa 47:1–15; cf. Ezek 28:2) and sets up overtones to be rung again more fully in the description of "Babylon's" downfall at the climax of the drama. The references to those who "commit adultery with her" and to "her children" not only establish these connections but also picture "Jezebel" (seemingly a local manifestation of "Babylon") as intimately connected with a community. Even the initial polemical reference to her as "*that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet*" sets up this corporate dimension—while also surprising the biblically literate reader who expects the title "Queen." A complicating factor is the suggestion that while "Jezebel's" fate is sealed, her collaborators may still repent. The judgment of unrepentant evil is unambiguous; the position of those implicated is not.

In this initial major section of the Apocalypse (the seven letters), we therefore find tantalizing glimpses of the women/city figures to follow. While these are brief, they are in no way minor accents, nor tangential to the discourse. Subtle allusions to New Jerusalem, scattered across the letters, crystallize in the letter to the most faithful of the congregations, Philadelphia (3:11–12). The danger of infidelity and warnings of judgment, similarly scattered across the letters, set up themes that will be sounded more fully in the descriptions of Babylon. At this early point in the Apocalypse, the figure of Jezebel emerges like a threatening cancer in the center of the letter section, Thyatira taking middle place among the seven churches. Within the heart of God's community, there is a pretender who is to be searched by the One with "eyes like a flame of fire" and found wanting; yet there is also the promise of glory for those who have endurance, and who listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. Both dynamics of faithfulness and faithlessness have a present reality. That the presence of infidelity is by no means marginal is suggested by the central placement of Jezebel's description. Still, there is the vision of purity, not *yet* brought to fulfillment in a final victorious statement, but held out as promise in the message to Philadelphia. For now, the seer will close on a darker note ("Therefore repent!") to Laodicea: the end is not yet.

At chapter 4, we leave the imagery of city and women for a while and are snatched up with John into heaven to behold the throne, the Lion/Lamb, the ongoing divine liturgy, the scroll with its seven seals, the unsealing of a scroll which unleashes plagues upon earth, the sealing of the 144,000, and the praise of the multitude. And we hear sounds and voices: the sounding of seven trumpets, voices of declaration, the uninterpreted and mysterious seven thunders. The momentum of action increases, and the inevitability of judgment and fulfillment seems assured, as we come to the measuring of God's temple, the victorious ascension of God's two servants, the long-delayed sounding of the seventh trumpet and a declaration of victory: "the kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ . . ." (11:15). But the end is not yet. Throughout the seals and the trumpets, we have experienced a sequence, or unfolding, of sight and sounds which shows deliberate signs of order, and of disrupted order. As we hear the sounding of the seventh trumpet, and look in awe at the pyrotechnics accompanying its final note (11:19), the end again eludes us. Instead, the prophet turns our attention to a new and different story. He has eaten a little scroll of prophecy, direct from the hand of God (10:11), and means to tell us about it, from his perspective in heaven (4:1; the scene is recalled at 11:16–19).

The Refugee Queen

Enter another woman (12:1–6). She is a great portent, a sign, clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her

head. *Here* is a queen (where "Jezebel" only pretended), about to give birth. A second sign is introduced, an enormous red dragon, with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns. He sweeps a third of the stars out of heaven, and blocks the woman, attempting to devour her child, a child who will "rule all the nations" and who is snatched up to heaven, while the woman flees to the desert. An evil dragon, a rescued prince, a refugee queen. "Speed, bonnie boat . . .," and all that. The stuff of stories!

Abruptly, with only the dragon as a link, John switches scenes. There is war in heaven, with Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his evil crew, and they are cast down to earth. Finally, our dragon is identified as the ancient serpent, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. After the expulsion of the diabolic forces, we hear a positive declaration by the loud voice in heaven:

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. Rejoice then, you heavens, and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short! (12:10-12)

Notice here that the declaration gives us another insight into the battle. Michael and his angels fight against the dragon; yet the dragon has been overcome "by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony." It seems that the one born to be king has not *exactly* been rescued after all, but that he has fought the good fight, and in being slaughtered, has won. Yet what does the casting down of Satan mean for those on earth? It means suffering, because the dragon is in hot pursuit.

What are we to make of this? The accuser of God's people, the one who wants to devour the child and hurt the woman, is God's enemy. In one sense, he has been conquered: the decisive battle has been fought through the death of Jesus, the Lamb. *Now* has come the authority of God's Messiah, the Lion who is a Lamb. No longer will God listen to the accusations of the adversary, no longer does Satan have access to the throne, because of what the Lamb has done. *Now* have come God's power, and kingdom, and salvation. Yet this very conquest means the unleashing of Satan upon the world, upon those associated with the woman. Suffering is a necessary *result* of the conquest of Satan, as much as it is the means to his defeat: "[T]hey overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and the word of their martyrdom. . . . woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you." Here is a convoluted but powerful "logic." The enemy has been conquered by suffering, yet the very conquest of Satan in heaven means the suffering of God's people here and now.

Again, the seer switches scenes, returning to the conflict between the

dragon and the woman in 12:13–17. No longer able to devour the child (for the child is the One who wields true authority), the dragon pursues the woman. And she is given help. Help comes from the earth itself, which swallows the flood coming from the dragon. Yet first, help comes from heaven: she is given eagle's wings, a help to the woman but also to the reader. By allusion to Exod 19:4, John cues us as to the identity of this refugee queen, reminding us of the children of Israel, carried by God on eagle's wings out of Egypt. The image of eagle's wings recalls also the great "Song of Moses" (Deut. 32:11), a metaphorical retelling of Israel's story (Deut 32:1ff.) that takes place at a climactic point in the Book of Deuteronomy, prior to the blessing of the twelve tribes by Moses. Here the differences are as instructive as the parallels. In the Song of Moses, the Lord discovers the foundling Israel in the desert, rescues him with eagle's wings, and leads him into a land of plenty. In John's vision, the woman is rescued on eagle's wings and flies *to the desert*, to a place prepared for her by God. The desert also is included in God's design, dismal and dangerous as it may be. It is a place of preparation (v. 6) and nourishment (v. 14). This dual theme of preparation/nourishment, of course, again recalls Israel, wandering for a probation period in the wilderness and fed by manna and quails before the tribes entered the promised land.

Thus, the queen is a kind of Israel, an Israel associated with the Messiah, and an Israel associated with other offspring who "keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (v. 17). This heavenly woman, introduced as one crowned with *twelve* stars, is bound up with both the people that brought forth the Messiah and with the children against whom the adversary fights. Not yet come to a throne or a city, she is the epitome of humility. In refuge, and requiring protection, she is nonetheless a queen by birth. Her two places of residence, heaven and the desert, are pictures of her identity.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the desert sojourn and the time references connected with it. Notice that two times are given for the woman's stay in the desert, at 12:6 and 12:14. In fact, they are the same, since 1,260 days is equivalent to "time, times, and half a time" (i.e., three and a half years)—and also equivalent to forty-two months (cf. 11:2). While we do well to disregard the ink spilled regarding these numbers in popular dispensational tomes, the numbers are not irrelevant. They are best understood in concert with other time references in the Apocalypse, since 7 is a recurring number, and the $1,260 = 42 = 3\frac{1}{2}$ times is found also at 11:2, 3, and 11, as well as at 13:5. This is the time period that the holy city will be trampled upon; this is the time period during which two paradigmatic witnesses of God will prophesy in sackcloth; this is the time period during which the demonic beast, who deceives the world, will be allowed to blaspheme and exercise authority. *This* is the time period in which the woman, in a desert place, will be cared for and prepared.

John's visions pile image upon image, suggesting that suffering and the seeming victory of evil are temporary, but allowed by God. The desolation, the humiliation, the oppression will all be used by God to God's glory—they are part of the care of God's people, a prepared time of three and a half that fits into the perfect "7" (or renewed, re-created "8") of this drama.

In considering the seven letters, I noted the placement of Jezebel at the very heart of that section—a dramatic description of infidelity requiring judgment. In the sequence of chapter 12, the disposition is equally effective, but to a different end. Consider again the outline of the chapter: the two major characters are introduced; the woman is persecuted and flies; there is war in heaven; there is a grand declaration of conquest (12:10–12); we return to the woman's persecution and flight; and there is war on earth:

- a The woman and the dragon
- b The persecution and flight of the woman
- c War in heaven
- d Declaration of victory
- c' War in heaven
- b' The persecution and flight of the woman
- a' War on earth (the dragon and the women's children)

This is a chapter, following a pattern of inclusive brackets, that describes and is enveloped by conflict and suffering. We return to the two major players (plus the women's children) in the final section, but the story is not brought to resolution, and the war continues. Yet in the midst of this, there is a confident declaration of victory (d), an oracle that connects the suffering of the Lamb with victory over the dragon and that declares even suffering to be a part of God's purpose. Those in solidarity with the Lamb (and the woman) are directed to understand that God's ways are often mysterious. The time in the desert, only half the story, is superintended by God. If there is a cancer in the heart of God's community, a state that requires judgment, there is also a victory in the midst of suffering. Things are not always as they seem: an apocalypse, an uncovering, is needed.

John continues his saga, telling us more about the dragon and his two beasts, reminding us of the final bliss of the Lamb and his followers, and giving a preview of the final judgment of God. Just as the New Jerusalem is allowed to make a quick appearance in the letters sequence (chs. 2–3), so Babylon receives a quick acknowledgment in the prophet's little scroll (chs. 10–14): "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication" (14:8). The preview of final judgment (14:14–19), with which the little scroll closes, finally merges into the sequence of the seven plagues (chs. 15–16), with which the drama comes to its climax.

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The Mad Mistress and the City

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Enter Babylon, city and woman (chs. 17–18). Like Jezebel and the refugee queen, she is a mother, and she, like the queen, is associated with a scarlet beast who has seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 17:3; also 13:1). The parallels highlight the contrasts: she is not the mother of the Messiah, nor of those who hold to the testimony, but the “mother of prostitutes,” of those who sell themselves. (Remember again the “grammar” of fidelity/infidelity in this book.) Nor is she in enmity with the beast, but she is, rather, its consort, riding upon it. Ironically, her very alliance with the beast will bring about her downfall, and she will be brought to ruin by the beast and the ten authorities who once “committed adultery” with her. Over against the refugee queen, this mad mistress takes the stance of luxury and pride (18:7), recalling again the archetypal pride of Babylon in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. Pride before fall. The description of Babylon merges with a dirge sung over the city/woman: she who has been great has been humiliated and brought low. This dirge stands in contrast with the song of joy in heaven (12:10–12), sung at the occasion of the dragon’s downfall. Three times we hear the refrain of woe, “Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great. . . . woe, woe, O great City!” (18:2, 9, 16, 19).

Babylon emerges, then, as the flip side of the refugee queen. She is proud, where the refugee is humble; she seems to prosper where the refugee is in exile; she rides on a beast, where the refugee is pursued by a beast; she is a pretending queen, where the refugee is a deposed (or fleeing) queen; she is the mother of evildoers, where the refugee gives birth to those who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus. Babylon’s end is destruction, while, it seems, the refugee will sooner or later be reinstated. The refugee displays a holy dependence upon God, where Babylon wields an evil dominion, seeking her independence from God. Babylon’s wilfulness and madness will eventually lead to ruin, despite a present time of prosperity.⁵

And so, along with the lamenters in chapter 18, we behold Babylon, the city now desolate, the woman now isolated, taking her true place not on the beast, nor on many waters or on seven mountains, but in the wilderness. Her final, desolate end—despite her outward grandeur—has, indeed, been signaled beforehand by the locale in which the seer was first introduced to her (17:3). She whose place is the desert is deserted. If the locale of this vision is the desert (over against the dual locale of heaven/wilderness in chapter 12), the dramatic action is that of a death and funeral (where in chapter 12 we heard of persecution and warfare).

⁵ For more on these similarities and differences see chapter 4 in the present volume, “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing: Literary Opposition and Social Tension in the Revelation of John.”

To be precise, chapter 18 is set up to provide the parody of a funeral, since the lament is prefaced and concluded by exultant angelic announcements of Babylon's fall and final end. Moreover, the mourners themselves, once intimate with the woman, do not come close in their distress, but "stand far off, in fear of her torment" (18:10, 15, 17). The tone throughout is that of irony, created by contrasts of Babylon's first and last state, and distancing of the mourners from the city. The final lament, in fact, mutates into a call for joy to heaven, and to the saints, apostles, and prophets (18:20), modeling even in the mouths of the mourners the preferred response to this judgment scene.

Yet the tone is not that of unmitigated triumph. In the initial picture (17:5) we were introduced to the woman with a sign on her forehead, proclaiming "a name, a mystery." Part of the mystery is that the woman is bound up with the life of the witnesses. How is this signaled? First, we consider the locale of this woman "in the wilderness" (17:3). The last time we looked, it was the refugee who was there. Second, the woman is "drunk with the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus": the cup of impurities and abominations in her hand indicates that the faithful have had intimate and hurtful contact with her. Finally, there is the commanding voice, sounding as we have full view of Babylon, and urging: "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" (18:4).

The command assumes that God's people must be instructed to come out of Babylon. How is this possible, given the stark contrasts of the Apocalypse—Jezebel against the faithful, two witnesses against two beasts, Babylon against the refugee queen? Yet we recall from the letters that the division has never been absolute: in the words of Leonard Thompson, the boundaries in this book are "soft."⁶ We have heard about Ephesus "forsaking her first love," of Pergamum and Thyatira tolerating "immorality," of Sardis's near-morbidity and "uncleanness," of Laodicea's pride and blindness. The command suited to each situation is the refrain, "therefore, repent!" For these very communities are called to the tree of life, the paradise of God, to eternal life and not a second death, to eat of hidden manna, to receive the morning star, to be known by a new name of intimacy with God, to have their name written in the book of life, to be dressed in white, to sit on thrones, to bear the name of the city New Jerusalem. The members of the community are called to glory, born to glory, and so they must come out of the one pretending to glory. At the heart of the identity of God's people is a mysterious infection with the power to negate their identity.

The second connection of the mad mother with the people of God is that contact which produces suffering, or martyrdom. The mystery of

⁶ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 100.

Babylon, as laid bare in the funeral lament (and heavenly joy) over her downfall, also involves the paradox that at present there is greatness where there should be judgment, life where there is no solid form of sustenance, light where all is darkness, fruitfulness where there should simply be barrenness. Babylon is fit only to be a home for demons, evil spirits, unclean birds of prey: and this, of course, is its final end. Yet in this city opposed to God, the unthinkable goes on: the round of joyful weddings, fruitful trade and commerce, festivity, fun, music. The seer here takes up the well-established theme of the prophets, exilic psalms, and later literature (e.g., 4 Ezra's laments)—the observation that the righteous perish while the arrogant seem to succeed. For the psalmist and the prophets, the dilemma was broached by complaint and the question, "How long, O Lord?" For John, this problem is cast in a different mode by going directly to the scene of judgment, and describing the greatness as something that is, from the perspective of justice, already weighed and found wanting.

It might seem that John's treatment suffers in comparison with the prophetic cry, lacking its depth and realism, and moving too facily to triumphalism. Yet taken in its completeness, the drama of the Book of Revelation does not function like a math book, with answers in the back for the impatient or lazy student. Its approach may seem less subtle than that of the struggling psalmist who envies the arrogance of the wicked, and who receives an unimparted encouragement from God in the sanctuary (Ps 73:16-17). In fact, the reader of the Apocalypse is not called to hear the lament, and to rejoice, without also being compelled to read the visions as a whole, and thus to participate in scenes that consistently portray the mixed character of human living. The balance of lament on earth (18:10ff.) and joy in heaven (18:20) found in chapter 18 mirrors the complexity of chapter 12, in which earth and heaven are called to contrasting responses over the downfall of the adversary (12:12). This complexity is consonant with John's sketch of an ambiguous present: the community of God itself is in more than one sense connected, even implicated with Babylon, and must learn separation. Chapter 17, with its view from the desert, does not allow the reader to forget that the present faithful community is still a refugee, still in preparation, beset by trials, and prone to seduction. There is here no false or cold comfort, for behind these scenes, too, lie the visions of chapter 5 and chapter 12: the weeping of John over unresolved mystery on earth, with the mystery's uncomfortable resolution in the Lion who is a Lamb; and the ongoing persecution of the refugee's children who are, nevertheless, in the care of God. Chapter 18 is also carefully balanced. The final word of the angel, "in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth" (18:24), rings in the ears of the reader, just as the emotive "Come out of her, my people" (18:4) initially sets a sober tone for this scene of judgment and "lament."

The Bride of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem

The closing angelic declaration of judgment (18:24) moves to a threefold cadential "Hallelujah!" (19:1-8) offered by "what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude" (19:6) and by the inner circle of worshipers around the throne. This tentative language of "seemed to be" or "like" or "as" is typical of revelatory reports and mystical writings. Its roots go back at least to the prophet Ezekiel, who writes about beholding "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek 1:28) and who prefaces most of his related visions with a qualification. Using this same technique, which became a commonplace in apocalyptic (and mystical) writing, John signals to the reader that the multitude of the redeemed creation, as well as the mysterious twenty-four elders and four living creatures, are the stuff of revelation. Not only does the faithful community await and derive comfort from the unveiling of the Lord: the community is an *item* of the unveiling, one of the mysteries! Thus, the comment on Babylon and the hallelujahs merge into the presentation of a final woman figure, with which John's vision will close. The somber but final notes of "the smoke goes up from her" (19:3) give way to the sound of servants, great and small, praising God. Included within that praise is a glimpse of the "bride" who has "made herself ready" and who has "been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" (19:8).

More than a glimpse we do not yet receive, however, for in the final chapters the emphasis is placed first on the One to whom this bride is to be given. Before the marriage supper comes a swiftly moving series of dramatic events: the defeat of adversaries; the binding and final defeat of the dragon; the establishment of thrones for the righteous; the appearance of the great throne that displaces all, in heaven and in earth; the judgment of the dead; and the opening of the books (chs 19-20). It is only then that John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and glimpses the holy city, "prepared as a bride," while he hears the proclamation of how God will make "all things new" (21:1-5).

John (and so the reader) had viewed the refugee queen, deposed from heaven into the desert, from the perspective of heaven, where he had been invited in 4:1; he had viewed the Babylon/mistress from the perspective of the desert, where the angel had carried him in the spirit (17:3). Now he is taken, like Moses (Deut 34), to a "great, high mountain" from which he (and we) will view the "bride, the wife of the Lamb . . . the holy city Jerusalem, coming out heaven from God" (21:10). From the heavenly perspective, in the vision of the deposed queen-mother, we saw the panorama of a huge war, a determinative battle in heaven, followed by an ongoing, if limited, series of skirmishes on earth. From the perspective of the desert, in the vision of fallen Babylon, we witnessed a funeral, or rather, a funeral parody, since the "far-off" stance of the mourners, and the framing of their lament by angelic declarations, distanced the reader from the event. Yet, even in parody, the vision remained complex, re-

minding the faithful community of their mysterious implication and connection with that city. These visions masterfully evoke a dual perspective of confidence and humility: God's people are intended for glory, despite (or perhaps *because of*) their present exile and preparation. Again, the vision of Babylon calls for a sober evaluation of evil in the world, and even in the community of God, as did the fleeting reference to "that woman" Jezebel. The reality and presence of evil is qualified only by the insistence that its time is limited.

Our final woman figure contrasts both with Babylon and with the refugee queen. In contrast with Babylon, we see white versus red, innocence versus worldly wisdom, purity versus jaded connections. In contrast to the harried and persecuted mother, we see a glorious and fortified bride Jerusalem, protected and illuminated by God. Earlier readers encountered such contrasts immediately, and without controversy. No doubt the early-twenty-first-century reader has already begun to feel "edgy" about the subordination implied in the use of female figures. Adela Yarbro Collins speaks of these symbols as "limited and limiting for women"⁷ because they are so male-centered; Tina Pippin insists that "the Apocalypse is not a safe space for women";⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has warned that the ethical reader must not "surrender the imagination" to the dramatic action of the Apocalypse, because "Revelation engages the imagination of the contemporary reader to perceive *women* in terms of good or evil, pure or impure, heavenly or destructive, helpless or powerful, bride or temptress, wife or whore."⁹ From such perspectives, the presentation of the bride, a female figure in a positive mode, is no less troublesome than the presentation of the evil Babylon, for it represents an unrealistic and therefore vicious, or at least dangerous, assumption about women. The bride is only pure insofar as she remains subordinate; Babylon is impure precisely because of her drive for independence.

It is a truism by now to notice that symbols not only speak about reality, but that they shape it. It is also true that symbols, because of their "polyvalence" (their potential for many meanings), may be hijacked or robbed of their deepest impact by the unscrupulous or the ideologue. But a sympathetic reading of the Apocalypse will acknowledge that this book paints its pictures not only for women, but also for men—indeed, for both together as a group, and not separately. There is as much scandal for the male reader of the Apocalypse, who is, from time to time, called to picture himself in a female role, as for the female reader, who must distinguish between a call to complete dependence upon God, and a call to "reign," along with others of the faithful community, with Christ. The eschatolog-

⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, "Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 33.

⁸ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 80.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, 199.

ical scene of chapter 20 is instructive: thrones are set up and authority is "given to those seated on them" (20:4; cf. Dan 7:9); yet before the great throne, earth and heaven flee away (20:11). The pictures are, on the level of sheer logic, contradictory: Does the Almighty establish thrones for the righteous so that they participate in ruling? Or does any human power pale before God's authority? The strange logic of the vision asserts that both are true. The subordination of the female figure of the bride (and of the refugee queen) in Revelation is, in the first place, a reflection on the supreme authority of the Alpha and the Omega. It is not as if Revelation were concerned with an elaborate chain of being, from God through angels, through males, through females, down to the inanimate created order. For John is twice forbidden to do obeisance to the mediating angel (19:10; 22:9), and all, great or small, find a level place before the throne of God and the Lamb (19:12). Moreover, if we read not solely for gender, but rather acknowledge the complex network of associative metaphors in Revelation, we see that the bride and queen are cast as strong as well as humble figures. The queen is mother, martyr, and warrior; the bride is a fortified city. As these figures are subordinate to God, so they retain strength over against their detractors. The book does not concern itself in the first place with empowerment, but with humility, suffering, and reliance on a mighty God. Yet strength, too, has its place in the human community, and so we move on to consider the transformation of humanity in the image of the bride Jerusalem, a picture that emerges out of pointed contrast with Babylon and the refugee queen.

In contrast with Babylon, the image of the bride Jerusalem is bound up with fecundity and fruitfulness. Here is a "bride" of radiance juxtaposed with an enormous metropolis, described in terms of maternal and fertility imagery: the life-giving water flowing down the middle of the major street, the tree of life, yielding its fruit every month, and providing healing. Just as the imagery of 22:1-3 recalls Eden, a reverse Eve (and, perhaps, Adam) is suggested by the removal of "every curse." (The allusion in *pan katathema ouk estai eti* is not well-expressed by the NRSV's "nothing accursed.") The specificity of this language suggests that the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience are to be undone, and thus deepens the declaration of 21:4, that there will be "no mourning and crying and pain"—neither in work nor in childbirth (contrast Gen 3:16-17). Such joyful fruit-bearing is in contrast to Babylon, who considered her children a sign of her own greatness, but who was brought low so that "the fruit for which [her] soul longed has gone from [her]" and "the voice of the bridegroom and the bride will never be heard in [her] again" (18:14, 23b). Similarly, the vicious and parasitic association of Babylon with others contrasts with the organic description of Jerusalem, built on the apostles and prophets, working for the benefit of the nations, and illumined by God. Bride, garden, city, and society come together in a picture of fullness and cooperation.

In contrast with the queen of chapter 12, the bride Jerusalem is found not in the desert, but seen from a mountain, descending from heaven, and associated with garden imagery. The menacing river from the dragon's mouth (12:15) is replaced by the river of life. Where the queen was associated with stars and moon, the holy city derives her light and glory from God. The twelve-starred crown of the queen gives way to a battlement gate, supervised by twelve angels. The first woman labors under childbirth, giving a loud cry, while with the second woman every curse is gone. All has been transformed! The refugee along with her offspring "deck the bridal garments of joy."¹⁰ Hidden glory becomes evident glory, as the time in the wilderness is seen to have been a time of preparation. The community's suffering, like the blood of the Lamb, emerges as a strength, rather than as weakness.

The final scene presents—more than a mere mending—a complete remaking of the human community and the cosmos. This is indicated in John's adaptation of Genesis imagery to a city-temple scenario that surpasses in scope even the grand pictures offered by the closing chapters of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The promises to the seven churches find their fulfillment: tree of life, hidden manna, new name, morning star, white clothing, the right to sit on the throne. The picture is multifaceted, piling image upon image to show the immensity of the blessing of those "invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb," not as spectators, but as participants. The corporate nature of these pictures cannot be overemphasized, since the three major female figures of refugee queen, mad mistress/Babylon, and bride/New Jerusalem speak of and to communities or groups, faithful and otherwise. Nevertheless, Revelation, as it began with a symbol of specificity, Jezebel, returns to speak directly to the individual reader. The Spirit and the bride issue their invitation to "the one who hears," asking her, or him, to join in the corporate call "Come," and to be satisfied by the water of life. Again, the warning is given to anyone who tampers with the revelation that they will miss their part in the "tree of life" and the "holy city."

The reader of the Apocalypse can hardly come to the closing passages without the awareness that this book issues a challenge. Taken on its own terms, the book resists the role of literary object that we have assigned to it and asserts a rhetorical power. It invokes the reader(s), first of all, to change perspective, to "come" (4:1) and see what things look like from the vantage point of heaven, from the desert, from a mountain. The summons is also to consider the implications of, among other scenes, three striking visions: visions of an ongoing but limited war, of a fall and "funeral," and of a paradisaical wedding. Where there is mystery, there is also realism, and thus the visions come uncomfortably close to both community and reader at certain points. One of the major questions broached by

¹⁰ Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), 417–18.

these corporate figures, and by the reference to individuals such as "Jezebel," "the one who is filthy," and "the one who is righteous," is the issue of the identity of God's community. The reader is encouraged to ask, not only what God has done, is doing, and will do, not only what is the nature of reality here, and in the heavenlies, but also, *who* are the people of God—in differentiation from Babylon, in connection with the people of hosts, in connection with the cosmos, in connection with the angelic answer suggested is twofold: the community of God is called both to humility and to God-endowed greatness. Readers of our time may have difficulty not only with the choice of imagery, but with the unveiling itself. The femaleness of the figures may be discomfiting to us, in the end, not because of its "chauvinist" implications, but because of its power to picture human frailty and promise. Could it be that the extremes of lowliness and authority, the realism and the aspirations, of the Apocalypse constitute a liquor too strong for our palates, too disturbing to our constitutions?