

REVELATION

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Introduction

Cast in the form of a vision of things that must "soon take place," the book of Revelation is full of bizarre, psychedelic imagery that allows many interpretations. The imagery would have been slightly more understandable to first-century readers, but even the ancients regarded the book as highly ambiguous and difficult. In part because of its obscure character, several branches of the ancient church were slow to accept the work as authoritative scripture.

Some of the book's most important symbols use feminine imagery. The new Jerusalem is envisioned as "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). At the opposite extreme, the city "Babylon" (a symbolic name for Rome) is portrayed as a whore, "holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" (17:4). As a third example, a woman who is "clothed with the sun" and who gives birth to the Messiah plays a role in the pivotal twelfth chapter of the work. Each of these symbols reflects the male-centered culture of the first century: women are caricatured as virgins, whores, or mothers. The author's narrow view of women has also shaped the other uses of feminine imagery in Revelation. In 2:20-23, John labels a rival prophet "Jezebel," claiming that she "refuses to repent of her fornication"; and in 14:4 the seer envisions 144,000 men "who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins." The stereotyped feminine images in the book do not represent the full spectrum of authentic womanhood, either in John's day or in our own. The images grow out of the patriarchal culture of the first century, which valued the *control* or *management* of women's sexuality by men. In such a culture, the virgin (who remains subject

to male control) and the whore (who does not) can come to represent diametrically opposite realities: purity and obedience versus corruption and evil. Exploring the cultural roots of John's metaphoric language about women will enable us to understand what he was trying to say at those points, but the dehumanizing way in which he phrased his message will remain deeply troubling.

Contents

The book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse (Greek for "revelation"), belongs to an ancient type of literature in which a seer describes symbolic visions of the heavens and secrets about the end of the age. This particular revelation came to the seer "John" while he was on the island of Patmos, and it is set in the framework of a letter from the exalted Christ to seven churches in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey; 1:11; 22:16). Each of the churches is either encouraged for its obedience or rebuked for its disobedience to the gospel in the face of persecutions and temptations (2:1-3:22). In the following panoramic vision, those who faithfully confess allegiance to Christ are vindicated (7:13-17). Meanwhile those who persecute the righteous or who practice idolatry and lawlessness are judged (9:20-21; 14:9-11). God's acts of judgment are described in cycles of seven (seven seals, 6:1-8:1; seven trumpets, 8:6-11:19; seven bowls, 15:1-16:21), though these cycles are broken by long and important digressions (7:1-17; 10:1-11; 11:1-14; 11:19-12:17; 13:1-18; 14:1-20). The visions climax in an account of the binding of the devil (20:1-3), resurrection and judgment (20:11-15), and inauguration of a "new heaven and new earth" (21:1-22:5). The

book concludes with admonitions, greetings, and Jesus' final assurance that he is coming soon (22:20).

Authorship

From an early date it was believed that the John who wrote Revelation was the apostle John, but the author himself does not make that claim. His reference in 21:14 to the "twelve apostles" suggests that he viewed them as figures of the past. Though some scholars have suggested that the author was a certain elder from Asia Minor named John, he is probably a figure unmentioned elsewhere in the extant early Christian literature. He appears to have known the Hebrew, not the Greek, version of the Jewish Scriptures. Moreover, he is quite hostile toward Rome ("Babylon"). These traits indicate that the author may have been a Palestinian Jew who had come to Asia Minor in the aftermath of Jewish defeat in the first revolt against Rome (66–73 C.E.).

Social Setting and Function

For centuries it was assumed that John and his readers were being persecuted by the emperor Domitian (who reigned from 81 to 96 C.E.) for failure to worship him in the imperial cult. More recently it has been shown that the historical evidence for that persecution itself depends on the book of Revelation. Thus, the argument is circular and the conclusions are unreliable. Excluding the reference in 2:13 to the recent execution of Antipas, the book's descriptions of martyrdom probably reflect not the reality of John's day but rather past persecutions (especially under Nero in 64 C.E.) together with the author's vision of what "must soon take place."

If there was no systematic persecution, then

what was the reason for the terrifying scenario? John feared for the salvation of the churches, whose members were becoming morally lax and conforming too readily to the standards of the larger culture (see 2:14–15, 20–23; 3:1–3, 15–17). Believers were giving in to the temptations of idolatry, perhaps even worshipping the emperor. By describing the rewards of the faithful and the punishment of the wicked, John may have been trying to encourage the faithful to persevere (14:12) and also to persuade more complacent Christians that even trivial ways of going along with their society's idolatry would be judged by God.

Use of Sexual Imagery

Several of the feminine images in Revelation presuppose a traditional symbolic use of the image of "adultery" or "fornication" to represent idolatry. The eighth-century prophet Hosea was among the earliest to use the word "fornication" (in Hebrew the meaning of the word is broader than but inclusive of "adultery") as such a metaphor. Hosea depicted God's relationship to Israel as that of a faithful husband to a "fornicating" wife, with the wife's "lovers" corresponding to gods other than Yahweh. "To fornicate" or "to play the whore," then, became virtually synonymous with engagement in idolatry (see, e.g., Hos. 1:2; 2:1–13; 3:1; 4:12–14; Ex. 34:16; Lev. 17:7; 20:5; Deut. 31:16; Judg. 8:27; 2 Kings 9:22; Isa. 57:7–13; Jer. 3:1–10; Ezek. 16:15–58; 23:1–49). John is borrowing this scriptural pattern when he portrays Jezebel and the city of Rome ("Babylon") as "whores" (symbolizing their alleged involvement in idolatrous activities) and also when he depicts the "heavenly Jerusalem" as a pure virgin (suggesting abstinence from any form of idolatry as well as total commitment to God, cf. 2 Cor. 11:2).

Comment

Jezebel (2:20–23)

In 2:18–29 John opposes a prophetic figure active in the church at Thyatira—the woman he calls "Jezebel" (most likely not her real name). John's references to his book as "prophecy" (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19; cf. 22:9) imply that he regarded himself as a prophet; probably the woman was a rival. John uses two devices to discredit her as a false prophet. First, he calls her "Jezebel" and

thus associates her with the notorious woman who opposed Elijah and supported the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 16:31; 19:1–3). Second, John has the exalted Christ use traditional language for a charge of false prophecy when Christ accuses Jezebel of "teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (2:20).

In earliest Christianity, there was a fierce debate about whether or not Christians could

eat the meat that was left over when sacrifices were made to idols. Much of the meat available for consumption (in the marketplace, at public festivals, and at private gatherings) would have been such "sacrificial" meat. The book of Acts reports that the Christian authorities in Jerusalem had decided that Gentile converts must follow rules designed to ensure that they avoid several very serious sins, including idolatry and illicit sexual activity. The rules, which corresponded to those placed by Torah on "aliens residing in the house of Israel" (Lev. 17:8, 10, 13, 18:26), forbade the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29; 21:25). By contrast, in Paul's opinion Christians *could* eat sacrificial meat, provided that neither the conscience of the one eating the meat nor that of any Christian observer was offended by the action (1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:25-30). The seer John adhered to the stricter view, attacking those churches from among the seven that tolerated a group known as "the Nicolaitans" (with whom "Jezebel" may have been connected). The Nicolaitans were said to advocate eating sacrificial meat and practicing "fornication." On the subject of sacrificial meat, they may merely have been following the more tolerant policy of Paul, who founded many of the churches in that region.

It is hard to know how to interpret the accusations of fornication and adultery made against the Nicolaitans. Some scholars take them literally, arguing that the Nicolaitans were a libertine Gnostic sect. But it is just as likely that these charges were unfounded, designed to vilify "Jezebel" and the Nicolaitans by underscoring their "promiscuous" attitude toward idol worship. So also the first Jezebel's idolatry was referred to as her "many whoredoms and sorceries" (2 Kings 9:22). In any case, John's use of the sexual imagery undermines "Jezebel's" authority and incriminates any who follow her teachings: they are not passive victims, but "adulterers" (2:22).

The Woman Clothed with the Sun (12:1-6, 13-17)

The vision of the "woman clothed with the sun" in chap. 12 is very difficult to interpret. John's symbolism fuses images from the Hebrew Scriptures together with images from ancient myths about the births of certain gods and about divine combat with monsters of chaos. Moreover, in composing the vision, John probably employed literary sources, whose original

significance may have been different from John's use of them.

The woman's celestial garb (the sun, moon, and stars) associates her with a high goddess, a "queen of heaven." Several pagan goddesses, including the Ephesian Artemis, the Syrian Atargatis, and the Egyptian Isis, could have laid claim to this title. All three were linked with stars and planets in ancient art. John has combined this pagan imagery with allusions to Jewish traditions. The notice that the woman's child "is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" echoes Ps. 2:9, understood as a prophecy about the Messiah. Some readers argue that, as mother of the Messiah, the woman should be identified with Mary, the mother of Jesus. On the other hand, because it is said that the dragon will "make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17), some interpreters argue that she stands symbolically for the church. Neither theory quite fits the scenario: How could the church be regarded as the mother of the Messiah? Or what would it mean to say that Mary was persecuted? A third theory seems most plausible: the woman represents the people of Israel, which gave birth to the Messiah *and* to the church (compare the portrait of Zion as a mother who gives birth to a nation in Isa. 66:7-13; of Zion as a grieving mother in 2 Esd. 9:38-10:60; and of Sarah/Jerusalem as "our mother" in Gal. 4:26). John's use of goddess imagery serves to portray Israel in the most exalted terms possible: the twelve stars of the zodiac (Rev. 12:1) have become, as it were, the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Gen. 37:9).

In antiquity various stories were told about a divine mother whose child was attacked by a monster of chaos. John's depiction of such events in 12:4-6 resembles both the Egyptian myth of the birth to Isis of Horus (who is then threatened by Seth-Typhon) and the Greek myth of Leto's delivery of Apollo (who is then pursued by the dragon Python). In both myths, the motive for the attack seems to have been to prevent the child from gaining authority over the attacker; and in both, mother and child were given divine assistance in escaping from the adversary. Moreover, both Horus and Apollo were said to have gone on to conquer their erstwhile assailants. These stories would have been well known to a first-century audience in Asia Minor. John seems to have taken over the basic plot of the myths, reinterpreting the woman as the people of Israel and the newborn child as

the Messiah. The description of the woman's flight to the "wilderness" on "two wings of the great eagle" (12:14) recalls not only the miraculous rescue of Leto by the north wind but also (and more pointedly) God's rescue of the Hebrew children from Egypt and Pharaoh on "eagles' wings" (Ex. 19:4; Deut. 32:11; cf. Isa. 40:31).

The depiction of war in heaven (12:7-9) has its roots in the so-called holy war traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures. In these traditions, Yahweh the "divine warrior" waged battles on behalf of the Israelites. The holy war traditions sometimes portrayed Israel's enemies symbolically as dragonlike monsters (see, e.g., Isa. 27:1; 51:9). The "dragon" in Revelation 12 represents both political and cosmic enemies of the church. On the one hand, it symbolizes the powers of the Roman Empire, which promoted idolatry through social and political means (Revelation 13). On the other hand, the dragon symbolizes Satan, who is the spiritual force behind *all* worship of idols (see esp. 13:2, 4). John's symbolism suggests that God will defeat the church's earthly adversaries, just as God's servant Michael had defeated the heavenly adversary.

Revelation 12 must have helped first-century believers to interpret their own social and historical situation: they would have perceived that *they* were the rest of the woman's "offspring," and so still under siege by the dragon. They would have realized that the dragon had been defeated in heaven but also that a period of suffering still separated those on earth from final victory (12:17). Perhaps John further intended for his vision to instill a new sense of urgency in those Christians who were, in his opinion, too willing to compromise with pagan culture. The children of "Jezebel" might fare better in the short run, but it was the heavenly woman's children who would eventually triumph!

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

In chap. 14, John depicts 144,000 followers of the Lamb, "who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (14:1). These persons are meant to contrast with those who worship the diabolical beast from the land and who were earlier described as "marked on the right hand or on the forehead" (13:16). John depicts the 144,000 as engaged not in the polluted worship of the beast but in the pure

worship of God. Probably John regards the 144,000 as a special, exclusive group of the elect, who die rather than worship the beast or receive its mark (cf. 7:4-17; 14:1; 20:4). These willing martyrs for Christ are the "first fruits for God and the Lamb" (14:4) and as such will participate in the privilege of the first resurrection (20:4), with the "whole harvest" to follow at the second resurrection (20:13). John's portrayal of the 144,000 as ones who "have not defiled themselves with women" may have been influenced by the notion that those who fight alongside Yahweh in holy war must temporarily refrain from sexual intercourse (as well as certain other actions) so as to be ritually pure (see, e.g., Deut. 23:9-14; Josh. 3:5; 7:13; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:11). Likewise, the Essenes at Qumran appear to have kept themselves ritually pure in preparation for the eschatological battle. By describing the 144,000 as not merely *refraining* from sexual intercourse but as *virgins*, John implies that the men not only meet but exceed the standard of purity necessary for participation in holy war.

The Whore, "Babylon" (14:8; 16:19; 17:1-19:5)

After the third cycle of numbered visions, that of the "seven bowls" (15:1-16:21), John reports that one of the seven angels of the bowls showed him "the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication" (17:1-2a). She is decked out with purple, scarlet, and jewels, and wears her name, "a mystery," on her forehead: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations" (17:5). The woman is seated on "a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names," with seven heads and ten horns (17:3)—in other words, on the beast from the land, introduced already in 13:1-10. The heads of the beast are now identified as "seven mountains on which the woman is seated" and also as "seven kings" (17:10). The details of John's description indicate that the beast symbolizes the Roman Empire as a whole, while the woman represents the city of Rome (17:18). John's portrayal of the woman recalls the depiction of the goddess Roma on some ancient coins: she is seated on Rome's seven hills, with the river Tiber running below. Any Jew or Christian living in the last decades of the first century would have recognized that her "mysterious name" was a symbolic designation for Rome, which—like ancient Babylon,

centuries before—had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.

As seen above, the Hebrew Scriptures frequently used the image of an adulterous woman or a prostitute to represent idolatrous peoples. Typically, Yahweh was portrayed as the loyal husband, and the people of Israel were equated with the adulterous wife (see especially Hosea; Ezek. 16:8–58). Sometimes, however, the metaphor was extended even to peoples that did not have a covenant relationship with Yahweh. In Isa. 23:15–18 the city of Tyre is described as a prostitute because of its corruption by commerce, and in Nahum 3:4 Nineveh is called a prostitute because of its “debaucheries” and its “sorcery” (regularly linked to idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures). In John’s earlier depiction of the beasts from the land and sea, symbolizing the Roman Empire and the imperial cult, he had made it clear that the idolatrous worship of the emperor was really worship of Satan (Revelation 13). Now, in 17:1–19:4, John portrays Rome as a “whore” so as to elaborate on the idolatry and other sins associated with the empire’s leading city. The metaphor also serves as a foil for John’s portrayal of the new Jerusalem as the pure bride of Christ (19:6–8; 21:2; 22:17).

John brings at least three types of charges against the city of Rome. First, it is associated with idolatry and sorcery. This association is made explicit in 18:23 and is implicitly suggested both by depiction of the city as a whore and by this figure’s proximity to the beast with “blasphemous names” (17:3; cf. 13:1, 5–6 [probably an allusion to the titles of honor given to emperors]). Second, the city is charged with violence: Babylon is “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (17:6; cf. 18:24). If John was a refugee from Palestine, then he had experienced firsthand the violent wrath of Rome as unleashed against the Jews in 66–73 C.E. He seems to have been deeply affected also by Nero’s persecution of the Christians in Rome (64 C.E.): he alludes to a myth that the deceased Nero would return to life and rule again (13:3; 17:8, 11). John proclaims that, in exchange for her making all nations drink “the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (14:8; 18:3, with “wrath” possibly referring to the empire’s violent aggression), Babylon will be made to drink “the wine-cup of the fury” of God’s wrath (16:19; cf. 17:16; 18:6; Jer. 51:6, 49). Third, Babylon is condemned for excessive wealth (18:3, 7, 9, 11–19, 23). This wealth is tainted by the city’s “fornication” (idolatry), and

its acquisition has led to an arrogance that verges on blasphemy (18:7; cf. Isa. 47:8).

The rehearsal of Babylon’s destruction in chap. 18 stands as an important reminder that God is not infinitely tolerant and will indeed judge against the perpetrators of evil: individuals, cities, and entire nations will one day be called to account for their deeds. It is a message that all persons need to hear! And yet one can only regret the misogynist imagery that the author has used to convey this important message. To be sure, the book’s imagery is violent from beginning to end; both the people of God and the enemies of God suffer harsh fates. But the author seems especially to delight in describing the gory destruction of the woman Babylon (see, e.g., 17:16). 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.

The New Jerusalem (19:7; 21:1–22:5; 22:17)

The announcement of Babylon’s fall and of the vindication of the saints causes rejoicing in heaven (19:1–5); this heavenly song quickly moves into one of celebration for the imminent marriage of the Lamb and “the bride” (19:6–8). Babylon was the “mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” (17:5), but the bride of the Lamb is clothed “with fine linen, bright and pure” (19:8). After this brief anticipation of the appearance of the “bride” follow successive visions of the warrior messiah, the capture of the beasts, the resurrection and millennial reign of those martyred for Jesus, the release and the defeat of Satan, the second resurrection, and the judgment (19:9–20:15). Then, at last, the new Jerusalem appears, “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2; cf. v 9). Here John has blended the conventional motif of a new Jerusalem, kept in heaven until the last days (cf. 2 Esd. 7:26; 8:52; 9:38–10:60; 13:36), with the metaphor of the church—the people of God—as the bride of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23–24). Indeed, the “new Jerusalem” envisioned by John is itself a metaphor for the people of God: the bride’s “fine linen, bright and pure” is said to be “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8).

The bride metaphor (like its opposite, the

prostitute metaphor] functioned especially well in the patriarchal culture of the first century, which placed a high premium on the strict management of women's sexuality. In this culture, the ideal bride was a "pure" virgin who had no interests or liaisons that would compromise her loyalty to her husband (see 2 Cor. 11:2!). In Revelation, "purity" is the central point of the metaphor of the "bride of the Lamb," as is clear from John's continuing focus on this theme even after he drops the metaphor in 21:9 (see especially 21:27; cf. 22:15). Christ had promised that those who remain faithful "will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (3:4-5). Such persons, indeed, are to fill the city of God (17:8).

Conclusion

The author of the book of Revelation mentions only one flesh-and-blood woman, who is hidden behind the incriminating name "Jezebel." All other references to females are in the context of metaphoric or symbolic speech. Studying the cultural background of this symbolism enables one to understand that John uses such language to represent certain basic concepts or realities: the worship of idols versus singleminded devotion to God; the people of Israel, "mother" of the Messiah and of the church; the pollution and sin of the Roman Empire versus the purity of the heavenly city of God. But even when one understands the "point" of Revelation's various references to women, John's language remains disturbing and dangerous. He categorizes women into the wholly good (the woman clothed with the sun and the new Jerusalem) and the wholly bad ("Jezebel" and "Babylon"). The wholly good are those whose sexuality is effectively controlled; the wholly bad are those whose sexuality escapes male management and manipulation. The woman reader is thus divided: she wants to identify with the good but is reluctant to do so because the images deny female self-determination; she hesitates to identify with the bad but may endorse the defiance of the "whores" against those who would control or destroy them. John's feminine imagery is dangerous because (whether intentionally or not) it promotes an ethos in which women are not allowed to control their own bodies and

their own destinies and in which violence against women is—at least in some cases—condoned.

John sought to convince readers of the need for their unswerving commitment to God in the face of omnipresent temptations to apostasy, idolatry, and arrogance. He hoped to inspire them to hold fast to their beliefs, even if such singlemindedness meant that they, like soldiers, should have to die for their loyalty to Jesus. It was a message designed to sustain those undergoing temptation and affliction and to stir the apathetic to repentance and reform. This central message of the book is an urgent one for Christians to hear today, especially where they have become complacent toward the pervasive idolatry of our culture. Revelation conveys a radical message for desperate times, but this radical message calls for radical critique. Revelation's approval of violence and implicit disparagement of women threaten to undermine the book's central truth. Modern readers must boldly decry those aspects of Revelation that celebrate bloody retribution rather than mercy and justice and that compromise the full humanity of women. One may protest in this way even while acknowledging the truth of John's claim that one day God will call all persons to account for their deeds on earth.

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