

RE-MEMBERING THE WHORE: THE FATE OF BABYLON ACCORDING TO REVELATION 17.16*

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The woman/whore called Babylon in Revelation 17–19 has often been interpreted as representing the Evil Empire.¹ Such interpretations are founded on the perception that this woman represents something other than a human being. To be certain, the text seems to point in that direction, when it states in 17.18: 'The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'²

This revelation of the meaning of this female character stands at the end of a long episode in which one of the seven angels featured in the previous scene first introduces (17.1–3a), then describes (17.3b–6), and finally explains (17.7–18) the vision of the whore.³ The woman's identity as city is more specifically disclosed after her impending annihilation has been announced and justified as part of God's purpose: '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. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled' (vv. 16–17).

Commentary on these verses often displays a disturbing tendency to explain away or justify their more troubling aspects.⁴ For example, some interpreters stress that the

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1 So for instance James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Biblia, 32; Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 137: 'The characterization of evil as a whore portrays the beguiling, stupefying side to evil's Janus-face – one side is ugly and repugnant, while the other side is attractive and desirous.' And Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), p. 888: 'She includes the entire evil economic-religious system of the world throughout history. She receives power from the devil himself.'

2 Unless stated otherwise, citations from the Bible come from the NRSV.

3 The angel is introduced in Rev. 17.1 as 'one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls'. This refers back to the scene related in Revelation 16. The angel serves more concretely as *angelus interpretis*. As David E. Aune observes, this is the only time in Revelation that John actually receives an explanation of what he sees: 'This may reveal the importance of Revelation 17 in the estimation of the author-editor, who emphasizes the revelatory role of the *angelus interpretis* at the beginning and end of the book (1.1: 22.6, 8–9), although this angel in fact appears only in Revelation 17.1–18: 19.9–10 and (if it is the same angel) in 21.9–22.9' (*Revelation 17–22* [WBC, 52C; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998], p. 919).

4 A similar observation is also made by Stephen D. Moore, who notes that 'the phrase "they will devour her flesh" trips a tad too lightly off the tongues of most commentators on Revelation' (Stephen D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* [Stanford,

sentence concerns Babylon as a city.⁵ To support this point, they refer to texts from the Hebrew Bible that pass the same judgment on other cities, be they Jerusalem, Tyre or Nineveh. A similar observation concerns the executors of this sentence, namely, the ten horns and the beast. Their actions against the whore are often understood to show the self-destroying power of evil.⁶ As I will demonstrate, however, these interpretations are problematic insofar as they tend to obscure other implications also present in these verses.

In Revelation's dualistic world view, Babylon appears on the wrong side as one of the enemies ultimately facing annihilation. In accord with what can be seen as the timeless rhetoric of war, 'the enemy' is literally stripped of her humanity and presented as an incarnation of evil. Studying the text's rhetorical strategy unveils how this effect is reached. In what follows, I focus on Rev. 17.16, which describes how Babylon is demolished. In my view this disturbing scene resists a facile reduction of the woman/whore to 'just a metaphor'.⁷ What makes her deserve such a gruesome fate? How is this murder motivated, legitimated, and thus covered up in the text? Rather than averting the eyes, one has to face the horror of it all.

From Whore to City

With its escalating violence, the scene unfolding could be a shot from an action movie, such as *End of Days* or *Terminator*. Together, the beast and its horns will undertake four actions against the whore: they 'will hate the whore'; 'they will make her desolate and naked'; 'they will devour her flesh'; and they will 'burn her up with fire'. The predictions of hating the whore, making her naked, and devouring her flesh either explicitly state or presume a person as object. The two other statements, making her desolate and burning her up with fire, are more ambiguous. They also recur with respect to the city in ch. 18, which mentions both her desolation (18.17, 19) and her being burned (18.8, 9, 18; 19.3).⁸ As I will show, 17.16 still belongs to the

5 So, e.g., Ulrich B. Müller, who speaks about 'die Zerstörung Roms, der Hure Babylon. Dies schildert der Verfasser in Vers 16–18 und weist damit auf Kap. 18 voraus' (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [OTKNT, 19; Gütersloh/Würzburg: G. Mohr/Echter Verlag, 1984], p. 296). Anne J. Visser understands 'make naked' to refer to thorough plundering and 'devouring her flesh' to the total extermination of all the inhabitants of Rome (*De openbaring van Johannes* [De prediking van het Nieuwe Testament; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972], p. 199). Anne (Revelation 17–22, p. 957) states that 'since the whore is a city, the phrase ἡ πόλις αὐτῆς πορνικὴ καὶ πόλις αὐτῆς, "they will make her desolate," i.e. depopulate her, is appropriate'.

6 So for instance George B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Black's New Testament Commentary, 19; London: A. & C. Black, 1966), p. 221; Charles H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* (GNS, 34; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 166; Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBCNT, 18; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), p. 209; Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, p. 140; Beale, *Book of Revelation*, p. 887.

7 Such a metaphorization of the whore's punishment is, for instance, undertaken by Beale when he writes: 'Perhaps three metaphors have been combined in the description: Babylon's nakedness is exposed like that of a whore, she is devoured like a victim of a fierce beast, and she is burned like a city' (*Book of Revelation*, p. 883).

8 Burning could also apply to a person. According to Lev. 21.9, the daughter of a priest who has prostituted herself is to be burned to death. For Lambertus J. Liefraert Peetbolle, the similarities between this text and Rev. 17.16 'should probably lead to the conclusion that the author of

While Babylon is named 'woman' only in the context preceding 17.18, the reverse holds true for Babylon as city. The term 'city' (πόλις) is used for the first time in 17.18 and occurs further only in the following context (18.10, 16, 18, 19, 21). In Revelation's narrative logic, therefore, the reader is first confronted with a female character, called Babylon in 17.5, which is only identified in v. 18 with 'the great city'.¹¹ Rev. 17.18 thus also forms a turning point in the representation of Babylon, because precisely here the identification of the 'woman' with the 'great city' is explicitly made. Verse 16, by consequence, still belongs to the section that predominantly describes Babylon as a woman. Moreover, 'the whore' is explicitly named as object and several elements in the sentence presume a human being as the main character referent. In sum, taking into consideration both the context and the content of Rev. 17.16, it does not seem justified either to limit the meaning of this verse to Babylon as city or to state that the judgment of the great whore, announced in 17.2, refers to ch. 18 rather than 17.¹²

11 As Aune (*Revelation 17–22*, p. 959) points out, the order of the elements mentioned by the angel in v. 7 is reversed in what follows. First, the beast, the seven heads and ten horns are explained and then the woman and in v. 18, does the woman appear.

16 Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible (Bilfu)*, 26; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 153–74.

Isa. 23.15–17, which compares Tyre's fate to that of a whore, but no judgment or sentence follows the comparison.¹⁸ A disturbing correspondence between these prophetic traditions and Revelation exists as far as their rhetorical strategy is concerned, because the depiction of the women makes their punishment look to be something they deserve.¹⁹

Most of the images Rev. 17.16 employs to describe the whore's fate are also present in the earlier texts. In Ezekiel 16, God through the prophet directly addresses Jerusalem as a woman (v. 3); the city is depicted as a whore in vv. 15–41, and her fate is announced in v. 35: 'Therefore, O whore, hear the word of the Lord.' The following verses elaborate: her clothes will be stripped and she will be left naked (v. 39); she will be stoned and cut to pieces (v. 40); her houses will be burned (v. 41). Both her being made naked and the burning of her houses correspond to elements in Rev. 17.16.

Later, Ezekiel introduces two more women who are first specified as Oholah and Oholbah and then identified with Samaria and Jerusalem (23.2–4). They too are criticized for playing the whore and are judged accordingly.²⁰ In Ezek. 23.9, Oholah has already been delivered to her lovers, who have made her naked and killed her with the sword (v. 10). In v. 22, Oholbah is addressed: 'Therefore, O Oholbah, thus says the Lord God . . .'. She will undergo a similar fate to that of her sister (vv. 22–35): her nose and ears will be cut off (v. 25); she will be hated and left naked (v. 29). Both Oholah and Oholbah will thus be made objects of terror and of plunder (v. 46), and the houses of their sons and daughters will burn up (v. 47). Again the parallels with Rev. 17.16 are striking, specifically the mention of hatred (v. 29), being made naked (vv. 10, 29), and the burning (v. 29).²¹ A further correspondence is that the names of the women are symbolic, insofar as they do not disclose the identity of the referents. In Ezek. 23.4 Oholah and Oholbah are identified as Samaria and Jerusalem.²² In Revelation Babylon is also a symbolic name, but the identity of the

18 See also Isa. 47.1–3, where Babylon and Chaldea are addressed as women facing divine vengeance.

19 Many commentators uncritically reproduce this view. So, for instance, Jean-Pierre Ruiz writes: 'In Rev 17.16 the devouring of the Prostitute's flesh is part of the punishment justly inflicted because of her crimes' (*Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16.17–19.10* [European University Studies Series, XXIII. Theology Vol. 376, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989], p. 366 [italics added]).

20 As Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes remarks, 'The intention is probably to strengthen the audience's resolve that both metaphorical women, so perverse since their very maidenhood, indeed deserve the utterly degrading and devastating treatment to which they are to be exposed' ('The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23', in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible [BibInr]*, 1: Leiden: Brill, 1993], pp. 167–76 [175]).

21 As Ruiz (*Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, p. 365) argues, 'in all three texts (Ezekiel 16, 23; Revelation 17) the metaphors are so constructed that the language[s] of hating, stripping/devastating and burning serve on the sociopolitical stratum as they would in describing the fate of a woman punished for sexual misconduct'. However, in his view, Rev. 17.16 differs from the parallel texts in Ezekiel insofar as: (1) different cities are in view and (2) 'devouring her flesh' is absent in Ezekiel 16 and 23. As a third difference I would add that the notion of sexual infidelity/adultery present in Ezekiel 16 and 23 is absent in Revelation 17, where no partner is mentioned.

22 See also Van Dijk-Hemmes: 'Oholah, which is traditionally understood to mean "she who has her own tent (i.e. sanctuary)," metaphorizes the capital of Northern Israel Samaria while Oholbah, "My tent (is) in her," metaphorizes Jerusalem' (*Metaphorization of Women*, p. 173).

envisioned party is never disclosed. Moreover, Babylon is not a fictional name but an existing one used as a codeword for a different entity. The choice of Babylon seems largely motivated by its role in Israel's history as narrated in the Hebrew Bible and by the characteristics it shares with (presumably) Rome: being a foreign colonial empire; destroying Jerusalem and its temple; having an (envisioned) downfall.²³

While Ezekiel focuses on God's own people, other prophetic books condemn non-Israelite cities as whores. In Nah. 3.1–7 Nineveh is first addressed as a city (v. 1) and later compared with a prostitute. Her fate is announced: 'I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame' (3.5). She will be made a spectacle: 'Then all who see you will shrink from you and say, "Nineveh is devastated; who will be man her?"' (v. 7). Nahum offers the opposite order from that found in Ezekiel, for it first addresses Nineveh as a city and only then compares the city to a whore. The image of the city resurfaces in the following context, which describes her being devoured by fire (Nah. 3.13, 15). Elements found in both Ezekiel and Revelation also recur here: nakedness, devastation and burning. Isa. 23.15 compares Tyre's fate with that of a whore. The comparison is repeated in v. 17, which states that Tyre 'will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth', but no judgment or sentence follows the comparison.²⁴

Both Nah. 3.1–7 and Isa. 23.15–17 thus share with Ezekiel and Rev. 17.16 the theme of cities being condemned as whores. Concerning Nineveh, the same elements are mentioned as part of her punishment: she will be made naked, devastated and burned. A major difference from Ezekiel, however, is that in Nahum and Isaiah the notion of adultery is absent. Nineveh and Tyre are foreign cities and consequently, no relationship between these cities and YHWH is presumed. This is also the case with Babylon in Revelation 17, where the issue of adultery is also absent. Babylon is presented as committing fornication with the kings of the earth, but no (betrayed) divine husband is in sight.

Alongside texts that condemn cities as whores, another cluster of texts also seems to have inspired the author of Revelation, namely, the prophecies from Isaiah and Jeremiah announcing the fall of Babylon. The angelic announcement in Rev. 14.8 recalls similar statements in Isa. 21.9 and Jer. 51.8, suggesting their fulfillment and thus re-inscribing the authority of the prophetic statements. The idea of Babylon making the nations drunk, introduced in the second part of Rev. 14.8, also appears in Jeremiah 51, but there Babylon herself is presented as a cup (v. 7: 'Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand') and the element of fornication is absent. The features of the (golden) cup, as well as making the 'inhabitants of the earth' drunk, reappear in Rev. 17.1–5 in the description of the whore, but it is in Revelation 18 where the focus shifts to the destruction of Babylon as city that the prophecies against Babylon from Jer. 50–51 play their most prominent role.²⁵

23 Collins, 'Revelation 18', p. 200.

24 As Jan Fekkes points out, this text may have played a role in the formulation of Revelation 17.2a and 18.3b, 9b ('the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her') (*Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development* [SNTSUp, 93; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], pp. 211–12).

25 Elements of correspondence can be found between the following verses: Rev. 18.2 and Jer. 51.37, 43; Rev. 18.3 and Jer. 51.7; Rev. 18.4 and Jer. 50.8, 51.6, 45; Rev. 18.5 and Jer. 51.9; Rev. 18.6 and Jer. 50.12, 51.37, 50.12, 51.37.

More important for our purpose is Isaiah 47, where Babylon is presented as a woman, but not a whore.²⁶ Isa. 47.7–9 depicts Babylon as ruler/queen, an image represented in Rev. 18.7–8. In both cases Babylon is introduced as a speaking subject who self-confidently denies being a widow, a fate said to await her in the near future.²⁷ Isaiah 47 may also have played a role in the formulation of Rev. 17.16, as in both cases part of the punishment of the woman called Babylon involves her being stripped naked (cf. Isa. 47.3), a motif that also occurs in Ezek. 16.39; 23.10, 29; and Nah. 3.5. Is this to be taken as a form of public exposure or as a prelude to sexual violence and so part and parcel of the physical violence to which the women are subjected?²⁸ Most commentaries on Isaiah 47 seem to follow the strategy already noticed with Revelation 17: 'The easiest solution taken to the problem of this metaphor by many commentaries and studies is to ignore the fact of the rape or to play it down to such an extent that it virtually disappears.'²⁹

Of the elements Rev. 17.16 uses to describe the fate of Babylon, one remarkable distinction from the earlier texts emerges: the prophetic texts offer no direct parallel for the image of devoured flesh.³⁰ And yet, this gruesome fate is not without its parallels in the Hebrew Bible either. In Gen. 40.19 Joseph interprets the dream of the chief baker, who saw birds eating the food out of the uppermost basket on his head, as a prediction that 'within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head – from you! – and hang you on a pole, and the birds will eat the flesh from you'. A similar fate awaits the people of the land in Jer. 34.20 because they transgressed the covenant. Ezekiel prophesies against Gog: 'I will give you to birds of prey of every kind and to the wild animals to be devoured' (39.4). The closest parallel to Rev. 17.16 is found in 1 Kgs 21.23, where being devoured is first predicted by Elijah, and later recalled by Jehu (2 Kgs 9.36–37), as the fate awaiting Jezebel. The Septuagint shows a clear correspondence with Rev. 17.16 as it uses the same expression, 'to eat someone's

26 The idea of fornication (πορνεία) is however not completely absent, insofar as it is explicitly mentioned in the LXX of Isa. 47.10 (καὶ ἡ πόρνευα σου ἔσται σοὶ ἀπογύμνη).

27 Other elements of correspondence exist between Isa. 47.9, 12 and Rev. 18.23, where reference is made to Babylon's sorcery (the LXX even has the same wording: ἐν τῇ φαρμακείᾳ σου) and between Isa. 47.14 and Rev. 18.8, insofar as both texts refer to being burned by fire.

28 Since the modern concept of 'rape' cannot simply be transposed to biblical texts, I prefer to use the term 'sexual violence' here. See further Brenner, *Intimacy of Knowledge*, pp. 136–38.

29 Majella Franzmann, 'The City as Woman: The Case of Babylon in Isaiah 47', *Association Biblical Review* 43 (1995), pp. 1–19 (17). Franzmann also points out that the detronement of rulers in the Hebrew Scriptures seems to be gender-differentiated, as sexual abuse only takes place in the case of the women in question (cf. Jer. 13.22, 26–27). That sexual violence is also taking place in the case of Rev. 17.16 has been acknowledged more recently by several commentators. So, e.g., Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 92–97; Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor*, p. 183; Harry O. Maier, *Apocalyptic Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 165.

30 According to Ruiz (Ezekiel in the Apocalypse, p. 366), this image 'looks ahead to the use of Ezek. 39.17–20 in Rev. 19.17–8.21'. There are indeed verbal correspondences between these texts in so far as the expression 'to eat someone's flesh' is used. Massyngberde Ford (*Revelation*, p. 283) rather sees a connection with Lev. 26.27–33, because this text 'suggests that one should look for cannibalism'. However, she overlooks the difference in subject, because in Leviticus 26 the one punished (the people of Israel) will eat the flesh (namely, of their sons and daughters), while in Revelation the one punished will be eaten (namely, by the beast and the horns).

flesh'.³¹ Other features that these women share serve as further evidence that the author of Revelation may have Jezebel in mind here. Notable is Jehu's reference in 2 Kings 9 to Jezebel's many whoredoms and sorceries. A similar accusation can be found in Rev. 2.20, where the woman prophet called Jezebel is accused of practicing fornication (πορνεία), a key element in Babylon's depiction as well.³²

The link between Jezebel and Babylon is even more striking when one compares the portrait of Babylon in Revelation 17 with that of the woman prophet 'Jezebel' in Revelation 2. Duff argues that part of the author's rhetorical strategy is to identify in the mind of his readers his female rival with the whore.³³ The underlying story about Jezebel evoked in Revelation 2 and further used in chs 17–18 merges both pictures and thus facilitates the identification of the woman called 'Jezebel' with the whore called Babylon. The terms 'whore' and 'woman' used for Babylon in Revelation 17 are then used not just as metaphors, but are also meant to establish a link with a real person mentioned earlier in the book.

If the prophet Jezebel's death is left to the reader's imagination, Babylon's end is not. While 'Jezebel' will be 'thrown onto a bed' (Rev. 2.22), the description of Babylon's fate is far more explicit and graphic. The whore will be devoured by the beast and the ten horns, a reversal of similar scenes from Ezekiel, where the beast itself, representing Pharaoh/Egypt, is eaten (Ezek. 29.3–5; 32.2–8; 39.17–20),³⁴ her fate is a gory foreplay to the great supper of Rev. 19.17 even as it has echoes of the Last Supper. But while the body of Christ takes on salvific meaning, the body of the whore does not.³⁵ Reading for gender, therefore, reveals, as Pippin puts it, the 'apocalypse of women'³⁶ turning, in the case of Revelation 17, into a

31 The prediction in 2 Kgs 9.36 that the dogs 'shall eat the flesh of Jezebel' (καταφάγονται τὰς σάρκας Ἰεζαβέλ) corresponds with the one in Rev. 17.16 (τὸς σάρκας αὐτῆς φάγονται). The wording is the same, except that the Septuagint uses the composition rather than the simplex form of the verb that appears in Rev. 17.16 and 19.18. Verbal correspondence also occurs between Rev. 19.2, where God is said to have avenged on Babylon the blood of his servants: ἡ ἀδικία αὐτῶν καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ ἐκ χειρὸς αὐτῆς; and 2 Kgs 9.7b LXX: ἀδικήσας, τὰ αἵματα τῶν δούλων σου καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῶν τρωτῶν τῶν δούλων κυρίου ἐκ χειρὸς Ἰεζαβέλ, 'so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord'.

32 Further parallels may also be found in the way Babylon sees herself ruling as a queen in Rev. 18.7 and in the accusation of having deceived all nations by her sorcery (Rev. 18.23). Beale (*Revelation*, p. 884) lists 11 more parallels between Jezebel and Babylon, but not all of them are equally persuasive or to the point.

33 Paul Duff, *Who Rules the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 89–92. A reading along the same lines is also offered by Maier, who observes that, as a result, the readers addressed in Revelation 2 find themselves recast in the roles of the whore's allies in Revelation 17 (*Apocalypse Recalled*, p. 84).

34 See also J. Priest, 'A Note on the Messianic Banquet', in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messianic Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 222–38 (235).

35 The expression 'to eat one's flesh' is also used in John 6, where Jesus tells his audience that the bread he will give is his flesh and they wonder: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' (v. 52). For the use of 'anti-eucharistic' language, see further Duff, *Who Rules the Beast?*, pp. 102–05. Another indication in that direction can be that the term used in Rev. 14.10, 16.19 and 17.4 for cup (ποτήριον) is also used in the accounts about the last supper (1 Cor. 11.25–26; Mark 14.23 and par.).

36 Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, 1, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 47.

'pornocapypse'.³⁷ The whore represents the city of Rome under the cipher of Babylon; yet she is also more than that: she is a woman both within the text of Revelation (as Jezebel) and without in terms of the correspondence with female identity in the larger sociocultural world of the text's readers and in the biblical landscape of female imagery upon which the text draws.

Just a Metaphor?

The most important objection raised against such a reading in terms of gender is that the whore is a metaphor and so should not be taken as representing a 'real' woman. Objecting to Pippin's reading for gender, both Schüssler Fiorenza and Barr state that she absolutizes gender and does not do justice to the ambiguity of the image, since the whore is not just a woman but also a city. For Barr, 'admitting this ambiguity changes the moral equation that comes from the Whore's destruction'.³⁸

This raises the question: to what extent is gender essential to the metaphor? Is it accidental that a city is represented as a woman? Could Babylon just as well have been represented by a male character? If, as Pippin claims, the "symbolism" of the evil empire would break down at this point,³⁹ why would that be? The answer to that question is that an image cannot be isolated from the sociocultural context in which it functions. In a patriarchal society, to compare the enemy to a woman is a means of ridiculing and denigrating him on the one hand, and of ascertaining one's own male superiority on the other.⁴⁰ What Exum and Brenner state for the prophetic texts under discussion holds true in this case as well. Inscribed in these metaphors are androcentric views on women, sexuality, and power in gender relations.⁴¹ To use a woman as metaphor for a city is more than just a matter of grammar, as Schüssler Fiorenza suggests.⁴² In the case of Babylon, the woman/city represents the other, viewed as alien territory to be conquered and eventually destroyed; the rhetoric thus presumes and affirms an analogy between military and sexual invasion, the colonizer

presented as male, the colonized as female.⁴³ Gender, then, is also more than just a matter of convention; it plays a role in the message to be delivered. In his analysis of violence and the construction of gender in the Hebrew Bible, Harold Washington points to the intended effect of presenting divine judgment in terms of sexual assault: 'The shock value of these biblical texts derives from the feminine positioning of men, not from horror at violence against women. Indeed, it is the cultural appropriateness of raping women that generates the scandal of the prophetic threat addressed to men. The prophetic metaphor therefore co-opts and suppresses women's experience of sexual violence.'⁴⁴

However, Babylon is depicted not only as a woman; she is further depicted as a whore (πόρνῃ). In the Hebrew Bible, this image is clearly gender-specific.⁴⁵ Moreover, as Brenner notes, most occurrences of both the verb and related nominal forms appear in the so-called pornographic passages.⁴⁶ Revelation 17–19 calls only the woman a whore, not her male partners. They are described in terms of their male power status as kings, while others, such as 'the nations' or 'the inhabitants of the earth', are said to participate in *her* fornication' (14.8; 17.2.4; 18.3; 19.2; πορνείας αὐτῆς). Moreover, the use of πόρνῃ/πορνεία and πορνείον⁴⁷ is not merely descriptive; it also implies a moral judgment. In line with its use elsewhere in the New Testament, prostitution appears here in the first place as morally evil,⁴⁸ which also contributes to the negative image of the woman, who is held responsible for it.

The fact that the Great Whore is a metaphor does not make it less dangerous and harmful to 'real' women, because as metaphor it both reflects and reinscribes gender relations. On the one hand, such a metaphor can only be potent if it is rooted in existing views and practices that shape the lives of real people; on the other hand, its power and danger also lie in the fact that it confirms such views and practices and thus legitimizes them, which again affects the lives of real people. I agree with Stenström who states:

an image as 'Babylon the Prostitute' speaks, on one, explicit, level about an earthly power which is not obedient to God. Still, on an implicit level, it reflects, expresses and reinforces views of female prostitutes, which are linked to views of women in general. Therefore, a

37 Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 92.

38 David L. Barr, 'Towards an Ethical Reading of the Apocalypse: Reflections on John's Use of Power, Violence, and Misogyny', *SBLSP*, 36 (1997), pp. 358–73 (365). E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), pp. 93–94.

39 Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 94.

40 As Keller notes, to call him a whore is to vilify especially the enemy male, to feminize and abject, mock and reduce him (to ashes). But to claim that because the text does not intend misogyny it is innocent of its metaphoric subtext is to sweep women's ashes under the carpet'. Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 77.

41 J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JOSOTSup. 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 120–21; Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge*, pp. 164–72.

42 It must not be overlooked, however, that such female imagery for cities utilizes conventional language because then, as today, cities and countries were grammatically construed as feminine' (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993],

43 Jean K. Kim, '"Uncovering her Wickedness": An Intertextual Reading of Revelation 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective', *JSTOT* 73 (1999), pp. 61–81 (73). See also Mieke Bal, 'Metaphors He Lives By', *Seneca* 61 (1993), pp. 185–207 (203); and Collins, 'Feminine Symbolism', p. 31. As Moore observes: 'In the final analysis, John presents Christ, together with his Christians, as icons of masculinity, reserving feminine imagery for the enemy' (*God's Beauty Parlor*, p. 190).

44 Harold C. Washington, 'Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach', *BibInt* 5 (1997), pp. 324–63 (356).

45 Phyllis Bird, '"To Play the Harlot": An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor', in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 75–94 (79). 'Prostitution shares with fornication, as defined in Israel, a fundamental female

initiation (cf. Gen. 38:15–16). See also Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 112–13.

46 Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge*, p. 148.

47 πόρνῃ: 17.1.5, 15, 16; πορνεία: 17.2; πορνείον: 17.2; 18.3, 9.

48 See e.g. its appearance in lists of vices: Mk 7.21–23; Gal 5.19–21; Col 3.5.

feminist analysis of Revelation must be concerned with all the implicit assumptions about gender in the text.⁴⁹

The view that the Great Whore is just a metaphor or image and therefore 'does not speak about a female person or refer to actual historical wo/men'⁵⁰ tends to obscure this relation between metaphor and reality. As Exum rightly observes: 'That meta-phoric violence against women is not the same as real violence is true, but . . . it is nonetheless harmful to real women because it shapes perceptions of reality and of gender relations for men and for women.'⁵¹

Schüssler Fiorenza criticizes such interpretations, stating that 'reading simply in terms of gender reinscribes cultural femininity by naturalizing Revelation's symbolic figurative language'.⁵² In my view, however, this critique is not justified, because these and related interpretations are not reading *simply* in terms of gender and they are not merely *re-inscribing* cultural femininity. It goes too far 'to imply (or, indeed, argue) that if an interpreter describes how something works, she or he is advocating for the maintenance of the practice'.⁵³

Schüssler Fiorenza's own view is that 'although Babylon is figured as an elite woman, the rhetorical-symbolic discourse of Revelation clearly understands it as an imperial city and not as an actual woman'.⁵⁴ But, as I have stated, Rev. 17.16 resists such a reduction of the woman/whore to just a metaphor. The killing of the whore is too disturbing for that. It is like watching a horror movie and telling oneself that the blood is not real. It may well explain why this verse often gets so little attention in the discussion of these chapters or why the focus is placed solely on the destruction of Babylon as a city. But, as Keller notes: 'There is no veiling the way this vision of justice boils down to the burning and devouring of a woman's body.'⁵⁵

It is therefore important to consider Babylon as Great City and Great Whore, as dominant, colonial power and prostitute. I agree with Schüssler Fiorenza that the "female" personifications of mother, virgin, or whore in Revelation must be problematized *not only* in terms of gender *but also* in terms of systemic structures of race, class and imperialist oppression.⁵⁶ However, it is hard to understand then why she herself sets up an opposition between two reading strategies, namely a reading that focuses on gender and a rhetorical-political reading. The first reading is identified as the position of white Western feminist scholars and the second as that of feminist subaltern and postcolonial studies. I find this opposition dangerous,

49 Hanna Stenström, 'The Book of Revelation: A Vision of the Ultimate Liberation or the Ultimate Backlash? A Study in 20th Century Interpretations of Rev 14:1–5, with special emphasis on feminist exegesis' (PhD dissertation: Uppsala University, 1999), p. 53.

50 Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (2nd edn, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 218.

51 Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 120 n. 55.

52 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, p. 218 (her comments are made with explicit reference to Pippin's work).

53 G. Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible* (The Bible and Culture Collective; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 262.

54 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, p. 219.

55 Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, p. 76.

56 Catherine Ewenson, *Book of Revelation*, p. 218 (first published)

because it suggests that gender research is apolitical. As Stenström states: 'feminist researchers must repeat basics: to speak about gender is to speak about a structure of power. To speak about power structures is to speak about something political. We must not allow that "gender" is taken from us and used as a code word for depoliticized research.'⁵⁷

Moreover, I find the formulation of this opposition problematic. In the first case, 'being white' and 'Western' are used as seemingly unproblematic labels and the focus is then on individual scholars. The other position, however, is described as feminist subaltern and postcolonial studies. Here no reference is made to the scholars in question or to their color or cultural background. Thus the first category is presented as exclusively white and Western, while the second category seems to include all 'others'. As the analysis here demonstrates, issues of gender are much more complex and multi-layered in the ideologies of text and interpreters than simple dichotomization will allow. Indeed, such binary oppositions all too readily replicate the dualistic apocalypticizing discourse of Revelation, re-inscribing the power structures of the text.

Women as Subject and Object of Colonizing Discourse

In her postcolonial reading of Revelation 17, Kim observes how female readers of this text are placed in a double bind 'because we are forced to betray our sexual identity in order to share the perspective of the author/God; otherwise we have to identify ourselves with the female object in the text'.⁵⁸ Kim further argues that the whore not only refers to Rome as colonizing power but also represents a colonized woman, exploited by the colonizers and abandoned by her own man. Thus 'sexually oppressed women are caught in a no-win situation between foreign and native men'.⁵⁹

I find myself caught in another double bind here, because I share the critique of an oppressive and violent regime, while I resist the violence done to the whore. However, there is more. As a citizen of Belgium, a colonizing country,⁶⁰ I rather find myself identified with Babylon as locus of colonial power and oppression. Moreover, the red light district of Amsterdam with its prostitutes from all over the world is only one block away from where I work. The traffic in women is flourishing there. Since the 1980s the European sex-business has become big business. Women from Asia, Africa, South America and Eastern Europe are lured to Western Europe with false promises – and often, false passports too – and then forced into prostitution.⁶¹ One

57 Stenström, 'Book of Revelation', pp. 284–85.

58 Kim, "'Uncovering her Wickedness'", p. 61.

59 Kim, "'Uncovering her Wickedness'", p. 63.

60 In 1884–85 Congo became the personal royal property of the Belgian king, Leopold II, and in 1908 the property of the Belgian state. It became independent in 1960.

61 According to the 'Trafficking in Persons Report' 2003 released by the U.S. Department of State, 'Belgium is a destination and transit country for trafficked persons, primarily young women from Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia, destined for Belgium's larger cities or other European countries for the purposes of sexual exploitation' ([www.state.gov/g/tiprpt/2003/](http://www.state.gov/g/tip/r/tiprpt/2003/) [accessed 16 January 2009]).

famous luxury brothel in Hungary is actually called 'Villa Babylon'.⁶² Soon enough, however, the women who arrive in Europe find out about the real nature of the jobs or the wealthy husbands they were promised.

The fate of Babylon described in Rev. 17.16 reminds me of the violence done to the women who refuse to prostitute themselves. Sometimes their passports are taken from them; sometimes they are guarded, locked up, intimidated and threatened, abused, raped and most often financially exploited. The death of the Great Whore reminds me of Nicolasa Duarte, a Dominican woman who worked in a striptease bar in Kortrijk, the city where I was born, and whose dead body was found packed in a suitcase thrown in the river in 1984. The pimp who was responsible for her death was arrested and even admitted to the murder, but he spent only three years in jail. Nicolasa had accepted a contract as *ballarina* in Europe to earn money for her poor family, but her life ended in this striptease bar.⁶³

Reading Revelation 17 from this particular context as *Stitz in Tod* or 'black hole'⁶⁴ makes me aware of yet another aspect of the gender ideology embedded in the text, namely how the negative depiction of the whore obscures the social reality of prostitution. The focus of the text is on the character of the whore, and the strategy is to present her as morally evil. This is done in a number of ways. She is presented not only as a prostitute, but also as actively pursuing prostitution: 'She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication' (14.8). This clearly puts the blame on her; since *she* made them drink and it is *her* fornication! Also contributing to her negative image is her presentation as being drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (17.6). As consumption of blood is explicitly forbidden in the Torah, this practice appears particularly repulsive. That she is presented as drunk makes her action even more excessive and demonstrates her lack of self-control (αὐτοῦνοῦν).⁶⁵ Both the woman prophet called Jezebel and Babylon transgress similar sexual boundaries and break food-related injunctions. In Revelation 2 the taboo is that of eating food sacrificed to idols (ἑὶδωλῶσφωτο); in Revelation 17 it is the consumption of blood. As Duff notes, the resultant picture in both cases is that of a woman who is out of control, thus tapping into cultural stereotypes regarding gender. Women operating independently in the public sphere should be shunned as potentially dangerous.⁶⁶ It can hardly be accidental that both Jezebel and Babylon lack male partners (and thus control) and that the only males

on the scene are presented as victims of these women, insofar as they have been deceived by them (2.20; 18.23).

Besides conveying negative elements in the description of the whore, the text also presents more explicit value judgments. Babylon is accused of blasphemy, impurity, abomination, iniquity, deceit and corruption,⁶⁷ and her sins are said to be 'heaped high as heaven' (Rev. 18.5). All these elements have this in common: the woman is pictured as morally reprehensible, which in turn makes her punishment look to be deserved. The text legitimizes as well as sanctions the measures taken against her by presenting them as being in accordance with God's will. The violence against her thus receives divine (i.e., absolute) justification in the constructed narrative context.

However, in order to reach this conclusion the Great Whore needs to be isolated and the social dimension of prostitution exposed. By social dimension I mean here prostitution as trade, and thus as a specific form of labor.⁶⁸ Albert indirect, the only trace in the text that the whore is rewarded for her services is found in the description of her wealth. According to Rev. 17.4, 'the whore was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls'. This description is repeated in 18.16 by the merchants who mourn for the destroyed city: 'Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls!' Although in the previous context reference is made to the city's commercial activity, the source of her luxury is never made explicit.⁶⁹ The suggestion in the text seems to be that she is making profit from her lovers, one way or another. This connection may be fairly obvious as far as the wealth of Babylon as a colonial power is concerned,⁷⁰ and it could even hold true for a whore. Still, the social reality of prostitution remains out of sight. The cultural associations embedded in this discourse create a dynamic lens for characterizing the whore in purely negative terms, but the lens fails to engage the broader sociocultural contexts that engender prostitution in the ancient world and our own. In this sense, the righteous rhetoric of Revelation readily deconstructs itself, as the dualistic conceptual framework too easily allows for the colonized to play out a role reversal as colonizer, focused, sadly, on the dismemberment of the female body in text and history.

A trace of this observation may be left precisely in the gendered character of the metaphor itself, because the metaphor also reveals the 'gender-based division of

67 Βλασφημία: 17.3; ἀνομία: 17.4; 18.2; βδέλυγμα: 17.4; 5; ἀδικία: 18.5; πλῆθος: 18.23; φθορά: 19.2.

68 Reference to the situation of prostitutes in antiquity is made by Luzia Sutter Rehmann. According to her 'the waters' in 17.1, 15 can be seen as a realistic reference to the places where prostitutes were contacted ('Für Korinth ist es z.B. belegt, daß Sklavinnen in Bädern arbeiteten und dort, neben Handruch und Seifenarbeits, den Gästen sexuelle Dienste anboten'. *Von Alin, gegen hineinsehen. Feministisch-befreiungstheologische Interpretationen zur Apokalypse* [Lucerne: Edition Exodos, 1998], p. 97).

69 So also Sutter Rehmann: 'Es ist aber auffallend, daß wir nichts von einem Lohn erfahren, den sie von den Freien erhalten würde' ('Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Inspirationen aus Pamos', in Luise Schottroff and Matthe-Theres Wacker [eds], *Kompentium: Feministische Bibeldeutung* [2nd edn, Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlag, 1999], pp. 725–41 [735]).

70 According to Duff, John's criticism is not directed at wealth as such (as the very similar description of Jerusalem demonstrates), but at the merchant class in Revelation 18 (Duff, *Who Rules the Beast?*, p. 63).

62 Chris de Stoop, *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer* (Antwerp: Kritak, 1992), p. 93.

63 de Stoop, *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer*, pp. 53–55.

64 The expression *Stitz in Tod* originally comes from Jon Sobrino, but it is adapted by Stenström to refer more specifically to the death context of women: 'By "death context of women", I understand the circumstances under which women die because they are women, and those where women do not die physically but are subjected to destructive powers which create a state of death during life' (Stenström, 'Book of Revelation', p. 23). Manuel Castells uses the cosmic metaphor 'black hole' for those regions of our society 'from which, statistically speaking, there is no escape from the pain and destruction inflicted on the human condition for those who, in one way or another, enter these social landscapes' (*End of Millennium* [The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, III: Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], p. 162).

65 Duff, *Who Rules the Beast?*, p. 101.

66 Duff, *Who Rules the Beast?*, p. 108.

labor'. That the Great Whore is a woman has everything to do with economics and power. As Uy Eviota puts it: 'The intersection between economy, politics and gender is embodied in the sexual division of labour: the demarcation of those tasks which are paid and those not paid, differentials in pay, concentrations in occupations and job-levels within these occupations, and sexual servicing as the paid work of women.'⁷¹ Gender ideology not only determines what sexual behavior is considered to male or female and what sexual needs are 'natural' (including how one is supposed to fulfill them), but also the kind of work men or women are supposed to do. Economic and political forces play their role in the social and financial evaluation of this work as they determine if and what labor is being paid and how much. In his analysis of social global change in our own time, Castells points to the link between supply and demand 'made by the global criminal networks that control much prostitution throughout the world, and are always striving to find new, more profitable product lines and markets'.⁷²

What is only a trace in the picture of the Great Whore is further substantiated in the examples I mentioned from my own context. They show, on the one hand, how the 'traffic in women' serves the sexual and economic needs of the still-colonial West, and how, on the other, these women are used and abused as slaves.⁷³ In my view, the ideology-critical power of Revelation falls short when it comes to gender ideology. The abuse of a whore as metaphor for a colonial power reveals this failure. As Kim states: 'the whore metaphor does not simply stand for the imperial city of Rome but also stands for women sexually involved in a colonizing context.'⁷⁴ The two cannot be separated, and the dramatic consequences of such metaphorization are exposed in the violence done to the whore. The reader is supposed to rejoice in her death, but not every reader does – at least not the resistant reader.

FEMININE SYMBOLISM IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION*

ADELA YARBRO COLLINS

Feminine symbols are prominent in the second half of the book of Revelation, which extends from 12.1 to 22.5.¹ Symbols can be approached in a variety of ways. In the twentieth century a dominant mode of interpreting symbols among biblical scholars has been the history-of-religion approach. This method has sought to discover the origin and history of various symbols and to discern their meaning and function in one text by comparing it with other texts from the same historical context and culture.² This approach is very illuminating for the analysis of the three major feminine symbols in Revelation: the woman clothed with the sun in ch. 12, the prostitute of ch. 17 and the bride of the Lamb in chs 19 and 21. The vision of the woman clothed with the sun has a highlighted position as the opening account of the second half of the book.

The traditional Catholic interpretation of the woman clothed with the sun is that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus, since the child she brings forth is the Messiah. Most Protestant exegetes, and now many Catholic exegetes, have found that interpretation unlikely. Alternative interpretations are that she is personified Israel, Jerusalem, or the people of God. Such personifications are common in the prophetic traditions of Israel.³

A history-of-religion approach leads to the conclusion that the woman is presented as a goddess.⁴ The vision is of a high goddess with astral attributes: the sun is her garment, the moon her footstool, stars her crown. The Greek word *ἀστὴρ* could mean star or constellation, so it is likely that her crown is the circle of heaven, the zodiac.⁵ These attributes suggest that she is a cosmic queen who has power over the rhythm of night and day and over human destiny, since the zodiac symbolizes fate.

Only a few goddesses in Hellenistic and early Roman times were depicted in such exalted fashion. These attributes, especially the sun and the zodiac, were usually associated with the male high-god, Zeus or his equivalent. Three goddesses who were so described were the Mother Goddess worshiped at Ephesus, who was identified with the Greek Artemis and the Roman Diana; the Syrian goddess Atargatis, whose

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1 For an argument that the book of Revelation is structured into two main parts, see A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR, 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 5–32.

2 An excellent commentary that emphasizes the history-of-religion approach to the book of Revelation is Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966; reprint of the 6th edn, 1906).

3 Hos. 1–3; Ezek. 16, 23; Isa. 54, 60, 62, 66; Mic. 4.9–10.

4 Collins, *The Combat Myth*, pp. 71–76.

5 Franz Boll, *Aus der Offenbarung Johannes: Hellenistische Studien zum Weltbild der Apokalypse* (Göttingen: Teubner 1914), p. 99 n. 1.

71 Elizabeth Uy Eviota, *The Political Economy of Gender: Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines* (London/New Jersey: Zed, 1992), p. 9.

72 Castells, *End of Millenium*, p. 157.

73 As noted by Barr, a trace of the trafficking in human beings is present in Rev. 18.13, where they are listed with other commodities for the colonial elite (Barr, 'Towards an Ethical Reading', p. 369).

74 Kim, 'Uncovering Her Wickedness', p. 69.

name is a combination of Astarte and Anat; and Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess who was worshiped in new forms all over the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

The iconography of Isis seems to be the closest to the woman of Revelation 12. She was called 'female sun', 'second sun' and 'mistress of heaven' in temple inscriptions in Egypt in the late kingdom.⁶ In a novel written during the second century CE, an appearance of Isis to a man named Lucius is described. He addresses her as 'Queen of Heaven'. She is called 'a very bright apparition'. On the midpoint of her forehead is a round disc like the moon. Her robe resembles the night sky; it is shining black and covered with stars; in the midst of the stars is the moon in mid-month.⁷

The plot of Revelation 12 involves an attack of a monster on a pregnant woman in order to destroy her and especially her child. Since the child is the one who will rule the nations, the implication is that the dragon wishes to prevent the child's kingship in order to be ruler himself. In Egyptian mythology, Set kills his brother Osiris in a struggle for kingship. Isis, who is their sister and also Osiris's wife, revives Osiris, becomes king of the underworld. She conceives a child by the resuscitated Osiris, Horus, who, when he is grown, kills Set and becomes king. This complex of myths is similar in general outline to the plot of Revelation 12.⁸

A much closer parallel can be found in some versions of the story of Leto.⁹ Leto is a very ancient Greek goddess, one of the Titans, children of Heaven and Earth, who ruled before the Olympian gods. She was one of the few Titans who had a cult in historical times, possibly because of the importance of her children. Apollo and Artemis. Homer and Hesiod simply say that she bore them and give no details. A later hymn in Homeric style, 'To Delian Apollo', says that Leto wandered far and wide seeking a place to bear Apollo and was refused time and again because each place feared to receive the mighty god. Finally Delos agreed, when Leto promised that Apollo would build his temple there and honor Delos over all his other cult sites. Leto is said to have labored for nine days and nights. All the chief goddesses were there supporting her except Hera and Eileithyia, the goddess of sore travail. Hera was envious of the faultless and strong son Leto was about to bear, so she stayed away and prevented Eileithyia from knowing of Leto's trouble. Finally, the other goddesses bring Eileithyia to Delos and Leto brings forth Apollo, holding on to a palm tree. In the third century BCE, Callimachus, an Alexandrian poet, wrote a hymn to Delos in which he tells a somewhat different version of the story of Apollo's birth. According to this version, Hera forbade any land to afford Leto refuge, but at last Delos ventured to disobey.

In Chapter 140 of a Latin translation of Greek myths attributed to Hyginus (second century CE), we find the version of Apollo's birth story which is closest to Revelation 12 (it is found in other primary sources as well):

Fabulae 140. Python

Python, son of Earth, was a huge dragon. He was accustomed to giving oracles on Mount Parnassus before Apollo. He was informed by an oracle that he would be destroyed by the offspring of Leto. At that time Zeus was living with (contubernit) Leto. When Hera learned of this, she caused it that Leto give birth where the sun does not reach. When Python perceived that Leto was pregnant by Zeus, he began to pursue (her) in order to kill her. But, by order of Zeus, the North Wind (*Aquilon*) lifted Leto up and carried her to Poseidon; Poseidon protected her, but in order not to rescind Hera's decree, he carried her to the island Orygia and covered the island over with waves. When Python did not find Leto, he returned to Parnassus. But Poseidon returned the island Orygia to the upper region, which island has been called Delos afterward. There, holding on to an olive tree, Leto gave birth to Apollo and Artemis, to whom (pl.) Haphaestus gave arrows as a gift. Four days after they were born, Apollo avenged his mother. He went to Parnassus and killed Python with arrows. (Therefore he is called Python.) He put his bones in a tripod and placed (the tripod) in his temple, and established funeral games for him, which are called Pythia.¹⁰

The narrative of Revelation 12 and the story from Hyginus share a basic plot, which is a mythic pattern of combat widespread in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world.¹¹ The myths that share this pattern depict a struggle between two divine beings and their allies for universal kingship. One of the combatants is usually a monster, often a dragon. This conflict may reflect cultural and political changes and struggles in the regions in which these myths were formed, repeated and modified. The basic conflicts in human life and nature are also reflected in these myths. The monster is often associated with chaos, sterility and death, while his opponent is associated with order, fertility and life. Thus their conflict is presented as a cosmic battle whose outcome will constitute or abolish order in society and fertility in nature. The mythic pattern has the following elements:

- A. The Dragon Pair: (1) husband and wife or (2) brother and sister or (3) mother and son
- B. The Attack: to keep the chief god from coming to power or to remove him
- C. The Champion's Death
- D. The Dragon's Reign
- E. The Recovery of the Champion: accomplished by his wife, sister, mother or son
- F. Battle Renewed and Victory
- G. Restoration and Confirmation of Order

The role of the woman in the plot of Revelation 12 is not that of the goddess ally, which belongs to the theme of the Recovery of the Champion or to the theme of Renewed Battle and Victory. Rather she is the threatened mother of the hero, a role that belongs to the theme of the Attack and to the theme of the Dragon's Reign. Like Leto, she is depicted as the mother of a heroic figure under attack by a dragon

6 Jan Bergman, *Ich bin Isis: Studien zum mythenliterarischen Hintergrund der griechischen Isisverehrungen* (Uppsala: The University Press, 1968), p. 162.

7 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.

8 Collins, *The Combat Myth*, pp. 62–63.

10 For the Latin text, see H. J. Rose (ed.), *Hygini Fabulae* (2nd edn, Lugduni Batavorum: A.W. Sythoff, 1963), pp. 102–03.

11 Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of the Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959); Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

because of the threat posed by her child. Nor does Revelation 12 come to a resolution in the restoration of order. The victory of Michael and the angels over the dragon and his angels is only partial: the dragon is defeated in heaven but reigns on earth. The final defeat of the dragon is described in 20.7–10. The restoration of order that follows this victory involves the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (21.1). As in many other ancient texts, the establishment of order involves a sacred marriage: the hero, the Lamb, is united with his bride, the new Jerusalem (21.2, 9). The sacred marriage symbolizes new life with the ancient connotations of fertility.

It may seem strange that the author who condemned assimilation of Greco-Roman culture in the messages to seven churches (Revelation 2–3) would adapt Greco-Roman religious traditions in recounting his visions. John's use of the mythic pattern described above shows that he shared the ancient mythic consciousness. It also suggests that he was forced to come to terms with the feminine aspect of the divine. Mother goddesses were very prominent in Asia Minor. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world. Sardis was another major center of the cult of the mother goddess.

The woman clothed with the sun is best understood as the Heavenly Israel; she is portrayed as God's spouse, whom he protects, as mother of the messiah, and of all believers (v. 17).¹² Like the symbol of the Lamb, the woman is characterized both by power and by weakness. Her power is manifest in her description as a heavenly being, as cosmic queen, and in her ability to bring forth a child who will be universal king. Her weakness is evident in her vulnerability to the attacks of the dragon, her inability to protect herself and her child, and her dependency on outside help for protection and rescue.

Her story is a paradigm for the audience of the book. Like her, they have a heavenly identity: they are God's kingdom in the world, God's priests (1.6); their names are written in the book of life (3.5). But they are also vulnerable: some have been arrested, some killed; their legal status in the Roman empire is precarious. The rescue of the woman and her being nourished in the wilderness suggests to the audience that God will deliver them as God delivered the people of Israel from Egypt.

The feminine aspect of the divine is also manifest in the symbol of the Bride of the Lamb. According to an inscription from the third century BCE, the sacred marriage of Zeus and Leto took place in Didyma, near Ephesus, where there was a shrine of Apollo at which oracles were given.¹³ Statues of Zeus and Leto, together with their twin offspring, were erected in the third century CE in Didyma, so their cult seems to have endured.¹⁴

Traditional readings of Revelation have identified the Bride with the Church or with the soul of the individual Christian that is united with Christ after death. A history-of-religion approach would see the influence of the sacred marriage in the formation of this symbol. The vision has also been shaped by Isaiah 54, in which Jerusalem is depicted as God's wife. The construction of the new Jerusalem out of

precious metals and stones may have been suggested by Isa. 54.11–12: 'I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles agate, your gates of carbuncles, and your wall of precious stones.' This text was interpreted by the community at Qumran as an allegorical description of the 'Congregation of His Elect', namely, the community itself.¹⁵ The Bride, the new Jerusalem, in Revelation symbolizes the community of the faithful at the time of their uniting with God and the Lamb in the new age.

The fulfillment of God's creation and God's interaction with humanity cannot be described in purely abstract terms or in metaphors that are only masculine. Both the masculine and the feminine are needed to express the richness, complexity and vitality of the created world in its fulfillment. This vision of the new creation as a wedding is a counterbalance to Rev. 14.1–5. Because of the present crisis, which John implied was about to intensify, the ideal was to renounce sexual relations and to prepare for the end.¹⁶ At the same time, as one of the fundamental characteristics of God's good creation, sexuality is a symbol of the new creation, of wholeness, of the time of salvation.

Contrasted with the Bride, who is clothed in pure linen (19.8), is the Prostitute of Revelation 17. The contrasting parallel is quite deliberate as the literary structure shows. The vision of the Prostitute is an elaboration of the seventh bowl, as the vision of the Bride of the Lamb in ch. 21 is an elaboration of the seventh vision in the last series. Each of these visions is introduced in the same way. In each case, one of the angels who had the seven bowls comes to John and says, 'Come and I will show you . . .' (cf. 17.1 with 21.9). Each time, what the angel describes is a female. In both passages, the angel carries John away in the spirit in order to show him the vision.

In ch. 17, the name written on the woman's forehead is Babylon the great. She symbolizes a city. The prophets of ancient Israel often personified cities as women, both Jerusalem and enemy cities. This metaphor may reflect an ancient Near Eastern understanding of goddesses as protectors of particular peoples or cities. This protective goddess, often called the Fortune of the city, was usually portrayed with a crown that looked like a city wall. The origin of these ideas cannot be determined, but the wall of the ancient city-fortress may have suggested the encircling comfort and security of the womb or a mother's arms.

The classical prophets also spoke of cities and nations as harlots. Nahum, in a triumphal ode celebrating the fall of the Assyrian empire, refers to Nineveh as a prostitute (Nah. 3.4). The image expresses the attraction other nations felt toward the center of power. The context suggests that Nineveh is maligned in large part because of its treacherous and deceitful dealings with other nations. In a late addition to the oracles against Tyre and Sidon in Isaiah 23, the restoration of Tyre is described as the return to favor of a forgotten prostitute. Prostitution here seems to express a way of life in which no scruples limit the quest for wealth.¹⁷ Elsewhere (Isa. 1.21; Hosea 1–4; Jer. 3.6–10; Ezek. 16; 23.5–21), it is Jerusalem, Samaria, Israel

12 Collins, *The Combat Myth*, pp. 134–35.

13 Albert Rehm, *Didyma*, part 2: *Die Inschriften* (gen. ed. Theodore Wiegand; ed. of this vol. Richard Harder; Berlin: Mann, 1958), p. 116.

14 Rehm, *Didyma*, pp. 115–17, nn. 89–90.

15 Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (2nd edn, New York: Penguin, 1975), pp. 228–29.

16 A. Yarbro Collins, *The Gospel and Women* (Orange, CA: Chapman College, 1988), p. 23–28.

17 Isa. 23.15–18; cf. Ezek. 28.16–18.

and Judah who are depicted by the prophets as prostitutes, with prostitution symbolizing unfaithfulness to Yahweh expressed in foreign alliances and the acknowledgement of other gods.

The frequency of the use of the prostitute as a symbol for Yahweh's people has led some to identify the prostitute of Revelation 17 with Jerusalem. The text suggests a different identification, however. The seven heads of the beasts are interpreted as seven hills (17.9), a detail that recalls the city of Rome. In the last verse, the woman is said to be the great city that has dominion over the whole earth (v. 18). These remarks make clear that the woman symbolizes the ancient city of Rome. Like Nineveh, Rome has seduced many nations into alliances because of its overwhelming and attractive power. Like those of Tyre, its commercial enterprises are widespread, enriching some and making the poverty of others harder to bear. Idolatry is a factor here as well, although the image has shifted. Rather than depicting the people of God as a prostitute, who has lusted after male gods and their human representatives instead of remaining faithful to Yahweh, Revelation presents the foreign god as female, as a prostitute who seduces the inhabitants of the earth.

The ancient Romans not only personified their city but allowed it to be worshiped in the cities of the empire as the goddess Roma. Roma was worshiped, sometimes alone, sometimes with one or more emperors, in many cities of western Asia Minor. From one point of view, Revelation 17 is anti-Roman propaganda. It is a parody of the honor given Roma: her supporters worship a prostitute, not a goddess! Besides idolatry, the qualities especially condemned in Rome are violence, oppression, arrogance and pride. According to Revelation 17–18, the imperial system involves bloodshed (17.6, 18.24), slavery (18.13), and a false, overblown sense of self-sufficiency and power (18.7).

The history-of-religion approach interprets the feminine symbols of Revelation in light of their origins and in terms of their meaning and function in the historical context in which the book was written. A quite different perspective on these symbols is opened up by placing them in the context of a psychological interpretation of symbols in the tradition of Carl Jung. My thinking along these lines has been stimulated by Erich Neumann's book *The Origins and History of Consciousness*.¹⁸ The question immediately arises whether his study is, in effect, an analysis of the origins and history of *male* consciousness only, or whether his description of stages of consciousness applies to females as well. This question will be addressed at the appropriate points below.

According to Neumann, the first stage in the evolution of consciousness is the time when the ego is contained in the unconscious. The symbol of this stage is the uroboros, the circular snake, the primal dragon that begets, impregnates and slays itself. In terms of the history of consciousness, this stage has given rise to creation myths. With regard to the individual psyche, it is the stage of infancy and early childhood when the ego is not yet detached from 'the round', the surrounding world, the primordial mother, the uroboros. The notion that there is a time when the ego is contained within the unconscious seems to apply equally well to females as to males.

The androgynous image of the uroboros is appropriate for both sexes. Further analysis, however, is needed of the creation myths associated with this stage of consciousness to see whether or not they represent the consciousness of both males and females. The Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, for example, seems to represent a male point of view, since the mother of the gods, Tiamat, is killed by the emerging king of the gods, who creates the heaven and the earth from her body.

The next stage is one in which the ego has separated from the uroboros, but is still under its dominance. The symbol of this stage is the Great Mother. This great uroboric Mother Goddess has two sides: she is the good mother who nourishes and lavishes affection, and she is also the wicked mother who devours and destroys. The myths that relate to this stage or layer of consciousness focus on the earth and symbols of vegetation, on fertility and growth, on agriculture and the sphere of food. In terms of the individual psyche, this stage relates to the ego's establishment of a certain degree of autonomy in later childhood and adolescence. This stage is related to the Madonna image: the Mother Goddess with the Divine Child, a symbol that emphasizes the good, protective, side of the mother. It is also related to the myths of a Mother Goddess in her relationship to her son-love, the myths of Cybele and Attis, Aphrodite and Adonis, and Ishtar and Tammuz. These son-lovers are loved, slain, buried, and bewailed by the Mother, and then reborn through her. The masculine principle is differentiated from the feminine, but it is not yet strong enough to be an independent counterbalance to it. The maternal is still primary and dominant. Fear and a sense of death characterize this stage or layer.

In principle, this stage of consciousness could represent the experience of both males and females, since boys and girls may experience the mother as both loving and threatening. Neumann's elaboration of the basic insight, however, is clearly from a male point of view; the mother is perceived as lover in a sexual sense. In the development of most girls, such perceptions are oriented to the father. Further research could be done to see whether there is evidence of myths involving the Father God and his daughter-lover.

Subsequent stages involve the formation of the conscious, higher ego, the development of the independence of the ego and of consciousness by the rise of principles of analysis, distinction and the delimitation of opposites. The myths that relate to these stages or layers are the myth of the separation of the World Parents and the hero myths, especially the slaying of the dragon, the liberating of the female captive, and the acquisition of the dragon's treasure. The hero's fear of the dragon corresponds to the male's fear of the female in general. The dragon symbolizes the Great and Terrible Mother. Like the uroboros, the Great Mother is, in a sense, bisexual. She possesses masculine, but not paternal, features. Her aggressive and destructive features may be defined as masculine. These aggressive and destructive elements of the Great Mother can appear symbolically and ritually as separate figures detached from her, such as animals. The horrible sea monster is originally the Great Mother's dependent phallic consort. He is the dragon or bull who represents the destructive side of the uroboros. Later, however, when the patriarchate has succeeded to the Great Mother's sovereignty, the role of the Terrible Father is projected upon the masculine representatives of the destructive side of the Goddess. This is done especially when it is in the interests of patriarchal development to emphasize the figure of the 'good mother'.

¹⁸ Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (German original: *Ursprünge und Geschichte des Bewusstseins*; Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1949; trans. R. F. C. Hull; New York: Pantheon

The stages of the development of the individual psyche, as Neumann defines them, apply to both males and females. Females as well as males develop a conscious, higher ego, independence of the ego and consciousness by the use of analysis, disfunction and the delimitation of opposites. Feminist analysis of culture, however, has questioned the heavy value placed on independence and dichotomous thinking. The myths that Neumann associated with these later stages clearly express the male point of view. The hero is male; the major threat is a negative female and the major prize is a positive female. The notion of the 'good mother' plays a role in social organization in which men are dominant.

In Neumann's terms, following Bachofen, the 'patriarchate' refers to a masculine world symbolized by spirit, sun, consciousness and ego. The matriarchate is a world dominated by the unconscious, by a preconscious, prelogical, pre-individual way of thinking. In the development of the myth of Athena, the old mother goddess is defeated by a new, feminine spiritual principle. Athena was not born of woman, but sprang from the head of Zeus; thus she is opposed to the earthly, unconscious but feminine element. She is the companion and helper of the masculine hero. She has attributes of the old mother deity, but the maternal power is subdued. The limitations of the gender-specific symbolism are obvious. Such symbolism creates 'moods and motivations', to borrow Clifford Geertz's terms, that do not give men permission to draw upon the creativity of the unconscious of women to develop logical abilities.

Turning to the book of Revelation, we find manifestations of the Great Mother symbol. The great prostitute of ch. 17 is the Terrible Mother. Her character as a prostitute symbolizes the seductive and charming power of the Great Mother's lure toward self-dissolution in the unconscious sea of participation, of non-individuation. This aspect is brought out by her seat upon many waters (v. 1), a symbol of the feminine unconscious, and by the allusions to drunkenness, a path toward forgetfulness, toward impersonal ecstasy (v. 2). The beast upon which she rides is her phallic consort, showing her power over the animal world of fertility, birth, growth and decay. Her threatening, violent side is manifest in the remark that she drinks human blood (v. 6). The Terrible Mother must be appeased by blood and needs to be soaked with and nourished by blood in order to be fruitful. The Jungian perspective leads us to find in the representation of Rome as the Great Mother a reflection of the struggle of Christian faith as a religion of individuation and consciousness to free itself from Greco-Roman culture and religion, which were more rooted in the participation mystique.

A feminist perspective leads to the observation that this vision is an expression of a male imagination. Tina Pippin has argued that the vision of the prostitute in Revelation 17 is sadistic, erotic and pornographic.¹⁹ 'Sadism' may be defined as delight taken in seeing someone else suffer. This definition is applicable to Rev. 17.1–19.10, but Pippin seems to imply that sadism always involves an erotic aspect.

I find no evidence of sexual desire in these chapters. Revelation 17 is 'pornographic' in the etymological sense; it draws a picture (*γράφειν*) of a prostitute (*πόρν*) 'Pornography' in general usage, however, means a text that expresses or seeks to evoke sexual excitement. The term should not be used more broadly for any linguistic expression that is offensive to us (as twenty-first-century people). The violence in Revelation 17 and the male perspective are due to the fact that war in the ancient world (and often in the modern world) involves violence against actual women and the use of female symbolism to express degradation.

The woman of ch. 12 is the Great Mother in her protective, good aspect. Motherhood is explicit in the depiction of a pregnant woman, her labor, and the mentor of her giving birth to a son. The Madonna symbol is suggested. Her originally earthy nature is perhaps reflected in the fact that the earth is her ally in the struggle with the dragon (v. 16). But like Athena, she represents a new feminine principle that incorporates consciousness and supports the patriarchate. Although she is associated with the primordial feminine symbols of the earth and the moon, these symbols are overshadowed by the masculine symbols of the sun and the stars. Her association with the masculine world of spirit and thought is also symbolized by her being given the wings of the great eagle and by her flight into the desert (v. 14).

The threatening, destructive side of the Great Mother has been split off from the good mother and is represented by the dragon. The woman, along with her son represents the spiritual masculine principle that is in danger of being swallowed by darkness, by the uroboric dragon that represents the maternal unconscious. The narrative of ch. 12 is a segment of a hero myth, with the male child cast as the hero who must slay the dragon. The conflict between the hero and the dragon is not fully resolved in ch. 12. The renewed battle and ultimate victory of the hero are described in chs 19–22.

Although the hero myth of Revelation does not involve a female captive being held by the dragon, the Bride of the Lamb has an analogous role. In the old fertility myths, the young hero king had to overcome a monster before being united with the Earth Mother in the sacred marriage, a union that restored the fertility of the year. In the hero myth of later stages of consciousness, the freeing of the captive expresses a new stage in the evolution of masculine consciousness, namely, the crystallization of the anima from the mother archetype. In other words, the hero kills only the terrible side of the female, and his own fear of the female, in order to set free the fruitful and joyous side with which she joins herself to him.

Rev. 14.1–5 represents the stage of the non-liberation of the captive, the continued dominance of the Great Mother under her deadly aspect. The final result of this dominance is alienation from the body and from the earth, haired of life, and world negation. The destruction of the prostitute, the Terrible Mother, in chs 17 and 18 and the defeat of the dragon, in ch. 20, make possible the union of the Lamb with the Bride and he founds his kingdom with her.

In Neumann's interpretation of the developed hero myths, the hero's rescue of the captive corresponds to the discovery of a new psychic world. The kingdom that they found together is a new continent of cultural accomplishment that breaks away from the world of the First Parents. The kingdom of the Lamb in Revelation is ambiguous. It may be seen as the new Jerusalem, a new vision of human society on earth, or as a return to paradise, the annihilation of human creativity in a return to

19 Tina Pippin, 'The Reproduction of Power: Feminism, Marxism and the Ideology of Reading,' unpublished paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in New Orleans, 1990. See now, Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen: J.B. Metzler, 1997).

the womb. This ambiguity may be resolved in particular readings and applications of Revelation.

In the course of this exploratory Jungian interpretation, I have made some observations relating to a feminist analysis of the symbols of Revelation. A further observation of this type is that the symbolic use of prostitution is problematic. In the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic literature, the word translated as 'prostitute' (*zonah*) has a wide range of meaning. It refers to any woman who transgresses the regulations surrounding her sexuality, not only to the ordinary prostitute, but also to the unmarried woman who has intercourse with anyone other than her betrothed, to the adulteress, and to the widow who has intercourse that does not fulfill the laws of levirate marriage. Reflection on the use of the term in a feminist context increases awareness of the sexual double standard. In a patriarchal system, it is essential that wives be faithful to their husbands for a variety of reasons, one being the need for legitimate, easily identifiable male heirs. The fidelity of men to their wives, however, is often considered inessential or even undesirable. In order to avoid a situation in which men fulfill their sexual desire with other men's wives or daughters, a special class of women is needed: prostitutes. The image of the prostitute is then used to define and enforce a strict code of female dress and behavior.

It is difficult today to use the prostitute as a simple, unambiguous negative symbol for other reasons too. In Greek and Roman society, many prostitutes came to be such because they were abandoned as infants or captured in war and made slaves. Today many prostitutes are women who were sexually abused as children or victims of violence or incest. Poverty, lack of self-esteem, and other factors beyond personal choice and control often lead women to become prostitutes. Behind the symbolic use of prostitution is the positive value of fidelity. The challenge is to resymbolize that value in a way that expresses mutuality between men and women and does not blame the victims of the sexual double standard and sexual exploitation.

Not just the symbol of the prostitute, but all the feminine symbols of Revelation are ambiguous when viewed from the point of view of the desirability of mutuality between men and women, and of flexibility in the definition of male and female roles. In comparison with exclusively abstract theological language or with texts that use only masculine symbols, Revelation makes a positive contribution by using both masculine and feminine symbols to describe the heavenly world, God's interaction with the earthly world, and salvation in the new age. The particular forms of the feminine symbols, however, are limited and limiting for women. The major symbols are mother, prostitute and bride. These are all relational terms with the male at the center. The normative person is male. The hero is male. Women are defined in terms of their sexual and reproductive roles. The Mother of Revelation 12 is good, but she is hardly even protector and nourisher any more. She herself must be protected and is hardly even protected and nourished. She is almost totally dependent on the male high God; she must be rescued. A positive value expressed in the notion of the 'bride' is the cooperative relationship between men and women, but the image of the 'bride' in our culture is overlaid with sentiment and consumerism. Furthermore, 'bride' and 'prostitute' are two sides of a binary opposition that arises from a male perspective. This character makes the retrieval of the symbol 'bride' undesirable. What is needed is a resymbolization of male and female partnership in the daily tasks of living, as well as

JEZEBEL SPEAKS: NAMING THE GODDESSES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

MARY ANN BEAVIS

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to them the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away their share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22.18–19)¹

The End of the Bible

As the last book in the Christian Bible draws to a close, the prophet John utters solemn warning that anyone who tampers with the words of his book will be punished by plague and eternal death. My students sometimes remind me that these words are at 'the end of the Bible', and that to raise the question of adding to or subtracting from the canon (as I sometimes do in class) is forbidden and dangerous. In answer, I explain that from a historical-exegetical perspective, these are merely the final words of one biblical book, the Apocalypse, placed at the end of the Christian Testament after a centuries-long process of canonical formation. To at least some students, this explanation is not satisfying: surely, someone is bound to insist, not only the writing of the biblical books but also the process of canonization (whatever it was) was divinely inspired. The irony that the sacred scripture of Christianity ends with words tantamount to a curse (cf. Deut. 28.58–68) goes unmentioned.

The Apocalypticist's effort to prevent the addition of further visionary material to the book evidences the anger and jealousy against other Christian teachers and prophets expressed in Rev. 2–3: the false apostles of Ephesus (2.2); the hate Nicolaitans (2.6, 15); the 'synagogue of Satan' in Smyrna (2.9; cf. 3.9); the members of the church at Pergamum who 'hold to the teaching of Balaam' (2.13–14 the Thyatirans who tolerate the teaching of 'the woman Jezebel' (2.20); the 'dear members of the church at Sardis' (3.1); the 'lukewarm' Laodiceans whom Christ threatens to spit out of his mouth (3.16). One cannot help but wonder whether the members of these communities heeded the prophet's warnings, or whether they persisted in the activities for which they were so harshly censured.

Admittedly, it is not quite accurate to say that Revelation 'ends' with John's imprecation; it is followed by a promise that the Lord is coming soon and an invocation of grace on 'everyone' (Rev. 22.21). Nevertheless, as an interpreter with fundamentalist Christian upbringing – a background shared with some of my students, who cherish vivid apocalyptic beliefs – I cannot help feeling slighted and threatened by the prospect of tampering with the content of Revelation by offering an interpretation that would profoundly offend the author, John of Patmos: a

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).