POWERFUL AND POWERLESS WOMEN
IN THE APOCALYPSE

'I sit as a queen, I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.' Revelation 18:7

MARLA J SELVIDGE

ABSTRACT
The writer of the Book of Revelation presents an ambivalent view toward women. He chooses to employ symbols/stories of women to attack a powerful religio-political establishment. His portrayal of Jezebel, Babylon the Great, and the Mother of Harlots involves highly descriptive and evocative language. He recognises their independent, creative and successful energies. While fiercely condemning the women and their strategies, he hints at his own jealousy. Yet he also employs symbols/stories of a female Goddess and a Bride who are nothing more than window-dressing in the great intergalactic conflict that he imagines.

The hope of exacting vengeance upon one’s enemy creates a captivating drama in the book of Revelation. ‘Its roots in social crises make it an ideal vehicle for the expression and outlet of feelings of envy, resentment and desire for revenge.’ In grotesque language, the writer portrays the violent demise of all forces or powers that oppose his point of view. Some of those forces are por-

1 John E Stanley, ‘The Apocalypse and contemporary sect analysis’, SBL Seminar Papers 25 (1986):416 says that ‘a yearning for economic revenge and status characterise the Apocalypse.’ In general we will assume that construction of this work occurred during the latter part of the first century C E. Scholars have placed the book of Revelation during the reigns of Claudius, Trajan, Nero and Domitian.


trayed as female conspirators.  

Out of the writer's own need for freedom and because of an experience with the divine, he propagates stories that attack the powerful establishment. Some of the images/symbols in those stories portray vivacious, intelligent women who, control not only congregations but empires. Other female images feature beautifully dressed women who have no control over themselves, their offspring, or their environment.

Memories of these portraits (stories/images/characters/metaphors) may languish in Jewish, Mesopotamian, Hellenistic, Persian, Roman, and Egyptian mythologies. While interpreters claim identification of historical figures in the stories about Jezebel (chapter 2), the Great Prostitute (chapter 17), The Woman Clothed with the Sun (12), Babylon the Great (chapter 18), or even the Bride (21) no consensus of opinion has emerged.

The following article presupposes that Revelation was written and edited by one author who has a point of view regarding woman/women. Data and conclusions about this view are based upon a detailed literary-grammatical analysis of every major passage in the Apocalypse which contains feminine imagery, lan-

4 John E Stanley, ‘The Apocalypse’:421 suggests that Revelation represents a sectarian group rather than sectarian literature.


6 The methodological approach of this paper is contrary to some feminists who claim that they can reconstruct history based upon the literary texts. See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread not stone (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984): 114.

The purpose of this study is to identify and summarise the writer's view of woman in the Book of Revelation. The methodology used in this paper began with identifying every word in the book of Revelation that was feminine or referred to a female in some way. Then I located all the passages where the words were found in Revelation and compared them to each other in order to detect a literary pattern. I did find a pattern and this will be published in another paper. I researched every female character, symbol, and feminine word against the background of Judeo-Christian Greek literature, which added little to the understanding of the book of Revelation. Then I turned to commentaries, books, and articles on the book of Revelation that investigated the passages under consideration: The results of my investigation is the following paper. For the sake of argument, I am assuming that the book of Revelation was written by one person during Hellenistic times who names himself John. Adela Yarbro Collins in her book Crisis and catharsis: The power of the Apocalypse (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984):25-53 discusses the possible theories as to the historical identity of the writer. She concludes that all attempts to link the author of Revelation with a known historical person in the church have failed. Scholars have suggested possible authors being John the Baptist, John the son of Zebedee, John Mark, and John the Evangelist or Presbyter.

7 David L. Barr, ‘Elephants and holograms: From metaphor to methodology in the study of John’s Apocalypse’, SBL Seminar Papers 25 (1986):400-411 suggests that Revelation should be approached in a multi-methodological fashion with an eye on pluralism and an acceptance of contradictory results. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, The literary guide to the Bible (Cambridge, Mass, 1987):524 suggests ‘most biblical scholars would hold that Revelation is indeed the work of one author ...’
guage, or characters.  

REVELATION 2: JEZEBEL. THE VOICE OF SATAN

The writer’s first portrait of a woman feeds upon a malicious myth about an ancient Sidonian queen. In a voice claiming divine right from the Son of God (2:18), the writer indicts a popular woman who wields both personal and intellectual power over the people. Viciously, he labels his opponent ‘Jezebel’ (1 Kings 16:21), and with that name conjures up loathsome feelings about an ancient Jezebel who challenged the forces of Yahweh and ultimately paid the price with her life (1 Kings 18:21-46). She is a teacher, a prophetess, and a leader in the community of Thyatira (2:9).

The beliefs of the writer may be in jeopardy. He attempts to silence her, but his words are ignored by the majority of the community. He lashes out at a very successful person and aims at conversion/change through the use of terror. In grueling epithets he characterises her control in terms of mental, emotional, and physical/sexual activities. She uses her superior talents to persuade the people to follow her religious beliefs and practices.

The writer labels her dynamic curriculum ‘that teaching’, τὴν διδαχὴν (2:24) which may be the same as ‘the deep things of Satan’, τὰ βαθύτατα (2:24). in Romans 11:32-33 speaks of the depth of God’s wisdom and knowledge. Here, Jezebel is in contact with the greatest knowledge one could have of Satan. The writer does not seem to be apprised of the content of that knowledge. R H Charles thinks

These false teachers held that the spiritual man should know the deep things of Satan, that he should take part in the heathen life of the community. Though he outwardly

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8 I have omitted an extensive study of chapter 21 because of the ambivalence of the term bride/bridegroom τὴν νυμφήν (21:9).

9 Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Women’s History and the Book of Revelation’, SBL Seminar Papers 26 (1987):81 says ‘...here John is claiming authority of Christ for his own personal point of view ...


11 D E Aune, ‘The social matrix of the Apocalypse of John’, Biblical Research 26 (1981):27 says that ‘John’s battle was with the Nicolaitians and Jezebel was...a conflict between prophets.’ R H Charles, The Revelation of St John: 69-70, thinks it might be a problem between the trade guilds in Thyatira.


shared in this heathen life, nevertheless as a spiritual man, he remained inwardly unaffected by it and so asserted his superiority over it.\textsuperscript{14}

Jezebel teaches her followers about cultic prostitution\textsuperscript{15} and eating meat offered to idols (2:20). Her teachings, apparently, meet the needs of those who listen. People willingly allow her to carry on religious activities. Most do not challenge her although some do not follow her in Thyatira (2:24).

While she is in control, the writer assures the reader/listener (perhaps the servants) (2:20) that those who will follow her will be severely punished. She will be punished for her religious activities and her ‘adulteries’ (2:22) (τοὺς μοιχεύοντας). Similar to the prostitute of Babylon, (18:23) the dragon (12:9), the beast (13:14), false prophets (19:20), and Satan (20:8), the writer claims that she ‘deceives’ (2:20) (πλάνοι) people. She does not need to use ‘signs’ (τὰ σημεῖα 19:20) or ‘magical acts’ (τῆς διακοπής 18:23), She reaches the people through her teaching abilities.

The writer believes that she should be punished for her success. He threatens her with violence from the Son of God ‘whose eyes are like blazing fire’ (2:18). In a powerful visual metaphor he laughs at her accomplishments. He characterizes her church as a bed of seduction which ultimately becomes her prison. (Some witnesses use prison [φυλακὴ] instead of bed.) Yet she will not repent. David E Aune sees this as ‘...a reference to an earlier oracle directed to Jezebel by John, or perhaps by one of the members of his prophetic circle.’\textsuperscript{16} She will not change her mind or her ways. But she is not alone. Throughout the apocalypse people who oppose John’s point of view refuse to repent even when faced with a torturous, scorching death or life in darkness (16:9, 11).

The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, it was allowed to scorch men with fire; men were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent...(16:8-9)

Since the writer cannot intimidate, change, or move Jezebel, he threatens ‘her children’ (tà τέκνα αὐτῆς). ‘I will strike her children dead.’ (2:23).\textsuperscript{17} Ironically in chapter 12 the dragon also uses the same tactic on the woman clothed with the sun. He seeks to devour ‘her child’ (τὸ τέκνον αὐτῆς 12:4, 5).

\textsuperscript{14} R H Charles, The Revelation of St John:73.
\textsuperscript{15} Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Vilification and self-definition in the book of Revelation’, Harvard Theological Review 79 (1986):316-317 says the problem is a conflict of values. She suggests that prostitution is not literal but refers to idolatry in general.
\textsuperscript{16} David E Aune, ‘The Social Matrix’:27.
\textsuperscript{17} R H Charles, The Revelation of St John:72, says that they ‘may be her own literal children or those who have absolutely embraced this woman’s theology’.
This powerless writer represents a minority opinion in Jezebel's community. The power that sent him to prophesy will vindicate him (2:26). The portrait of a Jezebel-like woman may be designed to frighten the readers (the community) into assenting to John's prophesy or to encourage them to gloat over their privileged status as one of those who does not follow her ways. In any case, while Jezebel may be performing and teaching religious activities that the writer negates, she remains in power. The writer is unable to control or change the dynamic leader in any way. He predicts power or authority (2:26) for those who do his will or follow his teachings to the end, but the writer can only wish for the woman's demise. He never actually describes or witnesses Jezebel's downfall. Although he does, in general, describe the ultimate annihilation of all opposing forces (Rv 19).

REVELATION 12: THE WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN. AN IMPOTENT GODDESS

This story takes place somewhere outside the earth's atmosphere. The writer unfolds an unusual story about a conflict between a dragon and a woman clothed with the sun. The dragon is so unsavory that he preys on the vulnerability of the woman while she is birthing. Poised to devour her newborn, he is foiled when God (who is also present at the birth) snatches the male child to heaven. The woman flees the scene with the aid of wings to the desert. The dragon pursues her, tries to drown her, but she is miraculously saved by the earth who

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18 Scholars have suggested many referents for the woman clothed with the sun. B J LeFrois, 'The Mary-Church relationship in the Apocalypse,' Marian Studies 9 (1958):89 sees her as the virgin Mary. R H Charles, The Revelation of St John:299, 315 sees a reflection of several international myths about goddesses. The referent here is the Church, a theocratic community, the true Israel, or a community of believers. He says that the portrait of the Messiah as passive 'is quite in keeping with Jewish, but not Christian conceptions.' Arthur S Peake, The Revelation of John:305-306 believes the woman is the mother of the Messiah but is not Mary the mother of Jesus who was a human. He also suggests that she might be the Christian Church, heavenly Jerusalem, or the true Israel. M Eugene Boring, Revelation, interpretation. A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989):151 sees the woman as the people of God. The woman is the goddess Roma, queen of heaven, the son is the emperor, who built the dragon and founds the new Golden age; the dragon represents the power of darkness. Adela Yarbord Collins, The combat myth in the Book of Revelation (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) suggests that this story is the Python-Leto version of the combat myth. J E Bruns, Catholic Biblical Quarterly 26 (4, 1964):461 thinks the woman is Valeria Messalina, the wife of the emperor Claudius.

19 See Ivan M Benson, 'Revelation 12 and the dragon of antiquity', Restoration Quarterly 29 (2, 87):97-102 for a survey of the historical background of the dragon symbol used in Revelation.

20 R H Charles, The Revelation of St John:332 cites Wellhausen's view that the woman who flees represents the elite Jews or Gentile Christians after the war.
swallows the water. \(^{21}\) The enraged dragon is temporarily stopped. In the future he will make war with the rest of her offspring (12:1-6, 13-17). \(^{22}\)

This woman is described in powerful and incandescent words. She is 'a great and wonderous sign' who is 'clothed with the sun' (12:1). John's apparition came to him in a similar burst of light, 'His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance' (1:16). She is aligned with the moon and the stars. Stars were thought to be living beings. \(^{23}\) She stands on the moon and wears a crown of 12 stars (12:1). But she has met her match in the battle that ensues. Her position in the heavens and her glistening attire fool the reader. She showcases power but is unable to protect herself or her child. She is a helpless goddess.

The dragon is also a sign and upon his seven heads and ten horns he wears diadems. His regal stature speaks of strength and a supranormal force. With one swoop of his tail he flung a third of the stars to earth (12:3-4). He is in control.

The pregnancy disadvantages her in the demonstration of power. For some strange reason the dragon is present at the birth of her 'male child' (ἀρνευ) 12:5). She cries out. Most translators attach this word καταφάγη with the rest of the phrase, thus, 'she cried out in pain' (12:2). Yet the writer of Revelation uses this word only when a special revelation is to occur. Only angels, the elect, and seafarers 'cry out' (6:10; 7:2,10; 10:3; 14:15; 18:2,18,19). She is in pain because of birthing but she is also tormented (βασανίζωμεν 12:2). Her torment is similar to the people on earth (ch 11) \(^{24}\) those who worship the beast (14:10), and the great prostitute (18:17).

The Dragon wants to consume, literally 'eat' (καταφάγη) \(^{25}\) the child (12:4). This male child is most privileged because he is taken directly to heaven (out of the battle and off the battleground) (12:5). He is rescued but the woman remains in jeopardy. She finds shelter in the desert, a hideaway, in some unknown zone (12:6,13).

The writer's view of this woman is ambivalent. She appears to have her own place in the desert/hideout (12:17). Her stature is majestic and supranormal but she exhibits no supernatural powers. The moon is at her feet and there are stars for her crown, but she possesses no armorment, no strategies, to fight the dragon. She cowes before the dragon instead of standing and fighting with him. She

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\(^{21}\) See Ezekiel 29:3; 32:2, 3; Psalm 74:13. The Dragon is referred to as a water monster.


\(^{23}\) Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 1:503, ἀστήρ.

\(^{24}\) R. H. Charles, The Revelation of St John:301 says that βασανίζω 'is never used in the LXX of the pangs of childbirth, and only here in the New Testament'.

\(^{25}\) See also Rv 10:9-10; 11:5; 20:9.
cannot eliminate the dragon and so must deal with his incessant war.  

She cannot make her own decisions. She is powerless to alleviate her pain, save her child, or herself. God takes the child away from her indicating great plans for it but — not for her. Both the earth and God must provide assistance. They give her a means and place of escape, and protect her from the elements.

While she appears to have a relationship with the heavens, the stars, and the moon, her most important attributes appear to be her abilities to bear children (12:17). This portrait of an impotent Goddess presents a humiliating picture of one who seems to have power but is in the end incapable of protecting herself, her child, or her offspring. She is a passive instrument who does not have the power to effect ‘good’ on her own. Like a beautiful jewel, her power is only in refracted light.

The impotent Goddess may be a reflection of the writer. He is in the same position as the woman, bearing an important message, but unable to change the design of history.

REVELATION 14: SEXUALLY POWERFUL WOMEN

There are only two paragraphs that employ woman images in chapter 14. Both of them involve prescriptions against sexual relations with women (14:4, 8). Women can cause men to be out of control sexually which can jeopardise their standing before the Divine.

According to the writer, woman can prevent the 144,000 (presumably males) from learning the new song before the throne (14:3) and from following the Lamb. ‘These are those who did not defile themselves with women for they kept themselves pure’ (14:4). The text actually says ‘they kept themselves virgins/celibate’ (παρθενόν 14:4).

Relationships with women often resulted in contamination in the Hebrew scriptures. This contamination hints that women have extraordinary power over men, power that can prevent them from achieving their religious goals. In order to avoid that power the men should be celibate. The writer fears women so much that he would recommend having no contact with them at all.

Chapter 14:8 characterises Babylon the Great as a woman, (see also chapter 18) ‘which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’ As in every other passage involving a metaphor or image of woman, the writer is

26 Allan A Boesak, ‘Struggle and victory in Revelation 12,’ Sojourners 16 (1987):27 says ‘She is defenseless and weak, but she is the bearer of life and hope.’
27 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The followers of the lamb. Visionary rhetoric and social-political situation,’ in F Segovia, Discipleship in the New Testament: 153. While the term παρθενόν is masculine, Fiorenza, disputes that they were a class of exclusive male ascetics.
interested in her sexual abilities and influence. She seems to have an unquenchable sexual desire which extends to all of the nations.

The Woman clothed with the Sun is a 'great' (μεγάλη) sign (12:2) and Babylon is 'great' (η μεγάλη) 14:8. That greatness is seen in her ability to seduce all nations with 'the wine of her adulteries.' The writer can find no antidote or cure to prevent the intoxication. Similar to alcohol (of which he understands the effects), her adulteries can be potent and lethal.

Woman in chapter fourteen becomes a symbol for a negative strength that opposes the beliefs of the writer. Her very presence and success negates his religious ideals. His fear of her seductive powers belies a minority position. This position will be amplified in the chapters dealing with the great prostitute.

CHAPTER 17: THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS. RULER OVER THE KINGS OF THE EARTH

The annihilation of the 'great city' (17:18) is a topic of great joy for the writer. He is taken to the desert where he witnesses the end of the harlot, the great city (17:3). Equating it to a great prostitute who, like a queen, sits on many waters, he viciously describes her activities that warrant punishment and painfully details her death by 'rape' (ἡμμαστένων 17:16), 'fire' (ἐν πυρί) and 'cannibalism' (κατακαυστός 17:16).

Her rule involves sexual/cultic practices that have a drugging effect upon the kings of the earth. Her power seems to be absolute. It can only be broken by internal strife or revolution. The beast 'will eat her flesh and burn her with fire' (17:16). This ability to overthrow the prostitute was given to the beast by God (17:17). All of the hosts of heaven and below must align in order to defeat this powerful woman. 'She is depicted as a gorgeously arrayed Bacchanal. Her purple and scarlet attire are emblems of luxurious living; the cup from which she drinks and with which she intoxicates the royal partners of her uncleanness.'

Her crimes are an extravagant lifestyle (17:4) which involved questionable religious and sexual practices (17:4) and the death of witnesses. 'I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore


30 Could this be the same desert where the Woman clothed with the Sun is hiding (12:14)?

testimony to Jesus (17:6). She sits on a beast that has seven heads and ten horns (as the Dragon in Chapter 12:3) and is called the ‘Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth’ (17:5). She is the cause. She is the originator of wantonness.

The woman, although labeled a prostitute, is quite effective and successful. Her methodologies have, perhaps, won many over to her way of thinking and living. According to the author, her strength is used to oppress and seduce others in spite of her own intoxicated state (17:2,15). She aligns herself with a supernatural beast (17:3). The writer says that she sits on both the many waters and the beast, this is, in graphic sexual terms, a reference to her power and physical prowess (17:1,3).

While he despises the great city, there is also a hint of jealousy. The writer describes her downfall so graphically that there appears to be a hint of joy in relating the gruesome story. If he could not continue to enjoy her ‘adulteries’ in life, he could be satisfied even uplifted by watching her mutilating death.

CHAPTER 18: A QUEEN, A WIDOW, AND AN ALLURING PROSTITUTE

In grotesque and vividly evocative terms Babylon the Great’s corruption and annihilation is shrouded with conflicting feminine images. Babylon is a widow, a queen (18:7), a prostitute (18:3), an unclean/menstruous woman (18:24), a murderer (18:24), and demon possessed (18:2). She is vile and her corruption will be burned (18:8). Only here in 18:5 and in 1:15 does the writer use the word ἀμαρτία (‘sins’) to describe her. She is accused of also only here ἀδικήματα (‘misdeeds’). He claims that she is responsible for all those who have been slain or consumed (18:24) on earth.

Inside her live demons. She provides a φυλακή (prison) for every hated and unclean spirit and bird (18:2). The writer warns ‘my people’ to ‘come out of her’ so that they may not taste of the violence that she will soon experience (18:4). She has aroused maddening passions (τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας) among the kings and peoples of the earth (18:3). This alliance has proved to be a wise investment for ‘the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries’ (18:3).

There is a hint of remorse for her grueling, tormenting fate. As the kings and merchants weep and mourn for her (18:9,11) the writer rehearses the material losses they will experience because of her demise (18:11-14). But they must also remember that she bought and sold ‘the bodies and souls of people’ (18:13). She


has the power over people.

There is no forgiveness, no compromise, ‘God has judged her for the way she treated you’ (18:20). Ironically what she brought them included things that made them happy. The writer speaks of wealth, music, employment in the trades, light, festivals, and public recognition (18:19; 22-23).

The dragon attempted to consume the child born to the woman clothed with the sun in chapter 12, here Babylon is accused of consuming (ἐσφαγμένην 18:24) the prophets and saints and all the people living on the earth. She is nourished by their blood.

The emotional tone of chapter 18 is punctuated with ambivalent views of woman. The writer laments his loss, remembers the seemingly wonderful things that the city gave to him (to the world), but continues to pronounce doom upon her. There is an underlying excitement in his description of her sins. He seems to be reliving his life with her.34

He abhors her independence. ‘I sit as queen, I am not a widow, and I will never mourn’ (18:8). She could never be a widow because she chooses to have many romances among the kings of the earth. She is in control of her own life. The writer has no influence over her. He deplores her values and her lack of commitment to anything but herself. In predicting her fall, he triumphs over her. She has the power to meet the needs of human beings, he does not. He only has the power of revenge.35

The stories about Babylon create a truly wretched image of woman who uses her powers to destroy others. She uses her freedom to feed upon people, lulling them into a relationship, not only with her richly dressed body, but with the finer things in life that she can offer them. These symbols of the rich, jewels, fine clothing, and rare commodities will die with her.36

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In an ironic way, the writer indirectly upholds and respects the independence of some creative women who are outside his religious tradition. In the process of castigating his opponents by using female stories, his language seems to come alive. The images of the opposing women are interactive, dynamic, and creative. They appear to have more power, persuasive abilities, and talents. Even in their


death, while enjoying their demise, he hints at remorse.

In the stories about the two women who do not oppose him (Chapters 12 and 19)). His language characterises the female stories as passive, unintelligent, almost boring. He can imagine the opposition with a great deal of excitement and this propels him into vivacious, sinister creativity. His portrayal of women who represent the winning side seems stagnant and inactive.

In conflicting, passionate responses to a powerfully oppressive religious establishment, the writer portrays ambivalent images of women. All of the images are strained characterisations of powers that he cannot control, powers that are manipulated by and succumb only to an intergalactic divine energy.

Prof Marla J Selvidge, Center for Religious Studies, Central Missouri State University, Wood 136, WARRENSBURG, Missouri 64093, United States of America.