



Women in the Bible

New Testament: The Whore of Babylon

Revelation 17–18

In the New Testament, the female figure who is depicted in a solely negative light is the so-called “whore of Babylon.” While not a human woman in the literal sense, this character can be best understood when read with attention to the gendered lens that the text uses to describe her.

Revelation’s vivid scenes of God’s final judgment of the world were revealed to someone who calls himself John. Scholars agree that this John is neither a character from the gospels, nor the writer of the Gospel of John or the epistles of John. He writes down these visions to share them with “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev 1:4), whom he seems to know personally.

A Name, A Mystery

The “great whore,” as the text calls her, appears in chapter 17. John tells his audience, “I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns... and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’” (Rev 17:3, 5).

The character never has the opportunity to speak for herself. Based on John’s description and the explanation from his angelic guide, she is irredeemable, so there is no need to hear her side of the story. The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk with the wine of her fornication (Rev 17:2). “Her sins are heaped high as heaven” (Rev 18:5).

The angel explains to John that this woman Babylon is a personification of the city of Rome, though the angel does not use the word “Rome.” John may have used the symbolism of the “great whore” so as not to get in (more) trouble with Roman authorities. With the city as a woman, the author can make his argument in code. She has fornicated and lived in luxury with all the kings of the earth. The text is clear: we should desire her obliteration.

The angel says, “The seven heads [of the beast] are seven mountains on which the woman is seated” (Rev 17:9). Readers at the time would have known which city had seven mountains. There was even a coin from that time with Rome, as a woman, sitting on seven mountains.

The “mystery” of her name is not a mystery in the sense of a Nancy Drew novel. Rather, the author is indicating to the reader that there is a spiritual or hidden meaning in the story. He is explicitly telling us to read the “great whore” as a metaphor. “The woman you saw,” the angel says all the more plainly, “is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18). She is Rome.

The Fall of Babylon, the Body of Babylon

The angel tells John what will happen to this woman. “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” (Rev 17:16). In God’s final judgment of the earth, she will be punished for her sins – not by God directly, but by her own beast and by the very kings who fornicated with her.

This destruction of Babylon’s body is highly gendered, violent, and even sexual. The male characters kill her, strip her naked, eat her, and then burn her. The author of Revelation and the angel speaking in the story are clear that this character is a personification of a city; she’s not a “real” woman. And yet the metaphor does not work in the same way if the personified city has a male body. In passages that talk explicitly about the city’s human body, like the one above, the female body ensures that the words will ring at a certain pitch, will call forth a certain type of drama.

The destruction of the “great whore’s” body may remind some readers of the destruction of that other notorious woman, Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37). She adorns herself with makeup and jewels before being thrown out a window, trampled violently by horses, and then eaten by dogs. She, like the “great whore,” receives her comeuppance.

The goddess Roma was often used to personify Rome: both the city and the empire. The tradition of feminizing cities and civilizations also extends throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in the writings of the prophets. For example, of Jerusalem the Lord says, “How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers!” (Isaiah 1:21). The unfaithful city, in this case, is not Rome but Jerusalem. She has forgotten her obedience to God.

Isaiah’s proclamation includes a promise: redemption for those who repent, “But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord *shall be consumed*” (Isaiah 1:28). It seems these (female) cities’ bodies bear the cost of the inhabitants’ faithlessness.

Corrupt Civilization

A theme in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is a suspicion of human civilization. There seems to be something corrupt in the ways we choose to organize ourselves into societies. Adam and Eve’s son Cain domesticates the earth and becomes a farmer, then becomes the first murderer (Gen 4:1-12). When society is organized into a level at which it can produce the Tower of Babel, God comes to destroy it and scatter civilization (Gen 11:1-9).

It may be no surprise, then, that the city of cities in Revelation would be a symbol for the corruption that the height of civilization brings. John writes, “The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication” (Rev 17:4). The purple and scarlet colors she wears, as well as the pearls and gold, are marks of imperial power.

But does she bear that imperial power herself? Is she the powerful goddess Roma? Or is she at the mercy of that power, just as the inhabitants of the city are? Interpretation has often understood her to be a courtesan with high status and a great deal of agency. She has chosen her actions, which is why the readers root for her downfall.

Dr. Lin suggests that perhaps this is a misread of the power dynamics in the woman's situation. Immediately after the description of her opulent clothing and jewelry, Revelation tells us that she has a name written (tattooed?) on her forehead. A forehead tattoo is a symbol of enslavement, not power. Perhaps this "whore" is a brothel slave, rather than a strong-headed rebel flaunting her sexual power. The kings of the earth are able both to take advantage of her sexually and to destroy her. Perhaps the "whore of Babylon" is not the character we originally imagined her to be.