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GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE “FEMININE SIDE” OF THE APOCALYPSE: THE FUNCTION OF FEMALE FIGURES IN REVELATION

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the Book of Revelation appears stereotypically “male” in many respects.¹ For example, as far as imagery is concerned, even though the predominant picture of Christ is as the Lamb, he is a Lamb who has “seven horns and seven eyes” (Rev. 5:6). In addition, the Lamb is also a Lion (5:5), who leads a vast army (19:11) and smites the nations with the “sharp sword” of his mouth (19:15). In opposition is the “great red dragon,” who has “seven heads and ten horns” (12:3), and who makes war with the people of God (13:7), achieving world domination through the terrible beast (13:3) and, in the process, slaughtering all who will not worship him (13:15). Such imagery seems to suggest that the essence of Revelation is a kind of “battle of the Titans,” a story of mythological proportions with enough blood and gore to be turned into a successful Hollywood action film.

Yet, is this really the essence of the Apocalypse? Or, is there something more, beyond the masculine images and violent plot, which also contributes greatly to the imagery and progression of the book? Contrary to one’s first impression, women play a visible, and absolutely vital, role in the drama of the Apocalypse, both as historical and symbolic figures. Such figures present to us another side of Revelation—a “feminine side”—that must be understood if the desired total effect of the book is to sink in on the hearer/reader.

The first step towards grasping this aspect of Revelation is to consider its usage of the word “woman” (Gk. *gyne*). It occurs 19 times in the book, though two of the uses² are irrelevant for our study. Of the remaining 17 uses, the first time *gyne* occurs is in reference to the false prophetess of the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:20), who is given the symbolic name “Jezebel.” Chapter 12 then contains the most uses of *gyne*, eight times, as the “great sign” in heaven portrays “a woman clothed with the sun” (12:1) who gives birth to the “male child” (12:5). Next, six occurrences of *gyne* appear in description of “the great harlot,” “Babylon the Great,” in chapter 17. The final two uses are for the bride of the Lamb making herself ready (19:7) and then for the bride in the eternal state (21:9).

¹ J. Ramsey Michaels addresses this issue briefly and skillfully in his work, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 137-139, but we feel the matter definitely merits pursuing further.

² In Rev. 9:8, the locusts in the vision appeared to have “hair like women’s hair” (Gk. *trixas hos trixas gynaikon*) while, in 14:4, the moral purity of the 144,000 is described as “not defiled with women” (Gk. *meta gynaikon ouk emolynthesan*). Note, however, that the following authors view the reference in 14:4 as an allusion back to the “woman Jezebel” in 2:20: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation,” *Semeia* 36 (1986), 132; and Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 180.

In order to trace the unfolding meaning and significance of the female figures and imagery of the Apocalypse, the above succinct word study will provide the inductive framework for this presentation. The first section will deal with the woman, Jezebel. The second section will explore the woman who gives birth to the messianic Ruler. The third section will focus on Babylon, the mother of harlots. The fourth section will handle the bride of the Lamb. Along the way, key comparisons and contrasts between the spotlighted female figures will also be introduced.³ The paper is crowned with a pulling together of the major exegetical and biblical theological conclusions drawn, setting up the need for further study of the implications, as well as a peek at an additional subtle research area that emerges.

I. "THE WOMAN JEZEBEL": A HISTORICAL CRISIS AND SYMBOLIC PREVIEW OF THINGS TO COME

The oracle to the church at Thyatira is where the first woman of the Apocalypse appears (Rev. 2:18-29). While apparently a historical figure in the church, the false prophetess is also given a symbolic name,⁴ which seems to indicate that there is more to her character than meets the eye.

The church at Thyatira, in which "Jezebel" is causing serious problems, has often been viewed as fairly insignificant in comparison to the surrounding churches. It is the smallest and seemingly most inconsequential city of the seven and, although it is the longest letter,⁵ it also occupies a somewhat hidden place in the middle of the other six.⁶ Yet, the letter to Thyatira's unexpected length and its central position amongst the other letters is strongly suggestive that it should be given more attention than it has had in the past.

In fact, in our studied opinions, a close examination of the text reveals a chiastic arrangement of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 that "spotlights" the church at Thyatira:⁷

A (2:1-7) Ephesus: The orthodox church that has left its first love, needing to repent; threat to remove their lampstand from its place

B (2:8-11) Smyrna: The church in "tribulation" for 10 days; addresses "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"; no criticism from the Lord

C (2:12-17) Pergamum: The church with "a few things" against them; rewards offered are hidden manna and a "white stone" with a new name written on the stone

D (2:18-29) Thyatira: The smallest, most insignificant city has the longest letter of the seven directed to it

³ Given space limitations, the full development of these comparisons and contrasts must wait for a later study.

⁴ The allusions and echoes of the Hebrew Bible that saturate the Apocalypse suggest that the name employed here, "Jezebel," is hardly a coincidence. Alongside her husband, King Ahab, Jezebel is infamous for leading the northern kingdom of Israel into false worship (1 Ki. 16:31-33) and the persecution of the prophets of the Lord (18:4).

⁵ In a simple comparison of the number of verses in an English Bible, the letter to Thyatira (12 verses) is three times as long as the letter to Smyrna (four verses) and twice as long as the letters to Pergamum and Philadelphia (six verses each). Interestingly, it is a third again as long as the next longest letter—to Laodicea (eight verses).

⁶ Given the unexpectedly length of the letter to Thyatira, its status would seem to be like Saul hiding among the baggage (1 Sam. 10:22-23): eventually something that disproportionately large will be noticed.

⁷ We are not the first authors who have suggested this chiastic arrangement among the seven letters. See also Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNTC, Revised Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Wall, *Revelation*; and G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

C' (3:1-6) Sardis: The church with only "a few people" who have not soiled their garments; rewards offered are "white garments" and not having name removed from the book of life

B' (3:7-13) Philadelphia: the church kept from "the hour of testing" for those "who dwell on the earth"; addresses "those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews, and are not"; no criticism from the Lord

A' (3:14-22) Laodicea: The lukewarm church, needing to repent; threat to spit them out of the Lord's mouth

As visualized above, in layer A, the churches at Ephesus and Laodicea both are urged to repent of their ways and threatened with the removal of God's pleasure and blessing if they do not. In layer B, the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia both are said to be struggling with those who are "of the synagogue of Satan," while both churches receive no rebuke from the Lord. In addition, the "ten days" of tribulation prophesied for the church at Smyrna mirrors the "hour of testing" prophesied for the whole world, from which the church at Philadelphia will be kept. In layer C, the church at Pergamum has only "a few things" against it, while the church at Sardis has only "a few people" who have not soiled their garments. They also are promised parallel rewards: a "white stone" with a new name written on it in Pergamum; and "white garments" with their names not removed from the book of life in Sardis. Layer D, of course, is the pinnacle of the chiasm, which focuses attention on the situation at the church in Thyatira.

In addition, two other textual indicators further support the above chiasm. First, notice that the first three letters conclude with the phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," followed by a promise to "he who overcomes" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17). Yet, with the letter to Thyatira, the order reverses for the remaining four letters, with the promise to "he who overcomes" placed before "He who has an ear, let him hear..." (2:26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22). Second, this same mirror effect is also in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, as the phrase "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan," found in the letter to Smyrna (2:9) is reversed in the letter to Philadelphia to read, "those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not" (3:9). Unless this flipped phraseology, and the points at which they are found in the text, are purely coincidental, it would seem that there is a strong possibility of the presence of an intentional elegant inverted parallel structuring.

Yet, such a proposed structure can be affirmed only when the midpoint of the chiasm is of enough significance to validate the chiasm's existence. A chiasm between chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation seems fairly innocuous, unless 2:18-29 is acknowledged as far more important than it appears at first glance. The following structure of 2:18-29, in our opinions, highlights the discussion of Jezebel in the church at Thyatira:

A (18a) "Form letter" address to the church at Thyatira

B (18b) Description of the Son of God

C (19a) "I know your deeds": faith, perseverance

D (19b) "Your deeds of late are greater than at first"

E (20a) "I have this against you": you tolerate the prophetess Jezebel, "who teaches and leads my bond-servants astray"

F (20b) “They commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols”

G (21; see 9:20-21) “I gave her time to repent,” but she does not want to repent of her immorality

G’ (22; “great tribulation” [Gk. *thlipsis megale*, only elsewhere in 7:14]) Those who commit adultery with her will be cast into “great tribulation,” unless they repent of her deeds

F’ (23a) “I will kill her children with pestilence”

E’ (23b) “All the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts and gives to each according to your deeds”

D’ (24) You who do not hold this teaching/have not known “the deep things of Satan”

C’ (25-26) “Hold fast until I come”; he who overcomes, keeps my deeds

B’ (27-28) Relates the overcomer to the Ruler with a rod of iron

A’ (29) “Form letter” closing to “the churches”

There are a few notable parts of this chiasm that merit further explanation. In layer D, what is meant by the “greater deeds” in recent times (2:19b) is not falling prey to the teachings of Jezebel, which, epexegetically, is said to be “the deep things of Satan” (2:24). This strongly implies that to resist Jezebel’s teaching and related sins is to resist what is, behind the scenes, Satanic teaching and behavior. In layer E, the mere toleration of Jezebel’s teaching and sins leads God’s “bond-servants” astray (2:20a). This results in the stinging warning to “all the churches” (2:23b) that the Lord is watching their minds, hearts, and deeds very closely, because the heresy and sin in Thyatira is not just divisive in one local church, but in “all the churches.”⁸ In layer F, lack of repentance for “committing acts of immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols,” reflective of the Jezebel teaching and lifestyle (2:20b), will result in the killing of Jezebel’s children with pestilence (2:23a). Interestingly, this wording is virtually identical to what is poured out maximally on unrepentant mankind, “those who dwell on the earth,” later in the book. Finally, in layer G, after giving time to repent,⁹ those still in “adulterous relationship” with Jezebel will be thrown into “great tribulation” (Gk. *thlipsis megale*), a phrase not used again in the Apocalypse, except in 7:14.¹⁰

In addition, it is also significant to note the relationship between the teaching of Jezebel in the Thyatiran church and the so-called “teaching of Balaam” (2:14) in the church at Pergamum. In the letter to the church at Pergamum, the Lord accuses the church of having some in their congregation “who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality” (2:14). This “teaching of Balaam” in the church of Pergamum is virtually equated

⁸ Beale views the phrase in verse 23, “all the churches will know,” as the center of the letter to Thyatira and, therefore, the focus of the chiastic structure (*The Book of Revelation*, 226-227).

⁹ Note that Rev. 9:20-21 says that unbelieving mankind will have had plenty of opportunities to repent of their behavior, which includes worshipping idols and committing acts of immorality.

¹⁰ Another striking similarity is that Jezebel’s relationship to her followers is precisely the kind of “adulterous” relationship the kings of the earth and the “earth-dwellers” have with Babylon the Great in Rev. 17:2 and following.

with the “teaching of the Nicolaitans” in 2:15.¹¹ Thus, when the church at Thyatira is said to be struggling with the woman Jezebel, who is leading the bond-servants of God astray, “so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (2:20), the parallel wording, though in reverse order, connects the heresies in both churches. Further, if Jezebel’s teaching, and the behavior associated with it, is characterized in 2:24 as “the deep things of Satan,” then it appears that not only are the teachings of Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans closely linked—if not one and the same—but the “deep things of Satan” are the invisible spiritual source of all three.

Finally, before moving on, the symbolic identification of Thyatira’s false prophetess as “Jezebel” should be considered briefly. Most consider the use of the name Jezebel to be a clear Old Testament allusion to the wicked queen of King Ahab. She led the Northern Kingdom into apostasy (1 Ki. 16:31-33), greatly persecuted the prophets of God (18:4), and infamously met with a violent and bloody end (2 Ki. 9:33). While this reference back to the Old Testament would be reason enough to classify the false prophetess in Thyatira as a “Jezebel,” we would also suggest that there is a possible foreshadowing meant in this usage, pointing toward the ultimate evil “queen,” named “Babylon the Great,” who is revealed at a later point in Revelation. This is an idea seems not to have been seriously considered to this point. But, in our studied opinions, the similarities between the reference to Jezebel in 2:20 and “Babylon the Great” in 17:5 are certainly important enough to be considered more carefully. We will do so in section III, entitled “The Mother of Harlots.”

II. “A WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN”: FROM “THE SEED OF THE WOMAN,” TO THE END TIMES, AND BEYOND

The next female figure in Revelation appears in chapter 12, as John sees “a great sign” in heaven. There, a woman appears, “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child” (Rev. 12:1, 2a). This great sign in heaven also reveals a “great red dragon” (12:3) that attempts to “devour” (12:4) the woman’s son, but when he is unsuccessful, proceeds to persecute the woman and her “offspring” (12:17). There have been many proposed explanations for this symbolic tale, from the transformation of pagan myths¹² to the figurative description of the church’s rapture.¹³ Yet, before addressing such interpretations, let us examine the structure of the text for the purpose of extracting any important clues to be found therein for the proper understanding of the “great sign.” Consider, then, the following structural outline:

A (12:1) The woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and crown of twelve stars
(see Gen. 37:9)

B (12:2) The woman crying out in labor pain

C (12:3-4a) The great red dragon and his stronghold in the angelic realm

C’ (12:4b) The dragon’s desire to “devour” the newborn “male child” (see Matt. 2:1-18)

¹¹ See, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 145.

¹² For a full discussion of this viewpoint, see especially Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976), 57-100.

¹³ See the recent fresh proposal by Michael J. Svelgel, “The Apocalypse of John and the Rapture of the Church: A Reevaluation,” *TrinJ NS* 22 (2001), 23-74.

B' (12:5) The woman giving birth to the Messianic Ruler

A' (12:6) The woman fleeing and being “nourished” in the wilderness for 1,260 days

There are several interpretive issues to note from the above chiastic structuring. First, in layer A, one cannot ignore the very Hebrew feeling of the symbolism found in verse 1. There is a fairly clear allusion to Jacob’s dream found in Genesis 37:9, and the woman is a classic Old Testament symbol for Zion, Jerusalem, and Israel.¹⁴ Thus, it appears that, “of all the various interpretations of the woman the most fitting is to view her as representing the nation Israel.”¹⁵ Yet, not just the nation Israel, but “the messianic community, the ideal Israel.”¹⁶ In 12:6, then, faithful Israel is protected and nurtured by God in the wilderness. As Mounce states:

To the Jewish people the wilderness spoke of divine provision and intimate fellowship. It was in the wilderness that God had rained down bread from heaven (Exod. 16:4ff.) and nourished his people for forty years... For John’s readers the wilderness in this context would not suggest a desert waste inhabited by evil spirits and unclean beasts, but a place of spiritual refuge.¹⁷

Further, in layer B, the woman cries out in the pains of labor (12:2) and then gives birth to the “male child,” who is “to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (12:5a). But, before he can be devoured by the dragon, he is “caught up to God and to His throne” (12:5b). There appears to be two main allusions in this imagery. First, the Old Testament frequently depicted Israel as a woman in distress. Isaiah 26:17 describes Israel’s oppression saying, “As the pregnant woman approaches the time to give birth, she writhes and cries out in her labor pains, thus were we before Thee, O Lord.” This seems to indicate that the woman in labor represents, in one way, the pre-messianic expectations of Israel.¹⁸ Second, the pain of childbearing also harkens back to the context of the *protevangelium* in Genesis 3:16, where the travail of the woman is prophesied to Eve. Thus, both faithful Israel and Mary, the historical mother of Jesus, brought forth the promised Messiah through much distress and anticipation, both figuratively and literally.

Then, in layer C, the focus is on the “great red dragon” who, has a powerful stronghold in the angelic realm¹⁹ (12:4a) and desires to “devour” the woman’s child (12:4b). While the entire section of 12:1-6 can be seen as a harkening back to Genesis 3:15, the specific reference to the dragon’s craving to “devour” the male child references the great theme that spans the entire Bible: the devil pursuing the “seed of the woman” since the beginning of human history until Christ’s birth. Also note that, since the woman continues to be pursued (12:13-17) even after the

¹⁴ See Beale, 625-632, for a helpful discussion of the woman’s symbolic elements and their Hebrew roots.

¹⁵ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers, III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 635.

¹⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised Ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁹ This is an interpretation of the phrase, “and his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth,” from a purely angelic/spiritual realm point of view. Beale, however, links Rev. 12:4 with Dan. 8:10, where he argues on page 635 that “some of the host and some of the stars,” (Dan. 8:10) is referencing both the Israelite saints of God and the angels. Thus, Beale concludes on page 636 that, “John’s wording refers to persecution of God’s people, which perhaps affects their angelic counterparts.” David Aune appears to concur with Beale in his commentary as well, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 685-686.

child is caught up to heaven (12:5b),²⁰ this indicates the ongoing enmity (Gen. 3:15) between the dragon (“the serpent of old,” 12:9) and the woman and her (plural) “seed.”

There are other interesting parallels to note between this woman in chapter 12 and the first woman of Revelation in chapter 2. First, both are rooted in historical women. Although the woman of chapter 12 is predominantly symbolic of the “community of faith within which the messianic line ultimately yielded a kingly offspring,”²¹ she should at least be acknowledged to have a secondary (or even tertiary) connection to Mary, the mother of Jesus.²² Likewise, the symbolic figure Jezebel was also a real prophetess in the church at Thyatira,²³ though her description in 2:18-29 obviously indicates that she represents an evil that is much broader than just her influence—or even the sum total of the problems in the seven churches of Asia.

Along these same lines, in addition to their historical roots, both women are representatives of a group of people. Jezebel is very closely associated with “those who commit adultery with her,” (2:22a), even to the effect that her followers must repent of “her deeds,” (2:22b) with which they share. In judging Jezebel, in a sense, the Lord will also be judging her followers.²⁴ In the same way, the woman in chapter 12 is representative of the “community of faith,” whether that is interpreted to mean the church,²⁵ the persecuted people of God,²⁶ or exclusively faithful Israel.²⁷ Whatever explanation one chooses, the woman still signifies a group of people who are protected and nurtured by God against the wrath of the “dragon” (12:6, 17).

Finally, both women are cast in a maternal light. The false prophetess Jezebel has spiritual “children” (2:23) who follow her teachings and will suffer the judgment of God through “pestilence,” that is, death. The woman of chapter 12 gives birth, both literally and figuratively, to a “male child” (12:5). This child is “caught up to God and to His throne” (12:5b) even as his “mother” is protected by God in the wilderness (12:14). Thus, the “children” of Jezebel will be

²⁰ In our view, the reason John skips from the messianic birth straight to the ascension is two-fold: 1) the death and resurrection of Christ are emphasized significantly a number of places elsewhere in the book; and 2) in our opinions, 17:1-6 functions as the mirror-image opposing symbolism to 12:1-6 (this will be discussed further at a later point in the paper), with suffering and death by martyrdom emphasized in 17:1-6, whereas the protection of God is emphasized in 12:1-6. Admittedly, while the view of 12:5b as the ascension of Christ is the most common evangelical view, some have suggested reasonable arguments otherwise. See Aune, *Revelation*, 689, for a valuable discussion of alternative interpretations of the male child being “caught up” to God.

²¹ Beale, 628.

²² Ibid. This is contra the adamant denial of any reference to Mary found in such works as Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 238; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 149; and George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 169. On the other hand, however, see a strong analysis of the mariological interpretation in Bernard J. Le Frois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Apoc 12): Individual or Collective? An Exegetical Study* (Rome: Herder, 1954), 211-262.

²³ See Osborne, *Revelation*, 156, for a concise and helpful discussion of the historical identity of the prophetess Jezebel. We agree with his conclusion that “no positive identification for ‘Jezebel’ can be made. All that we can speculate is that she was a woman whose prophetic utterances made her the leader of the movement (most likely Nicolaitan, as at Ephesus and Pergamum) at Thyatira.”

²⁴ This is parallel to the judgment of Babylon on behalf of “those who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 19:2). See more on this line of thinking in our article, “The Earth-Dwellers and the Heaven-Dwellers: An Overlooked Interpretive Key to the Apocalypse,” *Faith and Mission* 20.1 (2003), 3-18.

²⁵ Le Frois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun*, 11-38.

²⁶ Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 107.

²⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232.

punished successfully by the Lord (2:23), while the “male child” of the woman, is pursued unsuccessfully by the dragon.

III. “THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS”: THE MYSTERY OF PERSECUTION AND ABOMINATION IN HISTORY

The next woman of Revelation appears in chapter 17, as John is carried away “in the Spirit into the wilderness,” (17:3a) to see “the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters” (17:1b). Quickly, it becomes clear that this woman is very different from that of chapter 12. She is “sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names,”²⁸ (17:3b) and she is “clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls” (17:4a). The great harlot has in her hand, “a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality” (17:4b), and she is identified by the name written upon her forehead, “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth” (17:5).

Several Old Testament connections are alluded to in the description of this “great harlot.” First, in Genesis 11, the people of the “whole earth” attempt to build a city, and “a tower whose top will reach into heaven” (11:4a). This effort to “link earth and heaven through self-glorifying pride,”²⁹ caused God to punish the people, confusing their language and scattering them over the whole earth. This same self-glorifying pride is seen in the life of the queen Jezebel who, while married to Ahab, led the northern kingdom of Israel astray into rampant idolatry and gross immorality (1 Ki. 16:30-33).³⁰ Jezebel’s notorious thirst for the blood of God’s prophets (1 Ki. 18:4; 2 Ki. 9:7) seems to be reproduced in the “great harlot,” about whom John says, “And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6a). Finally, the Neo-Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar also displayed the religious harlotry, and economic and political power that the woman of chapter 17 represents. It was Nebuchadnezzar who was punished by God for declaring in haughtiness, “Is this not Babylon the great...?” (Dan. 4:30). Along these same lines, John is probably thinking of the personified Babylon of Isaiah 47 and Jeremiah 51, who are threatened with fierce judgment as well.

In light of this vivid description, it is clear that the virtuous woman in chapter 12 “stands in obvious contrast to the scarlet whore of chapter 17.”³¹ There are two ways in which we will

²⁸ Regarding the woman sitting on both “many waters” and a “scarlet beast,” Mounce points out helpfully, “That she was earlier said to be sitting upon many waters (v. 1) should cause no problem. The constantly shifting scenes of apocalyptic should not be taken with a rigidity that imposes artificial conformity on its symbols” (*The Book of Revelation*, 310).

²⁹ Beale, 1119.

³⁰ About the Old Testament queen, Caird writes on page 213 that it is, “probable that Jezebel was the queen who sat for the portrait he is now painting.” Some textual connections between Jezebel and Babylon the Great are as follows: In 2 Kings 9:7, God says he is going to “avenge the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord, at the hand of Jezebel.” This statement corresponds to the references to Babylon’s fall in Rev. 18:20, where it says, “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her,” as well as the statement in 18:24, “And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth.” In addition, both are said to be “thrown down,” (2 Ki. 9:33; Rev. 18:21) and both have their “flesh” eaten, (2 Ki. 9:35-36; Rev. 17:16). In explaining the symbolism of the woman in chapter 17, Caird combines the personal imagery from the historical queen Jezebel in 1 and 2 Kings with the socio-political clout of the personified nation Babylon in Isaiah 47 and Jeremiah 51. We would agree with this understanding as a key aspect of the symbolism of the “great harlot,” while also maintaining that the tower of Babel and the arrogant claims of Nebuchadnezzar are at least equally significant.

³¹ Mounce, 232.

view the “great whore” as a contrast to the “woman clothed with the sun”: the first is primarily through structure and the second is through a closer look at the passage’s content.

Michelle Lee has proposed and skillfully defended an insightful grand chiasm for the entire Book of Revelation that we believe is, aside from a few small details, compelling.³² Though a complete defense of her proposal cannot be provided at this point, her skillful pairing of the women in chapters 12 and 17 is evident in layer H of the structure outlined below:

A (1) Prologue

B (2-3) Present Situation: Letters to the seven churches

C (4-5) Fundamental Paradigm: Worship of God, worthiness of the Lamb

D (6) Judgment of God’s enemies (note rider on white horse)

E (7) Faithful believers (note “great multitude”)

F (8-10) Judgment of God’s enemies (II; note first two “woes”)

G (11) False power of the Beast: Defeat through the two witnesses’ resurrection

H (12:1-6) Woman brings salvation

I (12:7-18) Judgment of God’s enemies (III): Dragon

J (13) Moment of Decision: Worship the Beast

J’ (14) Moment of Decision: Follow the Lamb

I’ (15-16) Judgment of God’s enemies (III): Climactically on Babylon

H’ (17:1-6) Woman killing saints

G’ (17:7-18) False power of the Beast: Defeat by the King of Kings

F’ (18) Judgment of God’s enemies (II; note repeated “woe, woe” over Babylon)

E’ (19:1-10) Faithful believers (“great multitude”)

D’ (19:11-21) Judgment of God’s enemies (rider on white horse)

C’ (20:1-10) Fundamental Paradigm: Damnation of Satan, worthiness of the saints

B’ (20:11-22:5) Future Situation: The new heaven and earth and New Jerusalem

A’ (22:6-21) Epilogue

³² Adapted from Michelle V. Lee, “A Call to Martyrdom: Function as Method and Message in Revelation,” *NovT* 40, 2 (1998) 174, 193-194. See also Luter’s adaptation of Lee’s structuring in his chapter on “Interpreting the Book of Revelation,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 469-471.

With this structuring lending support to the juxtaposition of the two women, one should also observe the many connections between their descriptions in 12:1-6 and 17:1-6. These detailed correlations are outlined in the chart below:

<i>Description of the Woman in 12:1-6</i>	<i>Description of the Woman in 17:1-6</i>
- Clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, with a crown of twelve stars (v. 1)	- Clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls (v. 4)
- Has her security “in heaven” (v. 1)	- Has her security in “the multitudes” and the “scarlet beast” (v. 1, 3) ³³
- Pain of childbirth (v. 2)	- Pleasure of immorality/harlotry (vv. 2, 4, 5)
- Red dragon with seven heads, ten horns (v. 3)	- Beast with seven heads, ten horns (v. 3)
- Dragon’s tail sweeps away “stars” to the earth (v. 4a)	- Kings of earth and earth-dwellers seduced by harlot (v. 2)
- Dragon seeks to devour child, who is protected/caught up into heaven (vv. 4, 5)	- Woman drunk on blood of martyrs (v. 6)
- Woman is mother of the prophesied messianic Ruler (v. 5)	- Woman is “mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth” (v. 5)
- Fled into the wilderness (v. 6)	- In a wilderness (v. 3)
- Protected by God for a certain period (v. 6)	- Judged by God after certain actions (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6)

While the above contrast between the woman of chapter 12 and the “great harlot” of chapter 17 is indeed compelling, it is hardly completely original. Many scholars have observed the relationship between these two symbolic women within the Book of Revelation.³⁴ Yet, we propose that there is another connection with “Babylon the Great” that most, if not all, have virtually overlooked.³⁵ If “Babylon the Great” of chapters 17 and 18 has much symbolic affinity with the Old Testament queen Jezebel, then what about the possibility of a relationship between Babylon the Great and the false prophetess known by the symbolic name “Jezebel” in chapter 2? The following chart presents the textual and thematic evidence that, in our opinions, connects the “Jezebel” character from chapter 2 with the “Babylon the Great” image from chapters 17 and 18:

³³ This point made by Beale, 857.

³⁴ See, e.g., Beale, 857; Caird, 148; Mounce, 232; and Osborne, 456.

³⁵ Caird comes close to positing a possible relationship between the false prophetess, Jezebel, and Babylon the Great (212-213). He suggests that the Old Testament figure Jezebel is the model for John in Rev. 17, both because of her historical infamy and her earlier mention in chapter 2. Charles Talbert suggests a thematic connection when he links Jezebel and Babylon, as the two unfaithful women of Revelation, against the “radiant woman” and the Bride, the two faithful women, in *The Apocalypse* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 86-87.

<i>The False Prophetess “Jezebel”</i>	<i>The Pseudo-Queen “Babylon the Great”</i>
<i>Exhortation to the saints:</i> “The rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold to this teaching...what you have, hold fast until I come,” (2:20a)	<i>Exhortation to the saints:</i> “Come out of her my people, that you may not participate in her sins,” (18:4)
<i>Claim of authority/power:</i> “calls herself a prophetess,” (2:20b)	<i>Claim of authority/power:</i> “I sit as a queen,” (18:7)
<i>Evil deeds:</i> “teaches and leads” the bond-servants of God astray and causes them to commit with her “acts of immorality” (2:20c)	<i>Evil deeds:</i> deceives “all the nations” with her sorcery (18:23) and causes them to commit “acts of immorality” (17:2; 18:3, 9)
<i>Coming judgment:</i> “I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to” (2:21a)	<i>Coming judgment:</i> In one day/one hour, her judgment will come (18:8, 10, 17, 19)
<i>Aspects of judgment:</i> “I will cast her on a bed of sickness...and I will kill her children with pestilence,” (2:22a, 23a)	<i>Aspects of judgment:</i> “in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire,” (18:8)
<i>Response to deeds:</i> “I know your deeds... I will give to each one of you according to your deeds,” (2:19, 23c)	<i>Response to deeds:</i> “her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities...give back to her double according to her deeds,” (18:5, 6)
<i>Source of evil:</i> Jezebel’s teaching is of “the deep things of Satan,” (2:24b)	<i>Source of evil:</i> Satan is behind the Beast, upon whom Babylon the Great rides (13:2; (17:3, 8)) ³⁶

There are, however, some fairly obvious possible objections to these parallels that deserve to be addressed. First, it may initially appear that the above comparison is illegitimate because the false prophetess Jezebel is an internal problem for the church, while Babylon the Great is a problem external to God’s people. Yet, Jezebel’s condemned teachings and practices seem to position her, at best, on the periphery of the church, at the blurring point between “the wheat and the tares.” She is teaching the so-called “deep things of Satan,” (Rev. 2:24b) to the end that the servants of God are being led astray. Likewise, “Babylon the Great” is involved in promoting the worship of the Beast throughout the world and is, thus, a similar “pseudo-religious” entity, spreading analogous falsehood and deception (note the parallels between their evil deeds above). Also, since God’s people are warned to come out of Babylon the Great immediately (Gk. *exelthate*, aorist imperative, 18:4), it would appear that to be involved with the Jezebel of John’s day is, in a very real sense, to be involved with Babylon the Great even now.

Second, it could be reasonably pointed out that the two women have very different roles in the Apocalypse and in history: the false prophetess is one first-century woman in a small city

³⁶ We recognize that not everyone associates the “scarlet beast” of chapter 17 with the “beast coming up out of the sea” in chapter 13. However, we concur with Beale when he states, “The portrayal of the beast is almost word for word that of 13:1, so the same beast is portrayed here again” (*The Book of Revelation*, 853). A representative argument of those who doubt the identity of the two is found in J. Ernst’s *Die eschatologischen Gegenspieler in den Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1967), 155.

in Asia Minor, while Babylon is both an age-long and end-times focused spiritual threat to the Lord's reign that transcends time and space. This would seem to disallow any comparison between the two. However, such an interpretation sells short the significance of the spiritual conflict within even the smallest local congregation. The place the two women would appear to "intersect" is that Jezebel is, so to speak, a present-tense local and individual manifestation of Babylon the Great in Thyatira. Thus, one could say that her teachings and practices are a kind of preview of the climactic spiritual harlotries to come. In addition, related though unnamed manifestations of a similar kind appear to have been present in the local churches at Ephesus and Pergamum, through the "Nicolaitan" and "teachings of Balaam" views and practices.

Finally, some may point out that Jezebel is an individual woman, while Babylon the Great is "the great city" (Rev. 17:18; 18:10, 16). While this may initially seem like an insurmountable distinction, it must be remembered that the building blocks of even the greatest cities are individual people. Thus, comparing Jezebel and Babylon the Great is no more a problem than to compare any individual resident and the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. (While it is a geographical location and a composition of thousands of buildings, all are for the purpose of the people living and working there; otherwise, it's a virtual "ghost town.") Anyone, then, could be a representative resident of "the great Metroplex." In the case of Jezebel, it would be showing how a representative church (note the address to "all the churches" in 2:23), is being infected by one false teacher, which could theoretically happen to "all the churches." In addition, since this type of teaching and behavior is effective at keeping people apart from proper commitment to Christ, it works equally well with any religious unbelievers, no matter the time or place (i.e., "those who dwell on the earth").

IV. "BABYLON THE GREAT" VS. "THE BRIDE" OF THE LAMB: TWO WOMEN AND TWO CITIES

After sketching the cases for the intended contrasts between Babylon the Great and the woman in Rev. 12, and the intended comparisons between Babylon and Jezebel, it might reasonably be assumed that it would be pushing things to suggest yet further intentional paralleling with Babylon in the Apocalypse. However, as will be seen below, a very strong case can be made that Babylon the Great is also to be viewed in the strongest direct contrast with the Bride of the Lamb imagery in chapters 19 and 21.³⁷

The bride of the Lamb³⁸ first appears in Rev. 19:7, where a "great multitude" is rejoicing in heaven after the fall of Babylon, saying, "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." She is then clothed in "fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints"

³⁷ This is not to say that there are not parallels between the woman of chapter 12 and the bride of Christ in chapters 19 and 21. In fact, some of the Old Testament background for the Rev. 12:1 woman, including Sg. of Sol. 6 and Isa. 61-62, appear to extend also to the bride of the Lamb in Rev. 21. However, we are not fully convinced by the studies that attempt to equate the two women. See Beale, 1045-1046, for a helpful discussion of the similarities. Primarily, we chose to focus on the parallels between Babylon the Great and the Bride of Christ because both, in addition to their feminine descriptors, represent cities: Babylon/Rome and the New Jerusalem. This is an important characteristic that the radiant woman of chapter 12 does not possess.

³⁸ The Old Testament background to the bride/wife imagery is very rich. Consider especially Isa. 54:5; 49:18; 61:10; 62:5; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:7-14; and Hos. 2:16-20. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of himself as a bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20) and used parables involving weddings (Matt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13). Paul also uses wedding imagery for the church and Christ, specifically in 2 Cor. 11:2, where he says, "I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin" (see also Eph. 5:25-27).

(19:8).³⁹ A voice then says to John, “Write, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9a). The next reference to the bride of the Lamb appears in 21:2 as the “holy city, the new Jerusalem,” is seen “coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.” It becomes clear at this point that the bride is also a city, like the great harlot of chapter 17 is viewed as a city in chapter 18. The bride, “the wife of the Lamb,” (21:9) is then described in great detail as a city at the end of chapter 21 and first part of chapter 22. The pattern of symbolism is clear: the bride is also the city, New Jerusalem, which is also the dwelling place of the people of God.⁴⁰

This pattern is mirrored in chapters 17 and 18, with the “great whore.” The woman of chapter 17, who is appropriately paired with the Beast (just as the people of God are with Christ), is essentially the opposite of everything for which the bride of Christ stands. She is a great harlot, who is also the city, Babylon the Great, which is also the corporate habitat of “those who dwell on the earth.”⁴¹ Many have noted the textual and thematic contrasts between the two symbolic women,⁴² but the following is a brief summary of them in chart form:

<i>Babylon the Great</i>	<i>Bride of Christ</i>
- A woman (Rev. 17) and a city (Rev. 16, 18)	- A woman (Rev. 19) and a city (Rev. 21)
- “Clothed in purple and scarlet” (17:4)	- Clothed in “fine linen, white and clean,” (19:8)
- Pseudo-queen and consort of the Beast (17:3, 4; 18:7)	- Bride of the Lamb and King of Kings (19:7, 9, 16)
- Dwelling place for demons (18:2)	- Dwelling place for God (21:3, 11, 22-23)
- Woman sitting on a “scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names,” (17:3)	- Army sitting on “white horses,” clothed in “fine linen,” following Him whose names are the “Word of God,” and “King of Kings and Lord of Lords,” (19:13-14, 16)
- A harlot who killed the saints (17:5, 6)	- Great multitude praises God for avenging the saints’ blood on the harlot (19:2)

³⁹ In our studied opinions, the phrase “great multitude,” which appeared first in 7:9 (the only two references in the book), as well as the presence of “fine linen, white and clean” (19:8a) and “white robes” (7:9), tightly connects the two groups of people from both passages. Along the same lines, the “white linen” clothed armies of heaven infer that all three of the diverse portraits are referring to the same group. See our article, “The Earth-Dwellers and the Heaven-Dwellers,” for a fuller discussion of this issue and its implications for interpretation.

⁴⁰ As we argue in our article, “The Earth-Dwellers and the Heaven-Dwellers,” our understanding of the progression is as follows: the church is taken from the earth as the “great multitude” (Rev. 7:9; see also 19:1, 6), who then join all the previous saints who “dwell in heaven” (12:12), who then become symbolized as the wife of the Lamb (19:7) and return to earth with him as the armies of heaven (19:14). This same group is also taken up into the “new Jerusalem,” coming down from heaven in chapter 21. See Robert H. Gundry, “The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People,” *NovT* 29 (1975), 95-100, for another point of view.

⁴¹ That the closest of relationships exists between Babylon the Great and the “earth-dwellers”—indeed, a connection almost as close as Siamese twins—is clear from the fact that the sure vengeance for the shed blood of the martyrs against the “earth-dwellers” (Rev. 6:10), in the end, comes instead upon “the great harlot” (19:2). For an in-depth discussion of every use of the phrase “earth-dwellers” in the Apocalypse, see “The Earth-Dwellers and the Heaven-Dwellers.”

⁴² See, for example, Beale, 1119; Krodel, *Revelation*, 352-354; Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 110-111.

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|--|--|
| - Closely related to the “earth-dwellers” (17:8) | - Closely related to the great multitude (19:1,6), who are the “heaven-dwellers,” (see 7:9-15; 12:12; 13:6) |
| - “The great city,” (16:19; 17:18; 18:10)/ “Babylon the Great” (16:19; 17:5; 18:2) | - The “holy city,” (21:2, 10)/ “New Jerusalem,” (21:2, 10) |
| - The earth-dwellers’ names are not written in the book of life (17:8; cf. 13:8) | - No one enters unless their names are written in the book of life (21:27) |
| - “She glorified herself,” (18:7) | - She has “the glory of God,” (21:11) |
| - “In one hour such great wealth has been laid waste...” (18:17) | - “Her brilliance was like a very costly stone...” (21:11) |
| - “The voice of the bridegroom and bride will not be heard in you any longer,” (18:23) | - “The marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9), for which the bride has made herself ready (19:7,9; 21:2)/“the bride, the wife of the Lamb... coming down out of heaven from God” (21:9, 10) |

Yet, in the end, the contrast between the two women and two cities is less than fully meaningful if we do not know what the intent is of such a comparison. We believe Beale summarizes it well when he says, “Revelation 21 portrays the true community of God in contrast to and in replacement of the false community of the world.”⁴³ Our conclusions regarding the wider implications of this dichotomy in Revelation will be outlined in the following section.

V. RECAPTURING REVELATION’S “FEMININE SIDE”: IN THE END, TWO WOMEN... OR ONE?

While examining the “feminine side” of the Apocalypse, much exegetical ground has been covered (with quite a bit being freshly plowed!). Every relevant occurrence of *gyne* in Revelation has been dealt with, from the false prophetess Jezebel in chapter 2, to the radiant woman in chapter 12, to the great harlot, Babylon the Great, in chapters 17 and 18, to the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem, in chapters 19 and 21. In addition, many connections, both comparisons and contrasts, have been made between the women of Revelation, including some completely new correlations between “Jezebel” (2:20) and Babylon the Great. Yet, what does all this mean? How are we to make sense of this oft-overlooked and much misunderstood “feminine side” of Revelation and its significance for interpretation?

In our studied opinions, the function of the female figures in Revelation serves to accentuate the fact that, in the end, there are only two kinds of people: those who worship the devil (whether directly or indirectly) and those who worship the Lamb. Thus, the great divide between the two groups of women in Revelation⁴⁴ is not intended to be sexist or degrading in any way. Rather, the distinctions function as vivid and emotionally powerful images of the two

⁴³ Beale, 1119.

⁴⁴ The division of the women into these two categories basically mirrors Talbert’s conclusion in *The Apocalypse*, 86-87, where he calls them the “faithful women” and the “unfaithful women.”

groupings of humankind that we could call the saints and the “aint’s.”⁴⁵ The false prophetess Jezebel is a local representation of the evil manifested in the great harlot, Babylon the Great, whose people, the earth-dwellers, follow after the devil instead of the Lamb. Yet, the radiant woman who brings forth the Messiah also becomes the beloved bride of Christ, who dwells in the New Jerusalem as the eternal heaven-dwellers. And, just as Babylon is cast down and given back double for all of her iniquities (18:6), with the smoke of her burning “rising up forever and ever” (19:3), those who refuse to worship Christ will suffer eternal punishment in the “lake of fire” (20:15). But, for those who serve God and His Christ, it is fitting that the Book of Revelation ends with the same relational imagery as the Bible begins: a couple, Husband and wife, dwelling in paradise, but, this time, never to be lost again.

Before closing, there is one other shadowy—actually unnamed—female figure who must be mentioned for this treatment of the female imagery in the Apocalypse to be complete. The allusion to Adam and Eve above is doubly important because the two kinds of women seen in Revelation are also the “two faces” of Eve. Just as Eve sought pleasure and power in listening to the serpent (Gen. 3:6), Jezebel and Babylon the Great play out those same motivations. Just as Eve became the focus of the wording “the seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15) and a faithful wife and mother (Gen. 4:1, 25), these godly characteristics characterize the woman in Rev. 12 and the bride in Rev. 19 and 21.

So, in our fresh and thorough study of the “feminine side” of the Apocalypse, while there are clearly two kinds of women, representing the two kinds of people among humankind and their eternal allegiances, both are actually the flip-sides of the character of the first woman. This observation seems to point to the eerie conclusion that, in assessing the grand sweep of biblical history, “the more things change, the more they remain the same,” for even in the apocalyptically portrayed eschatological events, all people are still like Eve, either at her tragic worst or her faithful best.⁴⁶

THE END

⁴⁵ This is also supported by Lee’s macro-chiasm for the book (see n. 32), which pinpoints chapters 13 and 14 as central to the message of the book: *worship the beast or follow the Lamb!*

⁴⁶ If space were available, much more of significance could be said about the subtle, but clearly present, allusions to Eve in the Apocalypse. Also, aspects of the above research will be reflected in A. Boyd Luter, “Revelation,” in the *Apologetics Study Bible*, gen. ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, forthcoming); Luter, “Revelation,” in the *Holman Christian Standard Bible Study Bible*, gen. ed. Edwin Blum (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, forthcoming); and Emily Hunter McGowin, “Revelation,” in the *Evangelical Woman’s Bible Commentary*, gen. eds. Dorothy Patterson and Rhonda Kelley (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, forthcoming).