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Just a Whore

The Annihilation of Babylon According to Revelation 17:16

Abstract / Résumé / Zusammenfassung

Im dualistischen Denkraum der Offenbarung erscheint Babylon eindeutig auf der falschen Seite, als eine der feindlichen Mächte, die letztendlich ihrer Vernichtung entgegengehen. Übereinstimmend mit dem, was als eine zeitlose Rhetorik des Krieges verstanden werden kann, wird "der Feind" jeglicher Menschlichkeit beraubt und als Inkarnation des Bösen präsentiert. Die negative Art und Weise, in der Babylon dargestellt ist, lässt ihre zukünftige Bestrafung als etwas erscheinen, was sie verdient hat. Kommentare zu diesem Text zeigen jedoch eine Tendenz, die beunruhigenden Aspekte dieser Vorhersage wegzuerklären, indem sie die Hure zu "nur einer Metapher" reduzieren.

In diesem Artikel konzentriere ich mich auf die Zerstörung Babylons, wie sie in Offenbarung 17,16 dargestellt wird. Ich zeige auf, dass der Körper, der hier gemetzelt wird, nicht irgendein Körper ist, sondern ein bestimmter, geschlechtsspezifischer Körper. Dass Babylon von Anfang an als Hure dargestellt ist, liefert die Rechtfertigung für die männliche Gewalt, die ihrem Körper angetan wird. Was hingegen ausgeblendet wird, ist der Missbrauch der Hure als Metapher für eine Kolonialmacht.

The woman/whore called Babylon in Revelation 17-19 has often been interpreted as representing Evil or the Evil Empire.¹ What such interpretations have in common is that they see this woman as representing something else. Sure enough, the text itself points 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

The revelation of this meaning of the woman stands at the end of a long episode in which the vision of the whore is first introduced, (17:1-3a), described (17:3b-6) and then explained

¹ So for instance Resseguie: '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.' (J.L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed. A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*. Biblical Interpretation Series, 32. Leiden: Brill, 1998, p.137) And Beale: 'She includes the entire evil economic-religious system of the world throughout history. She receives power from the devil himself.' (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999, p.888)

² Unless stated otherwise, citations from the Bible come from the New Revised Standard Version.

(17:7-18) by one of the seven angels, featured in the previous context.³ The identity of this woman as city is more specifically disclosed after her annihilation has been announced and motivated as part of God's purpose in the preceding verses: '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.'

Commentaries on this text show a tendency to explain away the more troubling aspects of this prediction. They do so in different ways, for instance, by stressing that the sentence concerns Babylon as city.⁴ In support of this point, reference is made to texts from the Hebrew Bible where the same judgement is also passed over other cities, be it Jerusalem, Tyre or Nineveh. Another observation concerns the executors of this sentence, namely the ten horns and the beast. The actions they undertake against the whore are often understood to show the self-destroying power of evil.⁵ I find these interpretations problematic in so far as they obscure other implications present in these verses.

In what follows, I will concentrate on Revelation 17:16, which describes the annihilation of Babylon, because in my view this disturbing scene resists a facile reduction of the woman/whore to 'just a metaphor'.⁶ But before pointing that out, I want to analyse what precisely is being stated in verse 16.

1. A Closer Look at Rev. 17:16

The subject named in this verse are the ten horns and the beast, which were mentioned for the first time in 17:3 together with the woman. The ten horns are later identified as ten kings: 'And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.' (verse 12) As the object

³ The angel is introduced in Revelation 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 Aune points out, this is the only time in Revelation that John actually gets an explanation of what he sees. According to Aune, '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.' (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*. Word Biblical Commentary, 52C. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p.919)

⁴ So for instance 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.' (U.B. Müller, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Ökumenischer-Taschenbuch-Kommentar zum NT 19. Gütersloh/Würzburg: G. Mohn/Echter Verlag, 1984, p.296) Visser understands "make naked" to refer to thorough plundering and 'devouring her flesh' to the total extermination of all the inhabitants of Rome (A.J. Visser, *De openbaring van Johannes*. De prediking van het Nieuwe Testament. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972, p.199). Aune states that 'since the whore is a city, the phrase ἡ πόλις αὐτῆς ποιήσεται ἄρη, "they will make her desolate," i.e. depopulate her, is appropriate.' (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, p.957)

⁵ So for instance G.B. Caird, *A Commentary to the Revelation of St. John the Divine*. London: A. & Ch. Black, 1966, p.221; C.H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation. The Open Book of Prophecy*. Good News Studies, 34. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 1991, p.166; R.W. Wall, *Revelation*. New International Biblical Commentary. NT Series, 18. Peabody (MA): Hendrickson, p.209; J.L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, p.140; G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p.887.

⁶ 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.' (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p.883)

of their collective actions in verse 16 the whore is named. Together, the beast and its horns will undertake four actions against the whore: first, they ‘will hate the whore’; second, ‘they will make her desolate and naked’; third, ‘they will devour her flesh’ and fourth, they will ‘burn her up with fire’. Some of these statements either explicitly state or presume a person as object: they will hate the whore, they will make her naked, and they will devour her flesh. The two other statements, namely ‘they will make her desolate’ and ‘they will burn her up with fire’ are more ambiguous. They also recur in the following context with respect to the city. Her desolation is mentioned more specifically in 18:17.19 and her being burned in 18:8.9.18 and 19:3.⁷

As already noted, the identification of the woman with the great city is made in 17:18. It is important to stress here that the term ‘woman’ (gunh) has already been used five times in the preceding context to describe Babylon (vv.3.4.6.7.9) and the term ‘whore’ (pōrnh) four times (verses 1.5.15.16).⁸ In the following context, to the contrary, the term ‘woman’ does not occur anymore and the term ‘whore’ only once, namely at the end of this section in 19:2, where she is mentioned for the last time as ‘the great whore’. This expression corresponds with the one in 17:1, the opening verse, thus forming an inclusion and framing the whole section.

But while Babylon is only named ‘woman’ in the context preceding 17:18, the reverse holds true for Babylon as city. The term ‘city’ (pōl ij) is namely used for the first time in verse 18 and further only occurs in the following context, more concretely in 18:10.16.18.19.21. In the narrative logic of this text, therefore, the reader is first confronted with a female character, called Babylon in 17:5, which is only identified in verse 18 with ‘the great city’.⁹ That verse thus forms a turning point in the representation of Babylon, because precisely in this verse the identification of the ‘woman’ with the ‘great city’ is explicitly made. Verse 16, by consequence, still belongs to the section where Babylon is predominantly described as woman. Moreover, this verse explicitly names ‘the whore’ as object and several elements in the sentence presume a person as character. In sum, taking in consideration both the context and the content of verse 16, it does not seem justified to limit the meaning of verse 16 to Babylon as city, as some commentators tend to do, nor do I agree with Aune who states that

⁷ Burning could of course also apply to a person. According to Leviticus 21:9, the daughter of a priest who has prostituted herself, is to be burned to death. For Lietaert Peerbolte the similarities between this text and Revelation 17:16 ‘should probably lead to the conclusion that the author of Revelation depicts the fate of the Harlot as her well-deserved punishment prescribed by the Mosaic Law.’ (L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist. A Tradition-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents*. Leiden: Brill, 1996, p. 163) In my view, however, the correspondence between these texts is too limited to be convincing. As I will demonstrate below, other texts from the Hebrew Bible play a far greater role.

⁸ In 17:5 Babylon is in fact identified as ἡ(μῆ)τῆρ τῶν πόρνων. According to Aune, this could be understood in an archetypal sense, meaning that she is the source of the whoredom of others, or in a superlative sense, meaning ‘the most depraved whore’. (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, p.937) However, her being called ‘mother’ can also be related to the preceding Babylon ‘the great’ (ἡ(mega)l h). In that case, the whore appears not just as mother, but as representation of the Great Mother. For Yarbro Collins ‘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.’ (A. Yarbro Collins, ‘Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation’ in *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 20-33, p. 30) I have made a similar point, using the work of Kristeva, in my article ‘Apocalypse, Art and Abjection: Images of the Great Whore’ in: G. Aichele (ed.), *Culture, Entertainment, and the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000 (forthcoming).

⁹ As Aune points out, the order of the elements mentioned by the angel in verse 7 is reversed in what follows. First, the beast, the seven heads and ten horns are explained and only at the very end, in verse 18, the woman. (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, p.959)

the judgement of the great whore, announced in 17:2, does not refer 'primarily to Rev 17 (though her judgement is briefly mentioned in 17:16) but to Rev 18'.¹⁰

We can take this analysis a step further by looking at the name Babylon. This name occurs for the first time in 14:8, where the fall of Babylon is already announced: 'Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication".' The same name (Babul wñ h(megañ h) occurs again in 16:19, where it is said that God remembered 'great Babylon' and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. Next, in 17:5 the name 'Babylon the great' is attributed to the whore on the beast: 'on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations".' In the following context, the name reappears in chapter 18 (verses 2.10.21), which deals with the destruction of the city. What these texts have in common is that, on the one hand, the name of a well-known city is used, while on the other hand the description is that of a female character, whose behavior is described in terms of fornication.

The name Babylon thus forms a link between the whore and the city. The identification, which is made explicit in 17:18, is already prepared for in the preceding context. And yet, this name is a 'chiffre', a mystery, because both 'the great whore' and 'Babylon the great' refer to a third party, hinted at but never explicitly mentioned in the text.¹¹ As far as the identity of this third party is concerned, I think the most probable candidate here is Rome.¹² Both metaphors thus have a common denominator and in both cases, the message delivered is a negative one. In the first case, the story told is one of seduction and sexual perversion, in the second case, one of oppression by a colonial power. The great whore/mighty city is clearly pictured as evil.

2. Cities and Whores

Similar views can be found in the Hebrew Bible, as in several prophetic books other cities are equally addressed and condemned as whores.¹³ The metaphoric use of Babylon operates against this background. I will analyse in what follows how the comparison between a whore and a particular city is made and investigate, more specifically, which of the images used in verse 16 are also present in those cases.¹⁴

¹⁰ D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, p.916.

¹¹ I consider it more likely that *musthñion* (mystery) is part of the introduction to the title, than part of the title itself. This interpretation is also supported by verse 7 where the angel announces that he will explain 'the mystery of the woman' (*to_musthñion thj gunaikoŵ*). In both cases, however, 'it describes a hidden meaning of Babylon the Great, that needs further revelatory interpretation' (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p.859)

¹² This is the majority view. According to Beale, however, not just Rome is meant, but 'the apostate church and unbelieving Israel are included inasmuch as they have become part of that sinful world system.' (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p.886). Other authors suggest that with Babylon not Rome, but Jerusalem is meant. So, for instance, J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*. The Anchor Bible, 38. Garden City (NY): Doubleday, 1975, p.285.

¹³ As G. Corrington Streete observes: 'The prophets of the exile (...) are particularly jealous for the honor of JHWH, which becomes symbolic of their own, a point illustrated by the fact that by far the largest number of occurrences of the terminology of adultery (thirty-four) are found in the writings of the exilic prophet Ezekiel, who is also the prophet with the most graphic and violent imagery of sexual punishment.' (G. Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman. Power and Sex in the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997, pp.79-80).

¹⁴ In other prophetic texts Israel or Judah are presented as a whore (for instance Hosea 2; Jeremiah 2:20-3:20). The accusation of prostitution also occurs in Jeremiah 13:20-27 with respect to Judah/Jerusalem. It should further be noted that in other cases cities (especially Jerusalem) are presented in a more positive sense for instance as Gods bride or wife.

Looking more specifically at the destruction of Babylon announced in 17:16, the closest parallel can be found in Ezekiel 16 and 23, where Jerusalem is pictured as a whore undergoing a similar fate. In both Revelation and Ezekiel, the punishment of the whore is presented as reflecting God's will, although in both cases, the sentence will be executed by others. In Ezekiel, this is done by the woman's lovers, in Revelation by the beast and its horns. Other, though less elaborate, parallels can be found in Nahum 3:1-7, where Nineveh is first addressed as city and then compared with a prostitute and in Isaiah 23:15-17, where the fate of Tyre is compared with that of a whore, but no judgement or sentence follows the comparison here.¹⁵ However, it is important to note here that there is also an important difference if in Revelation, as I presume, Babylon indeed refers to Rome. In that case, Babylon is a symbolic name. Nevertheless, a disturbing correspondence between these prophetic traditions and Revelation exists as far as their rhetorical strategy is concerned, because the way the women in question are depicted, makes their punishment look as something they deserve.¹⁶

With respect to Ezekiel 16 it can be noted that Jerusalem is addressed directly by God through the prophet as a woman (verse 3). In verses 15-41, the woman is more specifically depicted as a whore. Her future fate is announced to her in verse 35 ('Therefore, O whore, hear the word of the Lord') and elaborated in the following verses: Her clothes will be stripped and she will be left naked (verse 39), she will be stoned and cut to pieces (verse 40) and her houses will be burned (verse 41). Several of these elements correspond with the ones found in Apocalypse 17:16, namely her being made naked and the burning, in this case, of her houses.

In another text of the same book, namely Ezekiel 23:2 two women are introduced who are first specified as Oholah and Oholibah and then identified with Samaria and Jerusalem (verse 4). They too are criticised for playing the whore and judged accordingly.¹⁷ In verse 9, Oholah has already been delivered to her lovers. They have made her naked and killed her with the sword (verse 10). In verse 22, Oholibah is addressed: 'Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord God...'. She will undergo a similar fate as her sister (verses 22-35): Her nose and ears will be cut off (verse 25), she will be hated and left naked (verse 29). Both Oholah and Oholibah will thus be made an object of terror and of plunder (verse 46) and the houses of their sons and daughters will burn up (verse 47). Here again parallels with Apocalypse 17:16 can be found, more specifically the mention of hatred (verse 29), the being made naked (verses 10,29), and the burning (verse 29).¹⁸

¹⁵ See also Isaiah 47:1-3 where Babylon and Chaldea are addressed as women facing divine vengeance.

¹⁶ Many commentators uncritically reproduce this view. So for instance Ruiz when he writes: 'In Rev 17,16 the devouring of the Prostitute's flesh is part of the punishment *justly* inflicted because of her crimes.' (J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17-19,10*. European University Studies Series XXIII. Theology Vol. 376. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1989, p.366. Italics are mine).

¹⁷ As 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.' (F. van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Metaphorisation of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23' in: A. Brenner, F. van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts. Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1993, 167-176, p.175)

¹⁸ As Ruiz argues 'in all three texts (Ezekiel 16; 23; Revelation 17) the metaphors are so constructed that the language 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.' (J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, p.365) However, in his view, Revelation 17:16 differs from the parallel texts in Ezechiel in so far as: 1. different cities are in view and 2. 'devouring her flesh' is absent in Ezechiel 16 and 23. As a third difference I would add that the notion of sexual infidelity/adultery present in Ezechiel 16 and 23 is absent in Revelation 17, where no partner is mentioned.

In two instances, non-Israelite cities are condemned as whores. The first case is Nahum 3:1-7 where Nineveh is first addressed as city in verse 1 and later compared with a prostitute. Her fate is announced in verses 4-7. '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 bemoan her?"' (verse 7). In this text, we find the reverse situation as in Ezekiel, in that Nineveh is first addressed as city and then compared with a whore. The image of the city resurfaces in the following context, where more specifically her being devoured by fire is mentioned (Nahum 3:13.15).

The comparison is even more limited in the second case, namely Isaiah 23:15, where it is the fate of Tyre which is compared with that of a whore: 'At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute'. The comparison with a whore is repeated in verse 17, where it is said that Tyre 'will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth'. In this case, however, no judgement or sentence follows the comparison.¹⁹

What Nahum 3:1-7 and Isaiah 23:15-17 have in common with Ezekiel is that cities are condemned as whores. A major difference, however, is that these are foreign cities and that the notion of adultery is absent, because no relation between these cities and JHWH is presumed. The same is the case with Babylon in Revelation 17, where the issue of adultery is equally absent.

However, if the elements used in Revelation 17:16 to describe the fate of Babylon, already show up in prophetic texts, there is one remarkable omission: no direct parallel occurs for the image that her flesh will be devoured.²⁰ For that we have to look elsewhere, namely in 1 Kings 21:23 where being devoured is first predicted by Elijah, and later recalled by Jehu in 2 Kings 9:36-37, as the fate awaiting Jezebel. The Septuagint version of this text shows a clear verbal correspondence with Revelation 17:16 as the same expression, namely 'to eat someone's flesh' is used.²¹ But there are also other features that these women have in common, which can serve as further evidence that the author of Revelation may have Jezebel in mind here. Striking is especially the reference to the many whoredoms and sorceries of Jezebel by Jehu in Kings 9. A similar accusation already shows up earlier in Revelation where the woman prophet called Jezebel is accused of practicing fornication (πορνεία: Revelation 2:20). This is also a key concept in the depiction of Babylon. Moreover, Babylon is also

¹⁹ As Fekkes points out this text may rather have played a role in the formulation of Revelation 17:2a and 18:3b.9b. (J. Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation. Visionary Antecedents and their Development*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, 93. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994, p.211-212)

²⁰ According to Ruiz, this image 'looks ahead to the use of Ezek 39,17-20 in Rev 19,17-8.21' (J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, p.366). There are indeed verbal correspondences between these texts in so far as the expression 'to eat someone's flesh' is used, but in my view the correspondence with 2 Kings 9:36-37 is more prominent in Revelation 17:16 than that with Ezekiel 39:17-20. Massyngberde Ford sees a relation with Leviticus 26:27-33, because this text 'suggests that one should look for cannibalism' (J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, p.283). However, he 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 its horns).

²¹ The prediction in 2 Kings 9:36 that the dogs 'shall eat the flesh of Jezebel' (kataφαγονται τὰ σαρκὰ ἰεζεβελ) corresponds with the one in Revelation 17:16 (τὰ σώρκα αὐτῆς φαγονται). The wording is the same, except that the Septuagint uses the compositum rather than the simplex form of the verb used in Revelation 17:16 and 19:18.

accused of having deceived all nations by her sorcery (Revelation 18:23) and a further hint may be found in the way Babylon sees herself ruling as a queen in Revelation 18:7.²²

3. The Meaning of a Metaphor

What the parallels with Jezebel as well as the whore/cities in the prophetic texts in my view make clear, is that the Great Whore is a gendered metaphor. Both its being gendered and its being a metaphor, are relevant. First, as far as the issue of gender is concerned. I think gender is by no means accidental here. Babylon could not be just as well a male character. In a patriarchal society, to compare the enemy with a woman is a way of ridiculing and denigrating him on the one hand, and of ascertaining one's own male superiority on the other. What Exum states for the prophetic texts under discussion also holds true here: 'Already inscribed in the metaphors themselves is a whole range of negative views about women and about female behavior and female sexuality, as well as about power in gender relations: men dominate and women submit.'²³ Therefore, I disagree with Schüssler Fiorenza, who considers the use of female images for cities to be 'conventional language because then, as today, cities and countries were grammatically construed as feminine'.²⁴ To use a woman as metaphor for a city, is more than just a matter of grammar, because it reflects an androcentric perspective. In the case of Babylon, the woman/city represents the other, viewed as alien territory to be conquered and eventually destroyed, thus presuming and affirming an analogy between military and sexual invasion, the colonizer presented as male, the colonized as female.²⁵ Gender, then, is more than just a matter of convention, but plays a role in the message to be delivered.

However, Babylon is not only depicted as a woman, she is moreover presented as a whore (πορνή). In the Hebrew Bible, this image appears to be gender-specific.²⁶ In my view, this is also the case in Revelation 17-19, as only the woman is called 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: πορνεία αυτη). Moreover, the use of this terminology, namely πορνή / πορνεία and πορνείω,²⁷ is not merely descriptive, but implies a moral judgement. In line with its use elsewhere in the New Testament, prostitution appears here in the first place as a moral evil.²⁸ This also contributes to the negative image of the woman, who is held

²² Besides the common expression (to eat her flesh), Beale also mentions that the fate of both women happens according to 'the word of the Lord' and lists 11 more parallels between Jezebel and Babylon. (G. Beale, *Revelation*, p.884). In my view, however, not all of them are equally relevant or to the point.

²³ J. C. Exum, *Plotted Shot, and Painted. Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series, 215 – Gender, Culture, Theory, 3. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, p.120-121.

²⁴ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation. Vision of a Just World*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993, p.95-96.

²⁵ J.K. Kim, ' "Uncovering her Wickedness": An Inter(con)textual Reading of Revelation 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective' in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999) 61-81, p.73. See also M. Bal, 'Metaphors He Lives By' in: Semeia, 61: *Women, War, and Metaphor* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 185-207, p.203; A. Yarbro Collins, 'Feminine Symbolism', p.31/

²⁶ Ph. Bird, ' "To Play the Harlot": An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor' in: P.L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, 75-94, p.79: 'Prostitution shares with fornication, as defined in Israel, a fundamental female profile, despite the fact that both activities require active male participation and may involve male initiation (cf. Gen. 38:15-16).' See also J.C. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p.112-113.

²⁷ Πορνή: 17:1.5.15.16; πορνεία: 17:2.4; 18:3; 19:2; πορνείω: 17:2; 18:3.9.

²⁸ See for instance its occurrence in lists of vices: Mark 7:21-22; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5.

responsible for it. But, not only her being a whore, also her death is gender-specific, because it destroys her sexuality and makes an end to her seductiveness.²⁹

Second, as far as its metaphorical character is concerned, 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 work and be powerful if it is rooted in existing views and practices, which 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 that ‘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 feminist analysis of Revelation must be concerned with all the implicit assumptions about gender in the text.’³⁰ 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,’³¹ tends to obscure this relation between metaphor and reality. As Exum rightly observes: ‘That metaphoric 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.’³²

Reading for gender, therefore, reveals, as Pippin puts it, the ‘apocalypse of women’³³ turning, in the case of Revelation 17, into a ‘pornoapocalypse’.³⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, however, criticizes Pippin’s interpretation stating that ‘reading simply in terms of gender reinscribes cultural femininity by naturalizing Revelation’s symbolic figurative language.’³⁵ In my view, however, this critique is not justified, because Pippin is not reading *simply* in terms of gender, nor does she *reinscribe* cultural femininity. ‘Here, the strategy is to imply (or, indeed, argue) that if an interpreter describes how something works, she or he is advocating for the maintenance of the practice.’³⁶

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.’³⁷ But, as I have stated earlier, Revelation 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 telling yourself that the blood is not real. That may well explain why this verse often gets so little attention in the discussion of these chapters or that the focus is solely on the destruction of Babylon as city.

²⁹ T. Pippin, *Death and Desire. The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*. Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p.64.

³⁰ H. 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*. (Unpublished dissertation) Uppsala, 1999, p.53.

³¹ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation. Justice and Judgment*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998 (2nd ed.), p.218.

³² J. C. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p.120 n.55.

³³ T. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p.47.

³⁴ T. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies. The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*. London/New York: Routledge, 1999, p.92.

³⁵ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, p.218.

³⁶ The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*. New Haven/London Yale University Press, 1995, p.262.

³⁷ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, p.219.

However, rather than focusing only on Babylon as city, it seems important to me to consider both sides of Babylon as Great City *and* Great Whore, as oppressive, 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.’³⁸ However, it is hard to understand then why she herself sets up an opposition between two reading strategies, namely a reading which 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 problematic and dangerous, because it suggests that gender research is a-political. 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.’³⁹

Moreover, I find the formulation of this opposition is problematic. In the first case, ‘being white’ and ‘Western’ are used as seemingly unproblematic labels and the focus is 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 nor 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’.

4. Double Bind

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.’⁴⁰ 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.’⁴¹ I would like to complement her analysis with some observations from my own context, namely that of a colonizing country.

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 citizen of Fortress Europe, I rather find myself identified with Babylon as *locus* of colonial power and oppression. 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 eighties 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. One famous luxury brothel in Hungary is actually called ‘Villa Babylon’.⁴² Soon enough, however, the women who arrive in Europe find out about the real nature of the jobs or wealthy husbands they were promised.

³⁸ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, p.218 (italics are mine).

³⁹ H. Stenström, *The Book of Revelation*, p.284-285.

⁴⁰ J.K. Kim, ‘ “Uncovering her Wickedness” ’, p.61.

⁴¹ J.K. Kim, ‘ “Uncovering her Wickedness” ’, p.63.

⁴² Ch. de Stoop, *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer*. Antwerpen: Kritak, 1992, p.93.

The fate of Babylon described in Revelation 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 the murder, but spent only three years in jail. Nicolasa had accepted a contract as *bailarina* in Europe to earn money for her poor family, but her life literally ended in this strip-tease bar.⁴³

Reading Revelation 17 from this particular context or *Sitz im Tod*,⁴⁴ 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. Not only is she presented as a prostitute, but 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 with her, since *she* made them drink and it is 'her fornication'. What also contributes to her negative image, is that she is presented as being drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (17:6). As the consumption of blood is explicitly forbidden in the Torah, this practice appears as particularly repulsive. Besides the negative elements in the description of the whore, there are also more explicit value judgements in the text. Babylon is accused of blasphemy, impurity, abomination, iniquity, deceit and corruption,⁴⁵ and her sins are said to be 'heaped high as heaven' (Revelation 18:5). What all these elements have in common is that the woman is pictured as a bad woman and this in turn makes her punishment look as something she deserves. The measures taken against her are legitimized as well as sanctioned by presenting them as in accordance with Gods will. The violence against her thus appears as justified.

However, in order to reach this conclusion the Great Whore needs to be isolated and the social dimension of prostitution blended out. With social dimension I mean here prostitution as trade, and thus as a specific form of labour.⁴⁶ The only, though indirect, trace in the text that the whore is rewarded for her services, may be found in the description of her wealth. According to Revelation 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 has been made to the commercial activity of the city, it is never made explicit where

⁴³ Ch. de Stoop, *Ze zijn zo lief, meneer*, p.53-55.

⁴⁴ The expression originally comes from Jon Sobrino, but 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.' (H. Stenström, *The Book of Revelation*, p.23).

⁴⁵ *bl asfhmīa*: 17:3; *akartoj*: 17:4; 18:2; *bdelugma*: 17:4.5; *adikhma*: 18:5; *pl anaw*: 18:23; *fqeiw*: 19:2.

⁴⁶ Reference to the situation of prostitutes in antiquity is made by 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 Handtuch und Seifenartikeln, den Gästen sexuelle Dienste anboten.' (L. Sutter Rehmann, *Vom Mut, genau hinzusehen. Feministisch-befreiungstheologische Interpretationen zur Apokalypik*. Luzern: Edition Exodus, 1998, p.97.

all her luxury comes from.⁴⁷ The suggestion of the text seems to be that she is making profit from her lovers, one way or another. That may be fairly obvious as far as the wealth of Babylon as colonial power is concerned. And it could even hold true for a whore, but than again the focus is on a particular whore, and the social reality of prostitution remains out of sight.

Still, a trace may be left, precisely in the gendered character of the metaphor. What the metaphor also reveals is namely the ‘gender-based division of labour’. 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.’⁴⁸ Gender ideology not only determines what sexual behaviour is considered male or female, and what sexual needs are natural and 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 valorization of this work as they determine if and what labour is being paid and how much.

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. 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, or as Kim puts it: ‘the whore metaphor does not simply stand for the imperial city of Rome but also stands for women sexually involved in a colonizing context.’⁴⁹ The dramatic consequences of such metaphorization are exposed in the violence done to her. And the reader is supposed to rejoice in her death, but not every reader does. At least not the resisting reader.

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⁴⁷ So also Sutter Rehmann: ‘Es ist aber auffallend, daß wir nichts von einem Lohn erfahren, den sie von den Freiern erhalten würde.’ (L. Sutter Rehmann, ‘Die Offenbarung des Johannes. Inspirationen aus Patmos’ in L. Schottroff; M.-T. Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 725-741, p.735.)

⁴⁸ E.Uy Eviota, *The Political Economy of Gender. Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines*. London/New Jersey: Zed, 1992, p.9:

⁴⁹ J.K. Kim, ‘ ”Uncovering Her Wickedness” ’, p.69.

The Annihilation of Babylon According to Revelation 17:16,â€ Lectio difficilior, European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis 1 (2000): 1. 39 Ibid., 4. 40 Revelation 17:2 (NIV). 41 Revelation 17:6 (NIV). 42 Isaiah 1 (NIV); Revelation 17 (NIV). 43 Stichele, â€œJust a Whore.,â€ 5. 44 Gordon Campbell, â€œAntithetical Feminine-Urban Imagery and a Tale of Two Women-Cities in the Book of Revelation,â€ Tyndale Bulletin 55 (2004): 99. 45 Revelation 21:2 (NIV). 46 Revelation 21:2 (NIV). 6.