

## FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF APOCALYPTIC SYMBOLS IN REVELATION

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From the incipience of church history, John's Revelation has been mis/used hermeneutically and theologically, at times engendering sectarian movements and controversies, and at other times serving as a source of spiritual and moral renewal by offering hope to the persecuted church and new historical and prophetic significance to generations of Christians.<sup>1</sup> When reading the book of Revelation, for those who have the patience and/or inclination for an apocalyptic imagination, one cannot help but be gripped by its compelling message about an impending cataclysmic end of the world. Not only is the book full of extraordinary, enigmatic, and terrifying apocalyptic imageries, but also its tone is unmistakably urgent and time-conscious.

For contemporary readers, the book of Revelation seems to donate an added significance because history has traveled into a second millennial era, possessing power enough to implode the planet earth by weapons of mass destruction. As Tina Tippin writes, "Revelation, despite the marginalizing treatment given in lectionaries, proclamation, and theological writings, invites a fresh reading for each generation with an increasing intrigue about the eschatological doom. No matter

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<sup>1</sup>For a concise analysis of history of interpretations of Revelation, see Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993). Within evangelical circles, the core of hermeneutical and theological debate from Revelation has had to do with the millennial rule of Jesus Christ and the dualistic final destinies of creatures. Despite the differences that exist, however, evangelical interpretations of Revelation basically uphold the intrinsic connection between soteriology and eschatology by affirming the uniqueness and finality of divine revelation in Jesus Christ. For a comprehensive review of evangelical views of eschatology based on Revelation, see Millard Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999).

what the reader's critical bearing may be, the 'eschatological disaster is always at the tip of [our] consciousness.'"<sup>2</sup>

The hermeneutical legacy of Revelation, therefore, testifies to its inherent capacity to draw a wide circle of readership—popular or academic—and for contextual applications.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, John's enigmatic book houses an inordinate power to generate interpretations that unveil the capricious/unstable quality of times and personalities of its readership. Specifically, the contemporary feminist theologians put forward the most provocative interpretations that not only challenge the book's explicitly sexist language, but also unapologetically set forth their own feminist theological vision. Reading Revelation from the vantage point of a reader-response hermeneutical approach, feminist theologians insist that it contains patriarchal/androcentric symbols and agenda that must be identified and corrected before rendering meaningful interpretations. In other words, feminists have challenged the historic readings of Revelation by claiming and/or revealing that not only has this book been interpreted by the churchmen who had a misogynic agenda, but also that the book itself embodies an undeniably patriarchal force.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to briefly highlight the key hermeneutical presuppositions of representative feminist interpretations of the book of Revelation and their consequent renderings of the diverse meanings conveyed in and by John's apocalyptic symbols. This paper is written especially for the students of Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology whose exposure to non-evangelical readings of Revelation is minimal. The first section delineates the basic feminist hermeneutical presuppositions that govern how Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Susan Garrett, Mary Grey, Tina Pippin, and Mary Daly interpret the book of Revelation. The following section covers how the aforementioned feminist theologians apply their hermeneutical principles or presuppositions to read John's apocalyptic symbols. For spatial concerns, the commonly shared interpretations among the

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<sup>2</sup>Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 49.

<sup>3</sup>Wainwright's *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* also provides interesting historical renditions of the apocalyptic symbols used in Revelation.

aforementioned feminist theologians are not excluded in subsequent sections.<sup>4</sup>

### FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

As a biblical scholar, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza concurs with the historic church's theological assertion that the central theme of Revelation lies in the divine proclamation of the eschatological redemption and acknowledges the text's power to inspire the faithful community to live out the reality of the Kingdom of God in light of promise and hope.<sup>5</sup> As a feminist/liberationist theologian, however, Fiorenza, who identifies the central message of the Bible as being human liberation from oppressive institutions, critiques literal-historical interpretations of Revelation. Over against this method, she integrates historical-critical and literary-critical hermeneutical models to create a new literary-historical method that meets the theological and ethical criteria of the contemporary readership.<sup>6</sup>

Fiorenza regards the book of Revelation as a taxing text to interpret, especially from a feminist/liberationist perspective. But she endeavors to delineate the text's messages on two grounds. First, the cryptic codes and imageries in Revelation can be studied against the back drop of their Old Testament apocalyptic roots.<sup>7</sup> Revelation also manifests similarities to other apocalyptic narratives of John's time that shed light on John's apocalyptic language.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, Fiorenza argues that Revelation is best to be comprehended as "a poetic-rhetorical construction of an alternative symbolic universe that 'fits' its historical-

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<sup>4</sup>The scope of this paper also does not extend to an in-depth discussion of how the represented feminists classify the genre of Revelation.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Revelation to John," in "Hebrews-James-1 and 2 Peter-Jude-Revelation." Gerhard Krodel, ed. *Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 120.

<sup>6</sup>Jon Paulien, "Developments in the Study of Revelation," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 160. See also Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Fiorenza, "The Revelation to John," 99.

<sup>8</sup>Paulien, "Developments in the Study of Revelation," 160.

rhetorical situation.”<sup>9</sup> This means that readers of Revelation must first seek to “explore the poetic-evocative character of its language and symbols” and move toward a literary approach. They need to analyze the text’s political or ideological elements to gain a meaningful message. Furthermore, the reader should not only deconstruct the text’s oppressive language but also reconstruct it to retrieve a relevant liberating message.<sup>10</sup>

In her reading of the book of Revelation, therefore, she consciously seeks to reinterpret the given text’s use of eschatological symbols and imageries from the vantage point of the feminist/liberation hermeneutical interests.<sup>11</sup> According to Fiorenza, John, in keeping with the social convention of his time, uses misogynic language to personify evil and portrays evil as being gender specific.<sup>12</sup> For instance, women readers of Revelation face a dilemma because it depicts the images of both redemptive and oppressive cities in feminine language. Personification of idolatry as “whores” and reference to woman’s sexuality as that which “defiles” the divinely elected elite (144,000) create harmful, pejorative characterizations about women. Moreover, Revelation imposes an extremely dualistic/dehumanizing conceptualization of women either as “good or bad, pure or impure, heavenly or destructive, helpless or powerful, bride or temptress, [and] wife or whore.”<sup>13</sup>

Language, however, is not a self-contained, “‘straitjacket’ into which our thoughts must be forced.”<sup>14</sup> It is possible to deconstruct John’s language that reflects the social conventions of his time and subsequently reconstruct it to recover a meaning acceptable to the contemporary social progression. Misogynic symbols such as above can and must be deconstructed and reconceptualized into words that are not damaging to womanhood precisely because language, even in its

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<sup>9</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 183.

<sup>10</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 52.

<sup>11</sup>Carolyn Osiek, “The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), 103.

<sup>12</sup>Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 12-13.

<sup>13</sup>Idem., *Justice and Judgment*, 199. See also Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 130-31.

<sup>14</sup>Idem., *Vision of a Just World*, 14.

misogynic depiction, houses inherent power to transcend its own literal meaning.

For this reason, Fiorenza's critiques are primarily directed toward the Western patriarchal religious institutions that have misrepresented or abusively used Revelation's inherent textual power rather than the sexist language found in the given text.<sup>15</sup> Since liberating people who are oppressed and marginalized can only begin with a critical analysis and denouncement of patriarchy, eschatology must first address the task of overcoming and transforming "androcentric-patriarchal" establishments.<sup>16</sup> For Fiorenza, "a new vision of redeemed humanity" can only arrive as a result of experiencing a just societal conversion that would grant complete equality to everyone. Here, Fiorenza takes John's announcement about the arrival of a new social order and dominion on earth as a ground to advocate that eschatological redemption necessarily encompasses a political deliverance.<sup>17</sup> She cautions against spiritualized reading of Revelation that ignores the present human struggle for equality and justice.

#### Susan Garrett

Susan Garrett's approach to Revelation also falls in the spectrum of feminist/liberationist tradition.<sup>18</sup> She proposes that Revelation is a synthesis of a reflection upon a past persecution and martyrdom suffered during Nero's rule and John's vision of the imminent end of the world.<sup>19</sup> John conveys his eschatological messages with urgency in order to inspire a renewed devotion to God and repentance amidst prevailing temptations of defiance, apathy, apostasy, idolatry, and moral depravity because he believed that God's impending judgment was at hand.<sup>20</sup> Garrett maintains that Revelation, even today, delivers "a radical message for desperate times, but this radical message calls for

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," 103.

<sup>17</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 68.

<sup>18</sup>Consult Osiek's categorization, 101.

<sup>19</sup>Susan Garrett, "Revelation," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 378.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 378, 382.

radical critique” from the perspective of women.<sup>21</sup> To extract the core message from Revelation, Garrett insists that one must first uncover the cultural origins embedded in John’s metaphorical language and peel off the androcentric connotations in them.<sup>22</sup>

Garrett grants that sexual expressions such as “adultery” and “fornications” in Revelation refer to idolatry.<sup>23</sup> Her problem, however, is that John’s use of feminine imageries does not allow for envisioning a “full spectrum of authentic womanhood.”<sup>24</sup> While John captures the most meaningful symbols in the book of Revelation in feminine images (the New Jerusalem, Babylon, and a pregnant woman clothed with the sun), his references to women or feminine are unmistakably objectifying, condescending, and pejorative. His text reflects precisely the patriarchal climate of the early Christian era in which men sought to “control” women’s sexuality by their reductionistic and dualistic categorization of women as either “whores” or “virgins.” In this schematization of women, the virgin is the one who submits her sexuality to male domination and the whore is the one who rebels against the male authority.

As a result, in Revelation, the woman remains suspended in a dilemma in which neither of choices would grant her full humanity:

[S]he wants to identify with the good but . . . reluctant to do so because the images deny female self-determination; she hesitates to identify with the bad but may endorse the defiance of the ‘whores’ against those who would control or destroy them.<sup>25</sup>

For this reason, Garrett insists that Revelation is decidedly “dehumanizing,” “disturbing,” and “dangerous” for women readers,<sup>26</sup> and, therefore, calls the readers to “protest” against the violence and misogyny embedded in and invoked by John’s visions, “even while acknowledging the truth” of God’s coming judgment.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 382.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., The central message, according to Garrett, is relayed in the following themes: the worship of idols versus unwavering dedication to God; the people of Israel, ‘mother’ of the Messiah and the church; the sinfulness and idolatry of the Roman Empire versus the holy and heavenly New Jerusalem.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 378.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 377.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 382.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 377, 382.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 382.

Less optimistic than Fiorenza, Garrett concludes that John's copious use of misogynic language seriously undermines Revelation's redemptive message.<sup>28</sup>

#### Tina Pippin

Dissociating her work from the orthodox understanding of Revelation as a prophetic and apocalyptic text, Tina Pippin prefers to call the given text as John's Apocalypse. She classifies John's text as a fantasy literature that intends to subvert the political, economical, and religious powers of oppressive institutions and to offer a cathartic experience.<sup>29</sup> Even so, Pippin claims that John's narrative poses politically dangerous and unliberating implications for women because they are portrayed both as the object of hatred/destruction and desire/idealization.<sup>30</sup> She also believes that Revelation speaks from patriarchal-ideological perspectives and agenda.<sup>31</sup> In her analysis of Revelation, Pippin employs Marxist/Materialist approach.<sup>32</sup> She also relies heavily upon psychological and cathartic interpretative methods as a way of decoding the gender-symbols in the text.<sup>33</sup>

Pippin states that the purpose of a feminist hermeneutic is "to make explicit the abundance of male sexual fantasy in the sexual imagery,

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 377, 382.

<sup>29</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 19. See also Joanna Dewey, "Response: Fantasy and the New Testament," *Semeia* 60 (1992): 86. Pippin defines fantasy genre as being "particularly helpful in uncovering the codes of a text--of gender, ideology, anthropology, utopia, etc.--because fantasy arises in tension with belief." Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 60 (1992): 67.

<sup>30</sup>Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 60 (1992): 67, 77.

<sup>31</sup>Pippin, "Eros and the End: Reading for Gender in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 200.

<sup>32</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 58. Marxist reading of the Bible presupposes that "full equality can be achieved only by the full integration of labor and ownership." A fundamental transformation of human society must occur so that women would not be forced to perform domestic functions such as reproduction and nurturing children. See Osiek, *Feminist Perspective*, 94-95. See also Vernon K. Robbins, "A Male Reads a Feminist Reading: The Dialogical Nature of Pippin's Power," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 211-12. Robbins delineates in detail dynamics of Pippin's hermeneutic.

<sup>33</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 17-21; Dewey, "Fantasy and the New Testament," 86.

seduction, and erotic tension of the narrative”<sup>34</sup> and reinterpret Revelation’s gender archetypes to answer the question “Who is the female and what are her powers and plays in the Apocalypse?”<sup>35</sup> Naturally, the historical contexts or the authorial intention are not Pippin’s major concerns in studying the Apocalypse.<sup>36</sup>

Also, because Pippin regards Revelation as fantasy literature in which reality and supernatural (“fictive world of text”) are schematically connected, she tries to “identif[y] both with the heroes of the narrative and with the fantastic representation of the social order.”<sup>37</sup> From this analysis, she deduces that John’s Apocalypse is “a phallogocentric text that exploits . . . female images as part of male desire” and that the text as a whole envisages society that has no redeeming quality for women. Pippin, therefore, concludes that Revelation is a thoroughly androcentric text that fosters religious exclusivism and that advocates the perpetuation of patriarchy even in its vision of a new social order.<sup>38</sup>

#### Mary Grey

In her brief interpretation of Revelation, Mary Grey combines mythological, allegorical, and sublimationist hermeneutical methods to propose that Revelation is not so much “the unveiling” of eternal truths issued from the transcendent realm as it is “the *Offenbarung*, the opening of the ears, that demonstrates how God relates to us through all the organic connectedness of creation. Revelation in this way opens up its readers “to all the creative possibilities of a future for our planet.”<sup>39</sup> As Carolyn Osiek comments, Grey’s sublimationist approach is a brand of “romantic feminism” that investigates how “the otherness of the feminine” is “manifested especially in feminine imagery and

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<sup>34</sup>Dewey, “Fantasy and the New Testament,” 87.

<sup>35</sup>Pippin, “Fantasy and Female,” 68.

<sup>36</sup>Idem., *Death and Desire*, 16.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 56. See also Jane Schlaberg, “Response to Pippin, ‘Eros and the End,’” *Semeia* 59 (1992): 219-21.

<sup>39</sup>Mary Grey, *Wisdom of the Fools?: Seeking Revelation for Today* (London: SPCK, 1993), 141-2.



symbolism in human culture” and seeks to understand the self and the world from the clues derived from them.<sup>40</sup>

### Mary Daly

As a feminist philosopher who espouses the most radical form of separatist hermeneutic against traditional Christian theology, Mary Daly interprets Revelation as a text that women must completely denounce.<sup>41</sup> She not only unapologetically condemns the patriarchal expressions found in the Bible and the Christian traditions but also rejects the entire biblical redemptive scheme/narrative and anyone who concurs with its veracity. For Daly, there is absolutely nothing redemptive about the Judeo-Christian faith for women. Daly’s alternative ideal future, therefore, cannot be drawn from what is contained in John’s Revelation. Her apocalyptic vision consists of a feminine sectarian society characterized by an “extreme apocalyptic finalism, rigid and unbending,” wherein will be an unceasing worship of “a hypothetical prehistoric past of idyllic goddess” in complete absence of evil. Here, evil is supremely embodied and identified with male/maleness, which in Daly’s projection will be eschatologically overcome by good (female).<sup>42</sup>

Returning to Daly’s thoughts on John’s Revelation, her exposition on the book’s function and purpose is shaped by essentially three hermeneutical presuppositions. First, Daly assumes that the power of myth lies in its “self-fulfilling prophecy.”<sup>43</sup> Her second hermeneutical presupposition decisively identifies violence/war with patriarchy. She writes, “Patriarchy is the State of War,” and “the civilized governments are run . . . by terrorists.”<sup>44</sup> Thirdly, she claims that the book of Revelation has historically functioned as “the blue-print” of destruction

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<sup>40</sup>Osiek, *Feminist Perspectives*, 101-2.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 98-99. Osiek astutely perceives that Mary Daly’s system ultimately “leads to a new dualism, in which maleness symbolizes evil and femaleness good, a reversal of the ancient Platonic . . . hierarchy.” 98.

<sup>43</sup>Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 102-4.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 103-104.

that men in political power have “faithfully” followed because they themselves were “possessed” by its “patriarchal myth.”<sup>45</sup>

Taking the aforementioned presuppositions, Daly argues that the book of Revelation is the primary source that originated and perpetuated the Christian “myth” about the end of the world, apocalypse. And patriarchal society, which is forever preoccupied with violence, took its misguided apocalyptic fantasy and envisioned and propagated an impending, calamitous end of the world, which in history has served as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” that releases its destructive forces.<sup>46</sup> She cites the escalation of wars and nuclear threat as the devastating evidences of the rule of the patriarchal God and eschatology of the Christian faith. Daly, therefore, warns that the book of Revelation has an implicitly fatalistic power to render a complete annihilation of the world. It is a devastating myth (inspired by a deadly divine being and penned by misogynist author) that operates as the driving force behind this violence crazed world.

Furthermore, the modern technological advancement exacerbates the apocalyptic myth/reality “beyond mere passive expectation to active enactment of the envisioned horror show.”<sup>47</sup> It fuels “Christian” apocalyptic expectation and arouses some Christians to declare a doomsday against the world as if God in His anger was speedily moving the history of the world to its ultimate cataclysm.<sup>48</sup> Christian myth inevitably becomes coalesced with another patriarchal religion called technology and thrusts the creation toward abysmal oblivion. Hence, Daly claims that there is no eschatology in John’s Apocalypse because his story in reality has produced no redemptive quality/power. She concludes that Revelation merely echoes her theological affirmation that the “point of Patriarchal Religion *is* Point Zero.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 103. She cites Jerry Falwell as an example.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid. “Technologists from Christian culture have led the way in acting out the Apocalyptic myth, making the magic mushroom cloud, fathering bodies/families follow automatically in the atomic death performing the last rites. Typically, the justification for the atomic bomb in the 1940s was ‘to end the war.’ Translated, this means: To end the world.”

APOCALYPTIC SYMBOLS CRITIQUED FROM  
FEMINIST/SEXIST PERSPECTIVES

Jezebel (2:20-23)<sup>50</sup>

According to Susan Garrett, “Jezebel” is the only female figure which is not metaphorical or symbolic in its representation.<sup>51</sup> Her identity is not revealed to the readers, for the name “Jezebel” is a fictitious name taken from the deplorable Jezebel in 1 Kings.<sup>52</sup> John purposely attributed that name in order to discredit her prophetic role in the Christian community because her prominence threatened John’s authority and leadership.<sup>53</sup> To this Pippin adds that John’s failure to use the real name for “Jezebel” signifies that the women in the Apocalypse are stripped from identifying themselves and are silenced.<sup>54</sup>

Although the general thrust of Garrett’s interpretation is in agreement with the feminist scholarship delineated in this paper, Fiorenza offers a critical insight in her discussion of John’s role. She maintains that John consistently presents himself as the servant of Christ (*doulos*) rather than as a prophet, thus placing himself on the same level with his audience: “John did not claim exceptional personal status and authority.”<sup>55</sup> It makes it unlikely; therefore, that John would discredit Jezebel unfairly in order to consolidate power for himself.

The Pregnant Woman (12:1-6; 13-17)

It is interesting to observe the various captions attributed to the woman in Rev. 12 in order to befit it to the hermeneutical agendum of each reader. For Garrett, she is “the woman clothed with the sun.”<sup>56</sup> This woman personifies the people of Israel, out of who was born

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<sup>50</sup>Fiorenza does not specifically discuss gender implications in this passage or in any other passages included in this section. See Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 56, 88, 96, 98, and etc.

<sup>51</sup>Garrett, “Revelation,” 382.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 378.

<sup>53</sup>Yarbro Collins also agrees that John’s motive was jealousy or envy, “Women History and the Book of Revelation,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers*, vol. 26, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>54</sup>Pippin, “Fantasy and Female,” 77.

<sup>55</sup>Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 196.

<sup>56</sup>Garrett, “Revelation,” 379.

Messiah, and the Christian church, and is fashioned from Egyptian and Greek goddess myths. The message is that the true believers must persevere in their faith, for they will be vindicated by God soon enough.

For Mary Grey, on the other hand, the woman in chapter 12 is referred to as “the woman in the wilderness” in order to underscore her abandonment, exile.<sup>57</sup> Grey rejects a christological reading of Rev. 12 because to accept it would mean submitting to patriarchal/violent interpretation: “As long as we read the text of Revelation 12 with the eyes of Logos, the woman will remain in the wilderness, separate from her child, who is being groomed . . . for military conflict.”<sup>58</sup> The child figure is created to represent patriarchal war/battle motif. Grey therefore focuses on the woman who is abandoned after her child is taken up to heaven and inquires who she is.

For Grey, this woman is most emphatically not the exalted Mary, the representative figure for the Church, or the Eternal Woman. Rather, she symbolizes the poignant revelation of the wisdom of God in female image (“an epiphany of Sophia”). She is identified with “the revelation of the victimization of the female” under patriarchal domination and functions as the archetype of the displaced/oppressed people, particularly women:

Her exile is our exile. Her marginalization . . . is that of the many groups excluded from society. She represents the Exodus of the woman - like Hagar - to the desert: vulnerable, pregnant, with creative vitalizing energies which society rejects.<sup>59</sup>

Secondly, Rev. 12 further exemplifies the dualism (between good and evil and heaven and earth) deeply rooted in the book of Revelation. In the pregnant woman’s forsakenness, the invitation of rescue and consolation comes from the nature which provides her place to rest, “swallows up” her pursuer, and rescues her baby (eagle’s wings).<sup>60</sup> Henceforth, she is “an epiphany of the connectedness of creation.”

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<sup>57</sup>Grey draws her interpretation from Catherine Keller, “Die Frau in der Wüste: ein feministisch-theologischer Midrasch zu Offb 12,” in *Evangelische Theologie* 50, no. 5 (1990): 414-32.

<sup>58</sup>Grey, *Seeking Revelation*, 141.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 142.

Unfortunately, Grey laments, the enmity between nature (animals) and human still persists, for she is the enemy of the dragon.

Thirdly, as the one who is intimately connected with creation and gives life through a birthing metaphor, the woman in Rev. 12 personifies hope for “the wounded earth.” She offers this worldly-utopia “as the ethical priority here-and-now.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, this divine Sophia also suffers as Christ suffered in innocence in order to give birth to the new creation. Even though she is clothed in the divine splendor (sun), she is still not disconnected from the earthly reality. As such, she presents hope for the disenfranchised, for “as epiphany of prophetic-mystic community” she conveys that the exile in the wilderness will eventually be over.<sup>62</sup>

Pippin, like Grey, focuses on the flight of the woman instead of the messianic child born.<sup>63</sup> The woman in Rev. 12 is the archetype of heroine who does not receive deserved attention. She gives birth to the messianic child in desert but the child is “immediately snatched” away from her by God: “The Woman Clothed with the Sun is a goddess subdued, tamed, and under control.”<sup>64</sup>

According to John J. Pilch, the focal point of this passage is not on the child who has been taken up to heaven but the woman “who is still exposed to the dragon’s hatred.”<sup>65</sup> The child is Christ and the mother is a collective symbol representing the Christian community on earth who is facing persecution from the evil power.<sup>66</sup> Fiorenza, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the child because the rhetoric of language unmistakably points to the child being Christ who is to consummate his victory over Satan once and for all.<sup>67</sup>

#### The 144,000 Male Virgins (14:1-5)

For Garrett the image of the 144,000 is derived from the ritual purification that the Israelite men went through before they were

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Jane Schlaberg, “Response to Tina Pippin,” in *Semeia* 59 (1992): 220.

<sup>64</sup>Pippin, “Fantasy and Female,” 72.

<sup>65</sup>John J. Pilch, *What Are They Saying about the Book of Revelation?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 80.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 78-81.

<sup>67</sup>Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 82.

assembled to fight battles.<sup>68</sup> They are an elite group of the saved who not only refrained from sexual engagement but also who “did not defile themselves with women.” Fiorenza also understands this sexual language as metaphorical. Based on the Bible’s portrayal of idolatry in terms of sexual relations, she translates the 144,000 as those who have not committed idolatry.<sup>69</sup>

The absence of women from the 144,000 connotes for Pippin a complete exclusion of women from the elect.<sup>70</sup> In Revelation, John’s language of female subjugation and “displacement” stems from the unconscious. The driving force behind John’s 144,000 virgin males—which not only excludes women but also any male who had “defiled themselves with women”—expressed the patriarchal need to dominate women. Also, there is “erotic tension” at this juncture precisely because those virgin males will enter into the Bride, the female from whom they once distanced themselves.<sup>71</sup> Joanna Dewey, however, contradicts Pippin by claiming that a wholistic reading of the New Testament (Revelation included) does not exclude women from God’s eschatological Kingdom.<sup>72</sup>

### The Whore of the Babylon

Although Garrett concurs with evangelical scholarship that Babylon and her harlotry symbolize the prevalence of idolatry, violence, and excessive wealth in Rome; still, she voices her objection that the metaphorical use of Babylon presents a problem from a feminist perspective: “The author’s exultation over the mutilation, burning, and eating of a woman—even a figurative one—tragically implies that women are sometimes deserving of such violence.”<sup>73</sup>

For Pippin, the cathartic force released upon the death of Babylon as a symbol of overcoming imperialism/materialism is not enough to be advocated by women readers,<sup>74</sup> for the point of Babylon is that a

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<sup>68</sup>Garrett, “Revelation,” 380.

<sup>69</sup>Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 87-89.

<sup>70</sup>Pippin, “Fantasy and Female,” 68.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>72</sup>Dewey, “Fantasy and the New Testament,” 87.

<sup>73</sup>Garrett, “Revelation,” 381.

<sup>74</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 59. There is an inherent ambiguity in the Babylon image for she is both the object of desire and splendor as well as hateful.

“woman [archetyped as a whore] bears the violent death.”<sup>75</sup> The gruesome destruction of Babylon means that “the Christian utopia is itself an oppressive world (for women).” The Apocalypse, therefore, is emphatically not a viable option for women, for its misogynic content is unredeemable.<sup>76</sup>

For Mary Daly, the true evil is personified by “the true believers of the Book of Revelation [who] live their faith, the faith of the Fathers.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, Christians, as they live “righteously” according to their “self-destructive myth,” become participants “in stripping, eating, and burning of the ‘famous prostitute,’ the whore hated by god and by the kings (leaders) he has inspired.”<sup>78</sup> The harlot is fiercely hated and punished because she represents what cannot be controlled by patriarchy and its god. Babylon, therefore, is a symbol of a scapegoat, a victim. She describes a Christian-historical tendency to blame woman since the story of Eve’s alleged disobedience.<sup>79</sup> Daly further argues that the ultimate “Holy War” is not what is described in Revelation but is “the wrenching free of female energy which has been captured and forced into prostitution by patriarchy.”<sup>80</sup> It is breaking free from the entrapment of the patriarchal myth and its impact.

#### The New Jerusalem (19:7; 21:1-22:5; 22:17)

Garrett proposes that John’s use of the bride analogy is deliberately done as a contrast to the prostitute imagery.<sup>81</sup> Indicative of patriarchal influence, the picture of bride conveys the exaltation attributed to “the strict management of women’s sexuality,” in which virginity is associated with the ideal.<sup>82</sup> Pippin’s interpretation is even more

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>76</sup>Idem., “‘Fantasy and Female,’” 78. See also, “And I will Strike Her Children Dead’: Death and the Deconstruction of Social Location,” in *Reading from This Place*, Vol. 1, ed. Fernandon F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 191-198. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 191-192. For additional work done by Pippin, see her discourse on *thanatos/eros*.

<sup>77</sup>Daly, *Radical Feminism*, 104.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Garrett, 382.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

detached from the historical/literal sense. She fancies that the bride symbol—standing in opposition to the diabolical destiny of Babylon—functions to heighten the erotic tension never fully resolved in the text by transferring that desire to “the virgin-bride-mother figure.”

### CONCLUSIONS

The preceding gender conscious interpretations of Revelation show that language/text inherently embodies political power that shapes the world in which we live. Also, psychological interpretations are helpful in assessing the complex/dynamic emotions evoked by the readers of Revelation. When one takes Revelation as a unified text, however, it is difficult to overlook the coming of a radical cosmic redemption that has both physical and spiritual dimensions.<sup>83</sup> The most fundamental dimension of the New Testament understanding of power has to do with its spiritual dimension.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, to interpret John’s metaphors/symbols only as sexist text would be to miss the most crucial message of his book. As Fiorenza denotes, it is possible to read Revelation without taking its references to feminine imageries literally.

For example, the prostitute in chapter 12 symbolizes cities who surrender themselves to idolatry, thus it does not connote specifically female.<sup>85</sup> John’s use of feminine imagery in chapters 19 and 21 actually places all readers “in the role of the woman!”<sup>86</sup> Also, John’s mention of Jezebel as a prominent prophetess indicates that he and his community recognized women’s leadership, for he repudiates her teaching and practice, not her gender.

Another example comes from Grey’s interpretation of the woman in the wilderness. Grey’s ethical emphasis in interpreting the woman in the wilderness—she embodies our responsibility to stand in solidarity with suffering and displaced people—is insightful. But Grey suspends the eschatological/salvific significance of the pregnant woman and her child taken to heaven. Also, her extremely allegorical interpretation

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>84</sup>Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 103.

<sup>85</sup>Ramsey S. Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 138.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 139.



discloses more about her subjective and socio-pragmatic motivation than the text's essential, canonically congruent message.

Additionally, in her treatment of the pregnant woman in chapter 12, Pippin takes too literally the symbolic figures such as "the Whore" and "144,000 men" and fails to ascertain critically their redemptive theological significance. And Grey allegorizes the woman in Rev. 12 in such a way that she becomes the main figure in the book. Regarding the imagery of "the Babylon," Pippin does not entertain the more obvious possibility (from the Old Testament theme of God's hatred of idolatry) that the violence with which she is killed symbolically reveals God's intense antipathy toward idolatry and injustice.

Against such con/textually ungrounded interpretations, Fiorenza astutely states that the "ethical thrust of the author [John] prevents the reader of that time, as well as us, from projecting 'evil' only unto others, but not to hold ourselves accountable."<sup>87</sup> Revelation calls its readers to anticipate a complete destruction of all the forces that rebel against God and exploits humans in the final consummation of creation. The condition for participating in the eschatological consummation prescribed in Revelation, however, cannot be defined by sexism of any sort. For this text resoundingly proclaims a genuine need for repentance from all people precisely because "evil" is not a thing but a corrupting power operating even within the believer's communities in Asia.

In final analysis, Pippin, Grey, and Daly's expositions of Revelation demonstrate that the task of interpreting a text is essentially self-involving; the textuality of a text is not only self-disclosive but also embodies a power to expose the reader's own agenda and to inspire new ideals. Pippin, Grey, and Daly treat the last book of the New Testament merely as one of many random apocalyptic books from the first and second century, highly androcentric and violent in content. They categorically dismiss the book's indigenous historical context, overarching theological and content and purpose, prophetic proclamations, and canonical significance and status. Also, by taking Revelation's pejorative feminine symbols and violent expressions strictly in physical and literal sense, they eschew John's theme of a fundamentally new cosmic redemption and consummation.

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<sup>87</sup>Fiorenza, "The Revelation to John," 108.

They, then, contrive their own hermeneutical schemas to interpret Revelation and reinforce their preconceived feminist/sexist interests to the book. As a result, the meanings they attribute to these symbols are far removed from the text's indigenous reality and contexts. At the expense of contextualizing the text's message to the contemporary readership (reader-response) to distill relevant messages, they have taken John's apocalyptic symbols out of their own con/textual environment. They are critical of the patriarchy but not of their own presuppositions concerning the authorial intention, textual structure, grammar and syntax, and the content of Revelation.

Therefore, although it is enlightening to give proper attention to different hermeneutical presuppositions that shed light to the expansive and profound meanings contained in the book of Revelation; nevertheless, existential perspectives, no matter how relevant to present reality, cannot be the ultimate window through which to peer at the reality prescribed in and by the text. The interpretation of Revelation must come from the clearly expressed theological/soteriological themes and contexts of the Bible, not mainly from tangential or culture specific prescriptions and elements. Furthermore, Daly, Pippin, and Grey's renditions of Revelation testify that extreme reader-response hermeneutical methods lack integrity necessary to produce a cohesive analysis of the given text.

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