

# An Apocalyptic Womb? The Great Harlot of Revelation 17-18

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## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

The depiction of the literary figure of the Great Harlot in Revelation 17 and 18 is a poignant expression of the wider New Testament apocalyptic concern with God's power over humanity and creation. The depiction portrays what is deemed requisite social control through and over women's bodies, and in a particularly poignant way, in that of the Great Harlot. This essay explores how a neglected element, namely the Harlot's womb is tenuously present and, alongside divine power, is eschatologically positioned and apocalyptically framed in Revelation 17-18, while exploring its intersections with the violence generated within a gendered context and through the posturing of authoritarian political and social regimes.

## KEYWORDS

Revelation; apocalypticism; Great Harlot; womb; embodiment

## Introduction: Apocalypticism, Women, and Wombs

Scholars may not agree about much when it comes to apocalyptic matters in general, and still less about apocalypticism in particular, but the strangeness of apocalyptic scenarios hardly require agreement for it to be recognised and acknowledged as such. The strangeness extends to themes and characters, and settings and events in themselves, but also to strangeness in portrayal, of which the prominent prostitute of Revelation 17-18, the so-called "Great Whore or Harlot," is a good example.<sup>1</sup> More than apocalyptic oddity, a deep-seated understanding of the otherness of women that characterised ancient medical texts in particular,<sup>2</sup> also informs various images and frameworks that are

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<sup>1</sup> The term πόρνη was customarily translated with "whore" or "harlot" or "prostitute," but these terms are contested for being pejorative and failing to account for the nature of the profession. The use of "sex-worker" has become more common, but is seen by some to regularise and sanction that which should be considered unacceptable. For the ancient context, the term "prostitute" may be more appropriate, given the status and roles of those who were involved. I will use these terms interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Véronique Dasen and Sandrine Ducaté-Paarman, "Hysteria and metaphors of the uterus in Classical Antiquity," in *Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneu-*

operative in the New Testament (NT) in general and in Revelation in particular. The image of the Great Harlot in its apocalyptic framework is part of the historicising of gender and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Together with the Thyatiran Jezebel (Rev 2:18-29), the “Woman clothed with the sun” (Rev 12:1-17), the “Bride” or “Heavenly Jerusalem” (Rev 19, 21-22), and a range of other gendered and sexual aspects in this document, the Great Harlot forms part of Revelation’s female, sexualised, and violent rhetoric – her portrayal and (often) unacknowledged reproductive powers in Revelation is the focus of this contribution.<sup>4</sup>

The Great Whore in Revelation is part of a violent setting. The NT does not shy away from violence, and more than presenting a picture of only Jesus and his associates’ suffering violence, the NT in fact portrays a broader range of agency – not unexpectedly so, given the imperialist context.<sup>5</sup> Agents of violence appear in many manifestations and formats, but in Revelation’s apocalyptic thought, violence takes on a particularly forceful form that presupposed and depended on regime change. Moreover, violence and worldview connected in “sexualised violence,”<sup>6</sup> while references to the body and sex(uality) in the NT functioned in the tension between culture versus ritual or norm, often impacting in gruesome ways on (the portrayal of) women.<sup>7</sup> Apocalyptic tone, typically poised towards the destruction of current imperialist regimes, also contemplates the emergence of a new reality, of new life.<sup>8</sup> In the apocalyptic

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*tics of Reading Ancient Art*, ed. Silvia Schroer, *Orbis biblicus et orientalis* 220 (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2006), 239.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin P. Murphy and Jennifer M. Spear, *Historicising Gender and Sexuality*, *Gender and History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Various similarities as well as differences exist between these women, also with regard to the (explicit) portrayal of their wombs, but space does not allow for this discussion.

<sup>5</sup> A taxonomy of possible engagements with Empire is listed by Carter as follows: survival, accommodation, protest, dissent, and imitation. Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 14-26.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* 13 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 17-32.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Punt, “Violence in the New Testament, and the Roman Empire: Ambivalence, Othering, Agency,” in *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Pieter G.R. de Villiers and Jan W. van Henten, *STAR* 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 23-39.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to deny the constructive purposes of apocalyptic, of the constructive use to which it can be put, see e.g. the essays in Cathy Gutierrez and Hillel Schwartz (eds.), *The End That Does: Art, Science, and Millennial Accomplishment*, *Millennialism and Society* 3 (London: Equinox, 2006).

ambivalence of and connection between destruction and new creation, of new life generated through violence and pain, and when apocalyptic language is replete with bodily and sexualised terms, the womb's life-giving presence such as in Revelation 18 may be subdued, but is not absent. Amidst the avalanche of violent, apocalyptic imagery – which may have resulted from an interpretive tradition as much as text itself – the aim here is to carefully pick up on notions of body, gender and sex, and the womb in particular.

To some extent, the violence of the apocalyptic setting and the gendered images of Revelation converge in the womb, which is typically neglected in interpretation. Notwithstanding strangeness, Revelation uses fleshy, bodily images in its concern for new beginnings. Although not explicitly mentioned in Revelation 17 and 18, the womb lurks in the background, as the origin of new life and beyond its biological role, its metaphorical alignment with new beginnings – which this contribution aims to foreground. For the ancients, the womb was not without a cause, and did not exist simply in and of itself; rather, the womb was defined in terms of its productivity and functionality. This article, then, intends to show how the life-producing womb exacted a cost in birth pains (e.g. Rev 12:2)<sup>9</sup> and that the multi-penetrated body of the Great Harlot gained particular apocalyptic significance through her womb, even though its presence goes largely unmentioned. To understand the womb's apocalyptic significance in Revelation 17 and 18, we first have to consider this book's focus and its violent, gendered imagery in which the womb is embedded.

## Apocalypse and Women in Antiquity

In the history of its interpretation, the genre of Revelation has often come up for discussion and contention.<sup>10</sup> This is hardly surprising, since by the

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<sup>9</sup> Such notions probably derive from the HB/OT, refurbished in support of an apocalyptic vision. These negative – and in ancient times considerably more life-threatening experiences – birth pains of the womb rendered good, new, or positive consequences. In the long run, a suffering self-discourse would develop in early Christianity; see e.g. Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995). Revelation's portrayal of the destruction of a city through the metaphor of an unfaithful woman finds roots in the Jewish tradition. The unfaithful woman, a proxy for the disloyal city, is destroyed in the HB/OT in Ezekiel 16 and 23, Nahum 3, and Isaiah 23. In Isaiah 21, Jeremiah 51, and Isaiah 47, Babylon is also a woman, a queen, punished by being stripped naked (Isa 47:3; cf. Ezek 16:39, 23:10, 29; Nah 3:6).

<sup>10</sup> Valuable contextual studies on apocalyptic texts and contexts include Adela Y. Collins, "Apocalypticism and New Testament Theology," in *The Nature of New Testament*

time Revelation was written, the apocalyptic genre did not exist in the sense that conventions for it were not yet formulated.<sup>11</sup> Recently, scholars have begun to place more emphasis on the hybrid and intertextual nature of Revelation as literature. Many of the intertextual forms are associated with either apocalyptic or prophetic writings or wisdom discourse, which resulted in a document that differed from other, contemporary apocalypses.<sup>12</sup> More than literary characteristics, making sense of the genre of apocalyptic writing means to get to grips with the

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*Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 31-50; David Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983); Roland E. Murphy, "Reflections on 'Actualization' of the Bible," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26, no.2 (1996): 79-81; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982); Christopher Rowland, "Apocalypticism," in *The Biblical World*, Vol. 1, ed. John Barton (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 129-48, to name a few.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory L. Linton, "Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 32. Terminology-wise, for the distinction between "apocalypse" as literary type, "apocalyptic" as a worldview, and "apocalypticism" as a social movement, cf. David L. Barr, "Beyond Genre: The Expectations of Apocalypse," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 84. Regarding genre, it should in any case be remembered that it is a constructed, some would say imposed, framework that scholars find useful for classification purposes, so that textual genres are pigeons rather than pigeonholes to use the terminology of Carol A. Newsom, "Pairing Research Questions and Theories of Genre: A Case Study of the Hodayot," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 17, no.3 (2010): 270-88.

<sup>12</sup> David E. Aune ("Apocalypse Renewed: An Intertextual Reading of the Apocalypse of John," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 39 [Leiden: Brill, 2006], 70) goes further, suggesting that the specific nature of Revelation's genre was intentional: "By placing apocalyptic traditions within a prophetic framework (Rev 1-3 and 22:6-20), and by juxtaposing apocalyptic with prophetic elements throughout the entire composition, the author appears to have attempted to give a new lease on life to apocalyptic traditions that could not and did not long retain their vitality in early Christianity because of their indissoluble association with nationalistic myths connected with the royal ideology of ancient Israel." The distinction between prophecy and apocalypticism is situated in the fact that "prophecy does not rigidly distinguish between the righteous and the wicked," while "[a]pocalypticism...(i.e. the religious ideology within the context of which apocalypses were written) is a perspective generally thought to have been espoused by an oppressed minority that clearly distinguished the righteous from the wicked and anticipated an eschatological denouement, in which they would be rewarded and the wicked punished" (Aune, "Apocalypse Renewed," 70). Barr, "Beyond Genre," 87, reminds us that prophecy then as much as now, was not primarily about the future.

social context of the performance of an apocalypse for the earliest audiences:<sup>13</sup> “Hearing the Apocalypse as apocalypse transforms it from a materialistic and unbelievable schema for the future into a serious reflection on how to live in a world of oppression and domination.”<sup>14</sup> These characteristics feed into the divergent opinions found among its interpreters, since the text requires them to make decisions about which conventions to profile, inviting them to participate in meaning-making.<sup>15</sup>

Like other apocalypses, Revelation primarily addresses its contemporary situation, although its many strange, horrific elements depend on the power of the prophetic vision of future events. The horror fantasy of the text creates a new realm, where the impossible such as the destruction of Empire and other worldly evils, becomes a reality. The lucid portrayals of the monstrous beings and their destruction, situate and exemplify current fears and oppressions. “The invisible supernatural forces and spirits are visible in Revelation. Everything that is alien is invited to this horror show.”<sup>16</sup> Revelation exhibits elements of anti-imperial resistance, wherein the faithful’s sufferings and deaths hasten the end along, that is, the eschatological battle where God conclusively resumes control.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The literary context of Revelation reaches back not only to prophetic and apocalyptic elements, but also to the wisdom traditions of the HB/OT and Second Temple Judaism. See also Michelle Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore: Reading Babylon’s Body in Revelation 17,” in *The Body in Biblical, Christian and Jewish Texts*, ed. Joan E. Taylor, Library of Second Temple Studies 85 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 148-51, for a brief discussion of scholarly positions on possible HB/OT precursor texts of themes for the Great Harlot.

<sup>14</sup> Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 89. Exactly how this explanation sits with Barr’s earlier comment, “I disagree with the notion that apocalypses are responses to oppression,” is not altogether clear (Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 76).

<sup>15</sup> Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse,” 24, puts it this way: “[A] greater degree of intertextuality and intergenericity opens a text to multiple interpretations. Its meaning and relevance appear inexhaustible.” See also Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse,” 9-41.

<sup>16</sup> Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999), 79. For Pippin, the comparison makes sense because the unexpected happens in horror, with the dead returning to life, supernatural acts taking place in different existential spheres, and evil abounds – amidst human fear. “This supernatural spectacle captures the imagination; the horror of the Apocalypse creeps in, for the end of the world is the ultimate horror. The Apocalypse is less like the shower scene in *Psycho* than the all-out killing in the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but there are elements of both these forms of subtle and big screen gross-out horrors in the text” (Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, 82-3).

<sup>17</sup> Collins argues that for Revelation, martyrdom forms part of the eschatological process. Although Revelation did not promote violent resistance, this book reminds of the Zealots in its beliefs that the faithful should be ready to die for the cause, that Roman

Using holy war traditions to make sense of its first readers' situation, it promotes non-violent resistance while anticipating the heavenly forces' victory over their enemies.<sup>18</sup> The contemporary threat is framed from a marginalised perspective, to protect and maintain the purity of God's righteous people. In all of this, the symbol for the threat is the uncontrolled woman, identified in Revelation as the Great Harlot alongside Jezebel.<sup>19</sup> In images with subtle uterine connotation, they are bad mothers of demonic offspring, active in public, not passive and enclosed, deceitful, and penetrable, not loyal and pristine.<sup>20</sup> Our focus here, however, remains on the Great Harlot.

The image of the Great Harlot forms part of the (re)mapping of the world regarding Empire, as well as gender and sex.<sup>21</sup> Conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphor is more than comparison and actually creates meaning.<sup>22</sup> Metaphors put one reality next to another, to contribute to understanding and experiencing the world anew across different dimensions. Israelite and Roman cultic and political discourse applied female symbolism to victory and peace as well as to domination and defeat, and it functioned as an index of moral and social health.<sup>23</sup> These

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rule was incompatible with the rule of God, and that protest against Romans included rejection of images (Adela Y. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, Vol. 50 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 217.

<sup>18</sup> Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology*, 198-217.

<sup>19</sup> Fletcher "Flesh for Franken-Whore," 155 cautions against equating the roles of these two women, since Jezebel is described as actively leading the faithful astray (Rev 2:20), while the Great Harlot is the abused prostitute, used and abused by the wealthy and royals (Rev 17:2). See also below.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, "Gender and Empire," 17-32.

<sup>21</sup> The boundaries of the new covenant group in Revelation 21 and 22 are drawn according to explicit gendered angles: "The boundary of the redeemed sets up a system of opposites expressed as insider and outsider, Christian and non-Christian, and fornicators and virgins. There is no room for dissent and no place for women's power and women's voices" (Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992], 55-6.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies 475 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1-9. In a mediating position among feminist interpreters, Huber acknowledges Revelation's "patriarchal paradigms," but calls upon readers to make sense of these metaphors' function in Revelation and for its readers (Huber, *Thinking and Seeing*, 44-55).

<sup>23</sup> Huber, *Thinking and Seeing*, 45, 48. The much-debated topic of sacred prostitution or cultic prostitution shows up fault lines of another kind. Early accounts, such as the Babylonian customs that the fifth-century Greek historian, Herodotus (*Histories* I.199) mentions that the overabundance of sacred prostitutes in ancient Acrocorinth forms part of a broader discourse of sacred or cultic prostitution in the ancient texts as well as

connections are apparent when metaphor relates woman to city (Babylon or Jerusalem), both dimensions of which construct the concept. A woman's garments signal moral integrity or corruption, and Rome characterised as a dressed-up whore, increases hostility against Rome and contests Roman gender and family norms.<sup>24</sup> Since "[i]n classical antiquity you were what you wore,"<sup>25</sup> the scripting of the Great Whore in an imperial garb serves to associate Empire with prostitution, but also emphasises what Empire was up to. Empire's portrayal, and its demise, through the attractive yet despised prostitute is, however, only part of the story.

In the construction of its anti-imperial, apocalyptic visions, Revelation strategically resorted to contemporary, stereotyped, and gender-biased tropes. Female imagery served a rhetorical purpose and was aimed at influencing the audience's understanding of the world and their perceived proper way of living in the world, and constructing and securing the identity of Jesus' followers as masculine.<sup>26</sup> Through postcolonial analysis and given the imperial context, Jean Kim offers "the possibility that the metaphorical figure, "the whore," in Revelation 17 might have had some-

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in modern discourse. A growing group of scholars not only challenge the very notion of sacred or cultic prostitution, but also question the use of the bodies of women in such myth-making (cf. Mary Beard and John Henderson, "With this Body I Thee Worship: Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity," in *Gender and Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maria Wyke [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998], 56-79). More broadly, by the time of Revelation, the tradition to associate cities with women was well established.

<sup>24</sup> Huber, *Thinking and Seeing*, 73; cf. Lynn R. Huber, "Gazing at the Whore: Reading Revelation Queerly," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, Semeia Studies 67 (Atlanta: Studies in Biblical Literature, 2011), 301-20.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2003), 4-5. "Roman jurisprudence distinguished between them [respectable married women and high-class prostitutes and others] by means of their appearance which was defined in terms of apparel and adornment" (Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 4).

<sup>26</sup> Hanna Stenström, "Female Imagery in the Book of Revelation," in *Religion and Female Body in Ancient Judaism and Its Environments*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 28 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2015), 213-24. See also Edith M. Humphrey, "A Tale of Two Cities and (At Least) Three Women: Transformation, Continuity, and Contrast in the Apocalypse," in *Reading the Book of Revelation. A Resource for Students*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: Studies in Biblical Literature, 2003), 81-96, who explores explicit and implicit female imagery in Revelation, not with a gender-reading in mind, but rather to explore the function and impact of feminine imagery within Revelation in aid of the construction of identity.

thing to do with a colonized woman's life in a (de)colonizing context."<sup>27</sup> Gender and sex informed the apocalyptic horror, with stock in trade gendered slander (today's misogynist hate speech) specifically found in the Jezebel and Great Harlot figures. The contrast with the demure bride of Christ (e.g. Rev 19) further heightens the gender rhetoric, exacerbating the contrast between social norm and the unacceptable, and reinforcing social expectations regarding women. The gendered discourse of Revelation<sup>28</sup> stands out because women figures tend to dominate where horror climaxes.<sup>29</sup> Both these notions, the ambivalence of Rome scripted through sexual desire and rejection, and a gender-biased world inscribed through the figure of a childbearing sex-worker, connect with and even converge in the womb. Indeed, as "an intersectional point of convergence of sexuality, gender, political form, class and so forth,"<sup>30</sup> the portrayal of the Great Harlot is tainted but she is also described as a mother before she is made barren.

## **The Great Harlot, Women, and Wombs**

Revelation 17 and 18 present "the judgement of Babylon as the Great Harlot" (τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης – Rev 17:1), in typical Roman-era gender-based ridicule, characteristic of ancient prostitution, even though she is no ordinary sex-worker.<sup>32</sup> She is a grotesque figure, and

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<sup>27</sup> Jean K. Kim, "'Uncovering Her Wickedness: 'An Inter(Con)Textual Reading of Revelation 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective,'" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no.73 (1999): 62.

<sup>28</sup> Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 87-107.

<sup>29</sup> One of the most serious concerns with literalistic readings of Revelation is that in their "attempt to give contemporary explanations for the mythic creatures and happenings and to involve the reader directly in the events" (Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, 80), they miss the wider reach and larger potential of this literature.

<sup>30</sup> Luis Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore: Deviant Sexualities and Empire in the Book of Revelation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 116.

<sup>32</sup> Although Glancy and Moore "How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation's 'Great Whore?'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no.3 (2011): 551-69, argue that the whore should not be confused with the servile, impoverished women in the brothels of the first century, nor with a ἑταῖρα or courtesan devoted to one man, but rather as a "whore-empress" mired in the degradations associated with sex-work of the day. Interestingly, in her article on prostitution in the HB/LXX and NT, Margaret Davies "On Prostitution," in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R, David J.A. Clines, and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 200 (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1995), 225-48 does not refer to Revelation 17 at all, while David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, *Word Biblical Commentary* 52C (Dallas: Word Books, 1998), 937 regards the "mother of whores" epithet as shorthand for a most depraved prostitute. The extent to which Herodotus' account of the "cultic prostitution" related to the worship of Ištar, played a



like Empire, at once appealing and repulsive, colourfully described with luxurious clothes, decorated in lavish jewellery. This stereotypical Roman prostitute image is marked out by clothing, although only costly courtesans wore dresses of flashy and transparent silk.<sup>33</sup> Drunk on the blood of saints and martyrs, she rides the many-headed beast, luring people with her seductive powers. Unlike the pure bride of Christ (Rev 19:8), she is homicidal and devious, intoxicated by power and exhilaration. Proxy for Rome, the Great Harlot proclaims herself “empress” (βασίλισσα – Rev 18:7), with reasoning similar to those of contemporary texts that portray imperial figures as pimps and whores.<sup>34</sup> As the “mother of harlots” (Rev 17:5), her disgraceful influence extends throughout the world. She signifies immorality and ungodliness; her malevolent glut threatens all; and her promiscuity and greed create all kinds of social ills without regard for others’ interests. She has to be destroyed, and eventually is, in a gruesome, violent way (Rev 17:16b).<sup>35</sup>

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role in the ancient metaphoric portrayal of Rome as a sex-worker, remains an open question, cf. Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2016), 266-7, 399. More recently, Justin J. Schedtler, “Mother of Gods, Mother of Harlots: The Image of the Mother Goddess behind the Depiction of the ‘Whore of Babylon’ in Revelation 17,” *Novum Testamentum* 59 (2017): 52-70 argues for the mother goddess, Cybele, well-known in Roman socio-political-religious systems, being the target of Revelation 17 in a thinly veiled attack of prevailing socio-political structures. See also Ralph J. Korner, “Whore of Babylon,” in *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture*, ed. Mary A. Beavis and Michael J. Gilmour (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2012), 594-5, for a short but valuable account of the impact of the Whore of Babylon-motif in Western history over centuries. Translations of Greek are my own, except when indicated otherwise.

<sup>33</sup> Scholars have long held that ordinary sex-workers often wore togas, typically worn by male Roman citizens, and so displayed their exclusion for respectable social hierarchy (Catharine Edwards, “Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 81). More recently, it has been pointed out that in many instances where sex-workers’ clothes are described, the toga is not mentioned (cf. Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* [London: Routledge, 2008], 113). However, cf. the critique of Thomas A.J. McGinn, “Prostitution. Controversions and New Approaches,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, Vol. 100, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 91-7 on Olson’s views and a strong argument in favour of the association of the toga with sex-workers (and adulteresses).

<sup>34</sup> However, in Revelation it is not an imperial figure who is depicted as a prostitute, but the Empire itself (Glancy and Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore’?”, 551).

<sup>35</sup> Marion Carson, “The Harlot, the Beast and the Sex Trafficker: Reflections on Some Recent Feminist Interpretations of Revelation 17-18,” *Expository Times* 122, no.5 (2011): 218-9.

Revelation's Great Harlot is a strong, contextualised critique of the Roman Empire, as signalled in Revelation 17:18.<sup>36</sup> Still, the body and womb of the Great Harlot should not be dismissed as superfluous, dissecting it into its metaphorical city claims, since she is after all first and foremost a woman, with a body, at that.<sup>37</sup> "When an ancient author chooses female imagery in order to make his message more emphatic, the female body as such forms an integral part of their metaphors."<sup>38</sup> The sexual invective would have served a broader purpose, common in Roman political discourse, including the association of the elite with dishonourable sexual practices.<sup>39</sup> The image points to the imperial power's numerous abuses, including its conspicuous consumption, economic exploitation of people, together with an indifference for the value of human life, and its ability to deceive all people. The prostitute image also strongly reveals the seductive power of Empire to assimilate.<sup>40</sup> Revelation 17 and 18 ostensibly present a corrupted woman who had gained international disrepute with an extravagant lifestyle by preying on the desires of powerful men. The ambivalence of her person and her social location is probably nowhere more pronounced than, although claiming empress status, she is marked as a slave, possessed by others and socially dead.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Both those scholars who read the apocalyptic rhetoric of Revelation as anti-imperial or resistance literature, and others who find an imperialist complicity in the book's rhetoric, seek to bring its relevance to bear on the reality of the present-day Empire. However, the notion that "[t]he figure of the Great Whore is understood as an anti-imperial trope, transcending gender categories deployed by a minority group with important economic and political consequences or as an imperial image that 'contaminates' Christian discourse with the gender ideology of Imperium" (Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore*, 19); he, however, tends to ignore the fleshly, bodily aspect of the woman.

<sup>37</sup> Fletcher, "Flesh for Franken-Whore," 17. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 219, "in chapter 17 Babylon is seen primarily as a feminine figure (17:1-7, 9, 15-16) and secondarily as a city (17:5, 18)."

<sup>38</sup> Géza G. Xeravits, "Preface," in *Religion and Female Body in Ancient Judaism and its Environments*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 28 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2015), v.

<sup>39</sup> "Juvenal relies on quotidian details of a Roman sex worker's existence – the stench of the brothel, the commodifying display of its denuded human wares – to emphasize the empress's moral turpitude," (Glancy and Moore, "How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation's 'Great Whore?'" 569.)

<sup>40</sup> Huber, "Gazing at the Whore," 316.

<sup>41</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Glancy and Moore "How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation's 'Great Whore?'," 567, points to "the pathetic in her profession,"

Central to the metaphorical critique of Empire through the Great Harlot, is her bodily, sexual existence. According to Revelation 17, and unlike Jezebel (Rev 2:20), the Great Harlot did not actively seduce men. She was the prostitute which men chose to visit. Unlike subsequent chapters (e.g. Rev 18:23, 19:2), in Revelation 17:2 she is accused that kings have carried out fornication with her. Ironically, figurative readings avoid her personhood and bodiliness, but primarily ascribe seduction to her and ignore literal sex acts in preference to the symbolic. “These two factors have led to the whore of Babylon being understood as an evil seductress, rather than a multiply penetrated prostitute.”<sup>42</sup> In Revelation 17, the Great Harlot is included as a fictional character in the narrative, as often happens in the literature of that time, but silenced more effectively than otherwise, by attributing to her power of a frightening nature.<sup>43</sup> Her portrayal is both appealing and repulsive, and indicative of the ambivalence of sex-workers at the time.<sup>44</sup> However, and at times overlooked in scholarship which has tended to focus on her sexual prowess, her

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wondering whether she is a sex-worker for her own lust, whether for sex or blood, or for the luxury that comes with what she does, or maybe out of fear for an abusive pimp (such as τοῦ θηρίου τοῦ βαστάζοντος αὐτήν “the beast that carries her” – Rev 17:8).

<sup>42</sup> Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 17, 156. The voiceless female prostitutes in the literature of the male elite of the Roman era, are like the overlooked prostitutes of the HB/OT (Thomas A.J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 9). Revelation will later allow her one utterance: “Ironically it is a line that declares her sovereignty – ‘I sit as a queen/empress [βασιλίσσα]’ (Rev18:7) – even as her otherwise voiceless role declares the stark limits of that sovereignty, at least within the world of the narrative” (Glancy and Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore?’” 567).

<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Revelation 17 is careful “to ensure that the βασιλίσσα is subsumed in the πορνή” (Glancy and Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore?’” 568).

<sup>44</sup> Even more chillingly and beyond academic readings, Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible* (London: Equinox, 2009), 169, has pointed out that modern-day sex-workers provide a different reason for their critique of Revelation’s Whore metaphor: their own beaten and dead bodies. Musa W. Dube, “Review of Ipsen,” *Religion and Gender 2*, no.2 (2012): 360-2, registers both appreciation for Ipsen’s constructive contribution and for giving voice to marginalised sex-workers, but also some criticism. According to Dube, “Review of Ipsen,” 360-2, sex-workers should not be generalised as if class, race, ethnicity, age, and nationality does not matter; it is not clear how sex-workers construct a different family model not based on patriarchal ethics; the male bias of the Bible should not be ignored in reconstruction readings; a materialist feminist reading does not sit well with a damaged reduction reading, which is reformative rather than transformative; and the possibility that coercion is involved in sex-work should not be neglected. See also Jeremy Punt, “Revelation, Economics and Sex: Contextual Biblical Interpretation and Sex-Work in South Africa” (Annual SBL meeting, Denver, 18 November 2018).

identity and agency to the extent that she had these, cannot be disconnected from her womb.

## **Apocalyptic Women, an Apocalyptic Womb**

To talk about the Great Harlot's womb at first glance may appear to miss the text's, and metaphor's point, given the perceived disconnection in sex-work between sex and procreation. In Revelation, however, the Great Harlot is productive womb-wise, which requires a broader perspective on the textually inscribed womb. Not only the connection between prostitute and commercial gain – whether the direct financial advantage benefits the prostitute or her owner – but also the reciprocity between women and wombs in ancient gender constructs, underscore the subtle presence of the womb in Revelation's gendered images.

## **Apocalyptic Wombs**

In Revelation, the Great Harlot's womb, or for that matter, hardly anyone else's womb is mentioned explicitly.<sup>45</sup> However, when towards the end of the vision of the Great Harlot one reads *καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ αἷμα προφητῶν καὶ ἁγίων εὐρέθη καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐσφαγμένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* (Rev 18:24),<sup>46</sup> that the blood of others (prophets and saints) was present in her, a uterine notion may be present. Earlier also in Revelation 18:4, the quote *Ἐξέλθατε ὁ λαός μου* ("Go out of her, my people") which picks up from Isaiah 48:20, 52:11, and Jeremiah 50:8, 51:6, 9,45 (cf. 2 Cor 6:17), the prophetic call is to avoid the unclean and leave behind the idolatry of Babylon. However, used together with the personified, sexualised figure of the Great Harlot, a more bodily departure and womblike setting is conjured up, of people emerging (and moving away) from the woman. In ancient times and for reasons different than today, concerns about the womb and control over it, were prominent. NT authors simultaneously made rhetorical use of the womb, pregnancy, and childbirth for different purposes: asserting God's power over humanity and creation; securing what was deemed to be the requisite social control over women's bodies; and depicting the end times.<sup>47</sup> The religious connection is

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<sup>45</sup> In Revelation, the term "womb" appears only once (*γαστήρ* – Rev 12:2). However, when the subject of the womb is broached, it is in any case more common to refer to Revelation 12:1-4. In Revelation 10:9,10, *κοιλία* refers to the stomach where food is digested. Another common term for womb – *μήτρα* – does not appear in Revelation.

<sup>46</sup> Revelation 18:24: "And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

<sup>47</sup> It is understandable then, that "[t]he reproductive bodies of women become the ground upon which claims of divine authority and human futurity are made and disputed"

unsurprising, since as Felder<sup>48</sup> reminds us, “Reproduction was a cultural imperative achieved, at least in part, by means of appeals to the divine.” In the gender-based separate social domain of the lives of women and girls in antiquity, religious sexual devotion was a long-standing tradition. Female deities were considered central to their sexual and procreative lives as much as to the welfare of their people, which made their removal difficult when such social groups were claimed for God.<sup>49</sup> The spectrum of connotations with the womb illustrates that for the ancients, the reproductive body was an important link between human life and the divine, as well as between the present and the future, in both religious-apocalyptic<sup>50</sup> and imperial discourse.<sup>51</sup>

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(Alexis L. Felder, “Birthing the Apocalypse: Images of Pregnancy and Childbirth in First Century Apocalyptic Literature.” PhD diss. (Boston, Boston University School of Theology, 2018), viii..

<sup>48</sup> Felder, “Birthing the Apocalypse,” vii.

<sup>49</sup> Kathy L. Gaca, “Early Christian Sexuality,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 554, states: “In one striking instance of this problem, Jeremiah (late seventh century BCE) singles out the Queen of Heaven for condemnation. In a confrontational interchange in Egypt with women in Jewish marriages, the women refuse to follow Jeremiah’s command to turn away from the Queen of Heaven and to follow the Lord God alone (LXX Jer 51:1-28).”

<sup>50</sup> The Bible, too, makes strong connections between the womb and God: “‘Opening’ or ‘closing’ the womb – fertility or barrenness – was believed to result from divine resolution, and human beings are not able to have any influence on it – as is to be concluded from Jacob’s words told to Rachel when the latter was reclaiming children (Gen 30:1)” (Ida Fröhlich, “The Female Body in Second Temple Literature,” in *Religion and Female Body in Ancient Judaism and Its Environments*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 28 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2015), 120; so also Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Recently it was noted that if one reads Paul’s letters within the echo chamber of first-century imperial discourse, his use of ἔκτρωμα could constitute a deliberate and maybe ironic misrecognition of the notion among the Empire’s powerful of being born at the opportune moment (Jeremy Punt, “Pauline Uterine Discourse in Context,” in *Reconceiving Reproductive Health: Theological and Christian Ethical Reflections*, ed. Manitzka Kotzé, Nadia Marais, and Nina Müller van Velden, Vol. 1, Reformed Theology in Africa Series [Durbanville: AOSIS, 2019], 125-43). Scholars have interpreted notions that are part of a Pauline uterine discourse such as adoption (cf. Robert B. Lewis, *Paul’s “Spirit of Adoption” in its Roman Imperial Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), and Paul’s pre-birth divine election as alluding to his birth as a Roman citizen (Gal 1:15), which is later followed by his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Jason J.C. Jung, “Separated from my Mother’s Womb: An Appraisal of Paul’s Testimony in Galatians 1:15,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no.1 [2018]: 26-33), with reference to the imperial context (cf. also Jeremy Punt, *Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: Reframing Paul* [Leiden: Brill, 2015]).

In an androcentric, patriarchal context in which fertility and procreation were emphasised, a woman's place and her role were determined by her reproductive abilities to the extent that women were defined by their wombs and the womb became the symbol for a woman.<sup>52</sup> "The long-lived notion of woman's natural inferiority was justified for many centuries by the extraordinary characteristics attributed to her most specific organ, the womb."<sup>53</sup> Hippocrates<sup>54</sup> and Plato<sup>55</sup> explained female hysteria as being predicated on women's uncontrollable longing for sex, according to their theory of the "wandering womb."<sup>56</sup> Physiologically expressed at the time, the woman's softer and more porous body caused it to heat up, which dried out the womb of moisture. The shrivelled, sex-deprived womb moves around, knocks against the liver, and both against the abdomen, in search of moisture, but bumping against the liver could cause suffocation.<sup>57</sup> With coitus that brings about dampness of the womb and fills the belly, the womb is not dislocated all that easily. Women are thus thought to be more susceptible to desire, brought about by these physiological ailments, which could be relieved through sexual intercourse.<sup>58</sup> For ancients, the womb defined women, not so much

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<sup>52</sup> Plato's *Timaeus* is a good example where a woman is presented as a womb. For the construction of women through wombs, see M. Érica Couto-Ferreira and Lorenzo Verderame, "Introduction," in *Cultural Constructions of the Uterus in Pre-Modern Societies, Past and Present*, ed. M. Érica Couto-Ferreira and Lorenzo Verderame (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 1-6.

<sup>53</sup> Dasen and Ducaté-Paarman, "Hysteria and metaphors of the uterus in Classical Antiquity," 239.

<sup>54</sup> Hippocrates *de Morbo Sacro* 1.

<sup>55</sup> Plato *Timaeus* 91c.

<sup>56</sup> The ancients generally believed that women, more than men, were vulnerable to the dangers of desire, even women who wanted to avoid child-birth agony (Sophokles fr. 932P). On lustful women see Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 504ff; *Ekkli.* 46870; 61620; *Lys.* 553ff.). For a *hetaira's* appetite, see Alkiphron (3.33). Aristotle ascribes a lack of sexual control among women to feminine weakness (*EN* 7.7.1150b6) and as a cause for marrying girls off while young (*Pol.* 7.14.1335a29).

<sup>57</sup> See also Christopher A. Faraone, "Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Mediterranean World," *Classical Antiquity*, F, 30, no.1 (2011): 1-32, on the womb as instigator of the troubles, with the wandering womb especially to blame: "Women alone possessed an internal organ that was variously interpreted as a mechanically defective body-part, a sentient and passionate animal, and then finally a demon with malicious intent, who bites and poisons the female body." For ancient Greek exorcisms of the wandering womb, cf. Christopher A. Faraone, "New Light on Ancient Greek Exorcisms of the Wandering Womb," *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 144 (2003): 189-97.

<sup>58</sup> Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 222-3.

symbolically as by physiology, and this connection appears to lurk beneath the surface of gendered and sexual rhetoric of the time.

### **The Great Harlot's Womb of Violence**

A narrowed perspective on body and sexuality, and the scholarly predilection for symbolic interpretations of the Great Harlot as Rome, tend to sidestep her penetrations by many men. So too, the “no-blood” readings of Revelation ignore the result of these penetrations, her children, which in the end in Revelation 18 are all sent away from her. “The ‘no blood’ readings have literally sterilized her bodily threat; overlooking her body as a living reproductive entity, and ignoring her ‘sterilization’ during her destruction.”<sup>59</sup> However, the Great Harlot’s womb features at least twice explicitly in Revelation 17, the one with positive and the other with negative results. In Revelation 17:5, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῆς ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς,<sup>60</sup> reference is made to her motherhood and children, while in Revelation 17:16b, καὶ ἡρημωμένην ποιήσουσιν αὐτήν καὶ γυμνήν καὶ τὰς σάρκας αὐτῆς φάγονται καὶ αὐτήν κατακαύσουσιν ἐν πυρί,<sup>61</sup> the term ἡρημωμένην (“desolate”) can also be translated with “barren,” which better fits other bodily terms and also γυμνήν (“naked”) as a description of the final abuse of her body.<sup>62</sup> Her fleshy body that is uncontrollably penetrated by many men together with her unbridled procreation, presented a threat in the narrative to the controlled creation from the divine.<sup>63</sup>

In a society preoccupied with seeing and being seen, and Revelation’s “preoccupation with matters of spectatorship, domination, and masculinity,”<sup>64</sup> it is little wonder that the Great Harlot’s exterior rather than what

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<sup>59</sup> Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 163.

<sup>60</sup> Revelation 17:5: “...and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations’” (RSV).

<sup>61</sup> Revelation 17:16b: “...they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire” (RSV).

<sup>62</sup> See also criticism in Fletcher “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 157-60 on Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, Harvard Theological Studies 48 (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 87-97, for her insistence that these and the other terms in Revelation 17:16 should necessarily be made applicable to the siege and destruction of cities of old.

<sup>63</sup> Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 163.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

defined first-century women – her womb – received primary attention.<sup>65</sup> However, the apocalyptic gaze, as Revelation 17 and the Great Harlot attest, does observe that apocalyptic wombs bring forth more than children. Pregnant with meaning, womb-related terminology sits well with apocalyptic texts and scenarios, but the suggestiveness of the horror that it details and evokes, introduces a further component, as Pippin has asked, “Is the Apocalypse cathartic? What is the fascination with a story of such intense violence?”<sup>66</sup> Such questions are answered differently by those affected by Empire. Given the connection between Empire and apocalypse,<sup>67</sup> the term “apocalypse” tends to invoke the notion of disaster,<sup>68</sup> not least because an apocalyptic worldview is in effect a violent worldview.<sup>69</sup> Since apocalyptic thought derives from prevailing disaffection rather than futurism, violence expressed through harsh language and strong emotions was aimed at destroying the current hostile world.<sup>70</sup> Such an outwardly directed gaze, when it comes to the woman, did not exclude her womb as the woman-defining marker in ancient times.

In the apocalyptic violence, the Great Harlot’s womb inevitably becomes a womb of violence. Her body fills most of Revelation 17, but she speaks

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<sup>65</sup> See also Huber “Gazing at the Whore;” Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, who explores Revelation’s injunctions to find intercontextuality, and the hermeneutical places of community experiences, created through the interactions between ancient texts and their interpretations. Earlier, Harry O. Maier, “Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 90, no.2 (1997): 153, has identified the performance, as well as the visual aspect of apocalypses in incipient and early Christianity: “Apocalyptic narrative is thus both show and tell.”

<sup>66</sup> Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, 79. Pippin declares that she opts “to take the violence at face value and condemn it, but obviously in a different way than Christian fundamentalists.” She refuses to legitimise violence for the reason that it is used against the imperial force, and insists that “[t]here is no democracy in the Apocalypse; God is as much a power of domination as any other power, only this apocalyptic manifesto calls for total obedience” (Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, x-i).

<sup>67</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 77.

<sup>69</sup> Gerhard van den Heever, “The Usefulness of Violent Ends: Apocalyptic Imaginaries in the Reconstruction of Society,” in *Reconceiving Religious Conflict: New Views from the Formative Centuries of Christianity*, ed. Wendy Mayer and Chris L. de Wet, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (New York: Routledge, 2018), 310.

<sup>70</sup> “Such a worldview is not only a call to arms to marshal the troops, so to speak, in an attempt to eradicate the grey zone, the area of compromises that gets erased under the pressure of societies that bifurcate under the identity, ideological and economic stresses and tensions. Purification is the ‘simplification’ of the social aggregation” (Van den Heever, “The Usefulness of Violent Ends,” 310).



no single word there. Written on her forehead for all to see, her womb rather than her mouth brings forth a response (Rev 17:5). Not uncommon in hegemonic contexts, subaltern responses, as far as they can speak (cf. Spivak),<sup>71</sup> are fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence.<sup>72</sup> The literal, wombly reaction of the Great Harlot poses a risk besides the figurative, imperial threat, by taking “pro-creation away from the hands of the creator.” The Great Harlot whose services are in demand and has the power of creation, creates a danger also for the One seated on the throne and claiming ultimate rights on creation (Rev 21:5). “Baby-(maker)lon must be removed so the male creator God can create on his own, with no baby-making rival. For this sole creative act to be able to occur the whore is destroyed and her womb depopulated forever. The path for children is shut.”<sup>73</sup> In her bodily form, the Great Harlot’s womb poses a narrative danger, threatening to take away power from the enthroned divine figure and his followers, all of whom are portrayed as being sterile.<sup>74</sup> In Revelation 17, then, gender cannot be divorced from metaphor, given the magnitude of the horror, disturbing images, and dangerous implications. In this way, the wombly aspects of the Great Harlot endures also into contemporary readings, be they pietist, or scholarly, or literary, with the metaphor’s perpetual birthing of Christian identity and formation.

## Apocalyptic Womb, Now!

With the growing awareness that language and meaning, form and function, or medium and message cannot be separated, some scholars have given up on redemptive readings of Revelation.<sup>75</sup> “That the Great

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<sup>71</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 24-8.

<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, Revelation strove to eliminate the threats faced by the subaltern, marginalised community by insisting on purifying violence, guarding the faithful against the temptation to succumb to a hybridity which would contaminate their purity. On the other hand, for its response to the Empire is to co-opt Roman ideology and rhetoric in an attempt to replace the *Pax Romana* with the *Pax Christi*, cf. Marshall, “Gender and Empire,” 17-32.

<sup>73</sup> Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 162. “Bible fantasy provides hope in the midst of world anxiety, but I want also to add that the biblical apocalyptic fantasy heightens the uncanny, the awe, and anxiety as the readers encounter the destructive deity” (Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, xii).

<sup>74</sup> The reference to the 144,000 in Revelation 14, includes the remark that οἱ μετὰ γυναικῶν οὐκ ἐμολύνθησαν (Rev 14:4 – “they have not defiled themselves with women”) – Fletcher, “Flesh for Franken-Whore,” 163.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Hanna Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’ Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” in *A Feminist Companion to the*

Where is a woman has everything to do with economics and power<sup>76</sup>...the ideological-critical power of Revelation falls short when it comes to gender ideology. The abuse of a whore as a metaphor for a colonial power reveals this failure.<sup>77</sup> Darden, who aims to bring about an African-American scripturalisation of Revelation, demonstrates that rather than the text showing a marginalised community's push-back against Empire, it shows the marginalised taking up and mimicking the Roman imperial agenda.<sup>78</sup> The lack of awareness among marginalised communities about the potential to re-inscribe oppressive elements also in the modern context, remains a danger, as long as marginalised communities remain unaware of their ambivalent identity construction.<sup>79</sup>

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*Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* 13 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 33-54; Caroline van der Stichele, "Re-Membering the Whore: The Fate of Babylon According to Revelation 17.16," in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* 13 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 106-20. The mythopoetic language of Revelation scripts an overwhelmingly negative image of women that is difficult to turn around, although some scholars try to accomplish exactly this much. Celebrating the brutal death of the Great Harlot is symbolic, but the symbol reaches much further, both showing the conventional and impacting the reader (Stenström, "They Have not Defiled Themselves with Women," 33-54).

<sup>76</sup> The Great Harlot is "a paradigmatic example of the connections between subject formation and political and economic macrostructures" (Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore*," 116); and "the decoupling of desire from sexual identity allows for a disavowal of imperial economy while identifying with the queer aspects of the desire routinely expressed in the text" (Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore*," 118).

<sup>77</sup> Van der Stichele, "Re-Membering the Whore," 120. While the accuracy of claims that "the author constructs Babylon...[draws] on prostitution imagery to warn of Rome's seductive economic power" (Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities*, 62), it is not disputed – the consequences also need to be accounted for.

<sup>78</sup> The emphasis of Darden on scripturalisation (Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire*, *Semeia Studies*, No. 80. Atlanta: Studies in Biblical Literature, 2015), where broadly interpretation assumes the generative purpose of making (renewed) life possible, forming community, and scripting alternative realities and futures, is echoed by other scholars too – cf. Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán Scriptures, Utopias, and the Chicano Movement*, *The Bible and Cultural Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore*, 19-20, taking their cue from works of Vincent Wimbush, like Vincent L. Wimbush, "Introduction: Scripturalizing: Analytical Wedge for a Critical History of the Human," in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush, *Routledge Studies in Religion* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> The claim that "[t]he femaleness of the figures may be discomfiting to us, in the end, not because of its 'chauvinist' implications, but because of its power to picture human

Identities are shaped and formed through cultural media and civic ritual and their identity construction roles.<sup>80</sup> Avoiding the imperialist attraction is particularly crucial when it comes to gender and sexuality, given its intersectionality across many other lines of divergence.

Using sex and gender, along with the unobtrusive yet significant presence of the womb, to express the political-imperial, is nowhere more acute than in the unsettling image of the Great Harlot in Revelation 17 and 18. Gendered features are not a stand-alone category, but are intersected with other hegemonic relations like race, status, religion, and colonial imperialism. For some scholars, Revelation's apocalyptic visions engender a world where a "rhetoric of inquiry must therefore be accompanied by an ethics of inquiry that is able to critically assess the scholarly frameworks and interpretive patterns that determine all interpretation of Revelation in light of its utopian vision of justice and well-being for all."<sup>81</sup> Specific social situations and the intention to serve political ends are seen to inform Revelation as much as they inform subsequent interpretations. This necessitates a hermeneutics of suspicion and a practice of ethical inquiry that asks whether proposed interpretations of Revelation do justice to its own rhetoric of resistance.<sup>82</sup> The caution not to romanticise Revelation should be unnecessary, given the association of women and wombs with violence and destruction, but in the end, the Great Harlot's womb challenges gender and sex stereotypes.

Attention to the Great Harlot's womb allows for a new reading and perspective, when it comes to the gendered, violent imagery in Revelation 17 and 18. The apocalyptic womb of the Great Harlot presents more than just a choice,<sup>83</sup> since "[t]his business of last things

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frailty and promise" (Humphrey, "A Tale of Two Cities," 96), may be too optimistic and too gender-undiscerning?

<sup>80</sup> Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 157.

<sup>81</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Babylon the Great: A Rhetorical-Political Reading of Revelation 17-18," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 269; cf. also Kim, "Uncovering Her Wickedness," 61-81.

<sup>82</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Babylon the Great," 269. "[I]ronically, John's colonized construction as 'almost the same but not quite like' had resulted in the production of a resistance strategy that was a blurred copy of the hegemonic tactics of empire that entail violent disruption and displacement" (Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 160).

<sup>83</sup> "The choice for the good woman that the author of Revelation wants us to make is not a gendered choice nor an individualistic choice but rather a political choice. It is the

disturbs business-as-usual.”<sup>84</sup> Revelation’s existential aspect and concern for the immediate, requires of its interpreters to consider, given their long afterlife, the importance of ancient theories of female and male bodies.<sup>85</sup> The Great Harlot, and her womb in particular, demonstrated the spectrum of sexualities perhaps even more than the spectrum of gender. Histories of interpretation always accompany texts, cannot be set aside, and should therefore be engaged consciously and critically.<sup>86</sup> “Early Christian apocalyptic eschatology, though certainly future-oriented, is nevertheless Apocalypse Now. It offers its audiences scripts for performing the self in the world.”<sup>87</sup> The Great Harlot’s body, and especially her unreferenced and under-acknowledged womb, call upon the interpreters of Revelation to make gender-wise decisions in re-evaluating prevailing gender and sexuality constructs, and to become involved in appropriate meaning making – and its acknowledgement – when they too use this document to construct their identities for life in this world.

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choice for God’s πόλις – New Jerusalem – God’s alternative city of justice and well-being” (Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities*, 165).

<sup>84</sup> Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Jean-Baptiste Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies According to Ancient Greek Physicians (Corps Masculin et Corps Féminin Chez Les Médecins Grecs),” *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 37, no.1 (2013): 33.

<sup>86</sup> Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 74. To put it differently, “The current study of the Bible as a text of the past is possible only because of the construction of the biblical text in the present” (Menéndez-Antuñía, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore*, 107).

<sup>87</sup> Maier, “Staging the Gaze,” 133.

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