

Article

# The 'Great Whore' of Babylon (Rev 17) as a Non-Survivor of Sexual Abuse

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**Abstract:** The article aims to re-read Rev 17:16 amid the catastrophic patterns of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Employing narratological methods as well as a close reading of the text, it is argued that Rev 17:16 can be coherently read as the violent sexual punishment of an anthropomorphic female character. Signals in the text point to God's involvement in this punishment and to its overall positive evaluation. Considering reader's realities in the context of sexual abuse and its cover-up, the article argues for the necessity of taking a positional stance while reading biblical 'texts of sexual terror'. Such a positional stance must have visible effects on a responsible reading and interpretation of the 'great whore's' story.

**Keywords:** Whore of Babylon; sexual abuse; sexual violence; female cities; revelation of John



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## 1. Introduction

Reading biblical texts is always challenging. Depending on the personal and collective context in which the process of reading and meaning-making takes place, the obstacles change. Reading a text is not independent of place, time, and the interpreter's characteristics and experiences. It is also not independent of the interpretive community of which the interpreter is part of.

This article aims to acknowledge the catastrophe of sexual abuse and its cover-up in the Catholic Church as an essential and fundamental context for reading and interpreting biblical texts today. This is not a theoretical issue. People who have been sexually abused are an integral part of the Catholic Church, an integral part of its parishes, an integral part of the scientific community.

Taking this into consideration, the paper will re-read the narrative of the 'great whore' of Babylon in Revelation. It will ask if the character depicted in Rev 17 is city or woman, and it will ask how explicitly Rev 17:16 shows Babylon as a victim of sexual abuse.

Finally, the text will be discussed in light of the following question: can and should Catholic biblical scholars remain impartial in offering different interpretive possibilities while reading texts that speak of sexual violence? If not, then what does this mean for exegetical debates moving forward?

## 2. Method and Perspective

The perspective on Revelation will mainly be a narrative one. The text will be examined in close reading, taking seriously the intertextual ties between biblical texts. Questions of historical context are considered but are not the focus of this investigation. Instead, a modern reader's perspective that also takes up questions of power and gender relevant to this special issue's overall theme will be centralized.

## 3. The 'Whore's' Origins: Texts of Terror and Personified Cities in the Hebrew Bible

Countless characters inhabit the pages of biblical texts. They are old and young, beautiful and hideous, male and female, rich and poor, and everything in between. Biblical characters are born and die, they love and hate each other, they build and destroy. Yet,

within this plethora of biblical characters, there is a certain type of females which are special: many texts feature *cities* that are depicted as women, mainly in the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament (OT), but also beyond (Sals 2004, p. 29). In the OT, Jerusalem and Zion are most frequently mentioned in this way, but other cities are personified as females as well, e.g., Samaria, Niniveh, Tyre, and Babylon (Yarbro Collins 2015, p. 296; Vander Stichele 2009). Where the texts contain more than a passing remark about the personified cities, they are not only clearly anthropomorphized but also very distinctly gendered. The gender-specific descriptions of the female cities manifest themselves socially through gender-specific roles, such as bride, daughter, mother, etc. (Maier 2008, p. 2; Müllner and Thöne 2012, p. 14). As such, they do not only speak (Jer 2:25), eat, are not only washed and clothed (Ezek 16:9–13), and encouraged to sing and make music (Isa 23:16). They also (and prominently) give birth (e.g., Isa 66:7; Jer 49:24; Mi 4:9–10; Ezek 23:4) and are (or have been) wed(ded) (e.g., Ez 16:8; Hos 2:20; Jer 2:2).

Additionally, the personified cities are described in a very corporeal and sexualized way that is highly gender-specific and has frequently been described as pornographic (e.g., Yee 2003, pp. 6 and 133; Heussler 2021, p. 105; and already Setel 1985, p. 87; and Ben-Chorin 1986, p. 49). The texts do not only talk about the female cities generally growing up but talk about (menstrual?) bleeding (Ezek 16:9) and comment on the growth, size, or firmness of their breasts (e.g., Ezek 16:7; Ezek 23:3.8 and 21). They also repeatedly mention exposed female genitalia (e.g., Ezek 23:29; Isa 47:3; Nah 3:5; Hos 2:9[11]) (Exum 1996, p. 104; Grütter 2019, pp. 18–19).

The examples above are not chosen arbitrarily. While many texts speak about JHWH's covenant with the female cities and envision a plentiful future for them, they also figure in some of the most challenging biblical texts, veritable "texts of terror" (Trible 1984). Phyllis Trible had initially coined this phrase to tell the stories of four 'fully human' female biblical characters (Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed woman of Judg 19:1–30, and the daughter of Jephthah). It is, however, justified to also apply the term "texts of terror" to the textual worlds of at least some of the female cities, as, e.g., Irmtraud Fischer does (Fischer 2021, pp. 164–65). This is justified because they all share the common fate of being depicted as sexually assaulted and violently injured. While Phyllis Trible had been "wrestling with the silence, absence, and opposition of God" (Trible 1984, p. 2), storytellers, readers, and interpreters of texts such as Ezek 16, Isa 47, and Rev 17, as we will see, are confronted with God's active involvement in punishing female cities by means of sexual violence. In some texts, God can (and must?) even be called "an active perpetrator of [ . . . ] sexual violence against women" (Magdalene 1995, p. 327).

Historically, there is a long tradition of narrating and visually depicting cities as women. More broadly, a connection between women and *space*, in general, can be made out, which also applies to countries, land in general, or social collectives inhabiting space, such as nations (Maier 2008, pp. 27–28; Yee 2001, p. 375). At least from the 7th century B.C.E. onward, we find women wearing turreted or mural crowns, indicating such a connection (Maier 2008, p. 66). In the 3rd century B.C.E., we have multiple certain attestations of cities depicted as women wearing the above-mentioned mural crowns. A prominent example is the sculpture of Antiochia at Orontes from around 300 B.C.E. (Maier 2008, pp. 67–68).

To depict (and narrate) cities in the form of women could also stem from an early concept of female goddesses protecting cities (Yarbro Collins 2009, p. 125). This idea is attested in antiquity for a big geographical range, from the Middle East to Rome (Meyer 1996), but the extent of its influence on the Hebrew Bible's practice of female personification, especially of Zion and Jerusalem, remains debated (Maier 2008, p. 69).

Depending on the scholarly perspective, various hypotheses have been offered to further explain the female personifications of cities, lands, and peoples. Among them is the observation that "the wall of the ancient city-fortress may have suggested the encircling comfort and security of the womb or a mother's arms" (Yarbro Collins 2009, p. 125). Other scholars are not as optimistic and point out the vulnerability of women as a point of comparison (Müllner and Thöne 2012, p. 14). This common vulnerability of cities and

women becomes especially prominent in times of war, and its brutal practice of raping (mainly) the female inhabitants of conquered cities (Bail 1998, pp. 176–77; Poser 2019, pp. 282–83).

In the medium of biblical stories, it is, additionally, linguistically easy to bridge the gap between woman and city (Müllner and Thöne 2012, p. 14), as the grammatical gender of the city in Hebrew is female  $\text{נָּיִב}$  as it is in ancient Greek ( $\text{πόλις polis}$ ), Latin (*urbs*), and consequentially, many modern European languages as well.

#### 4. Revelation 17

##### 4.1. *The Whore's "Multi-Sourced Textual Body" (M. Fletcher)*

Not only in the Hebrew Bible, but also in New Testament (NT) writings do we encounter female cities. Considering the wide distribution of the phenomenon in antiquity and the close intertextual ties between Hebrew Scripture(s) and the NT texts, this is not surprising. Revelation, especially, is suffused with allusions to OT texts; up to 30 percent of Revelation's text corpus is heavily influenced with OT motifs (Hieke 2015, p. 271). Prophetic texts play an especially prominent role among the various texts visible in the intertextual fabric of Revelation (Yarbro Collins 2015, p. 291). Thomas Hieke considers this to be so crucial to an appropriate interpretation of Revelation that he claims Revelation *forces* its readers to re-read other (and earlier) biblical texts to make meaning of Revelation itself (Hieke 2015, pp. 289–90). While it is up to the readers to succumb to this force, if they choose (and are able) to do so, the intertextual connections do open up a whole galaxy of possibilities for meaning-making in Revelation. This is also true for the 'Great Whore' Babylon (Rev 17:1) and her "multi-sourced textual body" (Fletcher 2014, p. 147). Among the texts making up this "multi-sourced textual body" are several OT texts featuring female cities, such as Ezek 16 (Fletcher 2014, pp. 147 and 150), Jer 50–51, and Isa 47 (Maier 2019, p. 222). Gail Streete does not focus on a (or several) specific intertext(s), but refers to "Israel as the adulterous whore-wife of JHWH [ . . . ] the scriptural prototype for the Whore of Babylon" (Streete 1997, pp. 7–8).

##### 4.2. *The 'Whore's' Body, Appearance, and Gender (Roles)*

In Revelation, Babylon appears for the first time in Rev 14:8, where, as part of several angelic announcements, her previous destruction is stated: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Rev 14:8a NRSV). In Rev 14, Babylon is not yet clearly identified in human form. She is, however, already linguistically marked female. Rev 14:8 continues: "She has given all nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication" (NRSV modified). While the verb 'give to drink', in the third person singular, could, in Greek grammar, be either male, neutral, or female, the 'fornication' ( $\text{πορνεία porneia}$ ) is specifically *her* fornication ( $\text{τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς tēs porneias autēs}$ ). After the announcements, the flow of the narrative turns to the one who is like a Son of Man, and his actions of harvest. In Rev 15, seven angels are introduced. They are given seven bowls, out of which they pour God's wrath in the form of seven plagues (Moloney 2020, p. 239). After the seventh bowl is poured out, an earthquake of monumental dimension shakes the earth, and the readers and listeners are told that the 'great city'—presumably Babylon—is split into three parts (Rev 16:19) (Moloney 2020, p. 250; Giesen 1997, p. 365 disagrees). V. 19b explicitly states that she receives attention from God so that she can be punished (lit.: given the cup of the fury of his wrath; Vander Stichele 2009, p. 109). One of the seven angels subsequently carries the seer John off to show him Babylon's fate. It is in this part of the Babylon narrative that the border between city and woman are most blurred. The adjective, 'great'—twice before applied to Babylon (Rev 14:8 and 16:9)—is now used as a description of the 'whore' whose punishment the seer (and with him the readers and listeners) are about to witness.

The 'whore' is described in a very detailed and corporeal way, even before she is actually seen by John. The angel tells John that the 'great whore' is *sitting* at many waters (Rev 17:1) and has had sexual intercourse. Rev 17:2 puts it less neutrally and speaks about the 'great whore' as one "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and

with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk" (NRSV). Even though her sexual activity takes a central position in the list of her transgressions, commentators up until today seem rather reticent in their phrasing. Francis Moloney, for example, talks, in his recent commentary, about the kings 'associating with' the 'great whore' (Moloney 2020, p. 257).

In Rev 17:3, finally, the character shown to John is explicitly referred to as a woman (*γυνή gynē*). Her bodily features become even more prominent in the verses 3–6 (Fletcher 2014, p. 152), as she is again stated to be sitting (this time on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns), clothed in exquisite crimson and scarlet robes, and accessorized with gold and pearls. She holds a golden cup in her hand. Her forehead bears a writing, and she is inebriated.

While Rev 17:7–15 describe and interpret the beast Babylon is sitting on in more detail, the attention of the narrative turns back to Babylon herself in Rev 17:16. John is told by the angel: "And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour the pieces of her flesh and burn her in fire." (NRSV modified).

#### 4.3. The Whore's Punishment

The main question to be debated here is not whether the 'great whore' should be interpreted as Rome or Jerusalem. Regarding the second option, Francis Moloney has recently offered an interesting approach connecting the 'great whore' both to the women clothed with the sun (Rev 12) and to the bride of the lamb (Rev 19 and 21) (Moloney 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the case will be made that the punishment described in Rev 17:16 is—from the readers perspective—the forceful exposure, abuse, and killing of a female anthropomorphic character. Even though this has been argued by numerous scholars in the past (with different emphases; see, e.g., Sals 2004; Vander Stichele 2009; Pippin 2010; Fletcher 2014), it still does not seem to be firmly anchored in New Testament exegesis if the commentary literature is to be the judge of it. To list only some examples: Beale (1999) extensively discusses the description of the 'great whore' as a woman, where it concerns her garments and even lists the parallels between the 'whore's' punishment and the violence directed against the female cities of Jerusalem and Samaria in Ezek 16 and 23. However, as far as I see, the implications are not further problematized. Instead, the interpretation moves on to the economic forces represented by the 'great whore'. Berger (2017) does not seem to thematize the violent character of the text at all, formulating that "the destruction of Rome/Babylon is achieved through a peaceful consensus of Rome's enemies against Rome" (Berger 2017, p. 1201; transl. J. König). Moloney (2020) refers to the 'great whore' as 'woman' in his summary of Rev 17:16. In the interpretation, however, he focuses on explaining the woman's punishment with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and mentions the—in my opinion, quite virulent—problem of bodily and sexual violence against the 'great whore' only in a two-sentence footnote, where he attributes the debate to "contemporary sensitivities" (Moloney 2020, p. 269 n. 44).

Considering this, in my opinion, still inadequate treatment of the topic in some commentaries, the most important arguments for seriously considering the 'whore' as a female anthropomorphic character will be recounted here.

To what extent, and in what way, does Rev 17, 1–16 encourage the perception of bodily violence against and sexual abuse of a female character?

1. In addition to the very corporeal description of the 'great whore' already shown above, she is introduced to the pericope as a 'whore' (*πόρνη pornē*), and will be repeatedly called a whore (and 'mother of whores') after that (Rev 17:1.5.15. and 16). 'Whore' is not only grammatically female in Greek, but also a highly gender-specific term in biblical literature;
2. Rev 17:3 presents the character in question for the first time in the pericope outside of the angel's annunciating speech. What John sees (*ὁράω horaō*) in Rev 17:3 is a *woman*

- (γυνή *gynē*). The character is subsequently called ‘woman’ four more times before the narrative moves on to describing her destruction (Rev 17:4.6.7.9);
3. It is uncontested that the text contains signals pointing to the hybrid character of the woman. Among them are intertextual allusions to OT scripture, the fact that the text calls the inscription on the woman’s forehead a *mystery* (μυστήριον *mystērion*), and the verses Rev 17:7–15, in which the angel interprets several elements of the beast’s earlier description to John. However, in contrast to the beast, Rev 17:7–15 does not offer any interpretation of the woman herself. Her name, attire, and cup are also not part of the interpretation offered in Rev 17:7–15 (Sals 2004, p. 69);
  4. The woman is identified as a city in Rev 17:18. However, from a narratological point of view, it is significant that this identification happens *after* the description of her punishment in v. 16 (Fletcher 2014, p. 152). She is hated, left alone, made naked, dismembered, eaten, and burned *before* Rev 17:18a tells the readers: “The woman you saw is the great city” (NRSV).<sup>2</sup>

Michelle Fletcher concludes—rightly, in my opinion—that: “Therefore, it appears logical, however disturbing it might be, to argue that she is presented to the audience as a fleshly body, not just at the start [ . . . ], but right through until the end of her destruction” (Fletcher 2014, p. 152; contra Rossing 1999).

What does this mean for the ‘great whore’s’ punishment announced in Rev 17:16? The angel first tells John that the beast and its horns will hate the ‘whore’. Μισέω (*miseō*) is not a very frequent term in NT texts, but it does figure in all the gospels, several NT epistles, and four times in Revelation itself. Mainly, it refers to human characters or social collectives hating other human characters (e.g., Matt 5:43; Mark 13:13; Luke 6:22; Tit 3:3). Of the remaining four following elements of the ‘great whore’s’ punishment, three can be read without any problems with referring to a human female character: The angel announces that the beast and its horn will make the ‘great whore’ naked (γυμνός *gymnos*), eat pieces of her flesh (pl. of σάρξ *sarx*), and burn her (κατακαίω *katakaiō*) in/with fire.

Starting with the last expression, biblical texts mention various things that can be burned (κατακαίω *katakaiō*), e.g., sacrificial animals (Exod 29:14 LXX), idols of false gods (Deut 7:5 LXX), trees (Ezek 21:3 LXX), books (Acts 19:19), and also buildings and cities (Ps 73:8 LXX; Jer 21:10 LXX). However, of course, also human characters and, more specifically, women can be burned. In Gen 38:24 LXX, for example, it is suggested that Tamar should be burned (κατακαίω *katakaiō*) for ‘whoring’ (εκπορνεύω *ekporneuō*).

Where flesh (σάρξ *sarx*) is mentioned in the plural-form in biblical texts, human characters are disturbingly often described as being eaten (e.g., Gen 40:19 LXX; Ps 78:2 LXX; Rev 19:18), sometimes even by other human characters (Lev 16:29 LXX; Mic 3:3 LXX). LXX (and later many NT) writings take up the Hebrew connotation of רֶשֶׁת meaning not human ‘flesh’ in an abstract sense, but more specifically flesh that is still or was once alive (Klein 2017; Staubli and Schroer 2014 emphasize the dimension of impermanence and transitoriness of life connected to רֶשֶׁת).

Finally, to be or to be made naked (γυμνός *gymnos*) is almost exclusively used as a term for undressed human characters in biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, it is only ever used to describe a city where the city takes the form of a female anthropomorphic city, such as in Ezek 16 and 23.

The OT stories of the female cities can also provide background to what is done to the ‘great whore’ in Rev 17:16. Even though the ‘great whore’ is not depicted as JHWH’s unfaithful wife in Revelation, other narratological characteristics are similar to the OT stories of the female cities. Ulrike Sals writes, with regard the OT texts: “From the point of view of the texts, the erotomania of the female city is always starting point, cause and stimulus for her behavior. Subsequently, her ‘punishment’ consists of violations of intimacy, such as exposing her nakedness, and of physical sexual violence, up to and including rape” (Sals 2004, p. 31; transl. J. König). Looking at Rev 17, the pattern is slightly changed. The text does call Babylon a ‘whore’ several times, but she is not depicted as an active seductress (Fletcher 2014). Rather, the text evokes the image of a powerful woman to whom



the “kings of the earth” (Rev 17:2) come to have sex and to be drunk. She does not move from the center of the narrated world in Rev 17, where she is sitting in power (Beale 1999, p. 854), until she is finally and forcefully destroyed. This does not mean, of course, that the text condones her sexual activity; this is clear from her repeated designation as ‘whore’, which especially the interpreting angel uses (Sals 2004, p. 71). Instead, sex is part of the way in which the female character has, in the past, exercised power—so, in the logic of the text, sexual violence must be part of her destruction.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the fact that readers will not interpret the nakedness of the ‘great whore’ as a voluntary state stemming, e.g., from her permissiveness, is induced by both the agency of the characters (1) and the order of narrated events (2). Rev 17:16 states clearly that the beast and its horns will make (1) ‘the whore’ naked (ποιήσουσιν αὐτήν [ . . . ] γυμνήν *poiēsousin autēn* [ . . . ] *gymnēn*) only after she has been hated and made desolate (2).

This leaves only one part of the ‘great whore’s’ punishment to be discussed. What does Rev 17:16 mean when it talks about the ‘whore’ being made *desolate* (part. pass. of ἐρημόω *erēmōō*)? Etymologically, the verb is connected to the noun ‘desert’ (ἐρημος *erēmos*), which, in biblical texts, often signals dryness, emptiness, and uninhabitability (Bosenius 2014, p. 83; Riede 2012). Frequently, the verb refers to spatial entities, such as cities, lands, buildings, streets, etc. (e.g., Lev 26:43 LXX; Bar 4:12 LXX or Ezek 19:12 LXX). It is also used several times in connection to the OT female cities (e.g., Isa 49:17 LXX and Jer 3:2 LXX). Isa 60:12 LXX employs it to refer to social collectives (peoples and kings). Michelle Fletcher additionally observes: “Even when the subject is a city, the verb itself does actually have a wider meaning, not only of being desolate, but also of being depopulated” (Fletcher 2014). This argument is supported by the use of the adjective ἐρημος (*erēmos*) in reference to childless women in Isa 54:1, which Gal 4:27 cites (Fletcher 2014). Even if one does not want to follow Fletcher’s reasoning all the way (she subsequently interprets the announcement of the ‘great whore’s’ ‘desolation’ as a euphemism for sexual violence resulting in permanent infertility (Fletcher 2014, p. 160)), it is possible to also read the ‘desolation’ connectively to a female human character who is left alone.

## 5. Babylon as a Non-Survivor of Sexual Abuse, Or: Where Does the City End and the Woman Start?

### 5.1. Methodological and Hermeneutical Remarks

Is, thus, Babylon, the ‘great whore’, depicted in Rev 17:16 as a non-survivor of sexual abuse? Does Rev 17:16 announce the future stripping, dismembering, and killing (by fire) of a woman? Three important considerations:

Firstly, the term ‘(non-)survivor of sexual abuse’ is, of course, modern terminology. Accordingly, limitations follow for applying it to a nearly 2000-years-old text such as Revelation. However, the extent of these limitations depends on the kind of questions asked about (and with the help of) the text. In my opinion, modern terminology is quite helpful—even indispensable—to talk about the impact of biblical texts on modern readers in various contexts. It can also have a heuristic value for debates in various fields of exegesis and biblical scholarship in general. An explanation of the term ‘sexual abuse’ remains necessary. Following the important remarks made by Reisinger and Leimgruber (2021), every sexual act which violates the sexual self-determination of an individual is considered sexual abuse. One of the definition’s strengths is the fact that little insight into the motivation of the perpetrator(s) is needed—something that is often problematic in the contexts of analyzing biblical texts. It needs to be added, moreover, that Reisinger and Leimgruber (2021) stress the fact that sexual abuse is also possible without the use of force or violence. In Rev 17:16, clearly, sexual violence is an important factor.

Secondly, biblical texts are always multi-voiced and possess more than one valid interpretation. This is not only characteristic of any kind of text per se (Breytenbach [2000] 2020; Alkier 2020), but is also an insight which is especially important in the context of sexual and spiritual abuse. As several examples from the collected volume *Erzählen als Widerstand* (Haslbeck et al. 2020) show, the Bible can be quite violently deployed in

concrete events of abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. Part of this instrumentalization of biblical texts takes the form of a “push for interpretive authority which sets itself absolute in order to enforce one’s own interests” (König 2020, p. 244; transl. J. König). As Katharina Hoff (pseudonym) writes: “Über die Interpretation von Bibelstellen, von Gebeten, religiösen Festhalten und Ereignissen hat er [i.e., the abuser] mir immer wieder Gehorsam gegenüber Gott und Jesus abverlangt” (Hoff 2020, p. 105; insertion: J. König).

And thirdly, from a literary-theoretical point of view, it is important to state that the city does not ‘end’ and the woman does not ‘start’ at a specific, identifiable point within the text. Of course, there are arguments to be made for and against highlighting one or the other aspect of the female city, as I have done above. A substantial part of the argument depends on the signals the text gives us. Essentially, however, “personification is a special case of metaphor that results from interference between two semantic fields, in this case a space and a woman” (Maier 2008, p. 60). In the case of the female cities, the woman never exists completely without the city and the city is never purely wood and stone. Within this complex relationship between ‘woman’ and ‘city’ in metaphorical speech, several aspects are important for our context:

- Metaphors depend crucially on the figurative elements they use. To stay within Maier’s terminology: It is highly relevant *which* semantic field is used in interference with the other; meaning is transported through this choice. In the context of the female city of Babylon, it is quite important that Rev 17 brings the semantic fields of ‘woman’ and ‘whore’ into interference with that of the ‘city’, because this interference adds specific characteristics to the readers’ mental image of the city and highlights other characteristics of the city that might be there already (for more on the general process of meaning-making in the metaphorical female cities, see Maier 2008, p. 60). Which characteristics are added and highlighted depends on the readers’ cultural context, their prior knowledge of similar texts, their personal experiences, and many other factors. With regard to socio-cultural aspects connected to the metaphor of female cities in ancient readers’ perspectives, there are already many excellent discussions (e.g., Seifert 1997; Baumann 2006; Maier 2008; Maier 2019). For ancient and modern contexts alike, it is important that this highly complex process of transferring characteristics is inextricably connected with the specific semantic field(s) used, so that meaning cannot just be extracted by ‘translating’ figurative speech into non-figurative language. In the context of the synoptic gospels’ parables, this has been discussed extensively: it makes a huge difference to speak about the unstoppable growth of the kingdom of God while using the semantic field of a spreading virus, the force of a tsunami—or the life cycle of a plant which bears abundant fruit. Similarly, it is relevant, if a city is personified as a ‘woman’ and ‘whore’, to depict a morally reprehensible and potentially dangerous entity (as, i.e., in the case of Babylon) or if it is personified as ‘man’ and ‘tyrant’.
- Additionally important to note is the fact that metaphorical speech is not a one-way-street in which meaning is transferred from one semantic field to the other (Maier 2008, p. 61; Zimmermann 2004, p. 106). In our case, not only do the semantic fields of ‘woman’ and ‘whore’ influence the way readers think about the ‘city’; rather, the way the meaning of ‘city’ changes in this process also changes the readers’ subsequent images of ‘woman’ and ‘whore’.
- This also shows that metaphoric speech actively involves its readers and/or listeners. While it is true for all forms of texts that readers have an essential role in meaning-making (Nicklas 2021, p. 116), in the case of metaphorical speech, the readers’ involvement is even more prominent than in most other forms of written communication. Readers are required to actively bridge the difference between the different semantic fields that are brought into contact with each other in the text and to construct meaning from the newly formed connection (Zimmermann 2004, p. 135; Rivera 2015, p. 63). In the case of Revelation, the readers are also sometimes tasked with entangling the not always linear but quite complex relationships between the different semantic fields. While this process of reader involvement, typical to metaphorical speech, is fascinating

from a literary and narratological perspective, in the case of violent texts, it can also become problematic, as we will see in Section 6.1, below.

### 5.2. *Babylon as Non-Survivor of Sexual Abuse*

Keeping the above-mentioned methodological and hermeneutical remarks in mind, I argue that it is possible to read the ‘great whore’—not only but also—as a non-survivor of sexual abuse.

That the ‘great whore’ does not survive the actions taken against her by the beast and its horns in Rev 17:16 is stated several times. Rev 18 is largely devoted to a lament over the destroyed female city made by the merchants who had been trading with her. Moreover, her final destruction is confirmed by an angel a few verses before the narrative turns to the jubilation about the lamb’s wedding in Rev 19:7 (Sals 2004, p. 73). The angel throws a big millstone into the sea and emphasizes: “With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more” (Rev 18:21b NRSV).

To characterize the stripping of the ‘whore’ as sexual abuse, we shall first consider the question of self-determination defined above as a central characteristic of sexual abuse. As I have already argued, the stripping of the ‘whore’ in Rev 17:16 cannot be coherently interpreted as a self-determined act. The ‘whore’ is stripped. The sexual connotations of the nakedness are amplified by the frequent allusions to whoring resp the designation of the character as a ‘whore’. Regarding the stripping per se, there are several current studies on the crucifixion of Jesus as sexual abuse that thematize forcible nakedness (Trainor 2014; Greenough 2020; Reaves et al. 2021). For example, in their introductory chapter, Reaves and Tombs urge: “the forced stripping and naked exposure of Jesus on the cross should be acknowledged as sexual abuse” (Reaves and Tombs 2021, p. 1). The same is true for the ‘whore’ of Rev 17:16.

### 5.3. *Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence: Power and Punishment*

Additionally, the forcibly induced nakedness of the ‘whore’ is accompanied by two other phenomena that have been discussed in the recent treatments of sexual abuse and sexual violence in Church contexts (e.g., Reisinger and Leimgruber 2021): power and violence.

Unfortunately for theologians, the punishment of the ‘whore’ is not only condoned by God but explicitly traced back to him in Rev 17:17, and again in Rev 19:2. He is named as the one causing the beast and its horns to abuse and kill the ‘whore’, by ‘putting it into their hearts’ (ἔδωκεν εἰς τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν *edōken eis tas kardias autōn*) to do so (Lupieri 1999, p. 278). Remembering that the female city Babylon is, earlier on, portrayed as a powerful royal figure, what J. Cheryl Exum writes regarding texts such as Ezek 16 and Isa 54 also sounds true for our example Rev 17: “physical abuse is God’s way of reasserting his control over the woman” (Exum 1996, p. 112).

The ‘whore’s’ destruction is not arbitrary but connected to her power. “As her epithet implies, she occupies a much greater proportion of the text than does any other female figure, whether good or evil [ . . . ]. The destruction of the Great Whore is the first of a series in which the most powerful forces of evil, including Satan, Death, and Hades, are overthrown” (Streete 1997, p. 155). Moreover, it might be noted that in the moment of her destruction, she is not ‘great’ anymore, just a ‘whore’ (Rev 17:16).

## 6. Possible Consequences for Reading Rev 17 as a Roman Catholic Scholar

### 6.1. *Readers and Their Bodies, Genders, and Traumas*

In the very beginning of this paper, I addressed the fact that there is no ‘they’ when focusing on survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence in church contexts. Our parishes, university families, and scientific communities consist of survivors. That people with trauma resulting from sexual violence read biblical texts has, in all likelihood, been true ever since the texts were written; that it is true for today’s Roman Catholic context is a certainty—it has been demonstrated by several quantitative studies showing the number



of people personally affected, and it has been demonstrated by several qualitative studies and survivor narratives which are enlightening on our way to changing the underlying structural problems. If we take this certainty into consideration, and turn again to Rev 17:16, we soon encounter a substantial problem. We realize that reading texts such as the narrative of the ‘great whore’s’ destruction can not only be liberating (e.g., for those hoping for the overthrow of oppressive political powers as has been thematized in postcolonial exegesis; see, for example, [Rosenberg 2017](#)), but reading the ‘great whore’s’ story also has a potential to be harmful, especially to readers who might identify easily with the ‘whore’. J. Cheryl Exum emphasizes: “Female readers [ . . . ] are placed in a double bind. On the one hand we are asked to sympathize with God and identify with his point of view. To the extent we do so, we read these texts against our own interests. On the other hand, by definition, we are identified with the object that elicits scorn and abuse.” ([Exum 1996](#), p. 103). The focus on female sexuality and its vulnerability makes it especially hard for female readers to distance themselves from these depictions of violence ([Fischer 2021](#), p. 164).

Problematic is, thus, not only the clearly gendered perspective that depicts a female character in a morally reprehensible way because of her sexuality. Problematic is also, and especially, the linking of the violent sexual punishment with its gender-specific context. Finally, the problem is furthered by the fact that the abuse and violence is initiated (although not executed) by God himself, and very clearly evaluated in a positive way in the text (cf. Rev 14:6–8; Rev 19,1–2).

## 6.2. Re-Thinking Interpretive Imperatives: Taking a Positional Stance

What follows if we want to keep valuing the immeasurable treasure the biblical texts are—not only as a literary and cultural testimony but also as the word of God? What follows if we do not want to just discard this word of God, which encloses all human experience and is without doubt also an indispensable spiritual resource for survivors of sexual abuse ([Kerstner et al. 2016](#); [König 2020](#); and the survivor narrative of [Adler 2020](#))?

As a Catholic biblical scholar and, thus, as part of an interpretative community which must acknowledge the catastrophe of sexual abuse and its cover-up as an essential and fundamental context for reading and interpreting biblical texts today, it is not possible to remain ‘neutral’ ([Haslbeck 2007](#); [Stahl 2019](#)). If one comes to the conclusion—as I have above—that a biblical text (1) can be coherently read and is, thus, likely to be read as depicting sexual violence and/or sexual abuse, and if (2) no textual signals can be identified that point to a disapproval of the violence and/or abuse, then it is the interpreter’s responsibility to problematize this ([Stahl 2019](#)): depicting sexual abuse and/or violence in a way that condones it is not acceptable. Moreover, this assessment is not dependent on the moral status or gender of the victimized character.

What could be cornerstones for this problematization apart from a clearly formulated statement against sexual violence and sexual abuse? I propose the following:

1. To engage in discussion about a responsible way of reading ‘texts of sexual terror’ with survivors. Biblical interpretation must not be harmful ([Alkier et al. 2021](#)); as much is certainly true and must be recorded. More concrete steps towards what this means are necessary, and should be developed in dialogue with those of us most acutely in danger of being hurt. The many qualitative studies published in the last years should also be utilized;
2. No interpretive track must claim exclusivity. As was emphasized above, this is not only important considering the Bible’s fundamental character as *text*, but an exclusive claim to interpretative authority can also be part of abusive strategies in cases of spiritual and sexual abuse;
3. Efforts should be made so as to not set different interpretative possibilities against each other, as has been the case in the past, e.g., with feminist and post-colonial biblical exegesis. Instead, the radical contextuality of interpreting biblical texts should be acknowledged. Talking about sexual abuse and sexual violence as a white person

from a warm and comfortable desk in Germany is, of course, just one perspective. Many voices need to be heard.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Instead of contrasting the ‘great whore’ with other female characters in Revelation, as, e.g., [Beale \(1999\)](#) and others do, [Moloney \(2020\)](#) outlines a complete storyline with the development of one ‘woman’-character that extends through the second half of the narrative from the woman clothed with the sun giving birth to a son in Rev 12, through the punishment and destruction of the woman in Rev 16 and 17, and to her restitution and eventual marriage to the lamb in Rev 19 and 21. The woman in question is identified as Jerusalem and explicitly connected to the OT tradition of the female cities whose turning away from God and worshipping of different gods is described as adultery ([Moloney 2020](#), p. 259; see also [Lupieri 2015](#), p. 315 n. 53, who links the ‘great whore’ at least with the woman of Rev 12). While Moloney makes an interesting proposition that certainly deserves careful attention and a more extensive discussion than can be given here, one could also voice doubt in several regards, of which only one shall be listed here: the destruction of the ‘great whore’ in Rev 17:16 does resemble the violent and sexually charged punishment of Jerusalem in texts such as Ezek 16:39–41. Moreover, in Ezek 16:40, the dismemberment of Jerusalem with swords does not prevent JHWH from restituting her in the end (Ezek 16:55) (and to renew the covenant with his wife who is not only brought back under the control of JHWH but also permanently made mute with shame (Ezek 16:62–63)). In Revelation, however, there does not seem to be such an event of reassembly of the female city. Moreover, her final destruction is confirmed by an angel just a few verses before the narrative turns to the jubilation about the lamb’s wedding in Rev 19:7 ([Sals 2004](#), p. 73). The angel throws a big millstone into the sea and emphasizes: “With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more” (Rev 18:21b NRSV). How the narrative moves from such total annihilation to marriage would at least have to be argued more extensively.
- <sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, none of the above-mentioned textual details are contested with regard to textcritical considerations, with the possible exception of a variant reading of ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν (*hē mētēr tōn pornōn*) in Rev 17:5. Neither the critical apparatus of *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th edition) and *Greek New Testament* (5th edition) nor [Metzger \(1994\)](#) show variants relevant to the argument. For the debate concerning whether the ‘whores’ in Rev 17:5 should be considered female or male, see [Bachmann \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> The exceptions to this rule include Job 26:6 LXX, with a reference to Sheol, yet another (personified?) space, being ‘naked’ before God, two references to nakedness in 1 Cor 15:37 and 2 Cor 5:3, where bodily resurrection is discussed, and Heb 4:13, where nakedness is used as a metaphor for the absence of deception and deceit.
- <sup>4</sup> Possibly, there is a second example of such a connection in Revelation. In Rev 2:20, Jezebel is introduced into the narrative, another woman (γυνή *gynē*) accused of ‘whoring’/‘fornicating’ (πορνεύω *porneuō*). After mentioning ‘whoring’ twice (πορνεία *porneia* and πορνεύω *porneuō*) in Rev 2:20–21, Rev 2:22 describes the first part of the punishment that the ‘One like a Son of Man’—a Christ-like character—has devised for Jezebel: “Beware, I am throwing her on a bed [ . . . ]” (NRSV). In the commentary literature, it is suggested again and again that the bed (κλίνη *klinē*) can and/or should be read as a ‘sickbed’, even though the context of the verse does not offer any indication to sickness whatsoever. Conspicuously absent from the most-read commentaries is the suggestion that Rev 2:22 might allude to Jezebel being raped, a reading plausible not only in light of the sexualized language of Rev 2:20–22 and the OT background of the character ([Streete 1997](#), p. 154), but also the connection between the bed (κλίνη *klinē*) and sexuality made, e.g., in Ezek 23:14, Tob 8:4, Song 1:16, or Sir 23:18, as well as in the scene interpreted as an attempt to rape Ester, in which a bed (κλίνη *klinē*) prominently figures, too (Est 7:8).

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