

## Re-envisioning the Church through the “Eyes” of the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride in John’s Apocalypse

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**Abstract:** The book of Revelation is dominated by many enigmatic images and symbols that spark a variety of interpretations and speculations. Among these puzzling images, the feminine symbols in the second half of the book are worth noting: the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12, the whore in Revelation 17, and the bride in Revelation 21. Their meanings are often debated. Some feminist scholars argue that these images evoke violence towards women and are full of androcentric language. Others, however, by underlining the metaphoric nature of these female symbols, refute this claim. This study aims to provide a fresh interpretation of this debate by looking more closely at the web of John’s metaphors and narrative system and utilizing both historical-critical and narrative approaches. This work argues that these female figures convey positive images of women and inclusivity in the Lamb’s Church. Moreover, the woman clothed with the sun and the bride have a vital role in John’s apocalypse. The link between these two metaphors—the transformation of the woman and becoming the bride—offers an important message to contemporary churches, including churches in Indonesia, in navigating the world and overcoming crises.

### Research Highlights:

- This article offers a fresh approach to interpreting the feminine symbols in the book of Revelation by analyzing John’s narrative system and symbols.
- This article provides a counterargument to some feminist interpretations that underline the misogynistic nature of the woman clothed with the sun, the whore, and the bride.
- This article highlights the ecclesiastical and pastoral elements of the book of Revelation.
- The feminine characters provide a vital way of envisioning the characteristics of Christ’s churches that can stand and persevere amidst persecutions, with congregations in Indonesia as an example in mind.

### Article history

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## INTRODUCTION

In comparison to other books of the Bible, the book of Revelation is unique in many ways. Two are worth noting: (1) its shape and form or genre, and (2) the content that dominates the book. Vis-à-vis its form, John's Revelation is the only "apocalyptic prophecy"<sup>1</sup> book in the New Testament. Many interpreters have agreed to categorize John's writing among the apocalypses, as it contains many elements that are common to this genre. In defining this form of literature, John Collins states, "'apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."<sup>2</sup> While John's experience in seeing a vision from God ("visionary revelation") is clearly apparent and important in understanding the book, John also conveys "oracular prophecy" throughout the book, e.g., 1:8, 2:1-3:22, 13:9-10; 14:13b; 16:15 and 22:12-13.<sup>3</sup> The prophetic aspect of the book is certainly worth noting, as it has been overlooked by many interpreters. This prophetic element also involves a pastoral interest aimed at the seven churches.

Concerning its content, the visionary experience consists of a constellation of images. On the one hand, this variety of pictures makes

the book of Revelation the most colorful book in the Bible;<sup>4</sup> these images are powerful and captivating. On the other hand, the book portrays many bizarre and gruesome images along with mysterious numbers that spread throughout the apocalypse. Interpreters, from time to time, have tried to decode these puzzling pictures, which has brought much speculation regarding their meanings. Thus, it is not without reason that among the books of the NT, the book of Revelation has sparked the most debate and speculation throughout the history of the Church.<sup>5</sup> John's writing is also considered to be the most difficult book in the NT. Nevertheless, the difficulty does not lie only in the otherness of these images but also in many distinctive aspects of John's metaphors that complicate any interpretive process.

Vis-à-vis its reception history, along with many parts of the Bible, the book of Revelation has been deemed as a text that promotes violence, including violence against women. Regarding this issue, many parts of John's apocalypse have been given red marks; some passages have also been used as weapons to marginalize women as second-class citizens. In the second half of his book, for example, John introduces a few feminine symbols: the woman clothed with the sun (Rev. 12), the great whore (Rev. 17-18), and the bride (Rev. 19 and 21). John's usage of these figures has provoked criticisms from feminist commenta-

<sup>1</sup>This term is adapted from Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>2</sup>John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed explanation of this duality nature of Revelation, see Bauckham, *Theology*, 2-9.

<sup>4</sup>Biblical authors, strikingly, do not frequently mention any colors in their writings. In contrast, throughout Revelation readers can easily come across many colors in John's writing, e.g., red, purple, green, white, black, etc. John's apocalypse is not only colorful but also "noisy." It depicts many different sounds, e.g., the sounds of trumpets, thunders, clashing of battles, and even the heavenly praises; see Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and*

*Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 519.

<sup>5</sup>For some surveys on the variety of interpretations of Revelation from the early church until modern times, see Charles E. Hill, "The Interpretation of the Book of Revelation in Early Christianity," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 395-412; Julia Eva Wannemacher, "The Interpretation of John's Apocalypse in the Medieval Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 413-430; Joshua T. Searle and Kenneth G. C. Newport, "Forms of Futuristic Interpretation of Revelation in the Modern Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 447-468.

tors.<sup>6</sup> They claim that the destruction of the whore illustrates negative attitudes towards a woman's body in a sadistic and pornographic way. In addition, they also criticize the two positive female figures. Both the woman clothed with the sun and the bride are depicted as passive figures with roles that are inferior to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the description of the virginal men in Revelation 14:4 seems to suggest that women are excluded from God's New Jerusalem. This reputation certainly brings significant challenges to readers of the Apocalypse, particularly female readers.

## METHOD

As a Christian woman raised in a very patriarchal society, embracing a text that disregards the value of my own identity as a woman would be the last thing that I would want to do. The question that is worth exploring is: does the aforementioned feminist interpretation present a fair assessment of John's vision? The issue becomes more complex when we, Christians, consider these texts sacred and inspired by God. Does John's vision truly denigrate women's status and exclude them from God's salvation story? Perhaps, some may argue that these violent notions are just the "residue" of the ancient worldview that is no longer relevant to us in the modern world. If we accept this argument, however, we indirectly affirm the violent tendency of these images against women. Is it true that God condones this type of violence? If the answer is "No," how then should we read this text?

In this essay, I offer a fresh reading of the three feminine figures in John's Apocalypse, in

particular the woman clothed with the sun (Rev. 12) and the bride (Rev. 21), and how the whore should be seen within the narrative frame shaped by the first two figures. This essay contains four parts: (1) John's distinctive web of metaphors and narrative system; (2) the feminine symbols and their textual and historical context; (3) the link between the woman and the bride; and (4) what these figures signify and what can we learn from them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### John's Imagery and Narrative System

The difficulty in understanding John's vision lies in its enigmatic symbols and figures, which occur throughout the book and have been debated for centuries. In the case of John's gendered symbols in Revelation 12-21, for instance, the method that we use to decode the meanings of these symbols and images is crucial; often it influences one's attitude towards John's apocalypse. Furthermore, even among feminist scholars, there is no universal reading of these feminine symbols, let alone among female scholars beyond this group. For some, the detailed descriptions of the three feminine figures underscore how these descriptions represent "violence undertaken by God at the end-time."<sup>7</sup> Others, however, highlight the metaphorical nature of these symbols. While some aspects of their descriptions contain violent imagery, in its symbolic world, they convey non-violent concepts.<sup>8</sup> In her reading of the whore in Revelation 17, for instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states, "The sexual metaphor of 'whoring' does not speak about a female person and actual historical wo/man but must be read

<sup>6</sup>Such as Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: the Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999); Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*, *Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 47; 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*, no. 73 (1999): 61-81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9902107304>. It is worth noting that the discussions sur-

rounding these female symbols were started by feminist interpreters; see Lynn R. Huber, "The City Women Babylon and New Jerusalem in Revelation," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 307-324.

<sup>7</sup>Susan E. Hylan, "Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2011): 777-796, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43727119>. For example, Pippin, *Death and Desire*.

<sup>8</sup>Hylan, "Metaphor," 777-778.

as a conventional metaphor for idolatry.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast with these two scholars, the eighteenth century prophetic movement in Great Britain seems to offer another line of interpretation. Strikingly, many women, like Elspeth Buchan, Sarah Flaxmer, and Joanna Southcott, were inspired by the woman in Revelation 12. As prophetesses, they claimed to be the embodiments of the woman and believed that they had an important role in the eschatological drama.<sup>10</sup> By including themselves in John's vision, they gave a voice to the woman, which is not available in the text.<sup>11</sup>

Considering this variety of interpretations of John's texts, it is crucial to begin our journey in decoding John's images by asking some basic questions: how do we define John's imagery, how it functions as a text, and what does it demand from readers?<sup>12</sup> In other words, readers need to identify a different level of nuanced meaning that these pictures could bring. First, it is helpful for readers to recognize three categories of images or figurative speech: simile or metaphor, symbol, and narrative image.<sup>13</sup> In defining the first notion, Ian Paul rightly suggests, “the depiction of one aspect of reality in terms of another is the linguistic feature we call metaphor.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, how far and how obviously the metaphor connects to the subject (“what metaphor is about”) is vital and needs to be analyzed. The relation between the metaphor and its subject can be direct and clear, e.g., “John cries like a baby.” In this statement, a “baby's

cry” is used as a metaphor to illustrate one element: the way John cries, but not John himself. Some examples of this type of metaphor in John's apocalypse include the sound like a trumpet (1:10), the eyes of the Son of God like the flame of fire (1:14), the authority of the locust-like scorpions of the earth (9:3), and many more. A different relationship may appear in a different setting, for instance, “You monster!” In this case, to whom the metaphor applies (the subject) is unclear, and which aspects of this person are similar to a monster is also unspecified. This form of unspecific metaphor is what we often find in Revelation.<sup>15</sup>

Some may refer to this type of metaphor as a “symbol:” “that is, as a signifier that stands for another item, whereby the relationship between both terms is not necessarily as apparent as with a metaphor. Whether a symbol is given or not can be only be clarified by considering the available traditional conventions and plausibility within the textual and contextual evidence.”<sup>16</sup> For instance, the subjects of the Woman and the Bride seem to be hidden. Also, how far these two images are used to represent the subject(s) is enigmatic: do they portray one aspect of the subject or its entirety?

A much more complex idea than a single metaphor or a symbol is the narrative image. This notion refers to a collective and dynamic portrayal of symbols that functions to depict a

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 101.

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed explanation of their story, see Jonathan Downing, “The Women Clothed with the Sun: The Reception of Revelation 12 among Female British Prophets 1780-1814,” in *The Book of Revelation: Currents in British Research on the Apocalypse*, ed. Garrick V. Allen, Ian Paul, and Simon P. Woodman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 265-280.

<sup>11</sup>Downing, “The Women,” 278.

<sup>12</sup>Hylen, “Metaphor,” 780.

<sup>13</sup>Konrad Huber, “Imagery in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 54. Cf. Ruben Zimmermann, “Imagery in John: Opening Up Paths in-

to Tangled Thicket of John's Figurative World” in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 15-27.

<sup>14</sup>Ian Paul, “The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbols, and Metaphor,” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (Edinburgh, New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 135. Cf. Huber, “Imagery,” 54.

<sup>15</sup>Paul refers to this type as “hypocatastasis,” which is a situation “where the metaphorical predication takes place within the relationship between text and its referent.”, see Paul, “Revelation,” 135; Ian Paul, *Revelation: Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (London: IVP Academic, 2018), 32-33.

<sup>16</sup>Huber, “Imagery,” 55.

unified meaning or concept.<sup>17</sup> Identifying the meaning of this conglomerate of images is important to see the continuity, connectivity, and unity of John's vision. We need to recognize that the entire book refers to *one grand revelation*, although it appears as *many visions*. John uses many repeated words, images, and themes that connect one unit to another; this points to the unity of the whole book.<sup>18</sup> Many different images may refer to the same entity as well.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, one image should not be seen in isolation from the others, especially when John intentionally places them within the same frame or theme. For instance, in Revelation 12, John saw a great sign. It consists of many scenes: the woman and the dragon and her child (12:1-6), Michael's battle with the dragon (12:7-12), the dragon fighting on earth (12:13-17), etc. The ties between these scenes need to be underlined; this great sign with multiple scenes demonstrates the great battle between God's people and Satan's power.

Furthermore, many of John's symbols act as 'agents' with storylines of their own. In a larger literary context, John does not present Satan as a static character in the story, represented by the red dragon, but as a dynamic character with his present actions and his future destiny.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the story of the woman in Revelation 12 should be seen in connection not only with the dragon, but also with the story of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 and the other positive female figure, the bride. The link between the woman and the bride is particularly crucial, yet often overlooked by scholars. The connection between the two, I argue, clarifies the meaning(s) behind the feminine symbols in John's apocalypse and

provides the redemptive aspects of John's vision, and they have much to offer to the contemporary church.

It is also important to note that John's web of metaphors is located within his distinctive narrative system. In this system, the relation between a scene with the one that follows or precedes it does not necessarily convey a chronological order. John applies what we may call a "wave" system where he utilizes multiple scenes or episodes to explicate a particular reality or theological concept.<sup>21</sup> In this system, one scene may function as a development or expansion of episodes that precede it. This intertextual connection is commonly found in ancient Semitic narratives.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as Konrad Huber correctly argues,

single images, visionary sequences of visions should not be taken on their own but interpreted through their interconnection within the literary context. They lead from the particular word pictures to what can be called the symphony of images as a whole. The impact and force of the visionary images in Revelation, like a musical composition, only unfold in a full sense on this level.<sup>23</sup>

Holding on to this interconnectivity principle, when we look back at Revelation 12, John may have used the image of the woman in Revelation 12 to expand the reality represented by the two witnesses in Revelation 11. Correspondingly, John may have also used the bride to develop an important theological concept previously represented by the woman.

<sup>17</sup>Huber, "Imagery," 55.

<sup>18</sup>Scholarly consensus supports the unity of the Book of Revelation. For the discussion on this issue, Paul, *Revelation*, 41-54.

<sup>19</sup>Huber, "Imagery," 58. For instance, John uses many images to portray God's people or Christ's Church, which is the focus of this paper.

<sup>20</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of Satan's role in the book of Revelation, see Cato Gulaker, *Satan, the Heavenly Adv-*

*ersary of Man: A Narrative Analysis of the Function of Satan in the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

<sup>21</sup>Felise Tavo, *Woman, Mother, and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation into the "Ecclesial" Notions of the Apocalypse* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 243-46; David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *Interpretation* 38, no. 1 (1984): 39-50.

<sup>22</sup>Tavo, *Woman*, 245.

<sup>23</sup>Huber, "Imagery," 57.

### The Woman and The Bride Within Their Literary Contexts

The book of Revelation begins with an epilogue that delineates the nature and the purpose of the text (1:1-8). John describes his writings as the record of the revelation of Jesus that God gives to his servants regarding things that must soon take place (ὁ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει). God sends his angel to John, who is specifically charged with reporting all the visionary experiences that he sees to the seven churches in Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, 1:4; cf. 1:11). The epilogue is then followed by specific messages from Christ for each of these local churches. As we know, John's apocalypse does not conclude with these prophetic messages. It continues to the story of how John sees God's heavenly throne (chs. 5-10).

In this scene, the Lamb and the scroll have vital roles. The Lamb depicts the crucified Jesus who has conquered (the power of evil, 5:5) and is worthy of receiving the scroll from God and opening its seals. The scroll itself holds a major key in deciphering John's Apocalypse.<sup>24</sup> As Richard Bauckham claims, this scroll contains "the things that must soon take place," which is important in John's prophecy (10:8-10).<sup>25</sup> Bauckham also cogently argues that the scroll that is sealed in Revelation 5 is also the scroll that he sees open in Revelation 10.<sup>26</sup> The dramatic portrayal of the opening of all

seven seals and the calamities that accompany these events serve as the preparation for the revelation of the scroll's content and underscore its significance. It is crucial to note that all three of the aforementioned feminine symbolisms, the woman clothed with the sun, the whore, and the bride, are part of the content of the scroll. The first and the third images are particularly important since John locates them, respectively, as the center of the book<sup>27</sup> and the climax of the prophecy. In the next section, we will see how these female figures are significant in John's revelation. A brief outline of the book and the place where John locates the feminine symbols can be seen below:

Table 1. Brief Outline of John's Apocalypse<sup>28</sup>

Theme	Reference
Prologue	1:1-3
1. Seven Messages	1:4-3:22
2. Seven Seals	6:1-7:17
3. Seven Trumpets	8:6-11:14
4. Series of Visions I	
<i>The women clothed with the sun (12:1-17)</i>	12:1-14:20
5. Seven Bowls + transition	16:1-21 +
<i>The Whore (17:1-18)</i>	17:1-18:24
6. Series of Visions II	19:11-20:15
7. New Jerusalem	
<i>The Bride (19:1-10; 21:1-3, 9)</i>	21:9-22:5
Epilogue	22:6:6-21

<sup>24</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 243-257.

<sup>25</sup>Bauckham, *Climax*, 243.

<sup>26</sup>For a more detailed arguments, see Bauckham, *Climax*, 243. However, Alan Garrow claims that the little scroll and the main scroll are not identical; Rather, the former foreshadows the latter. For the arguments in this paper, either one of these two options still highlights Revelation 12 as the content of the scroll. See, Alan J. P. Garrow, *Revelation*, NTR (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>27</sup>The importance of the Woman cannot be overlooked. For some, Revelation 12 provides a key to John's vision; see Tavo, *Woman*, 225. Similarly, Collins sees this chapter as "the conceptual framework which underlies the book as a whole," see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion, vol. 9 (Misso-

ula: Scholars Press 1976), 231; Edith M. Humphrey, "To Rejoice or Not To Rejoice? Rhetoric and the Fall of Satan in Luke 10:17-24 and Revelation 12:1-17," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 113-126.

<sup>28</sup>This table is a modification of Tavo's outline in Tavo, *Woman*, 39. Many have also attempted to provide an outline for John's apocalypse in a variety of ways. For some representations of the models of the outline, see Edith M. Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas*, JSPSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 82-83. It is worth noting that in all of these frameworks, the woman clothed with the sun occupies the central position.

### The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:1-6; 13-17)

Although the figure of the woman clothed with the sun seems to come from nowhere at the beginning of Revelation 12, the subject of what she signifies has been present since the first half of John's vision, as if she is waiting in the "background" and ready to emerge at the dramatic moment.<sup>29</sup> Her story is part of the three recapitulative scene scenarios involving the dragon and the cosmic battle in verses 1-6, 7-12, and 13-17. The main point of Revelation 12 itself is to emphasize God's protection of his people against the devil by Christ's victory through his death and resurrection. This chapter aimed to encourage the churches in John's time to be faithful witnesses of Christ despite the persecutions and tribulations.<sup>30</sup>

The seer begins his description of the woman by declaring "a great sign (σημεῖον μέγα) appeared in heaven (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ)." As a potent sign, the woman's appearance and the events in her storyline deserve full attention from John and his readers. The woman has the sun as her garment, the moon under her feet, and a crown (στέφανος) of twelve stars upon her head. This description has parallels with some Jewish writings, which offer some clues as to interpreting the woman's story. In these writings, Abraham, Sarah, and their offspring are portrayed as the sun, moon, and stars (Test. Abr. B 7:4-16).<sup>31</sup> The twelve stars, the crown of the woman, represent the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>32</sup> All of these clues lead to one conclusion; these images illustrate Israel's heavenly identity.

Furthermore, it is common among apocalypses that the authors combine many different elements taken from a variety of cultures and religious backgrounds that are familiar to their readers to effectively deliver the message.<sup>33</sup> The same case can be seen in John's apocalypse. He draws not only from Jewish notions in depicting the woman but also includes some Greco-Roman elements. From the Greco-Roman perspective, John's description of the woman suggests a similar idea to the previous conclusion: John portrays the woman as a divine and powerful figure. The description of the woman in Revelation 12 depicts a potent character that resembles the attributes of a goddess. The word "ἀστήρ" could also be translated as "constellation" or "a star." The twelve stars could refer to the twelve constellations of the Zodiac. By having the Zodiac as her crown, the woman is a cosmic queen with power over humans' fate.<sup>34</sup>

The first scene (vv. 1-6) shows that the woman is pregnant and about to give birth. She will soon deliver a male child who will rule the nations with an iron rod (12:5); the iron rod is a clue to identifying the child as Jesus Christ (2:27; 19:15). John then sees another sign in heaven, i.e., the appearance of the great dragon with seven heads, and ten horns and ten diadems in his heads. The dragon is waiting to devour the child as soon as he is born. Immediately after the child is born, however, he is snatched away and brought to God and to his throne. At the end of the first scene, the woman flees to the wilderness to be at the place where God has prepared her to be nourished for 1260 days.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Edith M. Humphrey, "A Tale of Two Cities and (At least) Three Women: Transformation, Continuity, and Contrast," in *Reading the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 81-86.

<sup>30</sup>G. K. Beale, *Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 624.

<sup>31</sup>In *Mid. Rab.* Num 2.13 the sun symbolizes Abraham, the moon Isaac, and the stars Jacob and the seed of the patriarchs; see Beale, *Revelation*, 625.

<sup>32</sup>Beale, *Revelation*, 626.

<sup>33</sup>As Humphrey aptly suggests, "the Apocalypse is revealed as a work characterized by cultural syncretism, and as such it demonstrates competence in both Hebrew and Greco-Roman convention." Humphrey, "Apocalypse," 115.

<sup>34</sup>See Adela Yarbro Collins, "Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (1993): 20-33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851593X00386>.

In the beginning, the woman herself represents the collective portrayal of God's faithful people encompassing the time of the OT, as they were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, to the early church, including John's readers.<sup>35</sup> The war between the rest of the children of the woman and the dragon bolsters the view that she is not a representation of a historical person.<sup>36</sup> The woman and the dragon's story portrays the conflict between the church and the devil by adapting the pattern of a combat myth from the ancient Near East and the classical world.<sup>37</sup> The pattern describes a conflict between two divine beings in order to get the highest dominion. The two divine beings are usually depicted as contrasting figures, one representing chaos (a monster or a dragon) and sterility and the other representing order and fertility. Therefore, the result of the combat affects the order and fertility in the natural world.<sup>38</sup> The woman's story in particular provides many similarities to the myth of Leto and Python in Greek mythology. She is described as a pregnant woman, a mother of a hero, who is attacked by a monster who wants to kill her child (Apollo) and who will have dominion over her nations so that the monster can prevent the child's kingship and he himself will have the highest dominion.<sup>39</sup>

In John's vision, the monster (the dragon) fails to devour the child. In fact, the woman's child overcomes the dragon and is on God's throne. The birth of the child itself signifies the whole life of Jesus, with an emphasis on his death, resurrection, and ascension.<sup>40</sup> It was in Jesus's passion when the devil machinated all events that led to the cross, and he assumed that death would put an end to Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus was raised and vindicated by God. More-

over, through his death Christ entered his glory (cf. Luke 24:26).

As part of the "wave" image system, Jesus's victory is rendered and explicated by the second scene in the heavenly realm. This scene (12:7-12) portrays the battle between Michael and his angels against the dragon and his lot. The former overcomes the latter, and as a result, the dragon is cast down to the earth. The dragon's fall to earth is followed by the heavenly praise proclaiming victory.<sup>41</sup> The dragon, however, knowing that his time is short, executes his vengeance on the earth and the sea (12:12). His action can be seen in the third scene (12:13-17) in which the dragon pursues the woman on earth and wages war against the rest of the children of the woman. Just like in the first confrontation, God protects the woman in the wilderness.

The story of the woman reflects the two realities faced by the church in John's time. Just like the woman, Christians would have had a heavenly identity as God's priestly community (Rev 1:6; 5:10). However, they could not deny their vulnerability as humans. Some of them suffered: they were arrested and killed during those times. As the woman was rescued by God and nourished in the wilderness, so God would rescue them from their tribulation in the same manner that he did for the Israelites when he brought them out of Egypt.<sup>42</sup> The desert, the place where the woman is nourished, alludes to this exodus experience.

God's protection and the woman's dependency towards God should not be perceived as a negative characteristic of the woman as a passive or impotent figure.<sup>43</sup> In the whole book of

<sup>35</sup>The personification of Israel and God's people as a woman is common in Jewish prophetic tradition (e.g., Hos. 1-3, Ezek. 16:23; Isa 54, 60, 62, 66; Mic 4:9-10), see Collins, "Feminine Symbolisms," 20. Catholic commentators, however, have argued that the woman is Mary, the mother of Jesus see Beale, *Revelation*, 628. For a list of previous works that focus on identifying the woman, see Marla J. Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless Women in the Apocalypse," *Neotestamentica* 26, no. 1 (1992): 157-167, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43070285>.

<sup>36</sup>Tavo, *Woman*, 233.

<sup>37</sup>Collins, *Combat Myth*, 57-75.

<sup>38</sup>Collins, *Combat Myth*, 57.

<sup>39</sup>Collins, *Combat Myth*, 64.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Tavo, *Woman*, n33 (234).

<sup>41</sup>A similar vision is mentioned in Luke 10:17-20; Satan falls from the sky (heaven) to earth.

<sup>42</sup>Collins, "Feminine Symbolism," 24.

<sup>43</sup>Pippin seems to see the function of the Woman Clothed with the Sun in John's narrative as only her ability for procrea-



Revelation, God is the main figure. Throughout his book, John strongly encourages readers to be faithful to God and depend on his power and protection. Even Christ himself is pictured as a recipient of God's action (as he was snatched away and brought to God's throne, 12:5). Furthermore, we should not be misled by a distorted idea of freedom commonly promoted in the modern West. The modern-western worldview often views freedom as the opposite of "dependence, relationship, community, and belonging."<sup>44</sup> All of these notions restrict the goal of achieving "true freedom." In contrast to this idea, the history of God's people throughout the OT and NT indicates that life is given to each person (cf. Gen. 1-2), which includes our freedom. Humans owe their existence to God their creator, and a part of understanding life as something that is bestowed upon us is to accept our finitude and dependence.<sup>45</sup> The woman owns her freedom, and she chooses to be the faithful warrior of God, depicted by the 144,000 virginal men. The explanation of this image and its connection with the woman of Revelation 12 is given below.

The woman clothed with the sun is also portrayed as the mother of a hero. It signifies that she has a special and important role in God's redemption story. Her child represents the Messiah, the Lamb. The woman's role as a mother also signifies a special role. God has given to Eve (who also represented women in general) a special role in procreation, so that humans can multiply and fulfill God's commandment (Gen. 3:28). In fact, through Eve's special gift of bearing a child, God also declares his promise that through one of her descendants, the head of the serpent will be stricken (Gen. 3:15). Accordingly, both the lives of the woman of Revelation 12 and her son fulfill this promise. The rest of her children also become Christ's witnesses to the world.

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tion. She says, "The Woman clothed with the Sun is a reproductive vessel who is exiled subsequent to giving birth." See Pippin, *Apocalyptic*, 119. Selvidge also presents a similar cynical view towards the woman by calling her an impotent goddess, see Selvidge, "Powerful," 161-163.

Tina Pippin argues, however, that even though the woman clothed with the sun is portrayed positively and carries with her the utopia as a heavenly mother, she is nevertheless not included in the ultimate city (the New Jerusalem) that is represented by the bride since the woman of Revelation 12 is no longer present after verse 17.<sup>46</sup> Although at first this argument sounds persuasive, it is debatable. Before providing an alternative reading, one needs to be aware of some limitations of Pippin's approach.

Pippin analyses John's symbols using a reader-response and post-modern framework, in which she enters John's narrative world as a participatory reader. With this method, she does not aim to reconstruct the historical context of the text; rather, she wants "to play with the polyvalence of the symbols, unanchoring them from any specific historical context."<sup>47</sup> Vis-à-vis John's images, her particular interest is to scrutinize the gender codes in them in order to provide ideological critique and political readings of them. In executing her assessment, however, Pippin falls into two major pitfalls.

First, approaching John's narrative world as a participatory reader would also mean entering John's playing field, in which John has embedded some codes and rules for understanding the meanings of his images. As previously discussed, the concept of narrative image and the wave system are two vital rules of thumb in deciphering John's metaphors, in particular the three feminine symbols. By following these codes, we allow the complexity and ambiguity of each symbol to come forth and meet its readers.

Pippin seems to ignore these codes while examining the three female metaphors. She isolates the woman clothed with the sun from its surrounding context. By doing so, Pippin does not let this figure "speak" from itself and grow

<sup>44</sup>Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>45</sup>Bauckham, *Crisis of Freedom*, 37.

<sup>46</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 69.

<sup>47</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 16.

in its own storyline. However, when one examines the woman through John's narrative image and wave system, one can see that the woman is not completely erased after verse 17. The woman still exists until the end of Revelation. Nevertheless, she is transformed into another figure, i.e., the bride in Revelation 19 and 21. This transformation can be seen in the narrative line of these two figures within John's metaphor system.

Second, by seeing John's feminine/female symbols as "real women", Pippin oversimplifies John's nuanced and complex metaphors, which move beyond their usual archetypal images of wo/men. The wave system of symbols in Revelation creates links between the three female characters with its intricacy. The image of the 144,000 virginal men, for instance, is part of this complication as it should be seen within the framework of the three female symbols. These figures also portray non-stereotypical images contrary to what Pippin argues as "male/men" (more will be discussed below). Thus, as Schüssler Fiorenza forcefully describes, "By establishing a one-to-one relationship between female/feminine language and symbol on the one hand and actual wo/men on the other, Pippin's reading does not destabilize but rather literalizes the gender inscriptions of the Apocalypse."<sup>48</sup> This type of reading will also fail to understand the "vacillation and ambiguity" of John's text.

It should be noted that a metaphor conveys layers of meaning.<sup>49</sup> Although the depiction of the woman clothed with the sun is not identical to the bride in the textual world (the first layer), they express a similar idea in the symbolic world, which is God's community (the second layer of meaning). While the heavenly Israel is symbolized as the woman in Revelation 12, all of Christ's faithful witnesses are symbolized by

the woman and the bride. These multiple layers of John's metaphors also provide a strong logic behind the transformation of the woman into the bride in Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9.<sup>50</sup> As Tavo forcefully suggests, "we would argue here that the woman of Revelation 12 and the bride/wife ought to be somehow connected or else the seer's intention would be seriously misconstrued."<sup>51</sup> The reappearance of the woman is expected at a future point in time; readers expect her to return after her temporary sojourn in the desert.<sup>52</sup> The journey in the desert is the link between the two figures. This is a transformative period, which will be discussed further below. The woman clothed with the sun transforms herself into the bride, who is also a warrior and victor in the grand finale of the cosmic saga.

#### The Bride (Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9)

John portrays God's faithful community as the New Jerusalem, i.e., the image of the bride (19:7-8; 21:2). The bride and the wedding banquet represent the victory of the Lamb. The conventional interpretation of the bride identifies her as the Church. This interpretation comes from Isaiah 54:5-7 in which Israel is portrayed as God's wife.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in Revelation 21:18-21, many kinds of precious stones (such as jasper, sapphire, agate, and emerald) become part of the construction of the New Jerusalem. This description may also have Isaiah 54:11-12 as its background. According to 4Q164, the Qumran community understands the text in Isaiah 54:11-21 as the "company of his chosen or the society of the *Yahad*."<sup>54</sup> By depicting New Jerusalem as the bride, John symbolizes the union between God's faithful communities with the Lamb as the bridegroom.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, based on Philo's and Josephus's explanations of Exodus 28 and 39, the woman's attributes may also indicate

<sup>48</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing*, 100.

<sup>49</sup>Hylen, "Metaphor," 778.

<sup>50</sup>For more detail about the definition of multiple metaphors, see Hylen, "Metaphor," 792-796.

<sup>51</sup>Tavo, *Woman*, 337.

<sup>52</sup>Tavo, *Woman*, 338.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Isaiah 61:10; 62:4-5.

<sup>54</sup>Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg, and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 213.

<sup>55</sup>Collins, "Feminine Symbolism," 25.

Israel's priestly status (cf. Rev. 1:6; 5:10). Philo and Josephus also use heavenly images, such as the sun, moon, and twelve stars (including a crown), to describe the vestment of Israel's high priest.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the portrayal of the bride also conveys Israel's priestly identity. Taken together with the image of the woman clothed with the sun, John underlines God's people having both divine and priestly statuses. From the view of Gentile converts, however, just as in Revelation 12 and 17:1-19:10 presents another combat myth pattern; the bride is part of the sacred marriage in a combat myth.<sup>57</sup> The sacred marriage is one element in the mythic pattern that follows a victory of the protagonist combatant "and/or the establishment of the kingship of the god."<sup>58</sup>

Some feminist scholars, however, argue for a negative evaluation of John's description of the bride. Pippin writes, "The bride is a woman as an object, adorned, and passive."<sup>59</sup> In contrast to this argument, I contend that the bride should be perceived as neither an inconsequential object nor a passive figure. First, the seer indicates in 19:7 that the bride has prepared (using the aorist active indicative of the verb ἑτοίμαζω) herself for the wedding. Second, in Revelation 19:7-8, the fine linen itself represents the righteous deeds of the saints (τὸ γὰρ βύσσινον τὰ δικαιώματα τῶν ἁγίων ἐστίν). The phrase τὰ δικαιώματα could be interpreted in two ways vis-à-vis the genitive noun. If "of the saints" is taken as an objective genitive, the linen represents the vindication (putting right) of the deeds of the saints by God.<sup>60</sup> The linen as God's vindication in Revelation 19:8 brings an allusion to Isaiah 61:10. The allusion underlines God's sovereign provision; the bride is capable of making herself ready because God has given her linen.<sup>61</sup> If this argument is correct, the bride

would be a passive figure, as is mostly argued by feminists.

However, there is an alternative reading of 19:7-8. I argue that the genitive case in τὰ δικαιώματα τῶν ἁγίων should be perceived as a subjective genitive. This form is the best interpretation for explicating Revelation 19:8. By interpreting 'of the saints' as a subjective genitive, the linen of righteousness is then the result of their perseverance. Then the fine linen is the reward for (or the result of) their righteous deeds. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the idea of perseverance, ὑπομονή, is important for the readers as part of their Christian lives and testimonies (1:9; 2:2,3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Revelation 19:8 could be interpreted as the act of the bride in adorning herself, whereby her action has been done within the realm of God's sovereignty. This interpretation is in line with John's description of the bride in the previous verse (19:7), which states that she "has prepared herself" (ἠτοίμασεν ἑαυτήν).<sup>63</sup> The bride is not only a woman that belongs to the Lamb but also a woman who participates in preparing for the wedding.<sup>64</sup> This active phrase emphasizes the woman's agency when she prepares herself; thus, she is not merely an object (someone who is being prepared).

It is also striking that in the Greco-Roman world, the bride's participation in making her own wedding attire was part of her development, which was also expected by society. Lynn Huber notes that the bride's attire was a significant tool for conveying a shift in the bride's identity at the wedding, signaled through

<sup>56</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* 3.164-172, 179-187; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 2.111-112.

<sup>57</sup>Collins, "Feminine Symbolism," 25.

<sup>58</sup>Collins, *Combat Myth*, 223.

<sup>59</sup>Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 72.

<sup>60</sup>Beale, *Revelation*, 936.

<sup>61</sup>Beale, *Revelation*, 938.

<sup>62</sup>Lynn Huber also argues that the phrase "of the saints" is a subjective genitive. See further, Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John's Apocalypse*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity, vol. 12 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 154.

<sup>63</sup>Huber, *Bride*, 150.

<sup>64</sup>Huber, *Bride*, 152.

her dress.<sup>65</sup> At her wedding, the bride adopted the attire of a married woman and no longer wore the clothing of a child. As a sign of her new identity, the bride would wear the *tunica recta*,<sup>66</sup> a garment ideally woven by the bride herself along with a bridal veil (*flammeum*), hairnet, and other embellishments.<sup>67</sup> John's portrayal of the bride's attire and her effort to prepare herself for the wedding may also have been drawn from this tradition. It would have been natural for Gentile converts in John's time to understand the active participation of the bride in Revelation 19 against this Greco-Roman wedding tradition.

Moreover, it should be noted that the passive word of δίδωμι in Rev. 19:8 conveys the passive idea that has been used throughout Revelation, i.e., giving someone permission to do something, likely by God (e.g., 6:8; 7:2; 9:3).<sup>68</sup> Any imagery that signifies the bride's dependency towards God that is depicted by the *passivum divinum* should not necessarily have a negative connotation. The bride herself is portrayed as the bride/wife of the lamb (19:7-8), and the lamb depicts a humble and meek figure. Far from a powerful image, the lamb signifies Jesus's full obedience to and dependency on God's will in his suffering and death.

This does not mean, however, that God plays no part at all in this process of transformation of the bride. Just as in the story of the woman clothed with the sun's story God has a vital role in protecting and nurturing the woman, in the imagery of the bride, God's judgement and victory over the evil forces functions prominently. Following the combat myth pattern, the wedding is part of God's victory. One can argue that the purity and radiance that the linen shows (19:8) depict God's transformative power given to the bride.

### The Journey in the Desert (Rev. 12:6, 13-17)

The seer mentions two occasions when the woman flees to the desert after her child is snatched away to God's throne (12:6, 14); in the second case, John adds an additional description that the woman is given (*passivum divinum*) two eagle wings so that she will be able to flee to the desert. In both of these verses, the seer says that the desert is the place that has been prepared by God so that the woman can be nourished. It is striking that these two verses form an *inclusio* for the cosmic battle in heaven between Michael (and his angels) and the fiery dragon (who is also with his angels); the battle results in the dragon and his comrades being thrown down to earth. The casting out of the dragon also signifies his defeat and the victory of those who are faithful to God until the end of their lives (12:11). However, the story does not end with this remark; the defeated dragon continues to pursue the woman and her descendants even after the woman flees to the desert. Nevertheless, Satan (the dragon) does not have the final word. John sees Satan's final fate, i.e., being thrown down to the lake of fire (20:7-10).

Therefore, the desert signifies a place of two seemingly paradoxical realities: God's provision of nourishment and the fierce battle of the woman and her descendants against the dragon. The depiction of the desert also echoes God's saving acts towards Israel in their Exodus in the wilderness. This period also becomes a challenging time when the faith of many Israelites is tested. A similar idea seems to be present as well in John's vision in Revelation 12. Although it should be noted that the prolonged period of the wilderness<sup>69</sup> experience for ancient Israel resulted from her disobedience to God, this is not the case in the portra-

<sup>65</sup>Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 77.

<sup>66</sup>In contrast to *toga virilis* or "toga of manhood" that signals a new identity for a boy in his "coming of Age," see Huber, *Thinking and Seeing*, 77.

<sup>67</sup>Huber, *Thinking and Seeing*, 77.

<sup>68</sup>Huber, *Bride*, 151.

<sup>69</sup>The sense of the delay of Christ's second coming also occurs in Revelation. In revelation, however, the delay signifies grace, a significant opportunity to repent.

yal of the woman and the rest of her children. As Edith Humphrey persuasively suggests, the desert is included in God's design: unpleasant and dangerous though it might be, it is a place of preparation and nourishment.<sup>70</sup>

Many scholars have often mentioned the connection between the image of the whore and the bride, and how the close literary structure of the description of these two figures should be seen together in tandem. The whore should be seen together with the bride since the two figures construct a framework of *topos* of two women, an evil woman, and a good woman. Both the whore and the bride are the personification of two cities, Babylon (17:5, 8) and the New Jerusalem (21:2) respectively; the whore is the contrasting image of the bride. Many interpreters, however, often overlook the connection between the woman and the bride and the transformation that takes place between these two images and the two realities that they represent. The period between the appearance of the woman in Revelation 12 and the bride in Revelation 19 signifies a crucial time in the transformation of the former into the latter, which takes place during the woman's day in the desert (ἡ ἔρημος). This period includes many episodes, which consist of several other pictures or symbols. The particularly important ones for our discussion are the whore in Revelation 17 and the 144,000 virginal men.

The whore and the 144,000 virginal men should be interpreted through the lens of this "period in between" in the desert, and how they function in elucidating the transformation of the woman in Revelation 12. Regarding the whore, it is true that many readers cannot escape the sadistic imagery of her destruction in Revelation 18. This violent picture

is unavoidable since the disturbing imagery of her defeat echoes the destructive and oppressive nature of the Roman imperial system and its active rebellious actions against God.<sup>71</sup> These violent deeds then return against herself. Nevertheless, God's people are summoned to come out of her (18:4), and the same call is also directed toward the nations and their kings. When people heed this urgent call, they are invited to join the woman of Revelation 12's journey in the desert, on her way to the wedding with the Lamb. Therefore, at the end, the bride replaces the whore; the former "redeems" the latter (people who come out of it) so that the whole world will not end tragically and may enjoy living in the New Jerusalem, where there is no more mourning, crying, or pain (21:3-4; 22:24-26).

Similarly, the 144,000 virginal men are also part of the woman clothed with the sun's journey in the desert. From a Greco-Roman worldview, a depiction of a group of virginal men is certainly counter to the culture. First, the word "virgin" (παρθένος) is often used for an unmarried girl, although sometimes it also refers to "a sense of sexual inexperience."<sup>72</sup> As Lynn Huber also adds, "Describing man this way challenges the ancient valuation of male power being evidenced through sexual conquest and fathering heirs."<sup>73</sup> Through this imagery, John changes the familiar notion into something new. Readers are urged to redefine the worldview, which is not according to the ungodly culture and tradition or worldly expectations, but godly principles. The vision transforms the way they see the world and their own place in it.

Moreover, this image does not represent the exclusivity of God's salvation, which seems to include only men. Rather, they highlight the

<sup>70</sup>Humphrey, "A Tale," 87.

<sup>71</sup>Besides its oppressive social-economic system, the rebellious nature of the Roman Empire included the worship of Rome as goodness called Roma. She was often depicted wearing a mural crown. She often appeared with a spear, a helmet, and with one breast. Roma was particularly famous among the cities in Asia Minor (and the eastern part of the Empire). Some

of these cities, such as Smyrna, Ephesus, and Pergamum, built a temple dedicated to Roma. Huber, "City Women," 311-312. This historical background provides clues on why John specifically wrote to these seven churches in Asia minor.

<sup>72</sup>Huber, "City Women," 318.

<sup>73</sup>Huber, "City Women," 318.

issue of purity and full devotion to Christ. The portrayal of these men alludes to the story of the Fallen Angels in the Book of Watchers.<sup>74</sup> While the book of Watchers provides a story of angels who lost their priestly status (were "defiled") by taking wives, in contrast, the virginal men mentioned are the men who did not fall into the 'same' sin. The book of Revelation depicts the virginal men as a special group within the church, God's priestly kingdom, replacing the priesthood of the Fallen Angels.<sup>75</sup> In fact, these men are part of the woman's identity in her transformative journey in the desert as God's faithful people. The woman is depicted as a community of warriors, whose lives are pure and who are fully devoted to God and ready to fight battles with evil forces. The vision of the eschatological wedding and the New Jerusalem guarantees her victory over the dragon and his lot.

### Lessons from John's Feminine Symbols for Contemporary Churches

The discussions above has shown that John's feminine symbolisms do not suggest a marginalization towards women. The fact that the seer utilizes feminine figures to depict the universal church of Christ and locates them in the centre and climax of his apocalyptic prophecy suggests the opposite. These female figures hold important roles in God's salvation plan for the whole world. The woman of Revelation 12 and the rest of her children represent both local churches and the Church; they are Christ's followers from every nation, tribe, and language (cf. 7:9). Just as John urges his readers to identify themselves with the woman, we are called on to be part of her story too. Readers, including female readers, are invited to be her voices, calling people out for rep-

entance. John's portrayal of the woman encourages many female readers to show their active participation, and to demonstrate their courage and determination to follow Christ's calling for them.

Furthermore, just as the seer encourages his readers to identify themselves with the figures of the woman and the bride, he also urges his readers (churches in Asia Minor) to understand their experience through the conceptual image of the transformative desert.<sup>76</sup> The woman in Revelation 12 is a partial image of the identity of the churches in John's time. Through the development and transformative process in the desert, they will reach their final image as the bride of the lamb. Understanding this time of growth and what they should do in their journey in the desert becomes a crucial task for all of Jesus's faithful disciples amid hostile environments. A deeper understanding of this transforming journey in the desert also offers a vital reminder, insight, and encouragement for modern churches in the twenty first century, where Christians often face adverse circumstances.

There are several lessons that we can take from this transformative journey of the woman in Revelation 12 to the bride in Revelation 21. First, the woman of Revelation 12's journey emphasizes the corporate nature of our calling as Christ's disciples, while at the same time acknowledging the uniqueness and differences among each of our contexts.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, there is the juxtaposition between the particularity and unity of being Christ's followers in John's apocalypse. The book begins with the messages for the seven churches, which convey a pastoral concern for them. The messages to the seven churches in Asia

<sup>74</sup>Adela Yarbro Collins, "Women's History and the Book of Revelation," in *SBL 1987 Seminar Papers*, ed. K. H. Richards (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1987), 80-91.

<sup>75</sup>Daniel C. Olson, "'Those Who Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women:' Revelation 14:4 and the Book of Enoch," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (1997): 492-510, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43723015>.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Tavo, *Woman*, 167.

<sup>77</sup>Cf. A similar argument is found in Mueller, who suggests, "The author seems to take it for granted that a Christian cannot live his or her life in self-chosen or self-inflicted isolation." Ekkehardt Mueller, "Introduction to the Ecclesiology of the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2001): 214, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jats/vol12/iss2/14>.

show that each church has its own strengths and weaknesses along with its own struggles. The pastoral interest, however, does not stop there; it functions as the main motive throughout the entire book.<sup>78</sup> John portrays the woman's journey with the seven churches in mind. Despite these differences, John's vision reminds us of the unity in our identity and mission. In fact, Revelation invites its readers to embrace a "radical" unity, which can be understood in two ways.

First, John urges all of his readers to identify themselves as the woman in Revelation 12 who fights for her purity and faithfulness on her way to her wedding. The text also invites Christ's followers from many generations to do the same. This calling demands that modern churches evaluate their effort(s) for unity. Some reflections are worth noting. For instance, how far do the divisions of denominational boundaries that churches have set throughout the history of the Church help us to understand our identity as Christ's faithful disciples, or do these 'borders' detach us from their identity as Christ's church and body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-29)? Focusing on our Indonesian context, how far do we strive for an interdenominational endeavor to reach out to the world around us and to make Christ's love more visible in all of the islands in Indonesia? How far does our common calling to be Christ's faithful witnesses affect our ways of solving internal conflicts in our churches? Moreover, how often and sincerely are we praying for our brothers and sisters who are persecuted because of their faith in many parts of Indonesia and the world? They certainly deserve our unceasing prayers, help, and intentional aid and best efforts to relieve or alleviate their pain and suffering. After all, we are all together on this journey in the desert waiting for Christ's return!

Second, the journey in the desert illustrates the life of the Church in between the two vic-

tories (in between Christ's event on earth and his second coming) in which we expect to find adversaries and rejections while at the same time being nourished by God. This is the period of both comfort and challenge. Regarding the latter, the length of the desert period, the 1260 days or 42 months (3.5 years), illustrates the temporary nature of this hostile period (cf. in contrast to the number 'seven', which represents wholeness). Therefore, the devil's seeming "triumphs" against God's people and the suffering that they bring to the Church do not have the final word, although it is allowed by God.<sup>79</sup> Just as the seer perceived the life of the Church of his generation as encountering a troublesome time due to the devil's constant trials, John also declares to his readers that the victory of those who faithful to Christ is assured by God.<sup>80</sup>

This reflection should also bring enormous comfort to whoever identifies themselves with the woman. For Christ's disciples in Indonesia, it is certainly not difficult to understand what it means to live under oppression and persecution. Nevertheless, one of the dangers for churches in Indonesia is the chance of experiencing "numbness" of the pain, which leads to ignorance, as we may try to cope with it and solve it with our own strengths. In contrast to these attitudes, John reminds us that while the problems, challenges, and tribulations are real, God's protection of and power in regard to Christ's church are also real. The war has been won by Christ; the dragon has been removed from heaven and will be removed from the earth. What is left are the "small" battles, and our final victory is guaranteed.

Just like the portrayal of the transformation of the woman into the bride who adorns herself for the wedding, in John's vision the seven churches were encouraged to keep doing good works, not to tolerate evildoers, and to keep alert and testify fearlessly about Christ's powerful name through their missions (cf. 2:2,

<sup>78</sup>Tavo, *Woman*, 356.

<sup>79</sup>Cf. Humphrey, "A Tale," 88.

<sup>80</sup>Cf. Tavo, *Woman*, 292.

10, 13, 3:3, 8). By doing these active works, they were called to be Christ's witnesses, and this was the only way for them to conquer their adversaries (21:7, cf. 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21). The time of waiting for the second coming of Christ is a time of active resistance and not a passive period of waiting for God's intervention. John's readers are urged to resist the lure brought by the powerful yet oppressive Roman social-economic system (18:3, 7), which idolizes materialism. The same command is also given to modern churches, i.e., how they should be critical in dealing with "worldly" ideologies, such as their view of wealth and prosperity. Therefore, the Church in the modern era should also demonstrate its active contribution to the world by testifying the Gospel of Christ while at the same time keeping itself pure and blameless amid a hostile environment (cf. Phil. 2:12-18).

John's exhortation speaks to Indonesian churches as well. The Great Commission should be at the heart of every church in Indonesia, and it should be done with faithfulness. First things first! The intensity of the "journey in the desert" certainly does not allow laziness or unpreparedness on our part; otherwise, our lampstand(s) would be removed (Rev. 2:4-5). Consequently, as Christ declares, "Let everyone who has ears listen to what the spirit says to the churches!" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

## CONCLUSION

A closer look at the figures of the woman in Revelation 12 and the bride in Revelation 19 and 21 offers significant insights into the reality of the Church in John's time and how the seer urges the readers to see their identity through the lens of these two female images. John portrays both feminine figures as active characters in proclaiming their testimony about Christ despite opposition in the Roman empire. These images depict powerful figures, the warriors, who successfully conquer their enemies with their faithfulness to Christ even until death. These images offer a liberating

image for women and inclusivity in Christ's Church. The link between the woman and the bride is particularly important; it provides important insights to modern churches in terms of how to be Christ's faithful churches even amid a hostile environment in the secular, post-modern, and post-Christian world.

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

### Author's Contributions and Responsibilities

I am responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. I have read and approved the final manuscript.

### Competing Interests

I have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately affected them in writing this article.

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