FEMININE SYMBOLISM IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Feminine symbols are prominent in the second half of the book of Revelation, which extends from 12:1 to 22:5. Symbols can be approached in a variety of ways. In the twentieth century a dominant mode of interpreting symbols among biblical scholars has been the history-of-religions approach. This method has sought to discover the origin and history of various symbols and to discern their meaning and function in one text by comparing it with other texts from the same historical context and culture. This approach is very illuminating for the analysis of the three major feminine symbols in Revelation: the woman clothed with the sun in ch. 12, the prostitute of ch. 17 and the bride of the Lamb in chs. 19 and 21. The vision of the woman clothed with the sun has a highlighted position as the opening account of the second half of the book.

The traditional Catholic interpretation of the woman clothed with the sun is that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus, since the child she brings forth is the Messiah. Most Protestant exegetes, and now many Catholic exegetes, have found that interpretation unlikely. Alternative interpretations are that she is personified Israel, Jerusalem, or the people of God. Such personifications are common in the prophetic traditions of Israel.

A history-of-religions approach leads to the conclusion that the woman is presented as a goddess. The vision is of a high goddess with astral attributes: the sun is her garment, the moon her footstool, stars her crown. The Greek word ἀστήρ could mean star or

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1 For an argument that the book of Revelation is structured into two main parts, see Adela Yarbro Collins, The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation (HDR 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 5–32.
3 Hos. 1–3; Ezek. 16, 23; Isa. 54, 60, 62, 66; Mic. 4: 9–10.
constellation, so it is likely that her crown is the circle of heaven, the Zodiac. These attributes suggest that she is a cosmic queen who has power over the rhythm of night and day and over human destiny, since the Zodiac symbolizes Fate.

Only a few goddesses in Hellenistic and early Roman times were depicted in such exalted fashion. These attributes, especially the sun and the Zodiac, were usually associated with the male high-god, Zeus or his equivalent. Three goddesses who were so described were the Mother Goddess worshipped at Ephesus, who was identified with the Greek Artemis and the Roman Diana; the Syrian goddess Atargatis, whose name is a combination of Astarte and Anat; and Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess who was worshipped in new forms all over the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

The iconography of Isis seems to be the closest to the woman of Revelation 12. She was called “female sun,” “second sun,” “mistress of heaven,” “mistress of the stars,” and “mistress of the four regions of heaven” in temple inscriptions in Egypt in the late kingdom. In a novel written during the second century CE, an appearance of Isis to a man named Lucius is described. He addresses her as “Queen of Heaven.” She is called “a very bright apparition.” On the midpoint of her forehead is a round disk like the moon. Her robe resembles the night sky: it is shining black and covered with stars; in the midst of the stars is the moon in mid-month.

The plot of Revelation 12 involves an attack of a monster on a pregnant woman in order to destroy her and especially her child. Since the child is the one who will rule the nations, the implication is that the dragon wishes to prevent the child's kingship in order to be ruler himself. In Egyptian mythology, Set kills his brother Osiris in a struggle for kingship. Isis, who is their sister and also Osiris' wife, revives Osiris, who becomes king of the underworld. She conceives a child by the resuscitated Osiris, Horus, who, when he is grown, kills Set and becomes king. This complex of myths is similar in general outline to the plot of Revelation 12.

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