

# ENGENDERING THE MILLENNIUM

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## THE JOY OF (APOCALYPTIC) SEX

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The Apocalypse's canonical status does give it a special religious and cultural power. But why is violence condoned when it is in scripture and when God is the actor? This book troubles me in different ways than it troubled the Eastern churches in the fourth century C.E. or Martin Luther in the Protestant Reformation. The problems of holy war, ecocide, gynocide, and the portrayal of the deities as wrathful powers just will not go away. I see the Apocalypse as a misogynist male fantasy of the end of time (1992:105). On this note, a feminist biblical scholar at a conference several years ago proposed that I work through my "no" to the text to get to "yes." My response was and is that I want to say "no" to this text, for ultimately, I do not find the Apocalypse to be a liberating story.

I want to address three major issues that come out of the responses to my work over the last five years. First of all, a postmodern reading enables a reader to enter the text at multiple points or gaps. I imagine the Apocalypse as a type of hypertext, and I can enter the imaginary (fantastic) world of the text/story wherever I can imagine an opening. For example, I could choose to enter at any of the following points:

gender	war	ecocide
violence	New Jerusalem	throne
beasts	Babylon	gynocide
Jezebel	angels	abyss
trance	fear	fire
hymns	robes	Pergamum
eating	mouth	vomit

Of course, there are many other openings into this text, and some are openings of openings (abyss, mouth). Apocalypse is the ultimate never-ended story; chaos is recreated and scattered over the universe. These apocalyptic scatterings are what I am learning to read in my culture. The multiple texts and images of apocalypse that are present speak in different languages, the tongues of doom, the voices of heaven. With every new entry into the biblical text, I must learn new languages -- autobiographical and ideological criticisms, fantasy and horror theories, the discourses of race, class, and sexualities.

Sexuality in the Apocalypse is complex. First, there is the male gaze on the sexually active female, either Jezebel and Whore or the Virgin who gives birth (ch. 12) and the Bride of

Christ. Then there are the 144,000 virginal men who enter into the Bride of Christ/New Jerusalem; I referred to this scene as "mass intercourse" in my earlier book (1992:80). The husband, Christ/Lamb of God, allows (wills?) this entering, after which the 144,000 men become the Bride. The Bride becomes the holy city Jerusalem (Apoc 21:9ff.). I now think that the 144,000 do not want to have the Bride but instead want to be the Bride. These faithful servants of God "reign forever and ever" (Apoc 22:5), so they must have thrones also. Are the 144,000 Queens of Heaven? Is their desire to be Brides of Christ? Or to usurp the Whore's queenly power and position? Keller relates, ". . . we may behold the Whore of Babylon as a great 'queen' indeed: imperial patriarchy in drag" (1996:77). So is the Whore actually the male city-state in drag? What "vested interests" are there in such cross-dressing (in "fine linen, bright and pure" in 19:8 and all the precious jewels and plants of heaven in chs 21--22)? What is really happening in the "Rapture"?

What kinds of transformation are occurring in the virginal males (Apoc 14:4--5) who enter the Bride of Christ and then become her? Is the heaven of the Apocalypse an all male domain, or is it a place of some men transforming into women by violation of the Whore ("Come out of her, my people" in 18:4), and other men by their virginal state and status as among the 144,000 and their violation of the Bride? Also are women (as part of the great company of the redeemed in ch. 7, the souls under the altar in 6:9, and "my people" in 18:4) having sexual relations with the Whore (and the Jezebel in 2:22) and eventually becoming men who become women through sexual acts with women? I do not think Keller is correct that the Whore is patriarchy in drag, since cities were considered female in the ancient world. Also, there is no indication in the Hebrew Bible Israel as God's wife is a patriarchal country in drag. In a reversal of some early Christian beliefs that women's bodies had to become male after death to reach heaven, must the male body in the Apocalypse become female (or at least be in female dress) to dwell with God? Are the 144,000 (and whoever else is saved for this realm) the mass "female" consorts of the male God? Could this be the ultimate of what Jean Genet calls "gender fuck"? -- the transgression of every gender boundary and heightening of ambiguities with deities and angels and all the company of heaven? Or perhaps this paradise is "gender rape," and heaven is the sequel of the rape of the Whore and of the Bride. Is God the grand director and voyeur of this heavenly orgy? Is there role switching in which God and the readers are voyeurs? Does fascination with the throne room represent some of the obsession with the monarchy and the sex lives of the rich, famous and powerful? Are we as readers the paparazzi, chasing down worldly suffering and disasters for a glimpse of the deity and his "coming" apocalypse?

The ultimate bonding of God and men occurs in the divine marriage. Male believers become women/brides in order to dwell for eternity in holy matrimony with the deity. The female church (like the traditional minyan) is all men. The male body identifies with the male God. The male becomes female to unite with God -- Eve's trick without Eve, and without God's interference. Lilith and Eve (and Asherah, God's consort) are demonized to make room for the men who become women to unite with God. By becoming women, men can love a man (God) without the threat of homosexuality. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz states, "By imagining men as wives of God, Israelite religion was partially able to preserve the heterosexual complementarity that helped to define the culture" (1994:3). He adds that "When males wished to know or be known by God, a potentially homoerotic relationship was avoided by feminizing one of the parties involved" (1994:18). Eden was a place of male and female, a heterosexist place, while at the other end of Bible the heavenly paradise is a place of gender ambiguity (a transgendered paradise?). Unity at last, but on God's terms. What does reigning with God entail? With no more

procreation necessary, are men allowed to cross over the previously defined gender boundaries? According to Bjorn Krondorfer, "A peculiarity in the history of Western Christianity is that it does not worship the *linga* directly but rather divinizes the male body by effeminizing it" (1996:9). The men in the heavenly throne room are penisless but still retain phallic power.

Does this text bring comfort or disruption to the believer? What of the groups of redeemed outside of the 144,000 that may or may not include women? Whatever the gender make-up of the redeemed groups, God requires the stereotypical passivity of women worshipping at the feet of the master. The redeemed even have the names of Christ and God on their foreheads (Apoc 14:1) making them truly slaves of Christ. Is there bondage or freedom in heaven? Heaven is as much a place of terror as hell. Or as the ad for a recent film *Sphere* announces, "Terror can fill any space." The "certainties" of heaven include strange transformations and ambiguous sexual boundaries.

Thus, ambiguous sexualities as well as terror fills the throne room of God. Are the brides of Christ transvestite prostitutes "made good"? Moore points out that the Greek term for "dogs" in the list of outsiders at the end of the Apocalypse can also relate to male prostitutes (1996:129). Is the Apocalypse engaging in a bit of hypocrisy -- male prostitutes of the pagan cults on the outside, but God's special male-brides (male order brides?) on the inside. The Bride (singular) becomes the excess, Brides (plural). There is the excess of desire, of *jouissance*, of the never-ending story in the Apocalypse. As Genet would say, "Their caricature is grotesque" (Millett 1979:17). God has more wives than Solomon, whom he condemned. It is not clear in the text whether the marital relationship between God and his brides is sexual or not. In this kinky heaven where sexual acts may or may not occur, there is nonetheless endless unity with God. This heavenly bliss is postponed, and the reader returns to earth; such bliss is a future hope (?) that will occur after possible suffering. What remains is the terror of the Revelations.

This message is still not liberating for our late twentieth century feminist and pro-gay liberation movements. Of course, I am using twentieth century language and terms to define a first century worldview. I make this hermeneutical leap because I want to figure out how to read the Apocalypse in this century of genocide and AIDS. In his reading Eilberg-Schwartz is more positive and finds "various forms of intimate relations to the divine. I find this 'polymorphously perverse theology' extremely liberating" (1994:242). He sees an opportunity for more diverse ways of identifying with the divine. One might be able to argue from all these ambiguities that God ultimately does not intend male and female in the traditional, gender-stereotyped way we thought. What of the pronouncement at baptism: "...there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), makes the believer genderless. Heaven is not genderless, but neither is it gender bound. What is God doing in this text? God can morph into Son of Man, Lamb, Christ, Spirit, Father, King, Lord God Almighty. The 144,000 change into the Brides. What remains is the misogyny and exclusion by a powerful, wrathful deity. In the Apocalypse the kingdom of God is the kingdom of perversity.