

THE WRATH AND THE REWARD: PARALLELS BETWEEN
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF THYATIRA AND
THE VISIONS OF REVELATION

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The letters to the seven churches of Revelation have received increasing attention as many scholars move away from viewing them as disjointed epistles in an apocalyptic book to viewing them as deliberately introducing key phrases, concepts, and themes that are significant in the rest of the book.¹ Just as each of the letters obviously include elements of the initial description of Christ in chapter one, they also anticipate elements of the visions to come and by doing so ground them in a local reality. In turn, these visions can shed light upon the local situations of the churches. This paper will investigate the parallels between the letter to the church of Thyatira and the visions of Revelation in order to highlight the impact the Thyatiran church would have received through being confronted by the divine perspective of its own situation. The subsequent graphic and cosmic visions reveal in a shocking manner the consequences of moral and spiritual compromise, as well as the reward of authority for those who remain faithful to Christ.

The difficulty interpreters encounter in understanding the letter to Thyatira is illustrated by Hemer's introductory statement on Thyatira: "The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities."² Because of our lack of archeological and literary evidence, most reconstructions of the specifics of the Thyatiran situation are largely conjecture, including the one presented in this paper. But the basic scenario of all reconstructions agree that Christ is sternly addressing spiritual and moral compromise within the church because of the false teachings of a local prophet. Severe judgment

¹ Though many parallels are noted in passing by most commentators, G. K. Beale devotes the most attention to them. In his *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, JSNTSup 166 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 299, "the primary purpose of the letters is to express the major themes of the following visionary portion of the book (Rev. 4-21), both of which exhibit an 'already-and-not-yet' end-time perspective. . . . the letters, especially their repeated conclusions, anticipate the symbolic visions and even explain the theological purpose of the visions."

² Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 106.

will fall upon that prophet and her followers, but authority to rule the nations will be given to those who remain pure and faithful to Christ. This is also the overall message of Revelation, and its echoes within the visions, both loud and faint, provide intriguing insights into the marvelous unity of Revelation and the force of its message upon past and present readers.³

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE SON OF GOD (2:18)

In the introduction to this letter, Jesus' title for himself is the "Son of God". While this is the only time this title appears in Revelation, it harkens back to John's vision of someone "like a son of man" in 1:13,⁴ a messianic title taken from Daniel 7 and 10.⁵ "Son of Man" is also found in Revelation 14:14 of a crowned figure seated on a cloud, an image directly taken from Daniel 7. God is described as Jesus' father in 1:6; 3:5, 21 and 14:1, and Jesus (frequently as "the Lamb") shares titles, worship, and a throne with God in nearly every chapter.⁶ This relationship is also found at the end of this very letter, in which Jesus speaks of the authority given to him from his Father (2:27). Jesus as the "Son of God" is the Messiah, in complete alliance with God and possessing of his power and authority. His words to the Thyatirans are to be taken with utter

³ Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974), 335; quoted in Leland Ryken, ed., *The New Testament in Literary Criticism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 313, calls Revelation "the most carefully structured long work in the Bible."

⁴ All English scripture quotations are taken from the NIV, and all Greek quotations from NA27.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 259, presents further intriguing connections between 2:18 Daniel and Psalm 2 and the Thyatiran situation. While the link with Daniel 7 and 10 is obvious, Beale believes it also echoes the story of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace in Daniel 3. For refusing to bow to the Babylonian king (the country symbolizing evil and compromise in Revelation), Daniel's friends are thrown into a blazing furnace but are delivered by one like a "son of God(s)" (Dan 3:25). "Just as that 'son of God' protected them, even in the midst of persecution (Dan 3:25), so will Christ do the same spiritually for those who are faithful in Thyatira." The title of "son [of God]" is also taken from Psalm 2, which exhorts the reader to reverence, serve, and take refuge in the authoritative Anointed One, or face the wrathful retaliation of the Father. The exhortation of this Psalm underlies the entire letter to Thyatira, as well as the entire book of Revelation.

⁶ Titles: 17:14, 19:16; 22:13; worship: 5:6, 12, 13; the throne: 3:21, 5:6, 12, 7:17, 21:5, 22:1, 3; other linkage of God and the "Lamb": 5:13-14, 6:16, 7:10, 17, 11:15, 12:10, 14:4, 21:22-23.

seriousness, and it is he, not the Roman emperor or the local deity Apollos Tyrimnaeus, who is to be revered and obeyed as the true Son of God.⁷

Jesus is described as one with eyes “like blazing fire” (2:18). This phrase is taken from the vision of Jesus in 1:14. Mounce suggests that blazing eyes represent “the penetrating power of Christ’s ability to see through the seductive arguments of Jezebel and those who were being led astray by her pernicious teaching,”⁸ and Malina sees a symbolic link with the later description of Jesus as the one who searches out minds and hearts (2:23).⁹ “Eyes like blazing fire” is found again in exact form in 19:12 in the depiction of the crowned, bloody conqueror who rides from heaven to “judge and make war” upon the nations who are deserving of God’s wrath. The power of his fury upon the compromised and the glory of his favor upon the faithful as depicted in 19:11-21 command the Thyatiran’s full attention to this same Jesus now speaking.

Jesus’ feet are “like burnished bronze” (2:18), a phrase that is also taken in exact form from 1:14. While a similar description is found in 10:1, where a mighty angel’s feet are like “fiery pillars,” the word χαλκολίβανου is not found elsewhere in Greek. Worth is representative of a number of scholars who believe this is a local term referring to and challenging the authority of the prestigious brass guilds of Thyatira.¹⁰ It could also refer to the gold-like qualities of

⁷ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A. (Dallas: Word, 1997), 201-202; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 259.

⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation. The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 85.

⁹ Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 58: “Eyes-heart constitute a symbolic zone of the human person that includes knowing, willing, and judging, while hands-feet constitute a symbolic body zone referring to activity, behavior. . . . The eyes and feet of the cosmic Jesus now play out in his judgment, proving that he is the one who searches out minds and hearts (eyes) and who rewards as works deserve (feet).”

¹⁰ Roland H. Worth, Jr., *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Greco-Asian Culture* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 161; Hemer, *Letters*, 111-117; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 259-260. Also, Malina and Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary*, 58: “The bronze feet might intimate that the son of God is the true patron of the bronze guild in the city” and is linked symbolically with rewarding works in 2:23.

Thyatira's bronze to emphasize the value and purity of Christ, or it could be a challenge to the emperors and gods represented locally by bronze statues.¹¹

COMMENDATION OF THE CHURCH (2:19)

Following the format of the letters in Revelation 2-3, Jesus commends the Thyatiran church in 2:19. "Love," "faith[fulness]," "service," and "endurance" are subordinated to τὰ ἔργα and define the substance of their "works."¹² While ἀγάπη is only elsewhere mentioned in Jesus' rebuke of the Ephesian church (2:4), and διακονία occurs only here, πίστις and ὑπομονή are used together again in the twin exhortations of 13:10b and 14:12.¹³ 13:10 concludes the account of the beast's persecution upon the saints who refuse to worship him or receive his mark, when faithful endurance is needed. Revelation 14:6-11 warns of the dreadful eternal punishment of the beast and those who receive his mark, a far worse fate than any temporary earthly persecution. But those who endure and remain faithful to Jesus unto death will "rest from their labor, for their deeds (ἔργα) will follow them" (14:13).¹⁴ While Jesus commends the Thyatirans' faithful endurance, the continuing visions warn that external pressure to become unfaithful will also increase, and they will need to continue standing fast to Jesus unto death itself.

¹¹ Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 161-162.

¹² Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 202.

¹³ 13:10b: "This calls for patient endurance (ἡ ὑπομονή) and faithfulness (ἡ πίστις) on the part of the saints"; "This calls for patient endurance (ἡ ὑπομονή) on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful (τῆν πίστιν) to Jesus." The other appearances of these words are in commendations to other churches (2:2-3, 13; 3:10).

¹⁴ Interestingly, 14:6-13 also contains the first proclamation of woe against Babylon the Great, who "made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries" (14:8), a theme that becomes the primary focus of chapters 17-18 and forms the most significant parallel to the letter to Thyatira in all of Revelation.

CONDEMNATION OF THE COMPROMISED (2:20-23)

The Thyatirans have fought a good fight in regards to external pressure to compromise, but a deadly compromising influence existed within the church itself. They tolerated a self-styled “prophetess,” whom Jesus called “Jezebel,” whose teachings led believers astray into sexual immorality and idolatry. The description of Jezebel’s harlotries and the divine judgment that will fall upon her and her followers in 2:20-23 are heightened drastically by the parallel figure “Babylon” in chapters 17-18. Through the lens of divine perspective, this prophetess and her teaching are unmasked, and the danger of the Thyatiran’s situation is shockingly revealed.¹⁵

The Identity of “Jezebel” and Her Teaching

The questions of who Jezebel was and what her teaching consisted of have stirred up much speculation. Some suggest she was Sibyl Sambathe, a local priestess-oracle who possibly delved into Jewish or Gnostic “magic.”¹⁶ Others posit that she was the wife of the bishop (“angel”) of the church,¹⁷ or an influential patroness/hostess of one of the churches,¹⁸ or even symbolic for a group of false teachers.¹⁹ At any rate, she was a person of influence inside the

¹⁵ Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 311; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 155.

¹⁶ Hemer, *Letters*, 117-119; Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 163 (who sees similarity between a converted pagan priestess and the Jezebel of the OT); Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 87 (who discounts this theory). Intriguingly, Hemer includes some ancient descriptions of Sibyl’s origin as Babylonian, Chaldean or Egyptian. If the former are true, then the link between Jezebel and “Babylon” of chapters 17-18 would be even more blatant.

¹⁷ Hemer, 117; Mounce, 86 (discounted by both). This theory is based on a tenuous textual variant that inserts σοῦ after τῆν γυναῖκα.

¹⁸ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 203: “It is possible that ‘Jezebel’ was a patroness or hostess of one of the house churches that made up the Christian community at Thyatira who found herself in conflict with other Christian patrons, probably over an attempt to accommodate Christian practices to the surrounding culture by justifying the eating of meat offered to idols”.

¹⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 260, likens it to the “the woman and her children” in 2 John 1.

church who by her teachings encouraged sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:20). Apart from these specifics the nature of her teaching is unknown, though some have compared it to that of Balaam in Pergamum or the Nicolaitans in Ephesus.²⁰

Most commentators believe that the substance of Jezebel's teaching was the encouragement of Christian participation in trade guilds. The number and power of these guilds was the most noteworthy feature of the city of Thyatira.²¹ Participation in trade guilds afforded economic gain and social benefits, but it also meant taking part in worship of the patron gods and sexual licentiousness.²² Not participating likely meant social stigma, unemployment, or even mild persecution from the guilds.²³ This scenario cannot be proved, but it leads to a number of intriguing echoes with the ensuing visions of Revelation. It also is congruent with our knowledge of the original Jezebel this woman is compared to:

The Old Testament match of Jezebel and Ahab was made to cement the commercial ties between Tyre and Ahab's Samaria. The successful trade link brought prosperity to Samaria but also encouraged the importation of pagan deities from Tyre. The parallel with Thyatira is thought to be that Jezebel encouraged religious and moral compromises within local guilds as a means of protecting the economic interests and prosperity of Christian businessmen. Just as Samaria without its pagan trade partner would have been grievously weakened, the believing businessman of Thyatira would have had his markets and product sources gravely narrowed, if not eliminated, if his religion caused him to be on the outs with those in the same trade.²⁴

²⁰ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 122; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 86-87.

²¹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 216: "the dominance of the trade guilds in Thyatira culture [was] a condition that did not exist elsewhere"; Hemer, *Letters*, 108: "Their prominence at Thyatira is quite exceptional."

²² Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 155: "The guilds were normally up to their necks in idolatry, even as part of their guild rituals, and open condoners and practitioners of sexual immorality at their guild social functions." Hemer, 109: "their feasts were essentially religious occasions, which took place in the temple."

²³ John Paul Pritchard, *A Literary Approach to the New Testament* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 311; Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 155.

²⁴ Worth, 163; Hemer, 117-120, and Mounce, *The book of Revelation*, 86, concur.

Two Jezebels and a Whore

If these similarities actually existed between the two Jezebels, and the proposed situation involving local guild membership is correct, then parallels abound. The most obvious is the Great Whore of Babylon found in Revelation 17-19.²⁵ As Revelation is so dependent upon the Old Testament for its imagery, an interpretive triangle is needed between the Old Testament Jezebel, the Thyatiran Jezebel, and the Whore of Babylon in which mutual similarities are noted and each sheds light upon the other.²⁶

All three female figures are portrayed as arrogant and influential leaders. The OT Jezebel was a vain queen of Israel who was the true “power behind the throne” and wielded her absolute authority ruthlessly.²⁷ Later in Revelation, Babylon boasts, “I sit as queen” (18:7), and, dressed in royal regalia (17:4), she “rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18) by controlling the wealth of the world (ch. 18). Though not a queen, the Thyatiran Jezebel was a self-proclaimed prophetess of considerable influence in the church, and her arrogance is revealed in her refusal to repent (2:21). Babylon’s confident boast and Jezebel’s evil intentions echo the thoughts of her heart.

All three are accused of immorality and of seducing others into adultery. While the Old Testament does not mention literal immorality for Jezebel, she is infamous for leading her husband and the nation of Israel into spiritual adultery through the worship of Baal (1 Kgs 16:31; 2 Kgs 19:22). As the worship of Baal typically involved sexual acts, it is possible that she was

²⁵ Hemer, *Letters*, 126-127; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 204. I agree with Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 426, that “Babylon” is not *Jezebel*, but is “a symbol for that which allures, tempts, seduces and draws people away from God,” which is exactly Jezebel’s crime. As the two have the same purpose, they can be painted in the same colors.

²⁶ Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 311-315, uses this same model and figures as an example “of the ‘shock-effect’ function of the apocalyptic parables” (311).

²⁷ Her vanity is shown by her painted eyes and carefully arranged hair in 2 Kings 9:30.

also guilty of literal harlotry (cf. 2 Kgs 9:22).²⁸ The Whore of Babylon, whose garments resemble that of a high-class prostitute's (17:4), is called "the mother of prostitutes" (17:5), and her adulterous nature is a constant refrain: she leads astray (πλανάω) the kings and nations of the world into adultery with herself (14:8, 17:1-2; 18:3, 9, 23; 19:2).²⁹

Likewise, the Thyatiran Jezebel leads her followers astray (πλανάω) into sexual immorality (πορνεία) (2:20). There is debate whether this immorality is literal or whether it is figurative of the spiritual prostitution of idolatry. Most commentators prefer the latter interpretation, as it is the primary usage among the Old Testament prophets that saturate Revelation.³⁰ But Worth argues that "in the ancient world spiritual adultery easily became the sanction for literal adultery," such as extramarital affairs, homosexuality, and prostitution.³¹ He concludes: "John's usage is compatible with either approach—quite possibly because he intends *both* approaches or, at least, intends not to exclude either approach. . . . He seems to have in mind any and all types of moral and religious compromise that a Christian might be tempted to, out of whatever motive."³² In both figurative and literal fornication one is unfaithful to Christ, so Jezebel is portrayed as a whore, whose followers "commit adultery with her" (2:22).³³ The

²⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 218, fully assumes that this is the case.

²⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262: πλανάω "occurs outside 2:20 only in the visionary segment of the book, where it refers exclusively to the activity of satanic agents—yet another indication that the visions are parabolic of the churches' situation."

³⁰ Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 122; Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 37; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 204, 213: figurative, hyperbolic slander meaning apostasy, "a usage found frequently in the OT." Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 191, is so certain of this that he uses this metaphorical understanding of 2:20 as the basis of his interpretation of πορνεία elsewhere in Revelation.

³¹ Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 164. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 87, agrees: "Since the eating of 'food sacrificed to idols' is undoubtedly intended in a literal sense, it is best to take 'sexual immorality' in the same way. Pagan feasts often led to sexual promiscuity."

³² Worth, 165.

³³ James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 220-221: John's Jezebel and the Whore of Babylon "both trade in spiritual harlotry and religious

depiction of a respected person of influence in the church as a common prostitute is shocking, and this imagery unmasks the true, corrupted nature of this false prophetess.

All three have a connection with idolatry. As mentioned previously, Jezebel of Tyre instituted the idolatrous worship of Baal in Israel. Idolatry is not specified in connection with the Whore of Babylon, but it is evident that she is venerated by the nations of the earth for the material benefits of her trade.³⁴ And the beast she rides is similar to the beast of chapters 13 and 14, whose image the “whole world” worships (13:3-4, 14-15; 14:9). The Thyatiran Jezebel encouraged the partaking of food sacrificed to idols. This is most likely to enable participation in the trade guilds, though as Worth points out idolatry could be expanded to the “political, social, and moral compromises rulers and the business class made in order to maintain their wealth and position.”³⁵ While she could have justified her teaching with arguments similar to Paul’s,³⁶ it is clear that the practice of her teaching had crossed into idolatry worthy of condemnation.

Material gain is associated with these three figures. As mentioned in Worth’s quote above, Ahab married Jezebel for the purpose of expanding trade with Tyre. Tyre, the source of both material goods and idolatry to Israel, is fiercely condemned in Ezekial 26-28, a passage that is taken up again in Revelation 18 about Babylon. Her “riches” (πλουτέω) are mentioned three times (18:3, 15, 19) and an entire section is devoted to the description of Babylon’s goods and

fornication—i.e., infidelity to God. In other words, John’s Jezebel lures Christians into assimilating their faith with the dominant culture, blending Christian norms and values with the values and norms of Babylon.”

³⁴ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 446, believes Babylon’s sins are “primarily those of idolatry” on the basis of the Old Testament texts on which this dirge is based; he also sees her confidence as “self-idolatrous” (449).

³⁵ Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 165.

³⁶ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 265, lists 1 Cor. 8:4 or 5:9-11: “if, indeed, ‘an idol has no real existence in the world,’ then participation at a feast honoring an idol could not harm one spiritually.”

lamentations of their loss (18:9-20).³⁷ Many of these goods are the same as those made and traded by famous Thyatiran guilds, which would have had a strong influence upon the church.³⁸ If the theory about Jezebel's teaching is correct, then material gain would have been the attraction for moral compromise. Not participating in the guilds in order to remain faithful to Christ would have been economically and socially detrimental, but this is the cost Christ is calling them to in order to gain the unimaginable wealth of eternity in God's presence (21-22).³⁹

Finally, all three persons are guilty of the blood of the saints of God. Jezebel of Tyre actively persecuted the prophets of God and was notorious for killing many (1 Kgs 18:4, 13; 2 Kgs 9:7). For this the LORD declared, "I will avenge the blood of my servants the prophets and the blood of all the LORD's servants shed by Jezebel" (2 Kgs 9:7). The Whore of Babylon is "drunk with the blood" of saints, apostles, prophets, and "all who have been killed on earth" (17:6; 18:20, 24; 18:24). For this, God "avenged on her the blood of his servants" with eternal torment (19:2-3). The consequences of the Thyatiran Jezebel's teaching is death for her "children" and great tribulation for those who refuse to repent (2:22-23). Consequently, the physical and spiritual blood of the Thyatiran Christians she has led astray is upon her head.⁴⁰

A few other comparisons and contrasts to the Thyatiran Jezebel can be found in Revelation. As a "prophetess" she can be compared to the false prophet of 13:11-18, who lead

³⁷ Kenneth A. Strand, "Some Modalities of Symbolic Usage in Revelation 18," in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24:1 (Spring 1986): 44: "The listing of trade wares and the lament of kings, merchants, and seafarers in Rev 18 draw especially heavy on Ezek 27:25-36 and 28:17-18. . . . [It is] a pervasive allusion."

³⁸ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262.

³⁹ Hemer, *Letters*, 126-127, presents a tentative connection of the trade guilds with 13:17, in which no one can buy or sell without the mark of the beast. To refuse the mark meant economic devastation and persecution, and this may have represented the situation in Thyatira. If this is so, then these two passages have a further link beyond the comparison of Jezebel and the beast/false prophet below.

⁴⁰ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 205: "In biblical tradition those who lead others astray in a calculating and insidious way bear a greater responsibility."

the nations astray (πλανᾶω) through miraculous signs, enforced idolatry, and control of the economy. This prophet is described as a “beast” (θηρίου), even as the Whore of Babylon sat on a beast (θηρίου). The words of the false prophet are compared to frog-like demons (16:13), and the fate of the false prophet is eternal judgment in the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10). This rhetoric creates revulsion of Jezebel and fear of her judgment.

She can be contrasted with the two witnesses (who resemble Jezebel of Tyre’s nemesis Elijah) in 11:3-13, who are vindicated by God through resurrection. Unlike this resurrection in full view of all peoples (11:9-12), Babylon will burn forever before the multitudes in heaven (19:1-3). Likewise, the deaths of Jezebel and her followers will be a warning to “all churches” (2:23).⁴¹ Though the two witnesses receive earthly persecution and martyrdom, they are the true prophets of God whom the Thyatirans should emulate.

Jezebel can also be contrasted with two other women figures in Revelation: the “woman clothed with the sun” of 12:1-17, who is under the protection of God and whose offspring are the true, faithful followers of Jesus (12:17), and the new Jerusalem, the pure bride of Christ who comprises the faithful followers of Christ (21:1-2).⁴² Unlike these admirable women of purity, Jezebel is compared to a whore (2:21) and her unfaithful offspring will die (2:23).

⁴¹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 261: “To allow these false prophets to continue would be to allow the satanic beast access to devour God’s people through deceptive doctrine. John later portrays those who engage in prophetic deception as a beast and ‘false prophet.’ whose master is a devilish beast, in order to give the Thyatirans a true, heavenly perspective of the real character of these false teachers (13:11; 16:13; 19:20).” 262: “Hopefully the connection would impress on them the gravity of the situation and shock them so that they would be impelled to take disciplinary action against the heretical teachers.”

⁴² Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 154, fleshes out the contrast between these two women and notes the rhetoric to identify with and “win the readers’ allegiance” to the persecuted woman of God rather than the persecutor, Babylon.

Divine Judgment Upon the Unfaithful (2:21-23)

Jezebel had been given time to repent of her immorality, but she refused.⁴³ Refusal to repent in spite of God's actions is found throughout Revelation. In chapter nine, horrendous divine judgment is poured upon humanity, killing mass numbers of people. But 9:20 states, "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands," which include idolatry (εἰδωλον)⁴⁴ and sexual immorality (πορνεία: 9:21)—the same sins listed in 2:20.⁴⁵ In chapter 16 judgment is again poured out, but humans "cursed the name of God . . . [and] refused to repent or glorify him" (16:9) or "repent of what they had done" (16:11).⁴⁶

Judgment Upon Jezebel

Unlike Jezebel's OT or Babylon counterparts for whom no grace to repent is extended, she has been shown mercy but has chosen to trample on it. So Jesus pronounces his judgment upon her in 2:22. Here again is an example of the interpretative triangle between the two Jezebels and Babylon. Jezebel of Tyre's punishment for her murders of Naboth and the LORD's prophets was to be thrown (κυλίομαι) out of a window by her own guards and eaten by dogs (2

⁴³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 87: "The fornication of which Jezebel was not willing to repent was her adulterous alliance with the pagan environment."

⁴⁴ Could the reference to idols made of bronze in 9:20 be specifically directed toward the Thyatiran bronze guild? The only mention of bronze-like substances in Revelation are in the description of Jesus in 1:15 and 2:18 (χαλκολιβάνιον), here in 9:20 (χαλκοῦς), and in 18:12 (χαλκός), where the description of Babylon's goods closely parallel those of Thyatira.

⁴⁵ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 205, also notes this link between Jezebel's refusal to repent and humanity in 9:20.

⁴⁶ These are the people who received the mark of the beast and worshipped him (16:2), and who have "shed the blood of your saints and prophets" (16:6). Here again is the suggestion of compromise for the sake of material gain, and their responsibility for the blood of saints and prophets parallels that of the Whore of Babylon.

Kgs 9:33-37).⁴⁷ In regard to Babylon, her own beast will turn on her and “eat her flesh” (17:16).

⁴⁸ Just as little was found of Jezebel’s body, the great city Babylon will be filled with plagues (18:4, 8), leaving her a wasted haunt, cast down (βάλλω), “never to be found again” (18:21).⁴⁹

Jezebel of Thyatira will be cast (βάλλω) on a bed (2:22). The nature of the “bed” (κλίνη) upon which Jezebel is cast has several possibilities: a sickbed, a deathbed (or ‘funeral-bier’), or a dining-couch of the guild-feasts. Most scholars prefer the sickbed interpretation because of the Hebrew idiom it derives from.⁵⁰ This choice need not exclude the connotations of the other suggestions: her bed of prostitution and revelry will become a bed of debilitating illness leading to death.⁵¹ At any rate, her punishment with illness parallels the plagues against Babylon (18:4, 8), as well as the plethora of deadly plagues against unbelievers (9:18, 20; 11:6; 15:1; 16:1-21).

⁴⁷ This fulfilled numerous prophecies of her doom (1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:23; 2 Kgs 9:10), and in like manner the prophecies of both Babylon and Jezebel will certainly come to pass.

⁴⁸ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, WBC 52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 957, sees this phrase as a “clear allusion” to Jezebel of Tyre’s fate. On pages 1025-6, he sees 19:2c as a clear allusion to 4 Kgdms 9:7: “And you will avenge the deaths of my servants the prophets and the deaths of all the servants of the Lord at the hand of Jezebel.” He also sees a link here to the other Jezebel: “Though John eliminates the name ‘Jezebel’ from his allusion, it is nevertheless clear that he saw a parallel between the infamous ‘Jezebel’ of Thyatira and the great whore (Babylon = Rome).”

⁴⁹ Also, the false prophet, to whom we compared Jezebel above, was cast (βάλλω) into the lake of burning sulfur (19:20).

⁵⁰ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 74; Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 166; Hemer, *Letters*, 121; Ramsay, *Letters*, 351-52; scholars who prefer the “bed of illness” interpretation include Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 263; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 205; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 88; and BDAG 4281.1. A deathbed interpretation would parallel the death threat against her “children” in 2:23. A dining-couch interpretation would be a direct reference to the “idolatrous and immoral banqueting couch of the guild feasts” (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 263). This would also hint of the bed of a prostitute, to which Jezebel is compared.

⁵¹ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1991), 78, muses whether the choice of her punishment, a bed of suffering, “may indicate that the false teacher champions the opposite—that is, an escape from suffering. . . . [a] ‘gospel’ of prosperity.” If this is the case, then this gospel of prosperity is reflected in the lavish prosperity of Babylon. In contrast, persecution, like the suffering she is attempting to avoid, is the lot of the faithful followers of Christ (6:10-11; 7:14; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 13:7; 14:12; 16:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). Again, Revelation leaves the reader only two choices: the suffering of persecution as a faithful Christian, or the suffering of eternal punishment as an unfaithful unbeliever.

Beale succinctly summarizes the power of this rhetoric: “The judgment due Jezebel and her cohorts is that deserved by unbelievers, which they are in process of proving themselves to be.”⁵²

Judgment Upon Her Followers

Jezebel’s followers are described as fellow adulterers with her, sharing in the immorality and idolatry she advocated. Like Jezebel, they are graciously offered the opportunity to repent of her ways, even though time has run out for her. If they do not repent, they will receive great tribulation (θλιψιν μεγάλην). Θλιψις is only used again in 7:14: while the saints come out of tribulation into ecstatic glory, unrepentant humanity face terror and death (ch. 6; 8:6-9:21; 14:14-16:21).⁵³ Repeatedly, her disciples are confronted through the visions with the consequences of those who refuse to repent (9:20; 16:9, 11): They will not be sealed from plagues (7:21-27), but will be its intended targets.⁵⁴ They will stand not among the victorious saints in white robes (ch. 7; 15:1-2; 19:14; 20:1-6; 21-22) who did not “defile themselves with women” (14:1-5), but are considered adulterers who will receive an adulterer’s fate. They are not the faithful, obedient offspring of the woman clothed with the sun (12:17), but are bastard children of an adulteress, doomed to die (2:23).⁵⁵ They will not be vindicated in resurrection (11:11-12; 20:4), but will be counted as the cowardly, adulterous idolaters whose destiny is the lake of burning sulfur (21:8).

⁵² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 263.

⁵³ Ibid., believes the great tribulation in 7:14 is identical to this reference in 2:22 because the article in 7:14 “indicates a previous reference, pointing back to 2:22.”

⁵⁴ Not only in the plagues of the visions, but Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 88, sees a parallel structure between the two clauses that sets Jezebel’s bed of suffering over against the “intense suffering” here. Also, Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 222, interprets θανάτω as “pestilence,” a curse that denotes “plagues.”

⁵⁵ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 206, believes there are two difference circles of Jezebel’s followers with two different punishments: the outer circle influenced by her who receive grace to repent (2:22), and the inner, devoted circle (“children”) who are as hardened as Jezebel and receive no grace, only death (2:23). Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 264, believes they are the same group, and verse 23 is simply a Semitic pleonasm. There is also an echo here of Jezebel of Tyre, for the seventy sons of Ahab were murdered (2 Kgs 10:1-11).

Temporal as well as eternal issues are at stake: If Jezebel has a counterpart in Babylon, and if material gain is the primary attraction for the Thyatirans, then her disciples have a counterpart in the kings, merchants, and sea captains that lived off Babylon's trade (18:9-19). The emotions expressed will be theirs: at seeing her destruction, they will "weep and mourn" and be "terrified at her torment" and ruin (18:9, 11, 15, 17, 19). They, in turn, will be ruined, for "no one buys their cargoes any more" (18:11) and their livelihood is gone (18:14, 17).⁵⁶ Jezebel's followers will face the devastation of the downfall of their leader, and sooner or later the wealth they compromised morally to gain will also be lost. In the background rings the warning of Jesus: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). The command is clear: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes!" (18:4).

Just as God's judgment upon the nations of the earth will be evident to all, Jesus' judgment upon Jezebel and her followers will be evident to all the churches.⁵⁷ "Hearts and minds" refers back to the opening description of Jesus' fiery eyes (2:18) and shows that nothing, including the evil motives of Jezebel and her followers, is hidden from his knowledge.⁵⁸ Repayment for deeds (ἐργον) has parallels later in the book: Babylon is given double for her evil deeds (18:6), the dead are judged according to their deeds (20:12-13), and in the conclusion of the book Jesus says, "I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (22:12).

⁵⁶ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 454, agrees that the choice of goods here acts as a warning to those in the churches associated with the "idolatrous trade system." They are also terrified because Babylon's destruction "signals their own sudden desolation. . . . which is total and spiritual, not simply economic and material" (457).

⁵⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 223, understands "all churches" as referring only to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3.

⁵⁸ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 264.

A COMMAND TO THE FAITHFUL (2:24-25)

Jesus now turns to his faithful remnant in the church for a further exhortation.⁵⁹ These are categorized as those who “do not hold to her teaching” (2:24). They are akin to those who “hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17), and those who have not received the mark of the beast (15:2; 20:4). Neither have they learned “Satan’s so-called ‘deep secrets’” (2:24). These satanic “depths” of Jezebel’s could have been elements of Gnostic secrets or magic, or simply be a sarcastic reversal of Jezebel’s claim to knowing the “depths of God.”⁶⁰ If it is the former, then several allusions can be found. “Magic” is found in three vice lists (9:21; 21:8; 22:15) that also include idolatry and sexual immorality—the two evils of Jezebel’s teaching. It is also characteristic of Babylon’s magical seduction of the nations (18:23). If it is the latter, then it parallels the deceiving nature of the beast/false prophet with lamb-like attributes and miraculous signs (13:11) and the beast ridden by the Whore of Babylon (17:3, 8-14). Behind a Christian façade and pleasing teaching lies Satan himself, the master of deception (20:7, 10).⁶¹ These followers of Christ have not been deceived, but Jesus solemnly charges them to “hold on to what you have until I come” (2:25). This is akin to the children of the woman clothed with the sun who “hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). It is also similar to the exhortations for patient, faithful endurance (13:10; 14:12). Jesus is “coming soon” (22:12), so they must not relax their vigilance.

⁵⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 207, sees v. 23 as only speaking to Jezebel’s followers, as v. 24 changes address.

⁶⁰ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 72, supports the possible element of Gnostic “magic”; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 207; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 266-267. The suggestion that it was blatant Satanism is unlikely, as it would not have had such an insidious influence on the church.

⁶¹ Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 312: “The point in Rev. 2.19-24 is this: as long as the church of Thyatira allows ‘Jezebel’ to teach such things within the confines of the church, the church itself is beginning to have spiritual intercourse with the Devil’s whore and with the devilish beast himself, upon whose back she rides in ch. 17.”

THE REWARD FOR THE OVERCOMERS (2:26-29)

Jesus gives the Thyatiran's version of the coming reward for those fulfill two conditions, the first being those who conquer (ὁ νικῶν) to the end. Revelation is filled with the theme of Christians who “finish well,” overcoming all hindrances, temptations, and obstacles in their pursuit of Christ. Their leader, Jesus, though slain himself (5:6), has conquered and will conquer every earthly and spiritual power (3:21; 5:5; 17:4). As they follow in their leader's footsteps, they also will be temporarily overcome by evil forces (11:7; 13:7) but will eternally conquer Satan through “the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” and their willing martyrdom (12:11; 15:2; 17:4).⁶² The glorious vision of the new Jerusalem is followed by the promise, “He who overcomes [ὁ νικῶν] will inherit all this” (21:7). The second condition fleshes out the first: those who “keep my works (τὰ ἔργα)” (my literal translation). This is a problematic phrase, for one “‘keeps’ or ‘obeys’ not works but instructions or commands.”⁶³ This is generally understood as doing the good works Jesus commanded, such as the earlier works (τὰ ἔργα) the Thyatirans were excelling at (2:19) but now including the total rejection of Jezebel.⁶⁴

The conqueror who keeps Jesus' works will be given “authority over the nations” (2:26). This was a tantalizing incentive for the Thyatirans, for “geographically, the city was in a very exposed position. . . The city was a pawn in any power struggle aimed at Pergamon, and the citizens recognized this fact all too well”; it was the weakest of the seven cities.⁶⁵ Though some

⁶² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 270, notes the paradox of “overcoming”: “Conquering spiritually by not compromising ironically entails being conquered in some material way by persecution”

⁶³ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 209.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 232; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 209; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 271: both parallel phrases show that “overcoming is to be understood primarily as persevering in faith *and* good works.” Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 37, notes, “‘my works’ is contrasted with ‘her [Jezebel’s] doings’. ‘To the end’ suggests that perseverance in the Christian life is all-important.”

⁶⁵ Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 154, 161.

commentators believe this promise is only metaphorically meant,⁶⁶ it parallels the enthroned, martyred saints who are given “authority to judge [the nations]” (20:4) and “[reign] with Christ a thousand years” (20:4, 6).

They will “rule [the nations] with an iron scepter . . . [and] dash them to pieces like pottery” (2:27). This is taken from Ps 2:8-9, well-known as descriptive of the messianic reign.⁶⁷ The “rule” (ποιμανεῖ) can mean a gentle “shepherd/guide,”⁶⁸ such as is in 7:17, but the addition of the iron scepter and the shattering of pottery points more to a reign with “destructive results.”⁶⁹ The iron scepter (ῥάβδος σιδηρᾶ) is symbolic of royal authority, and it is used of Christ’s absolute rule over the nations in 12:5 and 19:15. The latter passage speaks of the bloody, conquering rider on a white horse (19:11-21), who, accompanied by the forces of his victorious followers (19:14), wreaks violent vengeance upon the nations that opposed them. The promise for the powerless Thyatirans is to ride in his train, joining Christ in his messianic reign of exacting vengeance upon their enemies (cf. 17:14).⁷⁰

They will also be given “the morning star.” Because “morning star” is only used again in 22:16 by Jesus to describe himself, a few commentators believe the same meaning applies here.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 209, believes it only there to point to the messianic quotation of Psalm 2.

⁶⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 90. This is the same psalm that bears the “Son of God” theme that is part of Jesus’ description of himself in 2:18.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Mounce prefers this interpretation, and sees the “iron scepter” as the protective shepherd’s staff.”

⁶⁹ BDAG 6021.2.a.γ; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 210; Worth, 161; Thomas, 234; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 267, sees a possible double meaning because of the positive and negative uses of ποιμαίνω in Revelation. He also observes irony that the iron staff “was a symbol of destruction to the ungodly nations but a sign of protection to Israel.”

⁷⁰ Hemer, *Letters*, 125. This is also the same passage that speaks of Christ’s “eyes like blazing fire,” the exact phrase that is part of his description at the beginning of this letter.

⁷¹ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 222; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79; Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 62; Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 37: it is a metaphor “announcing the dawn of a new day and the fulfillment of hope after the night of longing and expectation. . . . In pledging to give this star to the conqueror, Christ is pledging to give himself. The ultimate reward enjoyed by Christians is to be with their Lord.”

Others suggest it refers to the “mighty star servant, ready to serve the victor” of Hellenistic mythology.⁷² But most believe it is another symbol of the share in the messianic reign that Christ offers, as stars, particularly the morning star Venus, are symbolic of victory and royalty.⁷³

With the powerful visions preceding and following Jesus’ letter to the church of Thyatira, all pretences and assumptions are stripped away as the situation of the Thyatirans is portrayed through the black and white vision of divine perspective. Christ is revealed as the sovereign Son of God, piercing in his knowledge, pure in his being, and authorized to wreak the wrath of God upon unfaithful humankind. The true nature “Jezebel” is unmasked, and her identity is transformed from a respected teacher in the church into a loathsome whore who feasts on the blood of the saints of God. Her disciples are exposed as unfaithful adulterers, whose doom lies in unimaginable suffering and death unless they respond positively to Christ’s gracious call to repentance. For those choose faithfulness to Christ over material gain, there lies the promise of persecution and poverty, but also the promise of a glorious, eternal participation in his messianic reign. But one must endure to the very end, even to death, to be counted as the pure Bride of Christ. These characters, warnings, promises, and exhortations are portrayed vividly on a symbolic level that possesses emotive power to either “enforce the anesthetized condition of people so that they continue in blissful ignorance of their sin (cf. Rom. 1.21-32) or they shock people out of their spiritual anesthesia.”⁷⁴

⁷² Malina and Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary*, 59: “Thus to give the victor the morning star is to give that person one of the strongest astral sky servants as his own personal servant, hence to reach and surpass the power of the mightiest of magicians.”

⁷³ Worth, *The Seven Cities*, 167-168; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 212; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 268; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 235: “in the messianic kingdom, the righteous will shine as stars. Because the star of the morning was thought to be the brightest, the glory that will follow conquest over the Messiah’s enemies (v. 27) is indirectly in view.”

⁷⁴ Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 315.

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