

## Imperial cult vs Afro-Asian and Afro-Diasporic Ancestral Cult. An Intertextual reading of Jezebel in the Bible and in Popular Afro-Catholicism

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I have against you that you tolerate that woman,  
the prophetess Jezebel (Rev. 2: 20)

*This research article is based on the current situation in Brazil and Latin America, around interreligious conflicts arising from the increase of religious fundamentalisms and what seems to be a holy war against the religions of African origins led by political leaders and a contingent of Christian adherents. It arises from the need to unveil biblical narratives as colonial projects favoring empires and dominant monocultures. The immolation of the priestess of Candomblé, Mother Bernardete in August 2023, is just one of the many crimes of hatred and religious intolerance that must be denounced. This article is the fruit of biblical workshops in ecclesial communities on the leadership and stigma against the priestesses of yesterday and today and the ethical and political commitment to unveil the silences and exterminations of the priestly power of women of the Afro-Asian persuasion. It stems from an intertextual reading of Jezebel in the Old and New Testaments, in dialogue with the religions of African matrices that coexist in the same space and proclaim their right to be, to exist and to re-exist.*

### Introduction

The religious practices of African diasporic traditions, such as Candomblé, have long navigated the tension between preserving ancestral legacies and resisting systemic repression. A striking example of this resilience is the syncretism between Santa Bárbara and Iansã, which not only illustrates the adaptive strategies of marginalized faiths but also sustains a profound spiritual and cultural connection that challenges the hegemony of dominant monocultures (Palmié 2013). These dynamic underscores the broader struggle of Afro-diasporic religions to maintain their identity amid persistent surveillance and erasure.

This essay focuses on an intertextual study among the Jezebel of the book of Revelations 2:18 -29, and the Syro-Phoenician woman so hated in Old Testament biblical exegesis (2 Kings 9: 9-27). What is the history of these women? Why are they typified as the symbol of immorality and idolatry? What is the danger that these images pose to both Judaism and Christianity under construction? Why are

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Afro-Asian Canaanite ancestral cults demonized by a religion that calls itself the possessor of an eternal and indissoluble revelation?

In summary, this study proposes the deconstruction of a monocultural reading of the biblical tradition and the opening to the Afro-Asian world and its religions. This approach is taken because a climate of religious intolerance is growing in the globalized world producing the symbolic death of peoples with their cultures. In this context, analyzing the cultural, spiritual and symbolic resistance that Afro-Asian, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have developed in Latin America becomes essential. In addressing these connections, will also be demonstrated how Divine Revelation, far from being unique to one religion, can be understood as a continuous process of interaction between diverse cultures and spiritualities (Nye 2019).

For the argumentative development of this essay, we begin with an approach to the narrative of Jezebel focused on the book of Kings. It is suspicious that the Midrashic rereading assimilated the evil represented in the local cults of the first century from the figure of Queen Jezebel. She was a political, religious and spiritual leader who directly faced the extermination of the Canaanite divinities by an initiatory prophecy that understood that the only way to impose an absolutizing monotheism was through the sword, hunger and the extermination of the Afro-Asian cults.

In a second moment, there is an approach to the religious cults in Asia Minor whose communities are going through a process of reorganization of their religious traditions not only from the imperial cult but also from the Afro-Asian and Christian world. These syncretic practices made it impossible for ancestral traditions to disappear.

Next, it is fundamental to analyze these resistances based on the cult of Santa Barbara in Salvador Bahía. The young Barbara was born in Asia Minor and lived in Nicomedia, an ancient Roman province of Bithynia, which in the tradition of Brazilian Candomblé is revered as Iansã, lady of thunder (De Sousa 2014). The feast of Santa Barbara, which falls in December, the month of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, consists of a banquet offered to children by most Bahian families, whether they are related to Afro-Brazilian religions or not (Johnson 2014). The Catholic festival consists of a catholic mass, and a procession around the Santa Barbara market in Salvador, Bahia, where they dance and drink in abundance. We will end with some comments that may help us in overcoming racism and religious intolerance promoted by the dominant religious monoculture and perhaps with this we can understand that Divine Revelation is not the patrimony of a single religious universe.

The book of Revelation, because it was written in a period of conflict and because of its enigmatic nature, has aroused the interest of many communities throughout the continent, during the millennium transition period, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. As one of the most enigmatic biblical books, it maintains a message that recapitulates our attitude towards the future that awaits us: on the one hand the

fear of the end times, which brings with it fanaticism of all kinds, and on the other the expectation of a new beginning.

This is also because the word Apocalypse or Revelation evokes in the minds of the communities the idea of destruction, catastrophe and endings. In this way, it is understood as the prophecy of the end of the world, which is directly related to the current world, since this book implacably condemns the time in which it was written from the perspective of an eschatological future. That time in the biblical context is both Rome, its empire and power, and the local imperial or ancestral religions called "pagan" (Adamo 2020).

Translating this into present-day Latin America we would refer to neoliberalism, its necro-politics and Christofascisms that promote all kinds of political and religious fanaticism (Ulrich et al. 2020). These tensions also reveal colonial strategies of delegitimizing ancestral belief systems, particularly Afro-Asians, by demonizing spiritual and cultural traditions that offered a sense of resistance and cohesion in the face of imperial oppressive forces.

From this conjuncture, we see juxtaposed foci: good/evil, kingdom/empire, poor/rich, Jesus/antichrist, God/Satan, ancestral religion/Christians. These foci hide religious tensions and crises of faith since the Christian community is coexisting with the empire that crucified Jesus and reviving grayish religious practices that are opposed to Christianity (Barros 2023). Moreover, these polarities show how apocalyptic narratives seek not only to legitimize Christianity as the only way to salvation but also to position it in a direct struggle against Afro-Asian religions, seen as a threat to spiritual and political monopoly (Muñoz 2024).

Because it is one of the most symbolically charged biblical books and because of its metaphorical language, it hides broad codes of social and sexual orthodoxy in its language. The first of these, as we said before, is the tendency to a certain fatalism that prevents our action in search of a transformation of reality. The second code, in our view, is fundamentalism (Blanco 2020) which separates the life and history of the people and absolutizes the Christian experience as the only true one in which God revealed himself, thereby demonizing the ancestral Amerindian and African-American religious traditions (Mendes 2021).

The third is *androcentrism*, which employs female metaphors to depict religious and social evil (Muñoz 2024). This study argues that such gendered symbologies—far from being merely rhetorical tools of imperial power—are strategically emphasized in apocalyptic discourse to eradicate the memory of goddesses (deemed "pagan") and cement the triumph of Christ over ancestral cults. This mechanism mirrors the repression faced by Afro-diasporic traditions like Candomblé, where syncretism (e.g., Santa Bárbara/Iansã) became a means of preserving spiritual legacies against dominant monocultures. Here, too, female imagery is weaponized to suppress alternative cosmologies, revealing a broader pattern of colonial and patriarchal control.

## Contextualizing the Old Testament Jezebel

Jezebel the Syrophenician woman daughter of the king of the Sidonians Etbaal (872–851 BC) was married to Ahab as the result of a commercial alliance between Israel and the Syro-Phoenician region (1 Kings 16:31). Despite being a victim of the purchase and sale of women in ancient times (Antela-Bernárdez 2008), she acquires royal prerogatives in Israel because she is a princess married to a king. The etymology of her name "Baal exalts" already points to her priestly activity, she is described in the Hebrew Bible as a dominant and potentially religious priestess, she was the spokesperson of the gods, and for this reason, and she is a priestess and prophetess. Archaeological investigations have identified a seal with an inscription with her name, which denotes her importance within the Omridan dynasty (Mandoca 2017).

It is for this reason that she is the religious leader par excellence of the group of 450 prophets of Baal who were killed by Elijah the prophet of Yahweh with the sword of Ahab her husband, and although we do not find any episode where she does the same, the narrative interprets Elijah's action as a legitimate reckoning for the supposed prophets of Yahweh that she would have passed to the sword, as a consequence of the prophecy that he launched, announcing the anticipated annihilation of all the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19: 1-2).

According to biblical tradition, the prophet Elijah, a native of the city of Thesbi in Gilead (1 Kings 17: 1), exercised his activity during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah (874-852 BC), therefore, his activity is inscribed in the context of Ahab's policy. In this way, the ascension and descent of the dynasty founded by Amri (884-841 BC), father of Ahab, provides the background in which the traditions of Elijah arose.

Amri came to power through a military coup (1 Kings: 16:15 -22), after a period of great confusion and infighting. The Amridas faced the crisis, combining an external policy of alliances with an internal policy of strengthening the state (Finkelstein & Siberman 2001). In the field of foreign policy, the alliance made with the Phoenicians through the marriage of Ahab with Jezebel, daughter of Etbaal, king of Tyre and Sidonia, stands out. From this international alliance arises a religious problem, due to the strengthening of the cult of Baal and Asherah and the alleged infidelity to the cult of a Yahwism still under construction. The internal policy was marked by the transfer of the capital Tirsa to Samaria (1 Kings 16:24). Undoubtedly, these policies brought great economic development to Israel, but with them came great socio-economic imbalance and also religious tensions. Ahab's religious policy is associated with the priestly activity of his wife Jezebel, a follower of the gods of Tyre, especially the god Baal. It is within this climate of conflict, that the Deuteronomistic narrative places the story of Jezebel.

In 1 Kings 16:31 he speaks of his marriage to Ahab, king of Israel, with a summary exposition of all the king's ills. However, it should be noted that this is not the only king who establishes an alliance with foreign women, Jeroboam had already done so, as well as David and Solomon, nor is he the only one who builds buildings and increases the number of his horses and installs altars for Baal and

Asherah (1 Kings 16:32 -33). During this reign, the city of Jericho was rebuilt by Hiel for the price of the two sons of Ahab (1 Kings 16:34). But the text does not directly say that Ahab was responsible for those sacrifices, it only emphasizes that his sin is greater because in addition to setting up an altar for Baal, he also set up one for the goddess Asherah (1 Kings 16:33).

In 1 Kings 18:4-13, there are references to the massacres of the "prophets of Yahweh" and that this is likely to be the work of Jezebel. But as Camp states, (1992) "it is unlikely that her polytheistic religion would have motivated her to eliminate Yahweh's prophets unless they posed a political threat." (p.104). The exclusivity of prophetic Yahwism induced some of its followers to adopt the mentality of the crusades against the worshippers of other deities. But it was the Deuteronomist wording that blamed Jezebel with extreme exaggeration and cruelty for the persecution of Yahweh's prophets, to the point that dogs eventually ate Jezebel's flesh (2 Kings 9:36).

Along the same lines, Sook Lee, (1998) states that "it is unlikely that an aggressive religion originated in the royal house against the religion of Yahweh, as described in the first book of Kings." (p.138) On the contrary, the royal house approved the Yahwist religion, a proof of that is that all the children of Jezebel and Ahab bore names of Yahweh (Ahaziah, Joram, Athaliah). In addition, Yahweh and Baal worked side by side with respect and veneration (Daly, 1994, p. 182-195), and even the diversity and ambiguity of the different monarchs in Israel and Judea made possible a trend of plurality and coexistence of various religious systems both in the court sphere and in the popular sphere. Such falsification of historical facts corresponds to an androcentric literary tendency bent on demonizing those women who possessed economic and priestly power.

In 18:40 Elijah captures and kills the prophets of Baal, and in 1 Kings 19:1 Ahab, husband of Jezebel, gives her the news that Elijah slaughtered his prophets on Mount Carmel. Jezebel sends a message to Elijah threatening him with death. According to Tribble, (1998) "there is a confrontation and opposition between Jezebel, the prophetess of Baal, and Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh" (p.8). In the same way that Elijah threatens Jezebel with death for murder, she also threatens him. "So do the gods to me, and even add to me, if tomorrow at this time I have not put your person as that of one of them!" (1 Kings 19: 2).

In Ch. 21 The king returns irritated and angry because Naboth refuses to sell his vineyard, claiming that the land is his father's inheritance. As a result, Jezebel puts together a plan. She writes to the elders and nobles of the city of Naboth, she promotes the proclamation of a fast-during which Naboth will be accused of cursing God and the king, and as a consequence, he will be stoned. After Naboth's death, she sends Ahab to take possession of that land.

The episode of 1 Kings 21 still angers and inconveniences many, and it seems that the story of Jezebel comes down to just this episode. As a result, we skip the abominable death that she receives and do not bother with it. If we compare the account of 1 Kings 21, the death of Naboth, with 2 Kings 9, the death of Jezebel, it is noticeable that in 1 Kings all the criminal credit is attributed to Jezebel while in 2

Kings she is not even mentioned as guilty but only Ahab. The possibility that Jezebel was not to blame for Naboth's death is reinforced at the end of 1 Kings 21, where the inclusion of the oracle of judgment against Ahab is a Deuteronomistic aggregate. For these writers, it is not Ahab who is responsible for making the people sin, but his wife who motivated him to. Thus, we see that there is a clear ideological tendency of a second editor of the post-exilic period, since, at this time, the controversy revolves around foreign women and the danger that mixed marriages represent for Israel. Jehu's attack on "Jezebel's whores" can also be explained in the same way.

Biased metaphors against Jezebel characterize the second book of Kings. Jehu the usurper appointed to conquer the kingdom of Judea (2Kings 9:9-27), in his struggle for hegemony, first murders Joran, son of Jezebel, but first highlights "the prostitutions and sorceries of his mother Jezebel" (1Kings 9:22). He immediately kills her second son (2 Kings 9:27).

The crime against Jezebel and her house does not appear to surprise many since memory always refers us to the death of Naboth. But the brutal reaction to Naboth's refusal to sell his vineyard can be understood within the context as an appropriate real response to insubordination, in contrast to the weakness of the leader Ahab. Thus we see how the power of patriarchal rhetoric allows injustices committed against women and especially against foreign women who exercise leadership roles, so they represent a danger of destabilizing the patriarchy and Israelite monotheism. For the reinforcement of this ideology later tradition defines Jezebel's sins in terms of prostitution and idolatry. This powerful queen is reduced to a simple sexual stereotype.

### **Death of the cursed Jezebel (2Kings 9:30 -37)**

According to the Deuteronomist wording, Jehu went in search of Jezebel and he found her at the window adorned as a prostitute (Provan, 1995, 220). The Hebrew noun *pk* "black paint for the eyes" (KLB, 1985, p.754) is always used in contexts of prostitution and female idolatry (v.30; Ez 23,40, Jr 4,30). She who is adorned as befits a queen, prophetess and spiritual leader of one of the fertility cults, is stereotyped with the two metaphors that encompass the lives of foreign women in the Deuteronomistic language, prostitution and idolatry. She cannot simply appear as queen, with all the glory of a monarch. To hide this, the editor gives an extraordinary emphasis to the adornments of Jezebel that echo even to this day, since she is remembered as a great prostitute.

A modern reader would not think to see in the text that a man in the position of king puts on his robes and crowns to wait with his head upright for his death. However, she in the face of her impending death proudly faces the challenge. She mocks Jehu and calls him Zimri, a clear allusion to 1 Kings 16: 8-20, where Zimri murders the king and usurps the throne, but his reign lasts only seven days. It is a

serious criticism of Jehu's politics and the God he represents since he calls him the "murderer of his lord."

Once Jezebel has carved out her end, Jehu asks for help in executing his plan to assassinate Jezebel, and ironically the editor chooses two or three officials of hers as accomplices. These are eunuchs, a common condition of the officers of the royal courts of the Ancient East. They throw her towards the plot of land below, her blood splashes on the wall and the horses trample her and crush her. All this violence against Jezebel's body, in addition to being a terrible crime, is absolutely (Dictionary, 1998, p.229) conscious and it intends to stereotype the woman's body even more. Together with the narrator and the eunuchs, Jehu testifies to this bloody fact. The text tells us he relishes this fact. "he went in and ate and drank", Jehu has been satisfied with the spilled blood of a woman, and the worst thing is that modern readers take pleasure in this cruelty without questioning why evil is stereotyped and encapsulated in the body of a powerful woman.

While Jehu ate and drank, the dogs also fed on Jezebel's body. After being satisfied, Jehu remembers a detail - "That damned woman is the daughter of a king", so he sends her to be buried. The verbal root 'rr "curse" as a passive participle has extraordinary force against women. He does not even mention her name, nor does he acknowledge her status as queen of Israel; her identity is derived from her father. She, who was independent and autonomous, but who to be buried as she deserves, must have her body claimed by her father. The Israelite patriarchal model must prevail.

However, at this time, Jehu's command cannot be obeyed. A proper burial at this point is impossible because the servants find nothing but the skull, the feet and the palms of the hands. Most of the body had already been devoured. In this way the prophecy has been fulfilled, Elijah has triumphed and she is defeated. Thus, the prophecy of Elijah in v.36, which is a later gloss, takes on more force. The prophet finally overcomes the woman. This ideology of extermination of women and their bodies does not seem to bother many, and even many of us women reproduce these patriarchal ideologies.

The archetype of Jezebel as a woman consumed by lustful prostitution and as an ambassador of a false doctrine is taken up through a vision of John, the alleged author of the book of Revelation, in a letter addressed to the communities of Asia Minor. In this letter, Jesus gives a warning, considering her to be a false prophetess. This happens at a time when Christianity begins to spread in this region and where, once again, this ancestral cult was already established in these communities before nascent Christianity. We will see how this archetype is nothing more than a strategy of a patriarchal religion whose interests are not only religious but of territorial expansion and economic power.

## Religious Cults in Asia Minor

The imperial cult and local cults of Asia were central to the understanding of imperial culture. The cult was one of the mechanisms through which the empire could extend a wide "network of power", since the inhabitants of the empire were linked to the emperor. Imperial worship was the only way the emperor was known in Asia Minor during the first century, only the elite could go to Rome to visit him. The cult of the emperor was located in each of the seven cities addressed in the Apocalypse. Temples played an important role in Asia's economy as they operated as banks and markets. In Rome, the temple of Saturn was the seat of the imperial treasury. The temple of Artemis, in Ephesus, was also a financial center.

There were local cults in Asia, among which those of Cybele, Isis and Mithras stand out. The most important cult was that of Cibele, Mother Earth dating back more than six millennia before Christ (Tucan 1992). Due to the need to incorporate female roles into a model of divinity, several Mother Earth cults originated throughout the region. This leads us to question what exactly the female influence in these communities was. This divinity was also assimilated by other Greco-Roman goddesses such as Artemis, Diana and Demeter (Gwyther 2003). In 191 BC, Cybele gained a temple of her own in Rome. Thus, at the time of the Apocalypse, the cult of Cybele was almost 300 years old in Rome and that is why the tradition of this goddess in Asia was strong.

Although Isis was not a goddess assimilated by the imperial cult, as happened with Cybele, statues of this goddess were found throughout the territory of Domitian's domain. In this period, the cult of Mithras was very similar to that practiced by Christians. During worship, astral and supernatural journeys took place, the resemblance was such that on many occasions they were considered by the Fathers of the Church as "demonic" elements within Christian worship (Gwyther 2003).

The original role of these local cults was to strengthen the unity and social order of the communities in this context of Hellenization, but the Romans, instead of transforming these goddesses and gods into their rivals, supported and assimilated them to such an extent that they were alienated from the system. With Christians, it was different, with the other cults as we see in Acts 19:21-41 where the community feels threatened by the evangelization of Paul who does not tolerate the cult of Artemis in Ephesus. This temple enjoyed numerous pilgrims, which, among other things, generated employment for those dedicated to goldsmithing. They elaborated temples and miniature images of this goddess. For this community, Paul's affirmation that constructed gods are not true is a discredit and disrespect to this Goddess venerated not only in the province of Asia but throughout the world.

Regarding the Christian *ekklesai* in the empire, there is no doubt that there were communities inspired by the memory of Jesus. From the beginning, the Christian movement was characterized by its political consciousness concerning the empire. His language was always marked by political rhetoric since the Gospels' semantic oppositions were an important literary resource: good/evil, kingdom/

empire, poor/rich, Jesus/Caesar, and God/Satan. In the context of the Apocalypse, this rhetoric returns with greater zeal and recognizes that the community is coexisting with the empire that crucified Jesus peacefully, forgetting the death of the Lamb. That is why John assumes a critical stance and resistance to the dominant imperial cult. Thus he sees Rome as a ferocious Beast and a seductive prostitute.

We suspect that female symbologies, in addition to being rhetorical figures opposed to imperial power, appear especially in apocalyptic language, not by chance, but because they are important for ending the memory of the goddesses, said pagans, and to reinforce the definitive triumph of Christ over the ancestral cults.

### **Jezebel in Rev. 2: 18-29: Socio-political and Literary Context**

Revelation is one of the few New Testament writings to bear the author's name (Rev. 1: 1.4.9; 21. 2:22. 8). The Christian tradition of the first centuries identified him with Jesus' favorite apostle, who was also credited with the authorship of the fourth gospel and the three Johannine letters. Although other names were suggested such as Cerinthus, Papias, John the Presbyter, etc., today the vast majority of scholars are in favor of the apostle John. The probable date of composition would be after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. Probably in the period of Domitian (88-96 A.D.).

In the period in which the Apocalypse was written, "Imperial Rome offered Asians an orderly and coherent structure of reality that unified religious, social, economic, political, and aesthetic aspects of the world" (Thompson 1990). The *ekklēsiai* to which the Apocalypse refers are located in important cities of the Roman province in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea (Ap. 2-3). The Asian locations are important for the interpretation of the Apocalypse. The province of Asia was incorporated into Rome's control in 133 BC and was achieved not by force but by the concession of territory by King Attalus of Pergamum (Koester 1992).

In first-century Asia, an established elite included Roman officials and local public notaries, illustrious families, agricultural property owners, and merchants. In Hellenistic politics, the council (Greek *boule*) was regarded as of a higher level than the *ekklēsia* in the local government hierarchy. There was a political orientation towards urbanization that strengthened the power of the elites. With the introduction of dual citizenship, the rights and duties of local elites who had to ensure the maintenance of buildings, food, public celebrations, games and parties in the cities were increasing. First-century Asian cities competed with each other for honor and imperial privilege (Gwyther 2003).

There is little information about the life of the provincials, but it is known that the basis of the economy was agriculture, which is why there were a good number of rural inhabitants who supported the life of the cities. They were poor because the high Roman taxes increased the work of rural producers and because there were rich landowners who seized the productive lands of peasants and consolidated them into

the hands of the bigger landowners and inhabitants of the city. Those who remained on the land were tenants and those who lost the properties came to the city increasing the social pressures there (Ap. 6.5-6) (Gwyther 2003).

This quick overview of the social situation serves to make us aware that we are talking about Asian communities that largely assimilated Roman culture. But this assimilation did not diminish the climate of conflict and tensions between the various social sectors, especially between the empire and the provinces, the countryside and the city, rich and poor and also between the local and imperial cults.

Our text in question Ap. 2: 18-29 is placed within a broader context entitled "The letters to the churches of Asia Minor" that are found in chapters 2-3. Here we have a series of messages, conventionally called letters, sent by Christ, through John to the seven communities located "in the coastal and pre-coastal area of Asia Minor, north of Ephesus" (Corsini 1984).

In Ap. 2:18-29 we have a letter addressed to the community of Thyatira. This community was located on the road to Pergamon and Sardis. Thyatira was an industrialized, commercial center. Its main products were textiles and metal industries such as iron and bronze. Like the other cities, Thyatira had its imperial cults and the main divinity of this city was Apollo, the Sun god (Mesters & Orofino 2003).

The content of this letter seems to follow the following outline: Presentation of Christ, praise, reprobation and promise, let us see:

1. Presentation of Christ: It is the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze (cf. 2:19).
2. Praise: The community is full of works: love, faith, service, patience and is in continuous progress.
3. Threat: There is against the community the fact of tolerating the woman Jezebel, who is said to prophesy. Christ gives Jezebel time for repentance. As this does not happen, he launches a threat against her: to throw her to the bed of pain and those who adulterate with her to a great tribulation while the children are wounded to death.
4. Promise: the victor is promised dominion over the nations and "the morning star" (cf. 2: 26 -28).

But what's behind this scheme? For this analysis we start from the study of the semantic fields: life/death personified in the figures of Christ and Jezebel.

Of Jezebel, it is said	Of Christ it says
She proclaims herself a prophet	the One who is the Son of God.
She teaches and misleads my servants to prostitute themselves by eating meat sacrificed to idols	He gives time for repentance, so he throws her on the bed and those who commit adultery with her, in a great tribulation He will also cause her children to die
She represents the depths of Satan	He is the One who probes the kidneys and hearts

We find in this scheme a series of oppositions that are inscribed within the symbolic field of life and death. To rebuke the community, the author relies on the figure of Jezebel as a symbol of the death of the community, Christ will be the life that will conquer death. For she is destined to suffer a terrible sentence, she will be thrown to the bed and those who fornicate with her and their children will be killed. It is incredible how we assume a God who is pleased with the death of some creatures. This seems to be the maxim of a religion that to stand as universal sovereign lacks any feeling of pity in the face of the death of some little ones and those who practice religions outside the dominant one.

In the androcentric language that surrounds biblical literature, it leads us at first glance to reject the evil that Jezebel represents and accept the merciful love of Christ, who with his infinite mercy cleanses the evil of this world. The text does not present a critical position to those stereotypes of sexuality and idolatry that the woman supposedly represents.

In Ap. 2:18-29 Jezebel is presented as a representative of a group opposed to official Christianity. She can relate to the Nicolaitans and Baalitans, representatives of other leaders who occupy the same space.

According to the editor, she is responsible for the diversion of the community that prostitutes and practices the idolatry of the oppressors. This proposition hides in some way, the possible conflicts, coming from the unsupportive practice of the community and its rulers. It seems that social problems are reduced to the practice of prostitution and contact with gods outside Christianity.

Jesus is presented as the Son of God who sees all things (eyes) and who stands firm (feet) and perseveres (v.18). It seems that observation and firmness are two important elements for that community. For Jesus does not excite in presenting the important qualities of the community, the fruit of observation and in exhorting the perseverance that is achieved in continuing their spiritual journey without becoming discouraged. However, he also observes negative aspects. There is a dissident faction led by a woman, who claims to prophesy and who receives the symbolic name of Jezebel (v.20). This name evokes Queen Jezebel, who, in the past, was also accused of idolatry and prostitution (1 Kings 16: 31-32). There is no clarity in the text if the group led by Jezebel is a parallel group to the Christian community. What is explicit is that it is a Balamite cult; therefore, it is likely that the cult of Baal was not eradicated as was previously believed from the reform of King Josiah in 621 BC.

She represents a group opposed to official Christianity. Jezebel's group had a different doctrine that is being disavowed in the letter. But it is only through her adversaries that we know what she taught. She is the leader of a religious group that occupies the same space as Christians. For the writer, she is responsible for deviant behaviors in the community. But it seems that until now the community did not consider Jezebel's attitude as wrong, since she lived in peace within the community. It seems that the possible conflicts also come from the unsupportive practice of the community and its rulers.

Prostitution in the text has a double dimension. The first refers to the sexuality of women and the second to the act of eating the flesh of idols, but both have a religious connotation: "I lead my servants astray to fornicate and to eat what is sacrificed to idols" (v. 20).

The first refers to the very act of having sex "Behold, I will cast her to the bed of pain, and those that commit adultery with her in great tribulation" (v. 22). This is reminiscent of the fertility cults widely known and legitimized by Old Testament Yahwehism (Gen. 38 and the book of Ruth). This type of cultic sexuality emulates the seminal rain of Yahweh (male) on Israel (female). In these cults women are called the *queesah* "sacred prostitutes" an erratic translation of the feminine of *qadosh* meaning "holy" also supported by De Matos in his doctoral thesis arguing that these women are the priestesses of Asherá (Matos 2022).

Starting in v. 20, John describes his Christ's treatment of a figure he calls Jezebel. The text itself seems to hypersexualize Jezebel, casting her as a false prophet who tricks Christ's slaves into practicing fornication and other types of immorality (2:20) and who refuses to repent of her actions (2:21). John indicates in 2:22 that Christ is 'throwing her onto a bed' (βάλλω αὐτὴν εἰς κλίνην) and her bedfellows and children will endure their punishments (Heister 2022)

In first-century Christianity, prostitution and fornication have a female profile, although this practice necessarily requires the active participation of men, a condition without which it would not exist as an institution. This markedly feminine profile already reveals an asymmetrical model of relationships, responsibilities and ethical valuation according to gender. Although she calls those who sleep with her adulterers, all the blame falls on the woman. Prostitution reveals a fundamental problem that involves everyone. It must be admitted as a concrete social problem and not simply as a metaphorical theme of apocalyptic symbolic language. We see from that, the emergence of forces that promote prostitution as a condition of life for women and their children. Two fragile sectors in society, especially children, the woman's offspring are the ones who are going to be mortally wounded. Those who did not commit any crime would pay for the "woman's improper" behavior.

The second emphasizes the act of eating meat sacrificed to idols, and we remember that in ancient Israel animal rituals were also allowed. These rituals consisted of the immolation of an animal for Yahweh. The viscera of these animals and the meat were burned, as it was for the supply of the royal and priestly house only.

Paul observed this practice. In 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13, Paul wrote that eating or not eating the meat offered to idols depended on each person's conscience. The fact is that what the local cults are promoting is the equitable distribution of meat, it will no longer be for the royal and priestly house but for the entire community. That meat was the part left over after the ritual burning of the inedible parts. And only the elite were invited to participate in the banquet and only the rich could buy the remaining meat. The banquets served to legitimize the patronage system, the

imperial cult and the privilege of the elite. It seems that the New Testament Jezebel is aware of this, which is why she makes an equitable redistribution.

However, John does not enthusiastically call it "the depths of Satan" (v. 24). According to the text, Jesus discerns between the oppressive satanic theology of Jezebel and the liberating apocalyptic one of John. But the question at this point is whether or not Jezebel should have known the Christian practice of eating the flesh of the lamb, that is, of eating unleavened bread that feeds the soul, but not the physical body. The act of eating that meat as we said before is not believed to be a type of distributive justice. It is worth remembering that, in the African context, especially Ethiopian, as attested to by Homer in the *Odyssey*, it refers to the table of the setting sun that invites a full commonality for all so that bread and meat are not a right only of the priestly elites.

Despite these intuitions, the androcentric language contained in the biblical writings immediately requires us to reject the evil practiced by Jezebel and accept the merciful love of Christ. Without a critical position to these stereotypes of sexuality and idolatry that women personify. In the end, the prize promised to the victor who remains faithful to the works of Christ will be "power over all nations and the morning star." This is a tempting enough prize to dwell on the details of sexist and patriarchal language and the power asymmetries behind this rhetoric.

Jesus' promise to the community of Thyatira is inspired by Psalm 2 (the political psalm that dominates the entire Apocalypse), where the Messiah is presented as the Son of God (2:18) who has power over the nations and all the kings of the earth. Now Jesus promises that power to whoever overcomes the community. The winners, in addition to having the power of domination over other peoples and cultures, will find the same Jesus represented in the "morning star" since in 22:16 he is called the "radiant morning star".

In this analysis, we highlight two problems related to women's lives: sexuality and idolatry. These are issues that transcend the entire history of Israel and also the history of women in the West. For centuries evil was associated with women, it is the inheritance that we have carried since Genesis with Eve. In Ap. 2:18-29 she is described as the depths of Satan. Although there is severe criticism of the oppressive system, we cannot forget that that system is made up of bodies that are being symbolically violated and through them, religious and gender intolerance is being promoted. It is possible that Jezebel simply represents a religion, or a goddess contrary to that of the empire and Christianity. This is a possibility that cannot be ruled out. Therefore, we can ask ourselves how long official Christianity will continue to impose itself as sovereign over other religious expressions. How long will we continue with those readings that associate evil with women's bodies?

Based on feminist criticism, it is impossible to continue with this type of reductionism. Prostitution reveals an underlying problem that involves both men and women. It must be admitted as a social problem and not simply as a topic elucidated in apocalyptic symbolic language. Although, in the environment in which the text is written, prostitution is more related to complicity with the cults

of the empire. This rhetoric also refers to the practice of female sexuality, this is inferred from the reference to fornication in Rev 2:20.

In summary, it is evident that in both Judaism and first-century Christianity, prostitution and fornication have a female profile, even though that practice requires the participation of men, a condition without which it would not exist as an institution. This markedly feminine profile reveals an asymmetrical model of relationships, responsibilities and ethical assessments according to gender.

In this study, there is another element in common, which is idolatry. According to Rev 2:18-29, Jezebel leads the community to practice the idolatry of oppressors, yet John qualifies it as the depths of Satan. Could it be that in fact, she represents the oppressors? Would it be a different religious practice?

### **From Santa Barbara to Iansã**

Regarding this final point, it is worth examining the extent to which such metaphors have shaped the lived experiences of Afro-descendant communities across the Americas. Branded as descendants of transgression, Black women remain subjected to persecution for offenses they did not commit. The Africans who arrived on the continent were marked by the curse of Can together with their descendants and only with much suffering and pain could they begin to be part of a controversial humanity that is still under construction. African American communities continue to build their identity and rebuild their tradition within the nation of which they are a part. Afro-Catholic syncretism occurs in that space and occurs at times of reconstruction or invention of the tradition of each religious group.

In the diaspora, this historical and symbolic construction of black women must be analyzed from an intersectional perspective, considering how race, gender and class have operated in an articulated way to structure specific oppressions that impact until today. The concept of intersectionality emerges as a response to the limitations of traditional social theories that treat gender, race, and class in isolation. This notion germinated from the abolitionist feminist movement in the United States in the mid-19th century, with Sojourner Truth and Maria W. Stewart, and (re)emerged from the 1970s and 1980s, both in women's movements and in academia. This development was highlighted by the contributions of Angela Davis (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Bell Hooks (1981) in the United States, and Avtar Brah (2007) in England, who raised criticisms of the problematic of the homogenizing stability of the category "woman" and highlighted the need to equally address the combined forms of differentiations and inequalities such as "race" and social class, which cut across women's experiences.

These demands were also present in Chicano feminism with Gloria Anzaldúa (2004), Norma Alarcón and Cherríe Moraga (1993), as well as in theorists of Asian origin such as Trinh T. Minh-há (1998), Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Gayatri Spivak (1990).

The communities of Asia Minor also went through this process of reorganizing their traditions not only in reference to the Western Roman world but also with the African world. Moreover, it is interesting to see how that phenomenon is perpetuated to this day.

Intersectionality thus challenges simplistic explanations of inequalities by demanding approaches that understand the complexity and simultaneity of the factors that structure oppression. This perspective, fueled by the struggles of social movements, is an invitation to academia to rethink its methodologies and epistemologies, recognizing black women as historical and intellectual agents, whose experiences and knowledge are rooted in more inclusive and transformative paths.

This notion also connects to the contexts of cultural and symbolic resistance developed by enslaved Africans in the face of colonial structures. In the case of Brazil, African-based religious practices, such as Candomblé, represented not only a space of spiritual connection but also of active resistance (Alexandre, 2024). The enslaved Africans, by identifying symbolic correspondences between the saints of Christianity and their divinities, such as the orixás and inkices, managed to preserve their beliefs amid surveillance and repression. Thus, Santa Barbara, syncretized as Iansã, not only becomes a religious icon but also a symbol of that cultural resistance.

In this context, devotion to Santa Barbara/Iansã reflects the dynamics of cultural adaptation and reconfiguration imposed by the African diaspora. The connection with Iansã, lady of thunder and winds, reinforces the ability of the centers of Candomblé to articulate symbolic strategies of resistance and reterritorialization. These spaces became meeting points for the reconstruction of identities, the transmission of ancestral knowledge and the organization of collective activities. In addition, in the specific case of Afrodiasporic women, centers of Candomblé became fundamental places to confront the colonialities of power and gender (Marinho & Simoni 2021). The occupation of these spaces allowed the materialization of beliefs fragmented by enslavement and made it possible to mobilize actions against racism and patriarchy (Marinho 2023).

Thus, the relationship between Santa Barbara and Iansã is not limited to a mere symbolic correspondence but encapsulates the cultural resistance, spiritual agency, and prominence of black women in the struggle against colonial and patriarchal impositions. This devotion is part of a broader history of resistance and cultural reinvention that continues to live on in Afro-Brazilian traditions.

The feast of Santa Barbara, which falls in December, the month of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, is celebrated with a banquet offered to children by most Bahian families, whether or not they are related to Afro-Brazilian religions. The Catholic festival consists of a mass and a procession around the Santa Barbara market in Salvador, Bahia, where they dance and drink in abundance. The origin of this festival dates back to the first centuries of Christianity.

The young Barbara was born in Asia Minor and lived in Nicomedia, an ancient Roman province of Bithynia. Her father was a very rich young man who resolved to protect his daughter from the world, isolating her in a tower. From there Barbara managed to communicate with Origen, in Alexandria. Then her father, himself a Christian, denounced her. Governor Marciano sentenced her to death and, finding no way to kill her, ordered her beheaded. Popular history tells us that when she was decapitated, a bolt of lightning fell from the sky and struck the trunk, reducing her body to ashes. It was the 4th of December and the time of Emperor Maximilian. (Sousa 2003)

The devotion to Santa Barbara spread very early, perhaps by the turn of the ninth century A.D. In the city of Salvador, where there had already been a chapel dedicated to Santa Barbara since the sixteenth century (Oliveira 2000). Devotion to the Saint since its inception is deeply linked to the markets, to the lives of vendors and especially of women. Markets played an important social role, it is there that kings made their decisions public, exhibited their women, mothers presented their new-born children, the dead are carried before being buried, the initiated presented themselves, people circulated, and marriages took place, among other things. It is a space for socialization.

In addition, markets and their cultural practices in the Americas represent a meeting point between African and European worldviews, reinforcing the role of women as guardians of the collective and spiritual memory of their communities. The problem is generated by the pre-understanding of syncretism as the deformation of an original matrix.

In truth, religious syncretism always existed in the history of human civilizations and occurred in various forms: assimilation of religious practices between conquered peoples, contacts between different cultural groups, catechism of native peoples during the colonization of new territories, trafficking of slaves, etc. Furthermore, all religions are syncretic. In Brazil, the term religious syncretism was historically applied, in a pejorative way, to refer to all religions within an African matrix. (Santos 2021)

In this way, the pattern of exclusion of women within priestly leadership continues, even though the role of women within this and other religious experiences and in the transmission of the faith is of extraordinary importance in communities of African origin. Many concepts such as "motherism" proposed by Catherine Acholonu (1995), "womanism" by Alice Walker (1983) and Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1996) have been developed. Others, including African Womanism by Clenora Hudsson-Weems (1993), Stiwanism by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Misovire by Werewere Liking (1983), Femalism by Chioma Opara (2004), Gynism by Pauline Marie Eboh (1996) and or Gynandism by Chinweizu and Barnabe Bilongo (1990), serve to expand the reflections on how black women reinterpret spirituality from their own cultural contexts, offering critical alternatives to hegemonic feminism.

The religiosity of black people is the foundation of their existence, therefore, the image of God the creator and of a Jesus Christ companion and friend has a

relevant importance. In their religious celebrations, they incorporate the rhythm, symbols and expressions of their tradition. As Lélia Gonzalez argues, Afro-descendant spiritualities resignify the values of Christianity, recontextualizing them in a relational ethic that prioritizes community and cultural resistance against colonialism.

That is why the church reflected in the faces of the poorest African-Americans must maintain its prophetic voice so that the richness of cultural and religious pluralism is not weakened by the dominant culture so that this cultural pluralism is an expression of a radical ecumenism of Christian utopia.

In short, this point served to point out that no matter how much in the history of Christianity, the struggle against other religious groups or traditions, as well as the obfuscation of women's work, is a constant on the part of official Christianity. Communities have nurtured and recreated their faith in contact with diverse traditions and cultures. That faith is what has accompanied black people in their history of struggle and resistance and is the same that keeps alive the hope that new relationships between genders, peoples and cultures can emerge. That faith is what encourages women to imagine and forge a better world for their offspring.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the social situation of violence and persecution of first-century Christian communities, which uses metaphors and female representations to explain prostitution, adultery, and idolatry, may at first glance seem a common conclusion. However, the analysis of the book as a whole indicates that both men and women would have to assume part of their responsibilities for these situations, as well as their plots of power to build alternative roads together. For this reason, commenting on the attitude of women looking for lovers, to accentuate how much the people had forgotten Yahweh, brings various prejudices, one of them being the reduction of the religious problem, the exchange of Christ for Baal without considering other social problems that were promoted by Christians.

The whole book of Revelation poses a hermeneutical problem for the readers of our time. The feminine metaphors used in apocalyptic symbols reinforce the idea that evil is rooted in the feminine. The socio-cultural context in which the book is inserted, and sexual ethics that classified women as despicable, by their power of seduction. These constructs can induce violent behavior by men against women. Especially, sexual violence or sexual behaviors classified as perverse for women and men could become socially accepted. These texts to some extent favor the sexual acceptance of a double standard.

Another hermeneutical problem is religious intolerance towards other non-Christian religious practices. This is a great challenge for Christianity, it starts from the realization that on our American continent, there are indigenous and African-American religions that must be valued. The path cannot be extermination as is presupposed in the Apocalypse and if the valorization and acceptance of diversity

must be implicit, only in this way is it possible to participate in the construction of a different world where relations between men and women are truly human.

In this sense, recognizing the spiritual and epistemological richness of indigenous and African American traditions not only allows for a more equitable coexistence but also mutual enrichment that challenges the idea that only Christianity possesses absolute truth. Interreligious dialogue and respect for spiritual plurality are essential steps toward just coexistence.

It is important to highlight that this reading is also placed in a critical perspective on the world economic order. It can be understood today as a *kairos* of our generations to overcome economic, political and cultural colonialism. It can no longer be believed that a single world economic order and a single culture is capable of embracing the full range of human experience. Cultural and religious colonialism has sustained a narrative of domination that invisibilizes alternative worldviews and ancestral knowledge systems. Overcoming it not only implies rejecting economic inequalities but also valuing the knowledge that emerges from the margins, understanding that subordinate cultures have valuable responses to global challenges.

We must be aware today that the Christ proclaimed in apocalyptic Christology may or may not be understood and eventually believed by those people who live in other cultures with other worldviews. The Good News is not just singing the conceptual content of a book, much less does it mean teaching an ideology as a vehicle of salvation. If the figure of Christ has a universal meaning, it must, at the very least, make some sense to people who do not belong to the Abrahamic line. The figure of Christ must not be a tool of cultural domination, but a symbol that can dialogue with other spiritualities, recognizing in them the presence of the divine and the dignity of their ways of life. Thus, Christians should not monopolize the knowledge of Christ. The affirmation that one is Christian begins with the challenge of this proclamation. Is it possible to leave the empire promoting exclusions and exclusivities at the same time? This reflection leads us to consider that Christianity, instead of being an agent of division, could become a bridge towards a more inclusive humanity, capable of learning from the spiritual and cultural richness of all traditions, collectively building a future where justice, peace and diversity are fundamental pillars.

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