

RESUMEN

“El significado del mito de Inanna/Ishtar en Apocalipsis 17”— El símbolo de Babilonia ha sido interpretado con una cosmovisión común en mente, el concepto de la Gran Madre. Aunque este concepto proviene de tiempos neolíticos, sus raíces se hallan en la literatura sumeria. Este artículo considera algunos mitos sumerios de la diosa Inanna/Ishtar en la evaluación de Apocalipsis 17. El estudio comparativo entre estos mitos y Apocalipsis 17 demuestra que quizás Juan se hace eco de manera irónica del concepto de la Gran Madre y de algunas características de la diosa Inanna/Ishtar. Juan presenta la creencia errónea de que la unión entre la religión y la política traería paz y prosperidad a la nación y que, a diferencia de estos antiguos mitos, la bestia/reyes resucitarán para morir por la eternidad.

Palabras claves: Apocalipsis 17, Inanna/Ishtar, la bestia, la ramera, el concepto de la Gran Madre, mitos sumerios.

ABSTRACT

“The Significance of the Inanna/Ishtar Myths in Revelation 17”— The symbol of Babylon has been interpreted with a common worldview in mind, the Great Mother concept. Although this concept comes from Neolithic times, its written sources appeared in Sumerian literature. This article considers some Sumerian myths of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar in the evaluation of Revelation 17. In the comparison of Inanna/Ishtar myths with Revelation 17, the analysis demonstrates that perhaps John echoes the Great Mother concept and some Inanna/Ishtar characteristics ironically. John presents the mistaken belief that the religiopolitical union would bring peace and prosperity to the nation and, unlike those ancient myths, the beast/kings will resurrect to die forever.

Keywords: Revelation 17, Inanna/Ishtar, the beast, the harlot, the Great Mother concept, Sumerian myths.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INANNA/ISHTAR MYTHS IN REVELATION 17

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Introduction

Revelation is a cryptic book, especially chapter 17. The harlot/city, also called Babylon, has been interpreted as a *tensive* symbol since she represents Babylon and Rome. However, if one considers the Exodus motif in Revelation, it is possible to connect the Babylon symbol with Egypt too.¹ Adela Yarbro Collins recognizes the Great Mother concept in Rev 17, an idea already presented, in her words, in “the Myths of Cybele and Attis, Aphrodite and Adonis, and Ishtar and Tammuz.”² The Egyptian couple Isis and Osiris could be added to the previous list.³ Nevertheless, the root of all these myths is found in the Sumerian marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi.⁴ Therefore, this paper explores the possible relationship between Inanna/Ishtar’s myths, the harlot, and the beast in Rev 17 by investigating the Great Mother concept. I demonstrate that some elements in the description of the beast and the harlot in Rev 17 could be understood under a comparative analysis with some Inanna/Ishtar’s myths. I conclude that perhaps John uses some popular concepts of the Mother goddess, which is rooted in ancient Sumerian myths to stresses the wrong belief that the political-religious union brings prosperity to the nation. Furthermore, John presents that, unlike the Sumerian myths, the beast/kings will resurrect to die forever.

1. Benjamin Wold, “Revelation’s Plague Septets: New Exodus and Exile,” in *Echoes from the Caves: Qumran and the New Testament*, ed. Florentino García Martínez (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 282.

2. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation,” *BibInt* 1, no. 1 (1993): 28-30.

3. Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 109-111.

4. *Ibid.*, 105-108.

Viability of the Sumerian Myths

The Sumerian literature is usually compared with the OT, and scholars see some parallels between (1) the flood and the story of Noah, (2) similarities between Cain/Abel and Enkimdu/Dumuzi,⁵ (3) correspondences between Job's story and some Sumerian disputations,⁶ (4) parallels between Gilgamesh and Eccl 4:12,⁷ and (5) connections between some Sumerian laws and Exod 22:15-16.⁸ Although the Sumerian parallels are more common in the OT, scholars connect the mythological creature Tiamat—the Akkadian counterpart for the Sumerian Nammu—with the combat myth in Revelation.⁹ In contrast, others see a similar role between the bride of the Lamb and the sacred marriage.¹⁰

The great challenge in the task of comparing the Sumerian literature to Rev 17 is the gap in time between Christians in the first century and the Sumerian civilization. However, although the gap in time between Christians in the first century and the Sumerians is more than 2,700 years, it is possible to find connections between both cultures.¹¹ Those connections are provided through Hellenism.

Inanna/Ishtar and Hellenism

The most important deities in the Sumerian pantheon are An,

5. William Hallo, *The World's Oldest Literature: Studies in Sumerian Belles-Lettres*, CHANE 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 667.

6. *Ibid*, 668.

7. *Ibid*, 669-670.

8. *Ibid*, 669-670

9. See Jeremy Black, "Tiamat," in *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Piotr Bienkowski and Alan Millard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 289; George A. Barton, "Tiamat," *JAOS* 15 (1893): 26-27.

10. Y. Collins, "Feminine Symbolism," 31. The great mother and the sacred marriage ceremony are Sumerian's notions.

11. The 2,700 years is a period that takes into account that the first Sumerian king was Enmerkar, who called himself Inanna's lover. See Pirjo Lapinkivi, "The Sumerian Sacred Marriage and Its Aftermath in Later Sources," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 18.

Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag, Nanna-Sin, Utu, and Inanna.¹² Inanna is the most famous Mesopotamian goddess, also known as Ishtar in Akkadian.¹³ Three elements attest to the importance of Inanna/Ishtar in Hellenism: (1) The name of Ishtar appears in cultic and non-cultic texts during the Hellenistic period when a new temple (Esgal) was built for her.¹⁴ (2) Several fragments of the myth *The Exaltation of Ishtar* “were actually copied during the Hellenistic period, implying its popularity and active use.”¹⁵ This myth is the Babylonian counterpart of *The Exaltation of Inanna*, a fact that demonstrates the importance and influence of the Sumerian culture in future generations.¹⁶ (3) Finally, a ritual text accounts that the Seleucid kings participated in the festival for Ishtar.¹⁷ Although the notion of the worship to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar does not appear among the Romans, they could know it through the concept of the Great Mother.

The Worship of the Great Mother

The Great Mother is usually associated with agricultural fertility, where the goddess is seen as the source of waters.¹⁸ According to Y.

12. Samuel N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 115-122. Enki was for a long time the fourth in the Sumerian pantheon; however, “he made the third place by displacing Ninhursang.” See Samuel N. Kramer and John Maier, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2. Some put Inanna in the sixth place after her father. See Joan G. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar—The Dimorphic Venus Goddesses,” in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (New York: Routledge, 2007), 332.

13. Rebekah Yi Liu, “The Background and Meaning of the Image of the Beast in Rev 13:14, 15” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2016), 267. This paper uses Inanna and Ishtar interchangeably.

14. Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice*, CM 25 (Boston: Brill, 2003), 121, referred in Yi Liu, “The Background and Meaning,” 267.

15. Yi Liu, “The Background and Meaning,” 267.

16. Westenholz, “Inanna and Ishtar,” 343.

17. Yi Liu, “The Background and Meaning,” 268.

18. James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 90, 92; John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London:

Collins the Great Mother is displayed in Rev 17 where “the great prostitute of ch. 17 is the Terrible Mother.... The beast upon which she rides is her phallic consort, showing her power over the animal world of fertility, birth, growth and decay.”¹⁹ The Great Mother arrived in Rome in 204 BCE, but scholars differ on several key points, including the motive for her cult introduction and the place from which she came to Rome.²⁰ Although she was worshiped before Sumer, written sources about her come from there, where the Great Mother par excellence was Inanna. From there, her worship spread to other cultures under different names. The Sumerian society influenced peoples like the Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Canaanites, and even the Greeks. The similarities, especially with the Greeks, are more evident in the Greek mythological motifs.²¹

Inanna/Ishtar the Archetype Goddess

The Sumerian goddess Inanna/Ishtar does not appear in the Roman pantheon. Nevertheless, two elements make her study essential in comparing Inanna/Ishtar with Rev 17. The first component is internal, which presents strong biblical resemblances.²² The second element is external and is related to the Sumerian religion and its influence in later cultures. Franz Cumont comments, “The equation Anahita = Ishtar = Ma or Cybele for the great female divinity is accepted everywhere.”²³ In other words, for Cumont, Cybele and Ishtar are connected, or they are the same deity with different names.

Thames & Hudson, 1970), 13; David Penchansky, *Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 71.

19. Y. Collins, “Feminine Symbolism,” 30.

20. L. E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 264.

21. Samuel Noah Kramer, “Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature: The Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts,” *Proceeding of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 6 (1963): 487.

22. See the heading “The Parallels” below.

23. Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago: The Open Court, 1911), 265.

Aphrodite presents some parallels with Inanna/Ishtar as well. A clear example of these correspondences is the similarities between the story of Gilgamesh and Ishtar with Aphrodite and Anchises. In his analysis of these resemblances, Scott B. Noegel concludes, "There can no longer be any doubt that at least some of these parallels are the result of contact with the Near East."²⁴ Moreover, the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis has its roots in the myth of Inanna and Dumuzi.²⁵

It is significant to remember that the Greco-Roman period presents elements of continuity with the preceding and succeeding periods.²⁶ Said differently, although Inanna/Ishtar does not appear in Roman mythology, she is still present in the concept of worship to the Great Mother. The written sources of her cult come from Sumer and this practice is transmitted to other cultures. The supports for this conclusion are (1) the parallels that scholars see between Inanna, Ishtar, Aphrodite, and Cybele; (2) the correspondence that scholars find between the Great Mother and the harlot of Rev 17; and (3) the parallels between Inanna/Ishtar and the biblical narrative.

The Sacred Marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi in the Sumerian Society

In order to compare two different pieces of literature, in this case, the Sumerian myths and Rev 17, one needs to take into account how that literature functions in its own society. The sacred marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi or *hieros-gamos* belongs to the Sumerian love poetry, which explains the marriage of the divine couple. This essential ceremony also appears in Assyrian and Babylonian love rituals. Talking about the importance of the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi in the Sumerian civilization, Samuel Kramer declares, "The most significant rite of the New Year was the *hieros-gamos*, or holy marriage,

24. Scott B. Noegel, "Greek Religion and the Ancient Near East," in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. D. Ogden (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 25.

25. Burkert, *Structure and History*, 105-108.

26. John T. Fitzgerald, "Greco-Roman Context," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. S. L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1:388.

between the king, who represented the god Dumuzi, and one of the priestesses, who represented the goddess Inanna to ensure effectively the fecundity and prosperity of Sumer and its people.”²⁷ This divine union also deifies the king and “support the king’s supremacy.”²⁸ In summary, the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi presents mainly a poetry genre with a sexual emphasis. Furthermore, two are the social functions of this ceremony: (1) the assurance of fertility and prosperity in the Sumerian culture, and (2) the deification of the king that presents the ideological function of his authority.²⁹

Inanna’s Descent into the Netherworld in the Sumerian Society

The reason why Inanna descends into the netherworld is due to her desire to reach power.³⁰ In doing so, she tries to steal the dominance of her sister, Ereckigala.³¹ In her journey to the netherworld, Inanna needs to pass through seven gates where she is destitute of her garments. When she passes through the last gate, she ends her journey naked. Inanna dies in the netherworld, but she resurrects after three days with the help of Enki (the god in charge of the abyss) and due to her substitute Dumuzi.³²

27. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 140.

28. Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295-299; Lapinkivi, “The Sumerian Sacred Marriage,” 15.

29. The *hieros-gamos* appears in later civilizations, where *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony* occurs between Adonis and Aphrodite. Moreover, in the *Antestheria* festival, this ceremony is depicted between the wife of King Archon and Dionysus. Finally, the *hieros-gamos* is represented in the Greek mythology between Zeus and Hera. See James G. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 105, 183, 233-234; Samuel Angus, *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity* (New York: Dober, 1975), 93-94.

30. Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty Nine Firsts in Recorded History*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 156.

31. Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence*, SAAS 15 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2004), 190.

32. Samuel Noah Kramer, “Death and Nether World According to the Sumerian

The myth *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* presents a double emphasis. The first idea is that the Sumerians have the notion that death was not the end of life since Inanna resurrects.³³ In the Sumerian literature, the netherworld is the region of death, but also this area is “a place to which one descends and from which one ascends.”³⁴ This first idea is related to the second one, which emphasizes that death is not linked to weakness. This last concept is stressed by the fact that Inanna descends into the netherworld to reach power, knowing that she could die in that place.

Enki is the God in charge of the abyss, and he plays a crucial role in the resurrection of Inanna.³⁵ The word abyss in the Sumerian language is *Abzu*, which refers to the cosmic sea,³⁶ and it is also connected with the abode or origin of demons.³⁷ The myth *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* attests the previous notion. In its line 16, Enki sails to the netherworld to conquer it, presenting an apparent connection between both places: *Abzu* and the netherworld.³⁸ Peeter Espak analyses the travel of the sun-god Uto to both places. He concludes that “this material suggests that the region of *Abzu* and the region of the netherworld where dead were residing seem to be somehow imagined as the shared regions.”³⁹ This last idea strengthens the link between the *Abzu/abyss* and the netherworld/death.

Literary Texts,” *Iraq* 22 (1960): 65; Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki*, 2.

33. Diane Wolkstein, “Interpretations of Inanna’s Stories and Hymns,” in *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 159.

34. Kramer, “Death and Nether World,” 64.

35. Enki is called the “god of underground waters.” See Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki*, 2.

36. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, “The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project,” <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/>.

37. Åke W. Sjöberg et al., eds., *The Sumerian Dictionary of the University of Pennsylvania Museum* (Philadelphia: Babylonian Section of the University Museum, 1994), A/II: s.v. “*Abzu*,” 196.

38. Jeremy A. Black et al., “The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature,” accessed June 17, 2016, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>.

39. Peeter Espak, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology*, *Dissertationes theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 19 (Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press, 2010), 182.

Scholars see a cyclical movement connecting the myth *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* with *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony*. They conclude that during six months, king Dumuzi and Inanna participated in the sacred marriage whereas, during the next six months, the king enters into a period of inactivity in the netherworld, a phenomenon that explains the lack of harvest.⁴⁰ The reason why Dumuzi goes to the netherworld is that Inanna chooses him as her substitute. After the period of inactivity in the netherworld, king Dumuzi resurrects and the cycle starts again. Therefore, concerning its social function, *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* is a juxtaposition of *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony*. On the one hand, this last myth guarantees prosperity in the land. On the other hand, *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* explains the change in the agriculture season and the lack of harvest due to Dumuzi's death.

Revelation 17 in Its Society

The message of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia (Rev 1:4). One can perceive that some of the struggles in those congregations are related to idolatry. The worship of the emperor in Rome was a common practice, which was in discordance with the Christian principles of worship. Talking about the emperor Domitian⁴¹ the historian Suetonius says, "He [Domitian] even insisted upon being regarded as a god and took vast pride in being called 'master' and 'god.' These titles were used not merely in speech but also in written documents."⁴² This assumption is significant in reading Rev 13:11-17; 17:6 because, among other texts, presents the Christian persecution in matters of worship.⁴³

40. Wolkstein, "Interpretations of Inanna's Stories," 167-168.

41. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 805-806.

42. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 2.329. To see the discussion about the date for Revelation, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYBC (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 78.

43. William M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire: Before A.D. 170*, 2nd ed. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1983), 295-296.

Collins identifies four areas of tension both internal and external in the seven churches: these are (1) the relationship between churches and the synagogue; (2) the relation between Christianity and its society; (3) the antagonism towards Rome; and (4) the tension between two groups, rich and poor.⁴⁴ It seems that Rev 17 is related to the areas in tension 2 and 3. The previous conclusion makes sense in considering the beast, the heads, the horns, and the harlot as political and religious powers opposed to God's people.⁴⁵

In summary, it could be said that there is an apparent dichotomy between the two Sumerian myths and Rev 17. On the one hand, the former emphasizes the importance of the divine-human association (Inanna-Dumuzi) to guarantee the prosperity of the kingdom as *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony* attests it. While the myth *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* highlights that although both Inanna and Dumuzi die, they resurrect, according to the cyclical element that connects both Sumerian myths. On the other hand, Rev 17 presents the persecution of the church in matters of worship, stressing the incompatibility of amalgam between a religious entity (harlot) and the political power (beast/kings). This last point is more evident in the analysis of the harlot's characteristics. According to David A. deSilva, John portrays that "she [the harlot] is not the sustainer of peace, but the source of violence and unjust bloodshed."⁴⁶ In other words, the juxtaposition of both narratives stresses their connection because while the Sumerian myths present the importance of the union of religious and political powers for the prosperity of the world, the biblical account presents the negative picture of that alliance.

The Relationship between Gods and Animals

In the ancient myths the beasts could represent a characteristic

44. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 84-104.

45. Koester, *Revelation*, 677-678; G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 358-359.

46. David A. deSilva, "Honor Discourse and the Rhetorical Strategy of the Apocalypse of John," *JSNT* 21, no. 71 (1999): 99.

of their owner god, or the animals could be a symbol of the gods.⁴⁷ Then when the people saw the god's animal, that could help them to remember that they were worshipping that god.⁴⁸ Explaining the relationship between the beast and the gods, Frank M. Cross mentions, "A god and his animal 'participate in each other,' and while the god may be conceived as enthroned or standing on the bull in Canaanite mythology and iconography, he also is immanent in his animal so that the two may be confused."⁴⁹ This statement describes that the differences between gods and animals were not clear and, therefore, the animal could be worshiped as a deity. Constance Gane explains the association of the beast and its god by saying,

When a monster is associated with an anthropomorphic deity, it operates in the same field of action or part of nature as that of the deity. Whereas the deity functions in the entire domain of his or her rule, the monster's activity is limited to only part of the god's realm. Thus, a monster that is associated with a deity as its attribute creature represents part of the divine nature or a particular aspect of the divine function of the god.⁵⁰

The previous assertion portrays a close relationship between the gods and their animals. Moreover, it presents two more elements. First, the beast's action is limited, but that limit is related to the activity of its god/goddess. Second, it seems that a monster shares some divine attributes of its associated deity. This last notion could mean that a beast linked with a god/goddess could be worshiped likewise

47. Tallay Ornan, "The Lady and the Bull: Remarks on the Bronze Plaque from Tel Dan," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na'aman*, ed. Yairah Amit et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 307. Billie J. Collins cites Marduk's myth that presents a man worshipping a horse "as if he were a god." See Billie J. Collins, *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 370.

48. Cumont, *The Oriental Religions*, 81.

49. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 73.

50. Constance E. Gane, "Composite Beings in Neo-Babylonian Art" (PhD diss., University of California, 2012), 3.

its consort. Perhaps that is the reason why Billie J. Collins, in his evaluation of KAR 218 obv. 10-rev. 11, determines that Marduk offers a sacrifice to the horse of the god Assur as if the horse were a god.⁵¹

The hymn *Inana as Ninegala (Inana D)* in the lines 34-35 says, “Your feet [Inanna] are placed on seven dogs.”⁵² Charles Penglase observing this hymn comments, “She rides on seven great dogs or perhaps more correctly, seven, lions, which are the animals usually connected with her.”⁵³ It could be assumed that Inanna/Ishtar is the chief, while the beast obeys her orders. At least two elements support this conclusion. (1) She appears not just seated on a beast, as the example above, but in some images, she also appears in a throne decorated with lions. According to Izak Cornelius, Ishtar riding a lion or setting in a throne depicts her role as a warrior.⁵⁴ If the goddess share attributes with her beast, this could indicate that Ishtar’s beast is also a warrior in nature. (2) Inanna appears most of the time wearing a crown, especially when she is on the beast. It seems this characteristic stresses her authority position. Although the beast obeys to its mistress, the goddess shares part of its divine nature with its animal. This element allows the worshipers to worship the beast as if they were worshipping the goddess.

51. Collins, *A History of the Animal World*, 370.

52. In the hymn to Inana (Inana C), lines 104-105 says, “You [Inanna] ride on seven great beasts as you come forth from heaven.” The previous text is a translation from Jeremy A. Black et al., “The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature,” accessed June 17, 2016, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>.

53. Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (London: Routledge, 2003), 46.

54. Izak Cornelius, “Aspects of the Iconography of the Warrior Goddess Ishtar and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecies,” in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 16-30. Although the author analyzes the Assyrian version of Ishtar, in the Sumerian version Inanna is depicted with masculine characteristics. Those characteristics lead some scholars to see Inanna as a warrior. See Rivkah, Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites,” *History of Religions* 30, no. 3 (1991): 269, 279. Maicol Cortes, “The Significance of the Inanna/Ishtar Myths to Revelation 17: A Comparative Approach” (MA thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2019), 70.

Inanna Sitting on the Mountains

In the Sumerian account *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, Inanna appears sitting on the mountains. The text says, “This great Queen of Heaven who drives the fearsome powers, / Who dwells on the peaks of the bright mountains, / Who thus embellishes the bright mountain dais.”⁵⁵ Herman Vantiphout explains that according to this hymn “the mountains are here represented as a throne, which is ‘embellished’ by Inanna when she sits on it.”⁵⁶ In Sumerian mythology, the mountain symbol is related to the netherworld. At the top of the mountain was the abode of the gods and at the bottom of the mountain was located the netherworld.⁵⁷ Then, perhaps, the picture of Inanna sitting on the mountain depicts her role as the only deity who dies but resurrects.⁵⁸

The Parallels

In order to avoid what Samuel Sandmel calls parallelomania,⁵⁹ one needs to examine the similarities as well as differences between Rev 17 and the Sumerian myths. Roy and Constance Gane argue, “Identifying such similarities and differences between biblical and antecedent extrabiblical views aids interpretation of a biblical composition by shedding light on what its author had in common with the ancient Near Easterners and what he wished to present as unique to the religion of his deity.”⁶⁰ Therefore, the following section presents

55. Herman Vantiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta*, trans. Theodore J. Lewis, WAW 20 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 69. See notes in the same book on page 94.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003), 65-79.

58. Brigitte Groneberg, “The Role and Function of Goddesses in Mesopotamia,” in *The Babylonian World*, 321.

59. Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81, no. 1 (1962): 1-13.

60. Roy Gane and Constance E. Gane, “Cosmic Conflict and Divine Kingship in Babylonian Religion and Biblical Apocalypses,” in *Meeting with God on the Mountains: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Davidson*, ed. Jiri Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, Theological Seminary, Old Testament Department, 2016), 286.

the parallels divided into two groups. The first group is composed of those parallels related to the myths of *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* and *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony*. The second group is related to general parallels associated with Inanna and her beast and Inanna sitting on the mountains.

Revelation 17 and the Sacred Marriage Ceremony

The Sexual Connotation

The bed is an essential element in the Sumerian myth, which does not appear in Rev 17. However, although the harlot in Rev 17 and Jezebel are different characters, some scholars see several similarities between them. For instance, Tuomas Rasimus suggests four elements that connect both figures: (1) The royal terms that John employs to describe the harlot suggest a connection with Jezebel. (2) The harlot is associated with *πορνέυων* like Jezebel. (3) She drinks the blood of the saints, an action that recalls Jezebel's murder to God's prophets. Finally, (4) Jezebel died by being eaten by dogs just as the beast will eat the harlot.⁶¹ Moreover, it could be added that in both contexts (Rev 2:20 and Rev 17:1-15), the idolatrous aspect of the society within the church is an important matter.

What I find interesting is the fact that, talking about Jezebel, Rev 2:22 says, "I will throw her onto a *sickbed*, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation" (ESV, emphasis added). The Greek word *κλίνην* appears nine times in the NT, and depending on the Bible version, it could be translated as "sickbed/bed."⁶² David E. Aune comments that this noun is a Hebrew idiom that means "to cast upon a bed of illness."⁶³ In other words, because "she [Jezebel] debauched herself with pagan gods on a bed of idolatry, so now God would 'cast' (*βάλλω*/*ballō*) her onto a different

61. Tuomas Rasimus, "Jezebel in Jewish and Christian Tradition," in *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity*, ed. Ulla Tervahauta et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 108-132.

62. "Sickbed/bed of suffering" (NIV, NLT, ESV, NASB) or "bed" (KJV, ASV).

63. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), 205

kind of ‘bed,’ a bed of pain.”⁶⁴ Although Rev 2:22 could have a sexual connotation, it seems that John is presenting here the judgment of Jezebel ironically.⁶⁵

Going back to Rev 17, this chapter presents a sexual emphasis. For example, in his explanation of the relationship between the woman and the kings, G. K. Beale mentions that the word *immorality* is a genitive of association, which literally means that the kings “have intercourse with her.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, it seems that the reason why John is using this metaphor is to denounce “the *political* alliances between Babylon and her client kingdoms.”⁶⁷

The King as God

To illustrate the apparent deification of the king, John uses the word *προσκυνήω* (“to worship”). This word occurs twenty-four times in Revelation, of which nine times refers to the worship of the beast/kings. Interestingly, this word does not appear in Rev 17, but it occurs in Rev 13. If the sea beast (Rev 13:1) and the abyssal beast (Rev 17:8) are connected, then the previous conclusion makes sense.⁶⁸ Moreover, if one considers the relationship between the goddess/harlot and her beast, it would not be unusual to observe that people worship the beast.

The Prosperity of the Nation

The union between the goddess Inanna and the king Dumuzi ensures the prosperity of the empire. On the other hand, John presents

64. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT 27 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 158.

65. Koester, *Revelation*, 299.

66. Beale and Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 354.

67. David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, WBC 52C (Dallas: Word, 1998), 931. Emphasis in original.

68. Eavid E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 736, 746-747; Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, ConcC 66 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 440-441. See also Roy Graf, “La relación entre las bestias de Apocalipsis 13:1-10 y Apocalipsis 17: Algunas implicaciones,” *Theologika* 26, no. 2 (2011): 176–198. In this article the author presents a variety of parallels between the sea beast and the abyssal one, those parallels support the connections between both beasts.

that the union of both entities (the kings and the harlot) provokes disgrace to the saints, whereas the non-believers benefit from this union (Rev 18:3, 7, 9, 15). Perhaps that is the reason why the wicked cry for the destruction of the harlot/city (Rev 18:9, 11, 15, 17-19), while the saints rejoice at her downfall (Rev 18:20).

At least three elements in this myth differ from the biblical narrative. (1) *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony* is a cyclical rite; this means that every year the king marries Inanna. The cyclical element is absent in the narrative of Rev 17. (2) In both narratives, the characters could be symbolic, but the figurative element is highlighted in the biblical account. (3) The ceremony has a sexual emphasis on the preparation of the bed, while the biblical account briefly mentions that “the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her” (Rev 17:2, ISV).

Revelation 17 and Inanna’s Descent into the Netherworld

The Nudeness of the Goddess

Inanna finishes her journey nude in the netherworld, as the harlot does it (Rev 17:16). However, whereas Inanna goes into the netherworld or death, the biblical account does not mention these details for the harlot. Instead, the beast eats her, and she is burned with fire.

The Netherworld and the Abyss

In Sumerian literature, the Abzu (abyss) is a place of waters, which appears in association with the netherworld (the place of the dead). The fact that Enki, the god in charge of the Abzu, is the one who assists Inanna to be resurrected strengthens the parallel. Although the netherworld does not appear in Rev 17, the abyss could carry the idea of death.⁶⁹

The Concept of Resurrection

Inanna resurrects from the netherworld, while in Rev 17, the beast resurrects from the abyss—a difference that could be explained

69. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 940.

through the association between the goddess and her animal. Moreover, both Inanna and the beast need external support to ascend/resurrect. In the case of Inanna, she needs to Enki, while it seems the beast requires the help of someone else.⁷⁰ At least two differences could be noticed between Rev 17 and the Sumerian myth: (1) the beast does not need a substitute for its resurrections, as the Sumerian myth requires for Inanna, and (2) Inanna dies and resurrects after three days, a time element absent in the biblical account.

The Desire for Power

Both entities, the harlot and Inanna, seek for power. Although they differ in the way they look for power: Inanna descends into the netherworld, whereas the harlot joins the kings of the earth. Inanna and the harlot die in their search: Inanna's sister killed her in the netherworld, whereas the beast and the horns kill the harlot.

General Parallels between Inanna and Revelation 17

The Beast and the Goddess

The fact that both, Inanna and the harlot ride a beast displays some similarities. For instance, both animals carry their consort (the harlot and Inanna), and it seems that both beasts represent their owners. The difference is that Inanna's beast is described as a lion or a dog, whereas Rev 17 does not present the harlot's beast appearance. The association between the harlot and the beast is underlined by the fact that both share the same color κόκκινος, "scarlet" (Rev 17:3-4). In Rev 17, the scarlet color represents the "ostentatious magnificence of the Empire."⁷¹ Louis A. Brighton comments that it is the harlot who conferred this color to the beast, which "indicates that she dominates it and that it acts on her behalf and for the purpose of magnifying her

70. The beast was ἐθεραπεύθη, "healed" (passive voice). The one who is healed is the sea beast (Rev 13:3). However, this article states that the sea beast and the abyssal beast are the same entity.

71. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911), 215.

splendor.”⁷² This last statement presents two essential ideas. First, the harlot is the one who dominates the beast, and the beast acts according to its mistress’s will. Second, it seems that the harlot is the one who confers to the beast its attributes. This last fact is expected if one considers that the harlot is the goddess and her representative is the beast.

The Seat on the Mountains

In the myth, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, Inanna appears sitting on the mountains. Similarly, the harlot is presented as one who is sitting on seven mountains (Rev 17:9). However, the number of mountains is absent in the Sumerian myth. Moreover, in Sumerian mythology, the mountain is related to the netherworld and therefore to the “land of the dead,”⁷³ whereas it seems that the mountains in Revelation represent empires.⁷⁴

The Significance of Inanna’s Myths to Revelation 17

The similarities, as well as the differences between Inanna’s myths and Rev 17, could indicate that Israel and its neighbors “shared the same pool of ideas and behaviors and that distinctiveness is to be found in the way Israelites reconfigured or patterned those ideas and behaviors.”⁷⁵ In other words, perhaps the author of Revelation echoes the Sumerian myths transforming them according to his own purposes. However, the question would be to what extent John echoes those common concepts in the polytheistic religion of his days into Rev 17.

In trying to understand the possible association between Inanna’s myths and the composition of Rev 17, several possibilities emerge. One option could be that (1) John did not interact with any Sumerian myth in his narrative, or (2) perhaps the source material is closer to the OT. It could also be possible that (3) the OT is closer to the myths

72. Brighton, *Revelation*, 440-441.

73. Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld*, 67.

74. Beale and Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 366.

75. Angel Manuel Rodriguez, “Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to the Bible and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12, no. 1 (2001): 48.

and Revelation draws upon it. Maybe (4) the author of Revelation writes in an environment where those myths were common, or (5) he uses intentional imagery, or even (6) employs these myths as a source. Since it seems that John associates the Sumerian myths with Rev 17 in some way, the first option is not possible. Considering that the *Vorlage* text for Rev 17 is Dan 7,⁷⁶ the second and third alternatives are not valid because although scholars recognize a mythological background in Dan 7,⁷⁷ the image of a harlot riding a beast is unique to Rev 17. The fourth option could be possible since John uses in Revelation elements of his environment to stress his message.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, although some goddess (such as Osiris, Ishtar, Aphrodite, and Cybele) assimilated Inanna's characteristics, Inanna is not part of the Roman pantheon. Finally, the last two alternatives could be also plausible; this means that perhaps John employs Sumerian myths in the narrative of Rev 17 in juxtaposition, using a common worldview, the one of the Great Mother Goddess.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that perhaps John echoes the Sumerian myth in Rev 17. The polyvalent symbol of Babylon may point out a variety of associations. Some of these associations could be Babylon, Rome, Egypt, and some goddesses as Osiris, Ishtar, Aphrodite, and Cybele.⁷⁹ The previous goddesses find their roots in the Sumerian goddess Inanna. The concept of the Great Mother with roots

76. G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 154-271; G. K. Beale, "The Influence of Daniel upon the Structure and Theology of John's Apocalypse," *JETS* 27, no. 4 (1984): 413-423.

77. John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 291.

78. One example of John using elements of his environment is the phrase "the throne of Satan" (Rev 2:13) in the message to the church of Pergamum. See Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 126.

79. Wold, "Revelation's Plague Septets," 297; Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, "Mother of Gods, Mother of Harlots," *NovT* 59 (2017): 67.

in the Sumerian mythology allows comparing the myths of Inanna/Ishtar with Rev 17. In this regard, *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony* highlights the importance of the association between the religious and political entities (Inanna and Dumuzi), whereas Rev 17 exhibits the negative side of this union (Rev 17:6). The myth *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld* presents that the goddess and Dumuzi die. However, they resurrect according to the cyclical element that connects this myth with *The Sacred Marriage Ceremony*, whereas John comments that the beast/kings resurrect to die forever (Rev 20:10). Consequently, it seems that the reconfiguration of these myths by John in his narrative attests the particular way in which the biblical account echoes the Sumerian myths. John underlines the ironic use of the Great Mother concept, a common idea in polytheistic religion in John's days.

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