

Drew University

Roasting Rome:

Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation

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Sarah Emanuel

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The survivor who [experiences] recovery faces life with few illusions but often with gratitude. Her view of life may be tragic, but for that very reason she has learned to cherish laughter.

*-Judith Herman,
Trauma and Recovery*

For survivors of trauma, personal and communal.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that Revelation is a Jewish postcolonial text that uses humor as a mode of opposition and repair in the face of imperial trauma. In order to demonstrate this, I argue that Revelation is, first and foremost, best read historically as a Jewish text. While Revelation scholarship typically situates the Apocalypse within a Christian conversation—contending, for instance, that it is a Christian text or, at best, a Jewish-Christian text—I illustrate how and why it is Jewish from beginning to end. Utilizing a postcolonial dialogical framework, I also argue that Revelation relies on a dialogical use of Jewish and Greco-Roman comic scripts to “write back” to Empire and make its anti-imperial claims. I suggest that the Apocalypse is postcolonial in the performative sense: It bears witness to the history of colonial oppression that subtends its cultural and psychological existence while bringing into being imaginatively a postcolonial form of community. This postcolonial reimagining, I further suggest, is evidenced not only in its claims of trauma and the value of a Jewish cultural self in the face of that trauma—integral parts of postcolonial-posttraumatic repair—but also in its erosion of the imperial transcript(s) that have deemed Jews “Other than.” This erosion is performed through Revelation’s use of humor. By “roasting” past/present Empires packaged into a Roman reality, Revelation creates a comic counterworld in which implied Jewish audiences overcome past/present Empires, particularly Rome. However, just as a “roastmaster” today often mirrors her/his subjects in mocking them, and just as a survivor of imperial trauma often risks introjection in her/his recovery process, so too does the vitriolic humor directed against Rome risk attaching itself to Revelation’s

messiah and God's empire, which goes against the grain of the text's ostensible intentions and has the effect of turning the joke back onto the Apocalypse.

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Introduction

The Beginning of the (Comic) End

Critics of comedy invariably begin with an apology, and in the heart of every commentator is a certain regret that, in this case at least, all criticism destroys its object.

-Scott Shershow¹

The book of Revelation invites readers to follow John, the text's protagonist and implied author, through a series of visions culminating in an eschatological war between God and all evil. The "end of days" is near, and John is giving us a front-row seat. To be sure, John's visions are strange—terrifying, even, as many scholars remark. Throughout the narrative, we learn that God's people are not only "tormented...[but] sometimes killed by various agents of Satan."² As John himself writes: "I, John, your brother, [share] with you in Jesus: the suffering (θλίψις)...and the patient endurance [of it]" (1:9).

But Revelation is not just about the suffering of John and his implied audience.³ Much of Revelation's chapters outline in detail the destruction of its adversaries, including those "various agents of Satan." Whereas Revelation's opening chapters delineate the downfall of local villains—presumably those who do not follow the Apocalypse's ideological orientation and halakhic worldview (e.g., "Balaam" and "Jezebel"; see Rev. 2)—succeeding chapters focus on the destructions of more global

¹ Scott Cutler Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 4.

² Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?: Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

³ For detailed expositions of Revelation's implied audience, see chapter one and chapter three.

forces. In chapter 12, for instance, we are introduced to a Satan-dragon who attempts to devour a newborn Jesus (12:3–4). In chapter 13, we meet two beasts, that of the sea and that of the land, who—despite their evil inclinations and outlandish physiques—succeed in deceiving many of the earth’s inhabitants (13:1–3, 11–14). In chapter 17, we learn that the Satan-Dragon and Beasts operate alongside the Great Whore of Babylon, “the mother of whores and the earth’s abominations,” who has similarly seduced the earth’s rulers and countless occupants (17:5). But as we soon also discover, not only are the Whore and her evil counterparts destroyed by Christ and the Israelite God, so too are her followers. In a vicious cosmic battle, Christ (in the form first of a lamb and then of an anthropomorphic superwarrior) works alongside his God to destroy the Beasts and Whore (14:9–10; 15:14; 17:16–17), making it known that *he* is the true “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16; cf. 17:14). Soon the Satan-Dragon also is consumed by fire (20:10), leaving Christ and God to dwell eternally among their devotees in the New Jerusalem (21:10), where death, sadness, and fear are seemingly no more.

Revelation remains one of the most challenging New Testament writings. Not only are the text’s allusions and imaginings cryptic and difficult to apprehend, but they also carry with them a long history of sensationalized interpretations, including, perhaps most acutely, predictions about when and how the world as we know it will come to an end. In the 18th century, for instance, Baptist William Miller read the book of Revelation alongside the book of Daniel and concluded that the end of days would come between the years 1843 and 1844. In the late 20th century, Vernon Howell (otherwise known as David Koresh) thought that he was chosen by God to initiate the cosmic battle outlined in Revelation—which, on his reading, included the need to procreate with his followers’

wives. More recently, the bestselling *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has outlined in detail the ills of this world and how they signify the oncoming battle between God and Satan in the end times.⁴ For reasons such as these, I agree with Wilfred Harrington when he writes that “this book, more than any other New Testament writing, demands commentary.”⁵ In fact, I would even rephrase his statement to say: “This book, more than any other New Testament writing, demands *critical* commentary.”

When examining the critical commentaries, one would be hard-pressed to find predictions about the end of the world. Instead, one finds a historical focus on ancient Rome. Critical scholars have long contested, for example, that these forces of evil outlined above—the Dragon and the Beasts and the Whore—are coded representations for the Roman Empire and its imperial rulers. Naming the Empire “Babylon” rather than Rome not only illustrates Revelation’s immersion in Jewish tradition, but also serves as a code name under which its anti-Roman sentiments can hide. In fact, the notion that Revelation provides a “hidden transcript”⁶ designed to disrupt hegemonic discourses is one to which most scholars subscribe. By characterizing Babylon as immoral and licentious—as “a mother of whores and the earth’s abominations” (Rev. 17:5)—Revelation disrupts normative notions of power to such a degree that the text’s opposing

⁴ A thorough overview of Revelation’s tempestuous reception history is in Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 1–40.

⁵ Wilfred J. Harrington, *Revelation*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), xiii.

⁶ I borrow this term from James C. Scott, who defines a hidden transcript as “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by the powerholders.” See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4. For another application of Scott’s hidden transcript concept to Revelation, see Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies and the Book of Revelation*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 47–55.

forces appear vilified and subverted at numerous moments throughout the narrative.

Subverting the Empire through Humor

This dissertation explores Revelation's subversions through the lens of the comic.⁷ It is my thesis that the text utilizes humor as a Jewish survival tactic. More specifically, I argue that Revelation is a postcolonial Jewish narrative (of becoming⁸) that

⁷ Although some Revelation scholars identify John's use of parody, mockery, the topsyturvy, the grotesque, sarcasm, irony, and satire at particular moments within the text, none to my knowledge present a comprehensive, inter(con)textualized analysis. For treatments of Revelation's use of humor (several of them merely ventured in passing), see C. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 31, 155–159; Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 105–106; Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 29; 171–174; Steve Friesen, "Sarcasm in Revelation 2–3: Churches, Christians, True Jews, and Satanic Synagogues," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 127–44; Harry O. Maier, "Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation," *The Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 2 (1997): 131–154; Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 164–197; Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 65–68; Tina Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: The Apocalypse of John in Feminist Perspective," in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 137–144.

⁸ I use this qualifier to refer to the notion that narratives contribute to the construction and becoming of selves. As socio-narratologist Arthur Frank puts it, "Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate.... Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, as worth doing or best avoided." In other words, because stories tell us what we can and cannot do, and who we can and cannot be, they contribute to the making of who we are and, in turn, who we will 'become.' See Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2010), 3. For more on this concept in biblical studies, see, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3-26; Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1995); Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian*

uses humor as a mode of opposition and repair in the face of imperial trauma. By putting humor and trauma theories in conversation with the postcolonial and historical theoretical view that Revelation is a counter-imperial text—a text that emerges out of and also writes back to Roman imperial subjugation⁹—I illustrate that Revelation implements humor *as an articulation of its imperial ex-centricity*,¹⁰ as well as *a means by which to construct a resistant and persistent Jewish selfhood*. While Revelation’s satiric attacks against local adversaries consolidate for readers “who” and “what” constitutes the “right” Jewish self/culture for Revelation, its comedic portrayals of global adversaries work to erode the dominant transcript in which that Jewish self/culture has been deemed a forgettable Other.¹¹

Culture Making (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), especially pp. 10–12; and Maier, “Staging the Gaze,” especially pp. 152–154.

⁹ See, for example, Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 13–37; Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014); and Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015). See also Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, *The Bible and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999); Greg Carey, “The Book of Revelation as Counter-Imperial Script,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 157–76; Greg Carey, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, *Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 39* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 169–80; Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 34–96; Warren Carter, *What Does Revelation Reveal?: Unlocking the Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011); Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ On the ex-centricity of postcoloniality, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 6.

¹¹ By “forgettable,” I mean that Rome often “forg[ot] the humanity” of the Jewish Other. For more on this concept and its traumatic effects, see Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). For more on this, see chapter two.

In order to demonstrate this, I first establish that Revelation is a Roman period Jewish text. Whereas in many contemporary contexts Revelation might best be analyzed as Christian in that it informs Christian communal memory and identity¹²—or even in that many Christians consider it “theirs”—historically speaking, the category “Christian” cannot be so easily applied to the book of Revelation. To be a Jesus-follower in the first century CE meant believing that Jesus was the *Christos*, the “messiah,” but this belief stemmed from Jewish tradition; it did not counter, challenge, or contradict how Judaism perceived itself. This does not mean, however, that Jewishness in the first century was uniform and/or static. As Shaye Cohen explains, first century Judaism was “marked by numerous sects and groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, the Jews of Qumran, Zealots, Sicarii, ‘The Fourth Philosophy,’ Christians, Samaritans, Therapeutae, and others.”¹³ I will position Revelation within this diverse Jewish matrix and argue that, through comic subversion, the text not only combats Rome, but also negotiates a particular type of

¹² According to Elizabeth A. Castelli, collective memory is both created and sustained via repetition. “Memories are processed through language, which provides the conventional and customary meanings that then refract back onto the memory. Through retelling—whether narrative, performative, representational, even liturgical—memory accrues meaning through discursive and embodied repetition” (Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 11–12). The Book of Revelation is repeated in many Christian communities primarily through song, with lyrics focusing on the glorification of God and Christ/the Lamb. These hymns, writes Craig Koester, “help readers interpret the warnings in light of the promises, and to understand that God’s purposes are directed toward the joy of salvation” (Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 38). A primary reason Revelation has been avoided in other liturgical contexts is the text’s violent and grotesque imagery. *The Revised Common Lectionary*, which is used by many Protestant congregations lists only six Revelation passages to be read every three years. According to Koester, “The result [of this] is a rather pleasant selection of texts that minimizes the likelihood that anyone will be embarrassed or confused by Revelation’s more bizarre or disturbing images” (ibid., 32). As noted above, however, not all Christian readers of Revelation avoid its fantastic and grotesque imagery. For more on the relationship between narrative and communal identity, see footnote 8.

¹³ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Third Ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 222.

Jewishness within the text's imaginary. This is also is not to say, however, that Revelation, its author, or its intended audiences occupied a space somehow separate from the larger cultural milieu. Just as many scholars have recently contended that all Judaism in the Hellenistic period was Hellenistic Judaism, regardless of whether it operated within or outside of Judea, or whether the community drew strong borders over and against Greek culture, I will argue that Revelation appears to be a Hellenistic Jewish text, written by a sectarian Jew, likely in the Roman province of Asia, in the second half of the first century CE.

I will also argue that Revelation implements popular aspects of the comic as means by which to undermine Rome and, ultimately, create a “signal of transcendence”¹⁴ for its implied sectarian counterparts. As the title of this dissertation suggests, Revelation “roasts” Rome—both humorously and via imagined incendiary flame (see Rev. 17:16; 18:8)—to the extent of creating a new world order in which the implied Jewish Other “reign[s] supreme”¹⁵ over and against the Roman imperial self. Rather than wallow in the repeated diminishment of a Jewish marginal self, the text combats Rome and Roman sympathizers via parodic and venomous depictions of them. In short, the text creates a comic counterworld—one in which Rome is fool and its implied Jewish counterparts thrive under God's new Empire.

¹⁴ Peter Berger defines the comic, much like certain religious experiences, as a signal of transcendence—a moment in which “the reality of ordinary, everyday existence” is reversed. Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin, Germany, and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 205.

¹⁵ This term is from Antonis K. Petrides, “Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 428.

Despite Revelation's ex-centricity, its relations to Empire and imperial power are ambivalent. As scholars such as Robert M. Royalty and Stephen D. Moore have shown, Revelation inevitably swallows imperial court ceremonial only to carry the caloric enterprise on its own hips.¹⁶ "Opposition to the dominant culture in the Apocalypse is not an attempt to redeem that culture but rather an attempt to replace it with a Christianized version of the same thing."¹⁷ By overturning the Roman court only to outline the Jewish God's and the Jewish Messiah's own occupation of it, Revelation, writes Moore, "replicates even as it repudiates Roman imperial court ceremonial."¹⁸

This ironic rhetorical effect extends to Revelation's use of humor. Implicitly, the text depicts Christ as a newer and better Caesar, but in so doing, the vitriolic humor that it directs against Caesar and the Roman Empire attaches itself to Christ's and God's Empire, a development that—as I will argue—goes against the grain of the text's interests and has the effect of turning the joke on itself. Just as a "roaster" today often mocks and praises his or her subject via obscene gestures and humorous insults,¹⁹ so too does the Apocalypse seem to simultaneously detest and desire the imperial throne. A major question I attempt to answer in this dissertation, then, is how to deal with this contradiction—how to make sense of Revelation's simultaneous anti-imperial and pro-imperial worldview.

¹⁶ See Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 246; Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 31. See also Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 173–74.

¹⁷ Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, 246.

¹⁸ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 14.

¹⁹ Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 80.

Backdrops, Backgrounds, and Other Important Starting Points

What Kind of Story Is This?

Biblical stories are not autonomous. They do not rule on their own or exist in social vacuums. In the words of Danna Nolan Fewell, “There [are] multiple versions of [biblical] stories.”²⁰ “What these multiple versions...indicate is that [the] stories talk to one another. Every story is an ‘intertextual performance.’”²¹ As we will see in more detail below (consult chapter two especially), stories talk to each other. They build off of each other. What, then, of Revelation? With *whom* does it speak? With *what* does it think?

In answering these questions, a common place to begin is genre. Because Revelation “introduces itself” as an ἀποκάλυψις—that is, some sort of “unveiling” of that which is hidden—scholars typically associate it most directly with the genre of apocalypse, even if it is too early to construe Revelation’s opening word as a formal genre designation. The apocalypse genre, generally speaking, refers to a form of ancient Jewish writing that originated in Judea/Palestine²² and flourished in the period between 200 BCE and 100 CE. John Collins’ standard definition of the apocalypse genre, with which most scholars agree, is: “A revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological

²⁰ Danna Nolan Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² “No known examples of Jewish apocalypses originated in the eastern or western Diaspora, nor did the genre survive long in early Christianity once it had moved outside the boundaries of Palestine.” David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), 1.

salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”²³

But Revelation contains elements of other genres, too. For example, while John refers to his vision as prophecies (1:3),²⁴ they are also framed by a greeting and conclusion that mirror those of ancient letters (1: 4-6; 22:16-21).²⁵ And while the text’s depictions of adversarial monsters resemble those of ancient myth (chapter 13 especially), Revelation’s inclusion of hymns indicates that it was supposed to be read in some type of worship setting. (4:8-11; 5:9-14; 7:9-12; 11:15-18; 19:1-4; 5-8; 15:3-4; 16:5-7).²⁶ For reasons such as this, Gregory Linton writes that “the Apocalypse resists classification in one pure genre... The multiple connections of the Apocalypse with various types of literature complicate the attempt to pin down its generic identity.”²⁷

In an effort to avoid this “pinning down,” I will be reading the Apocalypse through a narrative lens. This reading practice does not dismiss Revelation’s apocalyptic, mythic, prophetic or hymnic associations, but rather recognizes them as constitutive parts of a larger narrative work. While Revelation’s greeting and conclusion, for instance, mirror what we see in ancient letters, they still operate within a larger narrative

²³ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 5. This definition appeared first in *Semeia* 14, which represented the analysis undertaken by the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project. See John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (*Semeia* 14; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979). For Collins’ most recent work on apocalyptic literature, including the issue of genre, see John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

²⁴ See Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 107–109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109-112

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127. See also Maccabees of the embedding of verse in narrative.

²⁷ Gregory L. Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 9.

imaginary. And while Revelation's John functions as the text's ultimate seer, his prophetic visions also take place within this larger narrative world. I thus agree with David L. Barr when he suggests that we should be spending less time *dividing* the material into different genre types, and more on focusing how "the author took such diverse material and wove it into a [larger] narrative."²⁸ As "a series of...events that are caused or experienced by actors,"²⁹ Revelation functions as a narrative text that is concerned with otherworldly mediations and eschatological retributions, which are recounted by John who functions as "both the narrator and as a character in the story."³⁰ Like other ancient writings, it offers a dialogical and intertextual "narrative representation of a revelation experience," which in turn invites the "audience [to] imaginatively share that experience."³¹ The text's visions, letters, liturgies, and myths do not take away from its narrative character, but rather add depth to it.

At the same time, the issue of imperial colonization is also of particular importance here. For while the field of postcolonial studies often focuses on imperial and colonial discursivities constructed in and around literatures written in English—and, more traditionally, those written in response to European colonizations of the early

²⁸ David L. Barr, "Narrative Techniques in the Book of Revelation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 378. For more on narrative theory in/and biblical studies, see Stephen D. Moore, "Biblical Narrative Analysis from the New Criticism to the New Narratology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Fewell, 27–50.

²⁹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine Van Boheemen (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 5. Quoted in Moore, "Biblical Narrative Analysis From the New Criticism to the New Narratology," 27.

³⁰ Barr, "Narrative Techniques in the Book of Revelation," 376.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 377.

modern period—I follow a more broad-based approach.³² I agree with postcolonial literary theorist Justin D. Edwards, for instance, when he writes that “texts from *different regions* [and *different time periods*] reveal the asymmetrical power structures that lie behind imperialist discourses, and how such discourses have [also] been used as a political and ideological tool to advocate change and liberation.”³³ Indeed, postcolonial narratives more generally work to “challeng[e] the hierarchical binaries of Empire...[and] to establish new centers of discourse, new subject positions, and new loci of freedom and power.”³⁴ This dissertation thus not only reads Revelation as narrative, but, in doing so, recognizes Revelation as responding to these challenges and constructing a postcolonial narrative ethos.

When and Where Was It Written?

Reading Revelation as a postcolonial narrative leads to another important starting point for our reading: the Apocalypse’s *Sitz im Leben*. Because Revelation paints an internal backdrop colored by the threats of imperial persecution—and because postcolonialism is inherently interested in the historical circumstances related to colonial and imperial subjugation—we must ask if there is indication as to *why* Revelation would construct such a narrative. Is there, for example, a particular *reason* for Revelation to be taking part in what we are naming the “postcolonial”? Is there a particular “when and where,” to match the world that Revelation so vividly depicts?

³² For more on this and, specifically, my rationale for applying the term “postcolonial” to Revelation, see chapter two.

³³ Justin D. Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

³⁴ John Clement Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

Although I do not think we can determine the when³⁵ or where of Revelation with precision, we can establish a dependable range. Revelation's *terminus post quem* date is likely 68 CE, as Revelation's depictions of the Sea Beast mirror stories of Nero's death.³⁶ Its *terminus ante quem* date is—at the very latest—around the mid-second century CE, as both Justin Martyr and Melito of Sardis reference it (ca. 155-160 CE, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80-81; ca. 160-170, Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae* 4.26.2).³⁷ Revelation was written, in all likelihood, somewhere in the Roman province of Asia. Not only does John state in the text itself that he writes from Patmos (1:9), but he also addresses his letters to seven assemblies in Roman Asia (1:4), thus inviting us to, at the very least, imagine Roman Asia as the backdrop.³⁸

While some may contend that this is not enough—that we must position Revelation within a specific *Sitz im Leben* so as to fully understand the text's constructions of a suffering Jewish community—I arrive at a different conclusion. Based

³⁵ I summarize the scholarly debate about Revelation's date of composition in chapter one.

³⁶ Nero died on June 9, 68 CE. For more on the Neronian myth, see chapter four.

³⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 71.

³⁸ Some scholars question if John wrote from Ephesus instead of Patmos. This hypothesis comes mainly from the early church fathers. According to Irenaeus, the John of Revelation is also John the son of Zebedee, author of the fourth canonical Gospel who wrote his Gospel when residing in Ephesus (see *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1). Although Dionysius contends that John of Revelation is not John the son of Zebedee, he alludes to the fact that there are two tombs that bear the name "John" in Ephesus, thus concluding that the writer of Revelation wrote his vision in Asia and perhaps even lived in or had connections with a particular community at Ephesus for a time (see Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25). However, even if John wrote from Ephesus or elsewhere in the province of Roman Asia, he still may have lived in or travelled to Judea before writing his apocalypse. Based on the his knowledge of Jerusalem topography, the Jerusalem temple, and the temple cult; his visions of Jerusalem as the center of the עולם הבא (otherwise known as the coming world, see 1 Enoch 71:15); and his use of a Semitic Greek style, it is certainly possible that John lived in Judea at some point, or even for most of his life, perhaps until the onset of the first Jewish-Roman War.

on its likely location and dating, we can situate the Apocalypse within a Jewish culture subjugated by Rome. And this is enough. For even though Jews experienced various levels of autonomy in Jerusalem, Judea, and the diaspora, they were nevertheless a minority group (roughly 10 percent of the population) living under Roman imperial rule and cultural dominance. Rome, as James Scott might phrase it, owned the “public transcript”—the discursive codes and exhortations that were “imposed...on the vast majority of people.”³⁹ This transcript consisted of a hegemonic gender gradient in which “to be better than” meant to be Roman—to be the powerful, conquering, valiant man, as opposed to, say, the colonized, conquered, weak (and therefore feminized) Jew.⁴⁰ This, paired with the fact that Rome’s military pervaded the streets of the Roman colonies, including Judea, meant that Jews were never “free,” not in our understanding of the term, but rather a conquered people who had to “accept subjection to [Rome].”⁴¹

Postcolonial trauma theory suggests that this type of deferred subjectivity and imperial subjection is in and of itself traumatic. Theorists and clinicians alike are coming to find that colonial experiences such as “dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide”⁴² should be included in our understanding of traumatic experiences, as well as the stressors “produced by the

³⁹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 2.

⁴⁰ For a reading of the Jew as feminine, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997). He writes: “By suggesting that the Jewish man was in Europe a sort of ‘woman,’ I am ... not claiming a set of characteristics, traits, behaviors that are essentially female but a set of performances that are read as nonmale within a given historical culture. This culture can be very broadly described as Roman in its origins” (ibid., 5).

⁴¹ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

⁴² Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (Spring 2008): 3.

structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities.”⁴³ As Shelly A. Wiechelt and Jan Gryczynski explain, “pressures such as oppression and aggressive encroachment on a culture will stress the culture as well as the individuals and systems within it with potentially traumatic effects.”⁴⁴ Revelation knows these effects. Regardless of dating or specific locale, the Apocalypse responds to a backdrop of Empire-wide domination—of Roman dispossession, oppression, and aggressive encroachment—in which Jews are molded by Rome into a position of subalternity. To be a Jewish Jesus follower only added to this positioning, as Jesus following Jews developed “on the margins of already established Jewish communities.”⁴⁵ Implied readers of Revelation, in other words, were the subaltern of the subaltern, worshippers of an even *greater* subaltern subject: a humiliated, crucified, inconsequential “Christ.”⁴⁶ Regardless of whether we date Revelation to the late 60s, late 90s, or even into the early second century CE, we can read its *Sitz im Leben* as a traumatic one.

Theoretical Orientation

This project engages three primary theoretical resources: trauma theory, humor theory, and postcolonial dialogics. First, I situate Revelation within a Jewish context of imperial trauma. In doing so, I not only analyze the ways in which the Apocalypse responds to and

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Shelly A. Wiechelt and Jan Gryczynski, “Cultural and Historical Trauma Among Native Americans,” in *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research*, ed. Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandell (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), 191.

⁴⁵ Greg Carey, “The Book of Revelation as Counter-Imperial Script,” 161.

⁴⁶ I use quotes to denote the view that he was a failed Christ. He did not conquer the Romans. Instead, they conquered him.

attempts to survive Jewish communal suffering⁴⁷ (e.g. eroding colonizing ideologies via humorous subversion), but also read Revelation as an act of communal repair (e.g. reclaiming the colonial past and present through narrative).⁴⁸ Humor theory helps me to illustrate Revelation's use of the comic as a survival tactic in the face of such trauma.⁴⁹ I show that humor at the expense of local and global adversaries in Revelation works to both construct an implied Jewish self and erode the dominant transcript in which that self has been deemed "Other than." By mocking Rome and Roman sympathizers via the Empire's own comedic devices, as well as drawing upon Jewish devices and gestures, Revelation creates a comic counter-world in which John's sectarian group—the cultural "anti hero"⁵⁰—outwits Rome, if only for a moment. Finally, in order to recognize

⁴⁷ Although I recognize specific circumstances (e.g. the crucifixion of Jesus, the Jewish-Roman Wars, etc.) I also at the same time consider this in terms of Jewish cultural memory of trauma more broadly, as well as the more general tensions between Jews (i.e., colonized subjects) and Empire (i.e. the colonizing self). For a brief overview of specific tensions, see Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark Ltd., 1996), 265–395. We also might consider the crucifixion of Jesus, John's Messiah, as part of the Christ-centered communal trauma to which he responds. See David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 157–158. For more on the trauma caused by colonization and imperial domination more generally, including the construction of narrative responses by the colonized, see Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 1–22. For a detailed exposition of trauma theory and its relations to postcolonial theory, see chapter two.

⁴⁸ Implicit in my use of trauma theory is an insistence we should take claims of trauma seriously. Rather than attempt to "explain away" Revelation's claims of suffering, as some scholars have done (see chapter one), I follow Judith Herman's lead that we must not silence trauma stories. For more on the harmful effects of trauma silencing, and silencing's relations to systems of power and oppression, see Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 7–9.

⁴⁹ For a detailed exposition of humor theory and its relations to survival, see chapter two.

⁵⁰ Language of the "anti hero" along with the "not hero," paired with the "antihero," is from Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

Revelation's multiple networks of textuality, I also implement a combination of Bakhtinian theory and postcolonial hermeneutics (i.e., postcolonial dialogics⁵¹) as a foil modality to better explore the relationships between texts and contexts in and around Empire and imperial trauma. While a postcolonial hermeneutic, for instance, recognizes Revelation's relations to Empire and situate it within an ambivalent attraction-repulsion position toward imperial Rome—particularly via postcolonial trauma theory and Bhabhan notions of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity⁵²—a dialogical analysis further illustrates the extent to which the text appropriates both Jewish and Greco-Roman texts/context/discourses into its own worldview. This dissertation relies on each of these theories, often simultaneously, to address the question of Revelation's relations to Empire and imperial power by reading Revelation as a Jewish postcolonial text negotiating communal trauma, and by arguing that its representation of Christ, God, and Rome are informed by Roman comic motifs and genres, as well as by a narrative use of humor in traditional Jewish texts that functions as a subversive gesture of cultural persistence.⁵³

⁵¹ For a detailed exposition of postcolonial dialogics, see chapter two.

⁵² See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. See also Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 25–26.

⁵³ I write this in conversation with Steven Weitzman. In his view, ancient Jewish cultural persistence refers to the preservation of Jewish texts, laws, rituals, and traditions. He writes that, as a subjugated people, Jews in the Second Temple period “developed a kind of ingenuity, an ability to operate beyond the constraints imposed by powerlessness that I will be referring to henceforth as the arts of cultural persistence...[They] developed a variant [de Certeau like] arts of the weak, survival tactics by which they could operate within an environment controlled by foreign rulers in defense [and preservation] of their cultural traditions.” Steven Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 7. On de Certeau's art of the weak, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, (Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 34–39.

Each of these theoretical lenses nuances and overlaps with the others. Postcolonial dialogics, for example, not only supports a reading of Revelation as cultural hybridity, but also connects with humor theory via a literary-historical contextualization of the text alongside other ancient comedic texts. Positioning Revelation within a complex web of intertextual associations paves the way for structural parallels between Greek and Latin humor/humorists, a use of humor found in traditional Jewish texts, and the book of Revelation. Here, I focus on the issue of genre (comedy, oration, satire, etc.),⁵⁴ and major tropes, figures, and topics pertinent biblical humor and the Roman comic form. Ultimately, I suggest that, although Revelation is not technically a comedy or a satire—at least not in the Roman sense of the terms—the Apocalypse nevertheless draws on aspects of the comic vision at numerous points throughout the narrative.

Postcolonial dialogics further supports my reading of Revelation as humorous, in that Revelation's use of the comic also highlights the ways in which John appropriates/adapts/transforms broader cultural scripts into localized and particular forms. Put simply, Revelation often situates Roman notions of humor alongside or even on top of particular Jewish referents. A primary example of this can be seen in John's vision of Rome as *Whore*—a street harlot operating at the bottom of the Greco-Roman hierarchical spectrum—of *Babylon*, the Empire at fault for the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the Jewish exile in 586 BCE. By evoking the Babylonian destruction in this way, the Apocalypse takes part in a specifically Jewish tradition that not only alludes to the conquest of Judah but also participates in a joyous, post-traumatic wish-fulfillment: Babylon and Rome are uniformly destined for divine shaming, humiliation, and defeat.

⁵⁴ This is addressed mainly in footnoting. See chapter two, footnote 237.

In this way, a postcolonial dialogical analysis of Revelation also links easily with conversations pertaining to trauma and cultural persistence. For not only does the text adapt popular notions of humor for its Jewish audience, but it also modifies humorous invective for its own gain. As Moore explains, Revelation implements *catachresis*—a “creative appropriation, a retooling of the rhetorical or institutional instruments of imperial oppression that *turns those instruments back against their official owners.*”⁵⁵ By humiliating Rome via Rome’s own tactics (e.g., satire, gibe, the grotesque, spectacle, public execution), Revelation creates space for implied readers to point and laugh at her demise. Even more, it establishes for itself a new world order—a kingdom of “[their] lord and his Messiah” (Rev. 11:15)—in which they are the overlords, whereas Rome, to use the words of Craig Koester, becomes “a contemptible buffoon.”⁵⁶

As we have seen, however, Revelation not only counters Empire but also eventually overcomes it with its own.⁵⁷ Thus, in addition to highlighting Jewish communal suffering and Revelation’s attempt to survive it, trauma theory also helps unpack the Apocalypse’s mimicry of Roman mores, as Christ’s eventual embodiment of Roman ideology is another way to suggest that the victim has learned—whether willingly, intentionally, or otherwise—to see reality through the lens of the perpetrator. Whereas Revelation’s goal may have been to lampoon Rome via mockery and jest—thereby retooling Roman notions of humor for its own attacks against the Empire—it inevitably becomes so attached to the Roman ideal that it metabolizes it completely, or

⁵⁵ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 106. Emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 155.

⁵⁷ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 35.

almost completely.⁵⁸ By the end of its revenge fantasy, Revelation no longer sees the world through the eyes of a distant other, but rather as the *new* Rome, albeit with God, Jesus, and implied Jewish readers at its center. In short, by countering Empire with Empire,⁵⁹ Revelation unintentionally swallows Rome's reality and digests the seeds of its own undoing.

Finally, at various point throughout this reading, I will converse with such scholars as Tina Pippin, Hanna Stenström, and Shanell T. Smith, who suggest that the text's use of violent and misogynistic imagery (whether read as reinscriptions of Roman ideologies or not) are harmful to real readers.⁶⁰ "When it comes to [Revelation's] gendered symbols," Stenström writes, "none of them is 'only a symbol'. They all participate in the construction of gender ... [and] oppressive structures."⁶¹ The gendered metaphors used to override both local and global adversaries "[shape] perceptions of reality and of gender relations for men and for women" reading in front of the text.⁶² While I agree that Revelation's rhetoric participates in the construction of oppressive structures, this dissertation ultimately diverges from these thinkers by suggesting that, even if harmful—both to readers in front of the text and to the implied community's own

⁵⁸ This is known in psychoanalysis as introjection. See Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis, Second Edition: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2011), 112.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 135.

⁶⁰ See Pippin, *Death and Desire*; Hanna Stenström, "'They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...' Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation," in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 33–54; Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*.

⁶¹ Stenström, "'They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...' Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation," 52–53.

⁶² J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 120 (see note 55). Quoted by Smith in *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 5.

recovery process—the violent, androcentric, and patriarchal rhetoric extended throughout Revelation, including its uses of humor becomes more understandable when read with a hermeneutic of trauma. By reading for projective-identification and trauma enactment in Revelation’s introjections of imperial mores, we may find that our responses to its violent humor help us to better understand the text’s own affect.⁶³

Summary of Chapters

In addition to this introduction, this dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first outlines the scholarly trajectories with which it most directly converges and builds upon—namely, conversations related to Revelation and Judaism, Revelation and Empire, and Revelation and trauma. I begin this chapter by introducing the standard reading of Revelation as a Christian, or, at best, a Jewish-Christian text. In doing so, I present Philip Mayo’s *“Those Who Call Themselves Jews”*: *The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John* and the positions it takes as representative of this approach. I follow this with a survey of counter-approaches—primarily, those of John Marshall, David Frankfurter, Elaine Pagels, and Greg Carey—which suggest that Revelation and its author are historically Jewish. Included in this overview are discussions on “The Parting of the Ways Debate,” the multiplicity of ancient Judaism, and ancient Judaism’s relations to the larger Greco-Roman world. Here, I show that Revelation’s internal evidence suggests a Jewish implied author and audience, who are, even if resistant, fully embedded in the larger Greco-Roman world. The following sections of this chapter focus on Revelation’s relations to Empire and imperial trauma. In them, I illustrate the ways in which scholars

⁶³ For an exposition of projective-identification and enactment, see Conclusion.

make sense of Revelation as a response to Empire and imperial subjugation. This works to not only further situate my reading within a postcolonial conversation, but to also illustrate more clearly Revelation's traumatic *Sitz im Leben*.

In chapter two, I outline in more detail the theoretical orientation of this project. While my focus on Revelation's relations to Judaism, Empire, and trauma grounds my reading in historical criticism, I also develop a literary theoretical framework for my reading. In this chapter, I combine a postcolonial hermeneutic with Bakhtinian dialogism to suggest that Revelation interacts with a complex web of textual relations, including those related to Jewish-Greco-Roman scripts, humor, and trauma. Revelation implements a dialogical use of humor—a humor associated with both Jewish and Greco-Roman comic scripts—that is then used as a mode of opposition and repair in the face of imperial trauma. This chapter thus works not only to explain in more detail a postcolonial dialogical view, but to also indicate how trauma theory, trauma theory's relations to postcolonial theory, and humor theory's relations to postcolonial and anti-imperial resistance literatures frame my reading of the text. In the concluding section of this chapter, I weave the theories together to illustrate that, while trauma fills the book of Revelation through its negotiations of past/present Jewish subalternity and colonial subjugation, its very claiming of a traumatic past/present, paired with its comical representation of its adversaries, works to construct a resistant and persistent Jewish selfhood.

Chapter three is the first exegetical chapter. Here, I read with the grain of Revelation's humor to illustrate how its comical representations of local adversaries—primarily “Balaam” and “Jezebel”—work to define members of Revelation's Jewish in-

group. Here, I show that, through a dialogical use of humor, the Apocalypse attempts to draw a line between its implied internal “us” and its implied internal “them.” This struggle for self-definition is an important part of the text’s postcoloniality. As we will see, not only do colonized groups, in writing back to Empire, often attempt to erode the dominant transcript that declares them Other than, but also, in doing so, often struggle internally to define who the colonized are, and who the colonized will be. This chapter suggests that Revelation’s lampooning of fellow Christ followers is part of its attempt at communal self-definition and, in turn, its own particular attempt at communal repair. Although Revelation relies on Greco-Roman humor to construct a Jewish self, most of its dialogical cues, in its construction of an internal “us” and “them,” come from Jewish sources. This does not negate the text’s hybridity, or its understanding of humor based on larger Jewish-Greco-Roman referents, but rather indicates a more localized borrowing of humor for a more localized, self-defining purpose. To put it otherwise: Revelation implements a more localized humor to target a more proximate Other.

Chapter four is a continuation of the third. Instead of focusing on local adversaries, however, I read with the grain of the text to suggest that the Apocalypse’s humor continues through its representations of Empire and imperial rulers. By constructing implied Jewish audiences as its heroes—and then constructing its implied, colonizing global adversaries (e.g., Babylon/Rome, Sea Beast/Caesars) as its implied, comic butts—Revelation creates a comic counter-world in which its storytelling community “reign[s] supreme”⁶⁴ over and against the Roman imperial community. In addition, as we move from Revelation’s defining of the in-group to its targeting of the

⁶⁴ Antonis K. Petrides, “Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments,” 428.

larger Empire, we will see that its hybridity deepens. Rather than focusing on more internal cues to define us and them, Revelation implements a more expansive dialogic as a form of *catachresis*—a subversive rewriting of the Empire’s comic scripts. Those familiar with the Jewishness of Revelation’s *catachretic* tricks will be able to recognize the retooling and, moreover, the undermining of appropriative imperial ideology.

Chapter five, which is the last exegetical chapter, offers a reading against the grain. Here, I take a step back from analyzing Revelation’s local and global adversaries to analyze one of its primary heroes, the Christ/Lamb, focusing on his simultaneous rejection of Empire and appropriation of Empire’s androcentric, patriarchal, and violent ideologies. Through this reading, I illustrate that the *catachretic* humor used to overcome Revelation’s enemies ultimately attaches back onto Christ and, in turn, the text itself. As noted above, Christ becomes a newer and better Caesar, while Christ’s New Jerusalem, the text’s עולם הבא becomes the new Rome. Bhabhan notions of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity are particularly useful in this chapter, as they help negotiate Revelation’s complicated pro/anti imperial constructions.

Finally, while chapters three, four, and five focus on Revelation’s use of humor as a mode of opposition and repair, they also spotlight, at various moments, Revelation’s claiming of Jewish subalternity as part of its defining of Jewish self/culture and writing back to Empire. As we will see, the book of Revelation seeks to both claim Jewish imperial subjugation, an important part of the text’s own “becoming”/construction of the in-group/writing back to Empire, and to rewrite, through humor, the dominant imperial transcript through which the Jews are deemed Other. The concluding chapter, although a summation of the project, ends with an engagement of projective-identification and

trauma enactment, which serves to help us understand more affectively Revelation's introjection of imperial mores from the perspective of the colonized.

Chapter One

Converging Conversations and Histories of Interpretation

What are Revelation's relations to Judaism? What are its relations to Empire? What are its associations with imperial trauma? The conversations surrounding these questions function as starting points for this dissertation. Before articulating the theoretical resources informing my reading—namely, postcolonial dialogical analysis, trauma theory, and humor theory—as well as the ways in which I will apply these lenses to the book of Revelation, I will first review the scholarly trajectories related to these key questions. This chapter explores in more detail pertinent histories of interpretation for the book of Revelation related to this project.

Revelation's Relations to Judaism

Philip Mayo's *“Those Who Call Themselves Jews”*: *The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John* is representative of how many Revelation scholars typically approach the Apocalypse's relations to Judaism. It argues that Revelation was written during a time in which “Jewish-Christian relations were quickly...deteriorating.”¹ Because of this, John's Apocalypse functions as a “transitional document”²—a document that exposes the historical shift from Judaism to Christianity—or, as Mayo puts it, the “emerg[ence of] a religion apart from Judaism.”³ Although John of Revelation, on Mayo's reading, was an ethnic Jew, his focus on Jesus as the Christ and, moreover, his

¹ Philip L. Mayo, *“Those Who Call Themselves Jews”*: *The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

attacks against “those who call themselves Jews” (Rev 2:9; 3:9; see below), leads Mayo to conclude that the Apocalypse

is a decidedly Christian text written by a Jewish Christian author to likely predominantly Gentile churches. John, who is an ethnic Jew, seems to deny the very name ‘Jew’ to his ethnic kin while accusing them of belonging to Satan (2.9; 3.9). Nevertheless, he does not abandon his own Jewish background and theology. ...It is John’s mix of Jewish imagery with a Christian message that may provide some insight into his perspective on the relationship between these two increasingly polarized sects.⁴

Whereas Mayo is correct concerning the Jewishness of the Apocalypse’s author, he does not consider the Jewishness of Revelation’s Christological content. For even though the Apocalypse rests at the end of what we now call the “Christian” New Testament, contemporary understandings of “Christian” and “Christian-ness” do not resemble what is known about the earliest followers of Jesus, John included. As noted previously, to be a Jesus-follower in the first century CE meant believing that Jesus was the *Christos*, the “messiah.” This belief stemmed from Jewish tradition; it did not counter, challenge, or contradict how Judaism conceived of itself.⁵ Both Jesus and his messianic status were crafted within, and until at least the fourth century CE continued to be to crafted to a large degree by, a Jewish conversation. Revelation’s Christology does not differentiate it from a Jewish context but, rather, situates it that much more *within* one.

We see evidence of this throughout the Apocalypse. Already in 2:14, John accuses those at the church in Pergamum of following the teachings of Balaam over and against those of the Israelite God: “But I have a few things against you. You have some

⁴ Ibid., 2–3.

⁵ John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 21.

there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication” (Rev 2:14). By associating those at Pergamum with Balaam, John is not only taking part in a specifically Jewish conversation,⁶ but also evoking Jewish halakhic practices. This becomes clear when reading Revelation 2:14 alongside its most obvious intertext: The book of Numbers. In Numbers, Balaam is depicted as a non-Israelite prophet who was so blind to YHWH’s commands that even his she-ass could understand YHWH’s desires better than he did. And although he soon blesses the Israelites as YHWH tells him, his blessings backfire. The Israelites begin to intermarry, worship false gods, and eat food sacrificed to idols, thus making it seem as if Balaam’s blessings were really curses (Num 25). Balaam is therefore blamed for the Israelites’ wrongdoings—i.e., their non halakhic practices—and is put to death for leading the Israelites astray (Num. 31:8; 31:16). By referring to these Numbers’ passages in his critique of Christ followers, John makes it clear that the implied community must abide by the Jewish commandment to honor the God of Israel—to eat food dedicated to that God, and not to fornicate with—that is, worship—other gods (c.f., 1 Cor. 8; more on this comparison below).

In chapter 7, we also learn that 144,000 law-abiding Jews from every tribe of Israel will be sealed in the end times, and that, in addition to the 144,000, “a great multitude...from *every nation*” will also be sealed (Rev 7:9). While it is clear that the sealing gives the 144,000 access to the New Jerusalem (14:3–4), as well as marks them as having priestly status (5:9–10), it appears less clear to what ethnic group(s) “the great multitude” belong. The traditional view is that the great multitude signifies a Gentile

⁶ For extrabiblical reference to Balaam, see 4Q339 2; Philo, *Migr.* 113–114, *Mos.* 1.227, 294–299; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.129–130, *L.A.B.* 18:13–14).

population, as the Greek term for “nation” here (ἔθνος) is often thought to designate a Gentile populace. If the book of Revelation is read as a Jewish text for halakhically-oriented followers of Christ, as I am suggesting here, then it might appear jarring that a great multitude of Gentiles are sealed *alongside* 144,000 law-abiding Jews. However, the notion that *all* nations—that is, Jews and Gentiles—will enter the kingdom of heaven in the end of days still reflects a first-century, Jewish worldview and an expansionist vision of Jewish nationalism centered on the messianic expectation that emerged from post-exilic prophetic literature (Isa. 60; Jer. 3:15; Tob. 13:11; Zech. 14; Mic. 4:2–4). Although Jews in the first century internalized the messianic expectation in different ways, the general understanding of it was that a messiah/anointed one in the line of King David would come to overthrow the powers that be and establish a new kingdom in which the God of Israel is the God of all people. Amy Jill Levine summarizes:

The coming of the messiah meant that there would be a manifest difference in the world...The messianic age, or the “world to come,” was the time of proclaiming “release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind” – not just some captives, but *all*; not just some who are blind, but *all*.⁷

Pamela Eisenbaum stresses even more the inclusion of both Jew and gentile in the coming world, and concludes that Paul preaches to gentiles—and requests that they *stay* gentiles—for the specific purpose of inaugurating the messianic age. She writes:

Paul...believes his mission is to help inaugurate this event by drawing the Gentiles in—not literally going to Jerusalem but turning them from their worship of idols to a recognition of the one, true God, and thus integrating of the nations constitutes the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3;18:18). In order to achieve the realization of this promise, Gentiles cannot become Jews. Undergoing circumcision, which is the signature mark of Jewish identity, would effectively turn Gentiles into Jews, and who not, therefore, constitute a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham and

⁷ See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 57, emphasis mine.

the prophetic vision of the ingathering of the nations.⁸

The point for Eisenbaum, then, is that even though God-believing Gentiles are included in the end-times, such an age still operates within a specifically Jewish framework and with the God of Israel serving as ruler over all peoples. Putting this view in conversation with Revelation, we discover that Revelation might indeed include Gentiles in the New Jerusalem as a product *of* its Jewishness. Throughout the Apocalypse, it is Jesus who fulfills the role of messiah. He is the Davidic King who establishes a new world order in which he and the Israelite God rule over all believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Zion. This New Zion functions for John as a bigger and better Jewish Temple; it is the “Holy of Holies,” matching the exact measurements of the Temple sanctuary outlined in 1 Kings 6:20.⁹ And “the nations/Gentiles [τὰ ἔθνη] will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (21:24).

In his 2001 published dissertation, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse*, John W. Marshall mounted one of the earliest arguments that both Revelation and its author are Jewish. He summarizes:

The Book of Revelation is properly understood as a Jewish text. By this I mean a text that is part of a Judaism that does not conceive itself as Christian and that

⁸ Pamela Eisenbaum, “Jewish Perspectives: A Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 141. See also E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 212–18.

⁹ In preparing for this destiny, the text includes a measurement of the Jerusalem Temple with the exemption of the Temple’s courtyard. Such measuring represents not only reverence of the Israelite God (see Ezek. 40–42; David Frankfurter, “Revelation,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011], 478, 480), but also the anticipation of a new age without non-believers, as the Temple courtyard was the only location where non-YHWH worshippers could visit and/or operate within the Temple’s walls.

cannot be understood as Christian....John's ethnic map is a Jewish map^[10]—a world of Jews and Gentiles—and his own name locates him in the Jewish territory of the map (Rev. 7:1-10; 10:11; 11:9; 17:15). His ideals of calendar and worship and his idealization of the heavenly Temple of God of Israel situate him within Second Temple Judaism. So do his commitments to the “commandments of God” (Rev. 12:17; 14:12). His care for purity is evident in descriptions of the Holy City (Rev. 21:27) and in his repeated emphasis on the washed and ritually pure robes of the saints (Rev. 7:4, 15:6; 19:8, 14; 22:14); conversely, Babylon is the haunt of unclean spirits (Rev. 18:2). John's mythological heritage is that of the Hebrew Bible inflected by the wide experiences of Jews living in the Greco-Roman world. All of this takes place in a time when “Christian” is not an identity articulated as such. John and his audience see themselves as Jews through and through (cf. Rev. 2:9; 3:9) who keep the commandments, who are drawn from Israel, and whose destiny is God's Holy City.¹¹

Marshall concludes that John of Revelation's belief in Jesus as the Christ functions as another Jewish script. While his argument is “not something like ‘all Christianities’ before 70 CE must be understood as ‘Judaisms,’” it nevertheless focuses on the notion that religious beliefs are “heterogeneous...even within a singular name like ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity.’”¹² As he puts it, “The devotees of Jesus do not necessarily stand outside

¹⁰ David Aune notes John of Revelation's literal familiarity with the Jewish “map.” On his reading, John has a familiarity with Jerusalem topography. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), I. For example, by claiming that the dead bodies will lie in the public square of the “great city”—using the articular infinitive to denote the location of an actual place—Aune suggests that John was referring to a specific square that existed in Jerusalem. On his reading, John is most likely referencing the “Tyropoeon Valley Street,” which ran along the western side of the Temple and operated as a popular Jewish marketplace. It should also be noted, however, that the location and meaning of “the great city” is debated. While some scholars render it Jerusalem, others think it more likely refers to Rome. For a brief overview of the conversation, as well as more information on the “Tyropoeon Valley Street” and the function of ancient Jerusalem marketplaces, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 618–19.

¹¹ John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire,” 21. Here Marshall is summarizing his argument in *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001) and “John's Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse,” in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts*, ed. Matt Jackson-McCabe (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2007), 233-256.

¹² John Marshall, *Parables of War*, 6–7.

the broad tent of contemporary Judaism.”¹³ That Revelation promotes the belief in Jesus as the Christ is indicative of a heterogeneity of ancient Judaism (a point to be discussed in more detail below), not the text’s separation from it.

David Frankfurter has also argued similarly. On his reading, Revelation is a decidedly Jewish text, evidenced in large part by its focus on Jewish purity codes.¹⁴ He argues that, by associating the Pergamum evil-doers with Balaam (2:14; see above), Revelation is not only taking part in a specifically Jewish conversation, but is also identifying with a specifically Jewish practice. As he puts it, Revelation 2:14 is rooted in John’s halakhically-oriented theology, which consists of “extensions, or consequences, of his Jewish hyperpurity.”¹⁵ By referring to a false seer associated with non-halakhic worldviews in its critique of Roman-sympathetic Christ-followers, Revelation makes clear that it detests those who, like Balaam, do not adhere to proper dietary codes and worship practices.

In fact, according to Frankfurter, the level at which Revelation insists its implied readers keep halakha becomes clearer when comparing its theology alongside the theology espoused in Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians 8, for instance, Paul says that it is

¹³ Ibid., 5. Here, Marshall writes that he positions his argument in conversation with Etienne Trocmé’s 1970 address to the Society of Biblical Literature and the subsequent publication of his address, in which he articulates the fluidity of ancient Judaism and the lack of a well-formed “Christianity” in the first century.

¹⁴ For more on John’s central preoccupation with ritual purity, see Hanna Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’: Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 33–54. However, while Stenström’s analysis of Revelation’s purity codes highlight some of the most thoroughly Jewish elements of Revelation, her use of the term “Christian” and “Christian identity” in making sense of them is inconsistent with her foci.

¹⁵ Frankfurter, “Jews or Not? Reconstructing the ‘Other’ in Rev 2:9 and 3:9,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 4 (October 2001): 414.

appropriate for Christ-followers to eat of food dedicated to idols: “Food will not bring us close to God” (1 Cor. 8:8). Likewise, in 1 Cor. 7, Paul announces that Jesus followers may undergo sexual activity in marriage for the sake of self-control and pleasure. “Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:5). According to Frankfurter, however, such ruling is not considered the standard, priestly interpretation of halakha, which supported sexual activities not for pleasure, but for the sake of procreation. Considering these points alongside Revelation’s statement that 144,000 persons who have not fornicated with women will be sealed in the end times (Rev. 14:4), Frankfurter contends that the Apocalypse advocates for the utmost practice of Jewish law, thus marking it as a Jewish text, perhaps even more than Paul’s own writings—at least, that is, from the view of Revelation’s writer.¹⁶

Elaine Pagels has most recently articulated the need to read Revelation as Jewish text in her monograph entitled *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*. Although Pagels’ book caters toward a general audience and deals less forcefully with its Jewishness than Marshall or Frankfurter’s work, I include her arguments here because they communicate well the notion that we must recognize John of Revelation as he would have recognized himself: as a Jew. Pagels writes:

¹⁶ See David Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?”, 414–418. See also David Frankfurter, “Revelation,” 469, 489. The notion that Revelation could be more Jewish than Paul’s letters (aside from Revelation’s implied view of what it means to be Jewish), is based largely on the fact that Paul was not only writing to Gentile Jesus-followers, but wanted those Gentiles to *stay* Gentile (and therefore not practice halakha). Again, for an alternative approach, which recognizes Paul’s letters as Jewish *because* Paul wanted Gentiles to stay Gentile, see Eisenbaum, “Jewish Perspectives: A Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles,” 141.

Once we step back from [the] interpretation [that John progressed from Judaism to Christianity] to reflect that John was writing during the first century—before the invention of “Christianity,” so to speak—we can see that what he writes does not support this view....John not only sees himself as a Jew but regards being Jewish as an honor that those who fail to observe God’s covenant—especially non-Jews—do not deserve.¹⁷

Finally, Greg Carey, albeit briefly, has argued much the same thing: “Revelation reflects no awareness of a ‘Gentile’-dominated ‘Christianity’ that has abandoned the primary symbols of Jewish identity...Revelation expresses its counter-imperial agenda through its foundation in subaltern Jewish tradition.”¹⁸

I agree with these claims. The Jewishness of Revelation, in my view, is demonstrated by John’s self-designations, as well as the text’s literary heritage, strict halakhic worldview, and focus on Jesus as the Christ. Not only does its author self-identify as Ἰωάννη (Rev. 1:1; 4; 9; 22:8), the Greek version of יהוה, which was a popular Jewish name in antiquity,¹⁹ but his writing style indicates that his first language was either Hebrew or Aramaic²⁰—that is, a language spoken by many Jews. Of the text’s 404 verses, at least 278 of them allude to stories or images within the Hebrew Bible. The text’s apocalyptic associations work to situate Revelation within a larger body of visionary literature that was well steeped in ancient Judaism, “reach[ing] back to Isaiah 6, the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, *1* and *2 Enoch*, and forward to the various apocalypses

¹⁷ Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2012), 61.

¹⁸ Greg Carey, “The Book of Revelation as Counter-Imperial Script,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 159–60.

¹⁹ The name *Iōannes* means “YHWH is gracious,” and would have registered as a Jewish name in the minds of ancient readers/listeners, regardless of whether it was written in its Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek versions.

²⁰ More probably Aramaic.

in ‘John’s’ own time composed under the names of *Ezra* and *Baruch*.²¹ Revelation’s strict halakhic worldview is marked by the fact that, throughout the Apocalypse, readers are told to adhere to halakhic dietary practices and worship the God of Israel. Jesus’ role as the Davidic messiah (5:5; 22:16) functions as part of this Jewishness. Although Jews in the first century internalized the messianic expectation in different ways, the general understanding of it was that a messiah/anointed one would come to overthrow the powers that be to establish a new kingdom in which the God of Israel is the God of all people.²² In this way, Revelation should be rendered a Jewish text contextually precisely *because* of its focus on Jesus as Christ. In Revelation, Jesus is the messiah who will overthrow Rome, so as to establish a new world order in which the Israelite God rule over all believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Jerusalem. By understanding first-century Judaism as including halakhically observant Christ-believers within its diversity (see below)—and even non-halakhically observant Christ-believers as part of a polemical Jewish conversation—one can conclude that Revelation is, indeed, best read historically

²¹ Frankfurter, “Revelation,” 464. Revelation’s focus on Jewish numerology, particularly the number seven (1:11; 1:12; 1:16; 6:1; 8:2; cf. 13:18), is represented as the “perfect number” in many Jewish writings. That 144,000 tribe members are sealed is also numerically symbolic, not only because such survivors come from the twelve tribes of Israel, but also because 144,000 is a multiple of twelve (perhaps representing 12,000 survivors from each tribe), which represents a form of Jewish eschatological “completeness.” Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 158. For another ancient Jewish text that focuses on the perfection of the number 7, see, for example, Philo’s *On the Creation*. See also David T. Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses: Translation and Commentary* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 47–93.

²² See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 56–57.

as a Jewish text.²³

The “Parting of the Ways” Debate

This position is shaped in large part by the “Parting of the Ways” debate. As Adam H. Becker and Anette Yoshiko Reed note in their introduction to *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, the standard “Parting of the Ways” narrative attests that Judaism and Christianity can be “likened to two paths that branched off from a single road, never to cross or converge again.”²⁴ According to this narrative, Judaism and Christianity not only “parted ways” in the wake of the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE (and then even more in 135 CE, see below), but that, in so doing, they became “conflicting and categorically different.”²⁵ While the Parting model assumes that the Jesus movement was still negotiating its place within the ever-complex terrain of Second Temple Judaism for most of the first century CE—as difference and debate permeated the Jewish landscape at this time—it

²³ Even when passages appear to be anti-Jewish, such as Rev. 2:9 and 3:9 (see below), one can observe the text as illustrating intra-Jewish polemic, as opposed to a “developing Christology” that is somehow different from Judaism. When investigating the writings at Qumran, we discover that intra-Jewish polemic in the first century was not only common, but often even more extreme than what we find in Revelation. See, for example, the *Halakhic Letter C7-7* and *C26-32*. Like the Temple elite in these passages, the Jews in Revelation’s Smyrna can be rendered evildoers—followers of Satan, even—precisely because they are not the *right* kind of Jews. In fact, they may be so far from being the “right” kind of Jews that Revelation insists that they are not Jews at all.

²⁴ Adam H. Becker and Anette Yoshiko Reed, “Introduction,” in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Anette Yoshiko Reed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

nevertheless claims that the destruction of the Temple and subsequent events/conflicts led the traditions to “institutionaliz[e] their differences.”²⁶

This historiographical narrative, however, has been scrutinized in recent scholarship. Interpreters have not only debated about the date of such a parting (e.g., was

²⁶ Ibid. Such institutionalization is often attributed to two parallel events that occurred in the wake of 70 CE: The Pharisees’ creation of rabbinic Judaism at Yavneh and the Jerusalem church’s flee to and subsequent loss of authority at Pella. As a brief overview: The traditional Parting narrative contends that around 90 CE, Rabban Gamliel II organized a council at Yavneh. Here, he and his fellow Pharisaic rabbis composed a “new way of being”—one in which sectarianism, particularly Christian sectarianism—was not permitted. The rabbis thus sought to instill a monolithic Judaism in which the Pharisees were no longer “Pharisees,” but the rabbis and leaders of a new, uniform Judaism. From this point on, the Jews were able to resist any influence from other Greco-Roman traditions, beliefs, and practices. Christianity was distinctively “Other,” bearing no relationship with its Jewish origins or Jewish contemporaries. Such notion is supported by mishnaic conversations of *minim*, the rabbi’s employment of the *birkat ha-minim* in the Mishnah, and the expulsion of Christians from synagogues on the Gospel of John (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

The traditional Parting narrative contends also that Jewish members of the Jesus movement helped put an end to Jewish sectarianism and Jewish-Christian dialogue around the same time as those at Yavneh, although perhaps with less “intention” than that of Rabban Gamliel. According to the narrative, Jerusalem Christians fled to Pella during the Jewish-Roman wars and, in so doing, lost their apostolic authority. Thus, once the rabbis constructed their own movement sans Christ, and once the Jewish-Christians lost their authority at Pella, the Jesus movement became dominated by “Gentile Christianity” endorsed by Paul. As Reed and Becker write, from this point on, Judaism’s only “relevance for Christian self-definition would be limited to the Jewish scriptures that the church appropriated” for its own needs (ibid.). For a more thorough summary of these accounts and their place in the “Parting of the Ways” narrative (and from which the summary above is largely based), see ibid., 4–6.

The historical reliability of these accounts, however, has been rejected in recent scholarship. See, for example, Daniel Boyarin, “A Tale of Two Synods: Nicaea, Yavneh, and Rabbinic Ecclesiology,” *Exemplaria* 12 (2000): 21–62; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 91–92, 151–201; Gerd Lüdemann, “The Successors of Pre-70 Jerusalem Christianity: A Critical Evaluation of the Pella-Tradition,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1, *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, ed. E. P. Sanders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 161–173; Annette Yoshiko Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ after the ‘Parting of the Ways’: Approaches to Historiography and Self-Definition in the Pseudo-Clementines,” in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 189–231.

the effective cause really the Temple's destruction?),²⁷ or if there really was a moment that necessitated a *definitive* split (i.e., was there really an exact moment in which Judaism and Christianity became “categorically different?”), but also whether such a parting ever took place at all.²⁸

²⁷ The failed Bar Kochba revolt in 135 CE has become a leading alternative contender.

²⁸ Despite my own qualms with the historicity of this narrative, I think it wise to recognize that this narrative functions in large part as an attempt to dismantle Christian supersessionism and Christian anti-Semitism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, the academic conversation surrounding early Christianity studies was dominated by a Protestant Christian readership. In addition to reading the New Testament for analogical, typological, and moral meaning, many viewed Jesus as the creator of a new religion that stood at its core in opposition to Judaism. Some even described the Judaism of the Second Temple period as “late Judaism,” suggesting that it was, to use the words of Shaye Cohen, “a sterile, lifeless organism, waiting in vain for the infusion of spirituality that only Christianity could provide.” Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 7. As such, Judaism was seen as the illegitimate “parent” of a grace-filled child.

In the 20th century, however, James Parkes sought to discover the roots of anti-Semitism, which he thought might have precedence in Christianity's separation from its “mother” tradition. In his work, he looked to Christian origins and highlighted the continuity between Christ-followers and Jews in the apostolic period. In the third chapter of his 1934 book, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, which he titled “The Parting of the Ways,” Parkes concluded that the separation had nothing to do with Jesus or Jesus' own worldviews. Instead, the split occurred toward the end of the first century, instigated by followers and non-followers of Jesus. Parkes' conclusion thus squandered previously held notions that Christianity was the “child” of an outdated and illogical elder parent from the time of Jesus. Although he employed the term “separation” more than “parting,” the language within his chapter's title gained traction, as did his pursuit to highlight the previously overlooked connections between Judaism and Christianity in the first century.

Parkes' pursuit gained more traction post-WWII, when conversations surrounding the origins of anti-Semitism impacted the scholarly discourse in a way they never had before. Scholars sought not only to dismantle contemporary anti-Semitic claims, but also to expose the anti-Semitism and prejudices of past research. In many ways, then, the “Parting of the Ways” narrative functioned as a response to medieval and modern anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish readings of the New Testament, as well as an avenue by which scholars could combat Christian anti-Semitism. By insisting that the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religion separate from Judaism did not occur until the late first century, Parkes and others asserted that Jesus and New Testament writings were not inherently anti-Jewish. This assertion led others to ponder whether anti-Semitic readings—through the recognition that neither the earliest writings of the Christian

One of the more influential scholars to ask these questions is Daniel Boyarin. In his view, Judaism and Christianity did not become recognizably distinct entities until the fourth century CE,²⁹ and, even then, each tradition is really a hybrid construction of the other with the intent to construct the other *as* “Other.” Boyarin makes this claim by suggesting a “wave theory of Christian-Jewish history.”³⁰ In his *Dying for God*, for example, he argues that Judaism and Christianity are products of convergence that “spread like a wave” from one site to another:

Social contact and the gradations of religious life were such that, barring the official pronouncements of the leaders of what were to become the “orthodox” versions of both religions, one could travel, metaphorically, from rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one hardly would know where one stopped and the other began.³¹

Boyarin expands upon this claim in his later monograph, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, where he contends that the construction of distinct Jewish and Christian “sites” not only took centuries to develop, but that the development occurred primarily through heresiological constructions of Self and Other.³² More specifically, he argues that non-Jesus-following Jews and non-Jewish Jesus-followers “exercised agency in the appropriation of textual ideas, images, and representations from a shared

tradition nor the Christian Son of God was anti-Jewish or contextually Christian—might dissipate as well. For more on Parkes’ role in the “Parting” narrative (and again from which the summary above is largely based), see Becker and Reed, “Introduction,” 7–16.²⁹ Interestingly, Parkes, in the 1930s, qualified his claims of a late first-century parting by insisting that the separation of Judaism and Christianity *as we know them* did not occur until the fourth century. Unfortunately, however, Parkes’ qualifier did not gain much attention.

³⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See *Border Lines*, 15.

developing pool”³³ for centuries. One of these pools, he contends, focused on a dualistic (“Two Powers in Heaven”³⁴) Godhead. For example, while certain Jews in the early centuries CE had a concept of the multiplicity of the godhead (through the Logos, Memra, Sophia, Metatron, Yahoel, etc.), Jewish Jesus-following, non-Jewish Jesus-following, and Jewish non-Jesus-following groups began to identify themselves and others as different (even though that difference was nevertheless determined via this shared referentiality, thus making them seem less “different” than we might assume at first blush). On Boyarin’s reading of John’s Gospel, for example, the prologue functions as a midrash of Genesis that illustrates a movement from a failed universalistic Jewish Logos theology to a particular Johannine Christology that focused on Jesus of Nazareth as the Logos. The difference constructed by John between his implied Self (the Jesus-follower) and his implied Other (the non-Jesus-follower), in other words, is not the belief in a dualistic Godhead but the particularity of Jesus’ part in it.³⁵

Justin Martyr does something similar in his second century text, *Dialogue with Trypho*. According to Boyarin, even though certain Jews believed in a multiple godhead theology, Justin *constructs* a Judaism *without* such dualism and a Christianity *with* such dualism as a way to create difference between movements.³⁶ In other words, shared referentiality is still part of the differences that are being constructed. “Justin’s expenditure of discursive energy is not so much to convince Jews to accept the Logos, but rather to *deny* to Logos to the Jews.”³⁷ Dualism is actually shared, but Justin hoards it

³³ Ibid., 66.

³⁴ Ibid., 143.

³⁵ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 89–147.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 37–73.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

on one side—the non-Jewish “Christian” side. Boyarin’s point, then, is that although groups of Christ-followers and non-Christ-followers began to *self-identify* as something “different” from each other in early writings, the constructions of Judaism and Christianity as two separate religious cultures with distinct systems of belief are a formation of related hybrids. In Boyarin’s view, the emergence of Judaism and Christianity as separate traditions from such heresiological discourses did not occur until at least the fourth century CE, with two separate constructs emerging “at the end of late antiquity,” post-Patristic writings at Nicaea and post-Talmuds.³⁸

Andrew Jacobs has similarly combatted the traditional “Parting” model through his investigation of Self/Other boundaries.³⁹ Utilizing the Lacanian notion that a child internalizes a sense of personhood when she recognizes her own “Other” in the mirror, Jacobs contends that Christianity began to internalize “her” personhood through the recognition of its own Others, too.⁴⁰ He notes that not only did the dialogue between Christ-followers and non-Christ-followers create discursive boundaries between them, but the boundaries themselves tended to be fluid, rather than fixed.⁴¹ By having to negotiate issues such as Jesus’ bodily Jewishness, for example, Christian heresiologists, despite their efforts to construct fixed borders, illustrated an ambivalent and incomplete separation of “self” and “other.” As Jacobs writes, “On Jesus’ body, the otherness of Judaism both articulates and disrupts the Christian self... [I]n the dialogic imagination of Christ’s circumcision, Christians repeatedly internalized the stark otherness of

³⁸ Ibid., 196, 201.

³⁹ See Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

Judaism.”⁴² In other words, even though proto-Orthodox Christians began to self-identify as non-circumcised followers of Christ in the early centuries, they still needed to negotiate the meaning and even importance of circumcision, precisely because their messiah *was* circumcised. Although these Christ followers defined themselves as separate and different from their Others (i.e., Jews), they nonetheless needed to encounter their Others as a way in which to define themselves. Such negotiation, contends Jacobs, lasted far past the end of the first century CE. He contends, like Boyarin, that there was never a *distinct* or *decisive* separation between Judaism and Christianity that the “Parting of the Ways” narrative proposes.

I agree with Boyarin and Jacobs when they assert that the many characteristics and traditions we see today as inherently “Jewish” or “Christian” were not distinguishable in the early centuries CE. I agree also when they assert that Judaism and Christianity are hybrid constructions of each other, and that the emergence of recognizable and somewhat stable (even if still fluid) Self/Other boundaries between them did not occur until at least the fourth century CE. The fall of the Jerusalem Temple, in my view, did not generate hostility between Judaism and Christianity, nor did it cause Judaism and Christianity to experience a distinct and decisive break from each other.⁴³ While negotiations and discussions of Self and Other took place between and across groups (as evidenced already in Revelation’s claims of halakhic Christ-following import),

⁴² Ibid., 43, 44.

⁴³ Based on their hybrid associations, we may even question whether Judaism and Christianity have, in theory, separated at all. I say “in theory” here, because I find that, in practice, the notion that Judaism and Christianity are still inherently connected can unintentionally foster supersessionist claims. Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam Becker allude to the idea of a non-parting through their evocative book title, *The Ways That Never Parted*.

such discussions do not demand fixed borders. On the contrary, they allude to multiplicity—a multiplicity, as we shall come to see, that was vibrant in Jewish discourse prior to Jesus of Nazareth’s birth, and also beyond his death.

The Diversity of Ancient Judaism

Judaism in the early centuries BCE and CE was not uniform. It was so varied, in fact, that some scholars have chosen to call it “Judaisms,” as opposed to the singular “Judaism.” According to Jacob Neusner:

The issue, how to define Judaism, is now settled: We do not. We define Judaisms. ... There never was, in real, social terms, that single Judaism, there were only the infinite and diverse Judaic systems, as various social entities gave expression to their way of life, worldview, and theory of the social entity they formed.⁴⁴

According to Philip R. Davies, however, the notion of Judaisms still begs the question of a singular Judaism. He explains:

The replacement of the concept of “Judaism” by the concept of “Judaisms” solves one problem only to create another, perhaps even more fundamental one—namely what it was that made any “Judaism” a Judaism... . The plural “Judaisms” requires some definition of ‘Judaism’ in the singular, in order itself to have any meaning.⁴⁵

Others approach Jewish diversity differently and describe it using a concept of ancient Jewish sectarianism. According to Seth Schwartz, for instance, while Jewishness was constructed in and around the Jewish God, Temple, and Torah,⁴⁶ subgroups

⁴⁴ Quoted by Gabriele Boccaccini in *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, From Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 13–14. For the original quotation, see Jacob Neusner, *The Judaism the Rabbis Take for Granted* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 12, 18.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, 32. See also Philip R. Davies, “Scenes from the Early History of Judaism,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 147, 151.

⁴⁶ In rejecting a multiple “Judaisms” and advocating for the development of Jewish subgroups (i.e., “sects”) as part of a larger God-Temple-Torah based Judaism, Schwartz

developed with nuanced views of this tri-part system. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Jesus followers are but a few.⁴⁷ And while self-identifying, self-constructing⁴⁸ Jews at the early centuries BCE and CE debated regularly *about* their God, Temple, and Torah—such as how best to interpret the Torah’s halakhic codes or how best to understand the messianic expectation—they nevertheless cared about the answers. By analogy, then, to believe that *Jesus* was the Christ—that *he* fulfilled the messianic expectation—was not a point of difference *from* Judaism, but rather functioned as another

also argues that there was a “nonsectarian norm.” Like sectarians, this norm constructed itself around a God-Temple-Torah ideological complex. In Schwartz’s view, however, sectarian groups still understood themselves as somehow “set apart” from a more “normative” set of negotiations. It is precisely this point of Schwartz’s argument with which I disagree—or, at very least, think requires further explanation. Rather than read sectarian groups as understanding themselves as different from nonsectarian groups, I read sects as promoting nuanced views of a nonsectarian God-Temple-Torah *system of negotiation*. I do not interpret the term “sect” in the modern sense (e.g., a group that holds somewhat separate beliefs from a larger group to which they belong), but rather as a “school” or “philosophy.” Sects debated about how to negotiate a broad-based God-Temple-Torah system, but even if that *system* is “norm,” I am not sure what a nonsectarian would have even looked like. The system itself is one of negotiations. Each self-constructing Jew/Jewish group understood herself/himself/themselves in relation to a broad-based *discursive* Jewish system, and each Jew/Jewish group negotiated an understanding of that system—a “philosophy” of that system—and therefore a “sectarian” view of that system. If there are distinctions between “norm” and “not norm,” I think the place to investigate is the Temple power system prior 37 BCE (i.e., prior to when Herod began appointing High Priests). The issue of norm and not norm (in my view) is related to power, not nonsectarian versus sectarian (those who had power, like the Sadducees and Pharisees, were associated with different “sects”). In sum, because there is no creed in ancient Judaism (as today)—just a set of principles with which to negotiate—we do not have the ability to claim a particular set of Jews as nonsectarian. They are all sectarian (i.e., engaging varying philosophies about Jewish principles). For more on Schwartz’s view of sectarianism and nonsectarianism, see *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8–10, 49–74, 91–93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 91. Schwartz focuses on Jewish subgroups in Palestine, but adds that “no doubt sectarians sometimes emigrated.” (*ibid.*)

⁴⁸ I add this qualifier to get to Schwartz’s astute observation that some Jews may have been only “peripherally or occasionally aware of belonging” to a particular Jewish social system and/or philosophy.

nanced view *within* Judaism. Those who identified as Jewish debated regularly about how best *to be* Jewish, and Jesus, as well as Jewish followers of Jesus, became part of those debates.

While the construction of Judaism and Christianity as separate traditions is certainly a product of heresiological debates (see above), we do not see the distinct emergence of them as such until centuries after the composition of the Apocalypse. The words “Christian” and “Christianity” are nowhere to be found in Revelation, whereas notions of “Israel” and the “True Israel” are alluded to repeatedly with regards to its implied community of readers (see especially Rev. 2 and 7). In sum, to believe that Jesus was the Christ in the first century was not a point of difference for Jews, but rather functioned as another example of Jewish multiplicity. To believe that Jesus was the Christ meant to operate alongside and even within a Jewish conversation.

Of course, one may argue here that the categories “Jewish-Christian” or “Christian-Jewish” are only reliable so long as we recognize “Christian” as another group within ancient Jewish sectarianism. As noted previously, first century Judaism was “marked by numerous sects and groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, the Jews of Qumran⁴⁹, Zealots, Sicarii, ‘The Fourth Philosophy,’ Christians, Samaritans, Therapeutae, and others.”⁵⁰ “Christians,” in other words, can be seen as operating within

⁴⁹ Scholars have recently questioned the extent to which we can understand or even name the “Jews of Qumran” a sect. For a recent overview and reassessment, see David Stacey and Gregory Doudna, *Qumran Revisited: A Reassessment of the Archaeology of the Site and Its Texts* (Oxford, UK: Archaeopress, 2013).

⁵⁰ Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 222. Here, Cohen understands “sect” in the neutral sense: “I see sect as a neutral term of description for various groups in ancient Judaism that were distinctive and coherent enough to receive special epithets from outsiders to bestow special epithets upon themselves.” He, in other words, values the original meaning of the Greek *hairesis* and Latin *secta* as a school of thought. However,

ancient Judaism sectarianism. As Daniel Boyarin writes plainly, “[W]hether or not there were Christianity and Judaism [as separate religions], there were, it seems, at least some Christians who were not Jews, and, of course, many Jews who were not Christians,”⁵¹ which implies that there were, in turn, some Christians who were Jews, and some Jews who were Christians—perhaps even “Christian Jews” and “Jewish Christians.” Already early second-century CE, Roman historians began referring to Christ-followers as *Christiani* (e.g., Suetonius *Nero* 16:2)—or *Chrestiani*, a likely misspelling of *Christiani*

when he sees sects combat other groups in the ancient literature (e.g. the *Halakhic Letter* and the *Pesher Habakkuk*), he writes that a sect can be rendered “a small, organized group that separates itself from the larger religious body and asserts that it alone embodies the ideals of the larger group because it alone understands God’s will” (ibid., 124).

According to Lawrence Schiffman, using “sect” in a separatist sense is not appropriate: “Sect is usually defined as a group differing from a dominant or normative, authoritative stream, and as yet there was no such stream in Judaism.” Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. Jon Bloomberg and Samuel Kapustin (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 2003), 150.

I agree with Schiffman that our language is lacking. Not only does sectarian vocabulary often assume too quickly a normative center, but it also negates the differing levels of political power that existed between and across these groups (see footnote above). Again, if there was a normative Jewish center in the Second Commonwealth (and, more specifically, prior to Herod’s appointing of High Priests beginning in 37 BCE), Pharisaic or Sadducean groups would likely constitute more of that center than, say, Essenes or Essene-like groups living on the outskirts and in protest of the Jerusalem elite. But even though more elite members of the Jewish community identified as Pharisaic or Sadducean, the term “sect” is used for both of them and other group members. In other words, “sectarian” does not leave enough room for nuance in self/other and center/periphery discussions.

While I think it worthwhile to consider other terms to discuss the plurality of ancient Jewishness and center/periphery discussions, here is not the space for it. In order to illustrate the conversation in which I am situating my project—and by proxy the cultural milieu in which I am situating Revelation—I will refer to these groups as “sects” in Cohen’s *neutral* sense, with, of course, an acknowledgement of the term’s limitations. Revelation combats not only Gentiles who do not follow Jesus, but other Jewish sects not subscribing to its particular understanding of what it means to be Jewish. This understanding includes the belief that Jesus is the Christ, and that all Jewish Christ-believers need to worship their Christ and God by practicing proper halakha.

⁵¹ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 7.

(e.g., Tacitus *Annals* 15)—so why can we not implement an even more nuanced, *iudaeus-christus* vocabulary?

I think it wise to avoid Christian language. Not only does the use of “Christian” in “Jewish Christian” terminology lack nuance, but it also assumes too quickly a separation from Judaism. As Boyarin explains, “The distinctions of identity/identification [between these groups] would, *ultimately*, make a difference. *But they hadn’t yet.*”⁵² Because the term “Christian” in contemporary discourse refers regularly to something “other” than Judaism, it becomes all too easy to render Christians different from Jews in the ancient world. We see this already in our use of language. For example, if “Christian” registered in our minds the same way “Pharisee,” “Sadducee,” or “Essene,” does, we would likely not need the Jewish qualifier aside the term “Christian” in order to stress that we are, indeed, talking about Jews. In other words, we do not say “Jewish Pharisee” or “Jewish Sadducee,” precisely because we do not assume that being a Pharisee or Sadducee was a point of binary difference within Judaism.

Even more, when reviewing understandings of New Testament texts as being representative of a Jewish-Christian hybridity, or a Jewish-to-Christian transitional phase, we see that Christian-ness is often deemed the “better half.” The origins of reading Revelation as a “Jewish-Christian” text, for example, do not stem from new approaches to Jewish-Christian relations or history, but rather from misguided and oftentimes anti-Jewish renderings of ancient Jewish-Christian relations. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, biblical scholars argued regularly that Judaism became a sterile entity after Jesus’ death, and that Christianity rose through Jesus’ resurrection as the *right* tradition.

⁵² Ibid. Emphases mine.

Because Revelation was written by a halakhically-oriented author and contains developed Christology (Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is divine, Jesus saves believers from their sins, etc.), many 19th- and 20th-century scholars contended that Revelation was in the process of “progressing” from Judaism to Christianity.⁵³ The Christological focus of these readings, in other words, is based historically not just on its Christology alone, but on the level of development of Revelation’s Christology.⁵⁴ For those who set the tone for reading Revelation as a Jewish-Christian text, Revelation’s focus on Jesus as Christ indicated that it was “better than” Jewish texts, which in turn indicated that it could not be fully Jewish. As Annette Yoshiko Reed summarizes:

[These terms tell] us as much about our own assumptions concerning the definition, development, and interrelation of Judaism and Christianity as about the broad continuum of biblically-based approaches to belief and worship in Late

⁵³ According to John Marshall, the tradition of labeling Revelation a Jewish-Christian text begins primarily with the Tübingen School and F. C. Baur’s anti-Jewish constructions of Jewish-Christian relations in the first century. John W. Marshall, “John’s Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse,” 236. Writing in 1878, Baur operated within the pre-“Parting of the Ways” trajectory by insisting that Judaism was not only a non-viable entity post-Jesus, but that it became a separate religion from Christianity at the time of Jesus’ death. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, trans. Allan Menzies, vol. 1 (London, UK: Williams & Norgate, 1878), 157. Because Revelation illustrates a “Judaistic character,” particularly when compared with Paul’s writings, Baur suggested that the Apocalypse represents a less valuable form of Christianity, and thus considered it part of the “Jewish-Christian” movement as opposed to a fully “Christian” one. Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, 85. According to Marshall, these views were upheld by later thinkers, such as R. H. Charles. (Marshall, “John’s Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse,” 238). For example, R. H. Charles suggested that the more “Jewish” passages within the Apocalypse are later interpolations by a Judaizing Christian—that is, a Christian who thought it was necessary to continue following Jewish law in addition to following Christ. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), xxii. On his reading, the text was originally written by an ethnic Jew who had become Christian by the time he wrote his Apocalypse. Because of this, Charles contends that the original Apocalypse, though still Jewish-Christian, would have been more Christian than Jewish. For more on this conversation, see Marshall, *Parables of War*, 7–9; and Marshall, “John’s Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse.”

⁵⁴ Pagels, *Revelations*, 60–61.

Antiquity. From our literary and archaeological evidence, we know of a variety of texts and groups that cannot be readily categorized as either “Jewish” or “Christian”—at least not by a modern schema that treats the two as different by definition and uses rabbinic Judaism and Western Christian orthodoxy as the standards for judging “Jewishness” and “Christianness.” For, contrary to our own understanding of early Christian self-definition as inextricably tied to supersessionism, triumphalism, and antinomianism, some late antique authors and communities appear to have accepted Jesus as a special figure in salvation-history, without seeing this belief as inconsistent with Torah-observance and/or the continued validity of God’s eternal covenant with the Jews.⁵⁵

When applying the term “Jewish Christian” or “Christian Jewish” onto ancient texts and groups, modern scholarship has all too often marginalized the “Jewish” in favor of a more monolithic Christian Self.

Interpretations of Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 illustrate this point well. In these verses, John displays apparent animosity toward ἰουδαῖοι (“I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” [2:9]; “I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet” [3:9]), which has led scholars, particularly those influenced by the notion of a first century “parting of the ways,” to assume that the text is setting itself apart from Judaism and must therefore be Christian—or, at the very least, Christian-like. The common interpretation of these passages is that those who “say they are Jews” represent all Jews for John, and that all Jews are therefore followers of Satan. As Marshall observes, for most scholars, “the discussion of people who are named as non-Jews founds an understanding of the

⁵⁵ Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ after the ‘Parting of the Ways’: Approaches to Historiography and Self-Definition in the Pseudo-Clementines,” 189.

Apocalypse that sees ‘Conflict with Jews’ as a fundamental element of the situation to which the Apocalypse addresses itself.”⁵⁶

In addition to relying on a monolithic interpretation of a first century parting, this reading also relies on *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* for historical contextualization. In this martyr text, Smyrna’s evil Jews help the Roman authorities hurt Christ-followers, which has led many scholars to think that the *ἰουδαῖοι* in Revelation must be doing the same. But according to Marshall and Frankfurter, such analysis is not historically dependable. Not only is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* an unreliable source,⁵⁷ but John does not suggest that those in Smyrna are Jews at all (they only *say* they are Jews), let alone all Jews or a group symbolic of Rome writ large.⁵⁸ Pagels thus argues that the *ἰουδαῖοι* are more likely Pauline Gentiles claiming to be Jews, and that scholars who insist these are Jewish groups assume too quickly that Christianity was a separate religion at the time in which Revelation was written. “Many—perhaps most—scholars” she writes, “accepted [the interpretation that ‘those who call themselves Jews’ are actually Jews] in the past, since only this reading could fit what most of them took for granted—namely, that John,

⁵⁶ Here Marshall engages primarily Adela Yarbro Collins and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 84; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 54. Marshall’s use of the phrase “Conflict with Jews” is quoting from Adela Yarbro Collins’ *Crisis and Catharsis* (84). According R. H. Charles, for instance, “The bitter hostility of the Jews to the Christians is unmistakable from the context.” See R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1920), 56. See also John Marshall, *Parables of War*, 13.

⁵⁷ According to Frankfurter, the text’s rendering of Jews overall is not historical reliable or plausible. Because of this, he contends that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* cannot sustain claims scholars make concerning Jews in John’s Apocalypse. See Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?”, 406.

⁵⁸ For a brief overview of interpretations of Jews in Revelation alongside the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, see Marshall, *Parables of War*, 14–16.

although probably Jewish by birth, had become a *Christian* by the time he wrote this book.”⁵⁹ Frankfurter posits a similar reading, contending that the “Jews” John derides in 2:9 and 3:9 are actually Gentile Pauline and neo-Pauline Christ-followers.⁶⁰

While I do not deny the possibility of these “so called Jews” being Gentile, or being specifically Gentile Pauline/neo-Pauline Christ-followers, I think it plausible that John *was* speaking to ethnic Jews here, although in a way that does not assume a Jewish-Christian split. Rather, he could be arguing with other Jewish sectarians who are not practicing and embodying Judaism in the way he finds most fit. His claims, in other words, could be indicative of intra-Jewish polemic, and, given the range of Jewishness in this time period, could even have nothing to do with Christ. In sum, it is just as likely that John was combatting Jews whom he thought did not have the right to claim Jewish status.

Indeed, Revelation’s reception history makes it all too easy to misunderstand a nuanced, sectarian understanding of the term “Jewish-Christian” for an overly simplistic and/or supersessionist one. Using the term “Jewish-Christian,” in other words, cannot account for the diversity of first-century Judaism. “Does [the term] describe Jews who believe in Jesus, or Gentiles who follow Jewish laws scrupulously and believe in Jesus, or Gentiles who imagine themselves to be a new Israel but have no historical connection with Jews?”⁶¹ To render Revelation as “Jewish-Christian” not only risks undoing the more recent work on ancient Jewish diversity, but also conflates too quickly representations of Jesus-following Jews with prior—and still lingering—supersessionist views of ancient Jewish-Christian relations. As Frankfurter explains, using the term

⁵⁹ Pagels, *Revelations*, 60.

⁶⁰ See Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?”; and David Frankfurter, “Revelation,” 469.

⁶¹ Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?,” 409.

“Christian” in and of itself “would imply that [Revelation’s] Jesus devotion somehow displaces or preempts [its] Jewishness, a thesis derived not from the text but from prior theological assumptions.”⁶²

Ethnicity does, however, play an important role in this discussion. Whereas some followers of the Jesus movement identified as Jews ethnically (perhaps Boyarin’s “Jews who were Christians”) others did not (perhaps Boyarin’s “Christians who were not Jews”). In other words, as Frankfurter notes above, Gentiles, too, came to regard Jesus as their Christ, and non-Jewishness is one of the most oft-used descriptors for this group. What are we to make of this?

I propose that the construction of Jewishness in the first century and the boundaries such construction necessitated are key to answering this question. As Cohen observes in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, individual Jews were not necessarily distinctive from Gentiles in ways that were obvious and unambiguous, but rather *imagined* themselves as Jewish—as members of an imagined Jewish community.⁶³ He writes, “Sociologists agree that ethnic or national identity is imagined; it exists because certain persons want it to exist and believe that it exists. It can be willed into and out of existence.”⁶⁴ It does this, he explains, by the boundaries it creates and “the ‘cultural stuff’ enclosed by the boundary.”⁶⁵ Many Jews in the ancient world carried their Jewishness ethnically through the observance of Jewish law and ritual, and the use or awareness of

⁶² Ibid., 408.

⁶³ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA, and London, UK: University of California Press, 1999), 3–5. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

particular Jewish referents.⁶⁶ Observance included believing in the Israelite God, recognizing the importance of the Jerusalem Temple, and adhering to halakhic codes. If we consider Judaism an umbrella term for this “cultural stuff,” as Cohen phrases it, then Revelation and its implied readers are operating within it. Of course, given the degree to which proper Jewish practice was debated in the first century, certain self-identifying Jewish groups who did *not* render Jesus the Christ might have considered those who did to be non-Jews. In reverse, certain non-halakhically observant Christ-followers, too, might have rendered themselves the true Jews, as opposed to all others. The point here is that Revelation appears in every which way to operate within an ethnically Jewish conversation—it *identifies* and *imagines* and *constructs* a storytelling community as ethnically Jewish and righteous Jewish followers of Christ, regardless of whether other self-identifying Jews disagreed with its claims. Throughout the text, Revelation combats not only Gentiles who do not follow Jesus, but *other Jewish sects*⁶⁷ (e.g., Rev. 2:9 and 3:9) who do not subscribe to its particular understanding of what it means to be Jewish. This understanding includes the belief in the God of Israel, that the New Jerusalem would function as a bigger and better Jewish Temple, that Jesus fulfilled the messianic expectation, and that all Jewish Christ-believers needed to worship their Christ and God by practicing proper halakha.

While New Testament scholars are more frequently relying on a more nuanced understanding of ancient Judaism and the “Parting of the Ways” model—contending in stride both that Christianity did not emerge as a tradition separate from Judaism until after the New Testament texts were written, and that many New Testament writings take

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Perhaps those mentioned in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

part in a shared Jewish discourse—Revelation is often missing from this conversation. To date, Marshall’s *Parables of War* is the only monograph that deals extensively with the Jewishness of Revelation from beginning to end. Even many decades past the problematic “Parting of the Ways” construction and the more recent impulse to render Judaism and Christianity as dialogically associated centuries past Jesus and his earliest followers,⁶⁸ scholars still more comfortably label Revelation a “Christian”—or at best “Jewish-Christian”—text, rather than recognize it as a Jewish text from beginning to end. According to David Flusser, for example, the text’s blend of Jewish referents and developed Christology indicate that it was written by a Jewish-Christian—by someone stepping away from a Jewish ideology—and that it reflects the mindset of first-century Jewish-Christianity.⁶⁹ According to Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, reading Revelation “as something ‘new’ affirms its continuity with Jewish apocalyptic while at the same time maintaining its own distinctive [Christian] perspective.”⁷⁰ According to David Aune, Revelation’s John was “a Jewish-Christian prophet who had moved from Judaism to Christianity at some point in his career.”⁷¹ On Craig Koester’s reading, “the most plausible view is that John was the real name of the author and he was a Jewish Christian prophet active in Asia Minor.”⁷² As Philip Mayo puts it, the Apocalypse “is a decidedly

⁶⁸ See, for example, Becker and Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted*; Boyarin, *Dying for God*; Boyarin, *Border Lines*; Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, UK, and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*.

⁶⁹ David Flusser, “Salvation Present and Future,” *Numen* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 144.

⁷⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 3.

⁷¹ Quoted by Pagels, *Revelations*, 60.

⁷² Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 66. Although Craig Koester is likely correct when he states that members of the assemblies to whom John writes included a mix of Jews and

Christian text written by a Jewish Christian author.”⁷³ According to Hanna Stenström, “Purity, language, and thus conceptions of purity...are basic to Revelation’s construction of Christian identity.”⁷⁴ Although each of these scholars recognize the text’s immersion in Jewish tradition, Revelation’s developed Christology, in their view, marks it as something *different*.⁷⁵

The critique of the parting of the ways model, as well as of the anti-Jewish origins of naming Revelation “Christian” or “Jewish-Christian” needs more attention in Revelation scholarship. Whereas many scholars allude to John of Revelation’s Jewish background, and perhaps even to the overall Jewish ethos of the text,⁷⁶ work situating Revelation and its implied audience thoroughly within a first-century Jewish matrix, both in its own right and as a starting point for a larger exegetical work, remains all too scarce. This project thus adds to conversations surrounding the Jewishness of New Testament texts by situating Revelation within a Jewish context. Put simply, I agree with scholars

Gentiles, this does not negate the notion that John and his *implied* audience was Jewish. For not only does John refer consistently to Jewish texts and contexts—including the expectation that both Jews and Gentiles will stand together in the coming world (perhaps alluding to those within his audience’s assemblies)—but he does so without explanation. In other words, he assumes that his readers are familiar with Jewish referents, standards, and codes—again, most predominately those pertaining to messianism and the עולם הבא, Zion theology, and halakha.

⁷³ Mayo, *Those Who Call Themselves Jews*, 2. Mayo does go on at length to describe his reading as one that is not anti-Jewish (unlike many previous readings of Revelation as being Jewish-Christian). In this regard, Mayo writes firmly that John of Revelation was a Jewish Christian, “but not in a pejorative way.” On his reading, John was simply writing at a time in which a developed Christology highlighted one’s separation from Judaism and uniformity within the Christian movement. See *ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁴ Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’ Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” 49.

⁷⁵ Traditional interpretations of Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 also support these claims. See above.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 9.

such as John Marshall, David Frankfurter, Elaine Pagels, and Greg Carey when they suggest that Revelation is best read historically not as a Christian, Jewish-Christian, or Christian-Jewish text, but rather as a Jewish text historically, from beginning to end.⁷⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I will use aspects of Marshall's, Frankfurter's, Pagels', and Carey's work as starting points for a larger literary reading of the text. I should note here that, in many instances, I challenge scholars' use of the term "Christian" by bracketing it with the phrasing "Christ-followers" or "Jesus-followers." More than a challenge, though, this bracketing enables me to maintain an understanding of the text's implied Jewishness without repeated qualification (i.e., without having to excessively explain my views of scholarly "Christian" terminology).⁷⁸

Revelation, Judaism, and the Greco-Roman World

Focusing on Revelation's Jewishness does not imply that Revelation, its author, or its implied audience occupied a space separate from the larger cultural milieu of the Roman world. As Tessa Rajak remarks, "It is fair, after all, to describe the Greek way of life as the most dynamic 'package' with which the Jews engage....Greek culture was deeply intertwined with Jewish life from the early Hellenistic period to an extent where

⁷⁷ There are points of disagreement, however. I disagree, for example, with Pagels on her reading of Revelation as being more likely a late first-century text. As noted in the introduction, I believe the internal and external evidence is all too lacking to make a pre-versus post-70 CE dating. In a similar vein, I disagree with Marshall's strong reading of Revelation as having been written during the first Jewish-Roman War. I also disagree with Pagels and Frankfurter that Revelation's local enemies are most likely Pauline Christ-followers. Again, while I do not deny the potentiality of this claim (see above on Revelation 2:9 and 3:9), I recognize that they might also be Christ- or non-Christ-centered Jewish sectarians.

⁷⁸ The amount of brackets used will thus also allude even more to how many scholars employ the term "Christian" as a stable category in their reading of the Apocalypse.

contemporaries were not themselves wholly aware of the strands.”⁷⁹ These “strands,” scholars note, permeated a variety of media. According to Shaye Cohen, for example, “Not a single ancient author says that Jews are distinctive because of their looks, clothing, speech, names, or occupations.” Whereas the Romans and Greeks, he adds, “noted that foreign peoples often looked different from themselves: they were peculiarly tall, or short, hairy, or smooth, dark or fair. The Romans also noted peculiar styles of hair and beard... . [N]ot a single ancient author comments on the distinctive, size, looks, or coiffure of the Jews.”⁸⁰ Rajak notes similarly that, by the first century BCE, Jews in Palestine, “arguably less exposed [to Hellenism], were well aware that around the Roman Empire lived Jews who knew no Hebrew, spoke no Aramaic, lived their lives, heard their Bible in a special form of Greek.”⁸¹

A major reason for this “blending in” has to do with the sheer success of Hellenization. According to Schwartz, “Hellenization was so pervasive and fundamental that it has little utility as an analytical category.”⁸² It came in like a “flood,” he explains, when the Greeks defeated the Persians in the fifth century BCE.⁸³ And by the fourth century BCE, “the flood of Greek goods reached the Palestinian interior, including

⁷⁹ Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue With Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (Leiden, Netherlands, Boston, MA, and Köln, Germany: Brill, 2002), 3, 4.

⁸⁰ Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 28. The rabbis restricted certain hairstyles, and even share a story of a man changing his hairstyle so as to pass as a Gentile, but this does not infer that all Jews, let alone all rabbis, actually wore their hair a certain way. Although Jewish sources note the use of tzit-tzit and tefillin, Cohen concludes that, based on the evidence, many did not actually wear them. See *ibid.*

⁸¹ Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue With Greece and Rome*, 4.

⁸² Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 25.

Judea.”⁸⁴ By the time Alexander the Great began securing his Empire across the Eastern Mediterranean, a level of Greekness had already been accepted.⁸⁵ Hellenization expanded even further when Alexander made every land he conquered even more Greek; “that is, they had constitutions and a public life loosely modeled on those of Athens.”⁸⁶ Throughout Alexander’s reign and even after, “founding new Greek cities became normal activity.”⁸⁷ The prestige associated with these new Greek cities led others to adopt the Greek life also. “It was now not unthinkable that nations long in existence or established by the Persians might simply be willed out of existence by their upper classes’ desire to be Greek, to reconstitute themselves as the citizen body of a Greek city.”⁸⁸

Jews, like others, were entirely formed culturally within this milieu. In certain settings, they even participated in the local politics. Erich Gruen writes,

Evidence, where we have it, indicates that they eschewed strict segregation or isolation...[D]ocuments from Egypt show regular dedication of the *proseuchai* or their appurtenances on behalf of the reigning Ptolemy and his family. Such gestures, of course, were prudent, even perhaps conventional. But not only that: they announced, in effect, that the peculiar Jewish institution belonged also to the larger society wherein it was situated.⁸⁹

While many chose to live in smaller Jewish communities⁹⁰ as a means by which to maintain their Jewish identity and live amongst those who understood the Jewish way of life, they did not, to quote Erich Gruen, “huddle in enclaves.”⁹¹ Even if Palestinian Jews were less exposed to Hellenization than their diasporic counterparts (a debated contention

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 25–26.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2002), 122.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6.

in its own right), they, too, did not live in exclusion. Tessa Rajak remarks, “Even if in Palestine the balance was different, already in the Second Temple period Greek was widely spoken by Jews who were often (as Jews have been through the ages) actively multilingual.”⁹²

Jews certainly did not “huddle in enclaves.” On Schwartz’s reading, the infiltration of Greekness among Judean Jews is found most evident in stories of Judah Maccabee and the Maccabean revolt. As he puts it, “It is...surely significant that the earliest Palestinian Jewish book to have been written *in Greek* was published by a partisan of Judah Maccabee at the height of the Maccabean revolt and may well have been addressed to a mainly Jewish audience.”⁹³ In fact, the very means by which Judah’s brother, Jonathan, became governor of Judea in the 2nd century BCE was by helping Alexander Balas become ruler of the Greek Seleucid Kingdom. In exchange for his aid against King Demetrios I, who had then ruled over the Hellenistic Empire, Balas appointed the Hasmonean high priest of Jerusalem. As Helmut Koester explains, it was precisely their working together that set “the foundation stone...for the Hasmonean state.”⁹⁴ In other words, even though the Maccabean revolt billed itself as a movement against Hellenism, Hellenism was still a part of the plight and continued to infiltrate subsequent Hasmonean rule. Similarly, when the Herodian dynasty superseded the Hasmoneans, Judean leaders “relied upon the favor of the Romans” in order to survive.⁹⁵

⁹² Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue With Greece and Rome*, 4.

⁹³ Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 35. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁴ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 2nd edition, vol. 1 (New York, NY, and Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 205. See also Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 32-33.

⁹⁵ H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 374.

Internal evidence suggests that Revelation does not huddle away, either. Scholars, in fact, note regularly the ways in which Revelation evokes Jewish and Greco-Roman discourses. On the sealing of the faithful, for example, Craig Koester writes that those draped in white and holding palm branches (7:9)

would evoke different associations, depending on the reader. For some, a vision of crowds waving palm braches and ascribing salvation to God might suggest the Jewish Feast of Booths....Other readers would see a transformation of Greco-Roman practice. At festival honoring various deities, worshipers were garbed in white and carried palm branches and other items (Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.10–11; cf. Plutarch, *Mor.* 771D; *Rom. Civ.* 2:188).⁹⁶

In a similar vein, Barbara Rossing notes that the text’s personifications of Babylon as a woman (17:3–4) “function to link Babylon to the evil-woman figure of the Proverbs and Heracles traditions.”⁹⁷ In both tales, she explains, there is a *topos* of good and evil embodied in feminine form, and readers are pressed to “choose between the two.”⁹⁸ While she contends that John of Revelation likely gathered this tale from similar Jewish legend (e.g., Proverbs 1-9), she does not negate the influence of Greco-Romanness on ancient Jewish discourse, including the possible direct influence the Heracles narrative had on the Book of Revelation.⁹⁹

The text’s beasts are most commonly noted as being crafted within a shared Jewish-Greco-Roman framework. Whereas the image of the dragon in Revelation 12, for example, bears a likeness to the mythic monsters of the Hebrew Bible (Ps 74:13-14; Job

⁹⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 428.

⁹⁷ Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 62.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41. Considering the exorbitant amount of scholarship that has been written on ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman relations since the construction of her monograph in which the argument resides (published in 1999), I certainly question if Rossing today would advocate for a more pressing Greco-Roman reading.

40:25; Dan 7:2-8), his rivalry with the woman clothed with the sun (12:1-9) mirrors popular Greco-Roman myths. According to Eugene Boring, this scene mirrors most acutely the story of Apollo's birth, which, he explains, was a "a story known to all John's hearers and readers from childhood."¹⁰⁰ In this tale, Apollo's mother, Leto, is carried by the North Wind to the island of Delos so she can escape the dragon, Python, who wants to kill her and Zeus' unborn children. Once at Delos, Leto gives birth to Apollo and Artemis, and, four days later, Apollo kills the dragon. Although not identical, Revelation exhibits a similar plot. Like Python, the dragon seeks to devour a woman's infant son. In Boring's view, Revelation thus "takes up the [Leto] story and literally recasts it, providing new identities for the characters. More precisely, [it] uses the old myth as a means of identifying the characters already on the stage of history with their cosmic counterparts."¹⁰¹

Apollo's birth is not the only mythic tale akin to Revelation 12, however. According to Hermann Gunkel, there are similarities between Revelation 12 and the battles of Marduk versus Tiamat. While Tiamat is the evil dragon, Marduk—the storm-god who kills Tiamat in the Babylonian creation myth—is the child.¹⁰² Others have noted that the dragon of Revelation 12 mirrors the Greek monster Typhon, who was half serpent and breathed fire.¹⁰³ In the Python, Typhon, and Revelation myths, a common

¹⁰⁰ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰² See Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung Und Chaos in Urzeit Und Endzeit: Eine Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung Über Gen 1 Und Ap Joh 12 - Primary Source Edition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895).

¹⁰³ See C. Koester, *Revelation*, 528. For an overview of Revelation's associations with Greco-Roman myth, including the Python and Typhon stories, see Adela Yarbro Collins,

motif is shared: “A dragon fights the gods, tries to disturb cosmic order and is being defeated by a ruler god.”¹⁰⁴

Whereas older scholarship has traditionally focused on one myth with which to compare the dragon, interpreters more recently have articulated the means by which myth is often remembered and transcribed without consistency in form or meaning.¹⁰⁵ As Craig Koester suggests,

[T] origins of mythic images do not determine their meanings. Authors could shape the mythic images to make different, even contradictory, points in different contexts... [M]yths are characterized by variety rather than uniformity. Mythic patterns share certain typical elements while exhibiting variations in detail. Sometimes, ancient plotlines were combined.¹⁰⁶

The imagery of the woman of the sun, for example, shares a combination of Jewish Greco-Roman referents. Akin to God, she is clothed in light with stars around her (Ps 104:2; Sib. Or. 1:137-40). Akin to Isis and Artemis, she is described via moon and constellation imagery (Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.2-4; Dio Chrysostom, *Disc.* 1.70-71). Akin to Leto, she gives birth to a son in the face of an adversarial monster. Precisely because of the chapter’s clear mixture of stories, Craig Koester adds that its composition can “be characterized as the creative use of multiple traditions.”¹⁰⁷

The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation, Reprint edition (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1976).

¹⁰⁴ Or son of a ruler God. See Jan Willem van Henten, “Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12-13,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 185, note 16.

¹⁰⁵ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 528.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 528.

Although not identical to any one story from any one culture, it is clear that Revelation borrows elements from multiple contexts.¹⁰⁸ This does not position Greco-Romanness and Jewishness at odds with each other, but rather indicates the give-and-take that took place between the multiple cultures at the time (see Chapter Two). As Marshall himself notes, the Jewishness of Revelation is “inflected by the wide experiences of Jews living in the Greco-Roman world.”¹⁰⁹ The cities from which and to which John claims to write were characteristically Roman and supported the imperial cult, evidenced both within (2:4; 2:6; 2:9; 2:14; 2:20; 3:9; 3:16) and outside the text. They and other such cities were adorned with Roman statues, Roman theaters, Roman baths, Roman libraries, and Roman gymnasiums. The city of Ephesus even built and bath and gymnasium to host the Olympic games.¹¹⁰ Although much of Revelation seeks to draw a line over and against Roman power and culture—and although John of Revelation self-identifies as Jewish in name, language, and ideology—internal and external evidence suggests that John and his text were still impacted, indeed shaped, by the larger Greco-Roman world. It is surely significant that, even though John is writing *against* the Greco-Roman power system and *against* his contemporaries’ immersion in that system, he does so with recourse to Greco-Roman story and, like stories of Judah Maccabee, *in Greek*. As Austin Busch might phrase it, Revelation “encompasses [Judaism’s] expansion beyond Judea into the wider Greco-Roman world, a larger canvas that benefits from the full palate of

¹⁰⁸ And perhaps even more directly the Heracles narrative that Rossing proposes.

¹⁰⁹ Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” 21.

¹¹⁰ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 260.

literary colors [it] employs, including questions and echoes of classical Greek writings scattered throughout [its volume].”¹¹¹

But therein lies the rub. For just as reading Revelation within a Jewish context does not negate its Greco-Romanness, Revelation’s immersion in Greco-Romanness does not negate its reflections of Jewish trauma under Empire. As Rajak explains on Jewish-Hellenist relations, ethnic boundaries were still drawn. Tensions were still raised.¹¹² Although many Jews “got by,” “blended in,” or even “enjoyed the benefits of Roman commerce...and Hellenistic culture,”¹¹³ they still “suffered from colonial abuses of power, exploitation, slavery, and famine.”¹¹⁴ As Rajak adds:

[W]hile there is good reason to view [polarization] as activated only intermittently, we may suspect that, in the group memory, the rare occasions of tension may have loomed as large as the links; for those moments when Jews saw themselves as diametrically opposed to what Greeks [and Romans] stood for, in the broadest sense, were indeed defining moments. At such moments physical violence often accompanied ideological conflict and this will have left a lasting mark which justifies their prominent place in the historian’s reckoning.¹¹⁵

Revelation’s emotive rhetoric certainly indicates Jewish opposition to what Greeks and Romans stood for. The tensions throughout loom as large as the links, and appear, indeed, to be defining moments.

The overall scheme of Revelation is thus one of both/and. There is adaptation, and there is opposition. There is assimilation, and there is trauma. It is precisely this both/and—the tensions and the links—with which Revelation works and struggles, and as

¹¹¹ Austin Busch, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66.

¹¹² Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome*, 6.

¹¹³ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 127.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue With Greece and Rome*, 6–7.

such, it is the lens through which I read the Apocalypse. Revelation's author, put simply, combines elements of the world around him so as to construct his own hybrid worldview (see Chapter Two). This "world" consists of Jewishness *and* Greco-Romanness, assimilation *and* pushback. As Smith puts it, this is "John's revelation, and *his* side of the story."¹¹⁶ "Although not all of John's readers were afflicted," John makes clear that he "identifies himself with readers who suffer."¹¹⁷ For the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on reasons for this pushback.

Revelation's Relations to Empire

The notion that Revelation is written not only under Empire, but in response to it is now commonplace. According to Stephen Moore, historical-critical readings of this kind "crystallized" in such works as Leonard Thompson's 1990 monograph, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, and Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther's 1999 book, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*.¹¹⁸ In Thompson's view, while the text may not appear, at first glance, to reflect life under Empire, Revelation's language is nevertheless "moored in that social order."¹¹⁹ According to Howard-Brooks and Gwyther, Revelation is resistance literature; it responds to and

¹¹⁶ Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 115.

¹¹⁷ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 250.

¹¹⁸ Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 97.

¹¹⁹ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York, NY, and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

attempts to correct the Empire's subtle seduction of those who were once faithful to Christ.¹²⁰

Scholars have more recently added to this conversation by articulating the ways in which Revelation utilizes Roman ideologies in order to resist them. According to Allen Dwight Callahan, for example, John of Revelation uses the master's language in order to subvert it. By tainting Revelation's Greek with a Semitic style and syntax, John purposefully undermines the master language.¹²¹ In line with Callahan, Greg Carey argues that John of Revelation's Greek functions as a "symptom of resistance."¹²² In "demanding disidentification from the larger society,"¹²³ he takes on a "discursive hybridization."¹²⁴ "The seer...negotiated a linguistic balancing act between decolonization and intelligibility. On the one hand, his language had to be close enough to the language of conventional discourse that [it] could be understood; on the other, he had to coin an idiolect sufficiently deviant to privilege."¹²⁵ Others, however, go beyond these assertions to suggest that Revelation does not merely adopt Roman ideologies as a means by which to *resist* Rome, but also as a means by which to *become the new* Rome. According to Robert Royalty, "Opposition to the dominant culture in the Apocalypse is not an attempt to redeem that culture but rather an attempt to replace it with a [Christ-

¹²⁰ Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), xxiii.

¹²¹ See Allen Dwight Callahan, "The Language of Apocalypse," *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 04 (1995): 453-470.

¹²² See Greg Carey, "Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 173-177.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

centered] version of the same thing.”¹²⁶ Or as Stephen Moore phrases it, “Revelation’s *anticolonial* discourse, its resistance to Roman omnipotence, is infected with the imitation compulsion, and hence with ambivalence, it contains the seeds of its own eventual absorption by that which it ostensibly opposes.”¹²⁷ Paired with its ambivalent use of an Aramaic-Greek syntax is an ambivalent language of “war, conquest, and Empire.”¹²⁸ In other words, by countering the language of Empire with its *own* language of Empire, Revelation, the argument goes, is less about *undoing* Rome than it is about *outdoing* Rome.

Interpreters are frequently coming to these conclusions by way of a postcolonial optic. As discussed in more detail in the following chapter, despite the term’s inclusion of the word “post,” postcolonial need not assume separation from a colonial atmosphere. Instead, it refers in large part to discursive strategies that are “ex-centric”¹²⁹—that deconstruct center/periphery, Self/Other bifurcations so as to expose/oppose the constructedness of them, as well as offer new “centers of discourse, new subject positions, and new loci of freedom and power.”¹³⁰ Postcolonial narratives are often defined as those which “emerge out of a concrete social reality and history of colonization and domination.”¹³¹ According to literary theorist John Clement Ball, for example,

¹²⁶ Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 246.

¹²⁷ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 31.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 6.

¹³⁰ John Clement Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 2.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Two of the chief distinguishing features of postcolonial texts, as theorized in the emergent discourse of postcolonialism, are oppositionality and referentiality. Oppositionality is variously articulated as resistance, subversion, counter-discourse, contestatory narrative, writing back, and critique. Referentiality...is related to the concepts of agency, materiality, and historicity, through which specific local or national contexts and subjects for writing are privileged.¹³²

The postcoloniality of postcolonial narrative thus pairs a historical/epistemological/ideological pointedness with an oppositional framework.¹³³

These new subject positions, however, can also often appear similar to older ones. As Homi K. Bhabha explains through his notions of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry, there is a give-and-take between colonizers and colonized that can come out as both resistance and reduplication in postcolonial writings. Biblical text, writes Moore, can often “irrespective of the conscious intentionality of its author, insidiously reinscribe imperial and colonial ideologies even while appearing to resist them.”¹³⁴

As a referential text that both exposes subjugation under Empire and unveils an ambivalent opposition/attraction to the Roman imperial system, Revelation, despite being an ancient narrative, functions as a postcolonial narrative. It exudes an anti-colonial sentiment by “interrogat[ing its] colonial past” and present. It exposes the construction of Roman hegemony by envisioning an alternate mode of being. Its postcoloniality is expressed not in the sense of being written *post* colonial-imperialism, but as literary theorist Sam Durrant puts it, in the “performative sense: [It] bear[s] witness to the various histories of [colonized] oppression that underwrite local, national, and international privilege and continue to inform, if not determine, [its] cultural and psychological existence in the hope that their literary witnessing will bring into being a truly

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ “In general, postcolonialism can be seen as a discourse of opposition to and liberation from coercive political structures, epistemologies, and ideologies.” *ibid.*, 2–3.

¹³⁴ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 14.

postcolonial form of community.”¹³⁵ To put it differently, Revelation is *postcolonial* as it is *posttraumatic*. As we will see, posttraumatic signification does not imply the ending of trauma, regardless of whether the traumatic “event” proper has passed or still lingers (such as in cases of repeated assault, ongoing systems of oppression, and ongoing imperial colonization), but rather, to quote Durrant once more, “bears witness” to traumatic events (past or present) and various *remaining* psycho-social responses. Revelation, as we will see more clearly in the following chapters, “writ[es] back” to Empire, and encourages readers to respond/“liste[n] again.”¹³⁶

On the other hand, it is precisely in this call to “listen again” that we recognize the ways in which Revelation, even in its resistance, subsumes a new imperial role. Whereas John’s violence against Rome illustrates an anti-Roman agenda, the means by which he destroys and eventually replaces her mimics imperial force and conquest. By mocking, torturing, and eventually burning alive those who do not worship Christ or abide by John’s strict halakhic worldview (17:16; 19:19–20; 20:10), Revelation appears seduced by Roman standards. As Moore notes on Revelation’s most targeted adversary, “Not for nothing is Rome figured in Revelation as a prostitute—indeed, as ‘the mother of whores’ (*hē meter tōn pornōn*, 17:5): what better embodiment, for the seer, of seductive repulsiveness, of repulsive seductiveness.”¹³⁷ As God and Christ become the new

¹³⁵ Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 2.

¹³⁶ “Listening again” refers to the listening of non-centric voices. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 25.

¹³⁷ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 30.

overlords of the New Jerusalem, we are haunted by images of the Roman past. Just as Rome was secured via war, rape, and conquest, so too is Christ's New Kingdom.¹³⁸

Revelation's grotesque imagery has not gone unnoticed. Many have written entire treatises on the Apocalypse's use of violent and misogynistic metaphors in the service of its anti-imperial resistance. In her now path-forging work, *Death and Desire*, Tina Pippin argues that Revelation's "protest against evil," is also a protest against women. By characterizing the evil Empire as a female whore, it effectively makes women "the receptacle of evil."¹³⁹ Shanell T. Smith agrees with this reading. In her published dissertation, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence*, she contends that the text's resistance is inherently bound in its own misogyny. "We cannot ignore the fact that John encases [Rome] in feminine flesh."¹⁴⁰ We cannot ignore the fact that, "although Babylon represents the imperial city...*she* is also a sexually abused woman."¹⁴¹ With the markings of a brothel slave (17:5), Babylon is sentenced to a sexually violating death. Before being devoured and burned, she will be made "desolate and naked" (17:16), which, writes

¹³⁸ For more on the violent origins of Rome, see David S. Potter, "Introduction," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter and David J. Mattingly, New and expanded (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1–16.

¹³⁹ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 56.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 131.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 137–138. Revelation's rape imagery is typically rendered a metaphor for idolatry. While this metaphorization is likely, Rome is still, as Smith puts it, "a female literary character in a narrative, and therefore some form of imaginative readerly engagement is warranted" (*ibid.*, 3). Depicted as a brothel slave (17:5), for example, readers are invited to imagine the "social reality of [Babylon's] sexual labor," which included abuse, assault, and rape (*ibid.*, 117–118). Her death, too, is specifically sexualized.

Pippin, is a “sexual murder” we cannot ignore.¹⁴² By using Rome’s own patriarchal, androcentric, and misogynist scripts, “Revelation’s *anticolonial* discourse, its resistance to Roman omnipotence, [becomes] infected with the imitation compulsion”¹⁴³ that leaves “no place for women’s power and women’s voices.”¹⁴⁴

Not all interpreters arrive at such chary conclusions, however. According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, reading Revelation as having no place for women overlooks too quickly the notion that the Apocalypse refers to Rome as a woman solely because of linguistic conventions. “John...uses the image of woman to symbolize the present murderous reality of the imperial world power... . It must not be overlooked, however, that such female imagery for cities utilizes conventional language because then, as today, cities and countries were grammatically construed as feminine.”¹⁴⁵ Revelation, on her reading, is not talking about an actual woman. If it were, “the female imagery of Revelation...would be completely misconstrued.”¹⁴⁶

Some interpreters have even found points of solace in their reading of Revelation, grotesqueries and all. Schüssler Fiorenza is included here. The fact that the text also includes a woman prophet (Jezebel; Rev 2:20) indicates to her that women were leaders in early Christ-following communities—a positive historical take-away, she contends, even if Jezebel is depicted in negative terms (more on this in Chapter Three).¹⁴⁷

Schüssler Fiorenza is not alone in offering a positive reading. As Catherine Keller

¹⁴² Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 57.

¹⁴³ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 31.

¹⁴⁴ Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 56.

¹⁴⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 95-96.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 222-223.

explains, “Liberation and third-world Christians have [also] recognized in this text a stunning prophetic solidarity with the plight of the oppressed.”¹⁴⁸ According to Alan Boesak, for example, “The Apocalypse is determined to keep the dream of God alive for God’s people. It is a protest against and a call for resistance to evil.”¹⁴⁹ Or in Brian K. Blount’s view, Revelation is “resistan[t] to oppressive power” in a way that resonates with the African American plight in the face of white supremacy.¹⁵⁰ Like the music of African American culture (e.g., spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, hip-hop, and rap),¹⁵¹ Revelation’s hymnic language invites readers to resist oppressive power structures “in their own lives.”¹⁵²

Despite differing conclusions concerning Revelation’s relations to Empire—including whether Revelation should be read as ambivalent in its own resistance—scholars typically agree that, regardless of interpretive inferences, the text’s response to Roman imperialism can have a powerful effect on real readers. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, this is the point of the text’s rhetoric. It is *designed* to influence real readers: “While the poetic work seeks to create or organize imaginative experience, the rhetorical

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Keller, “Ms. Calculating the Endtimes: Additions and Conversations,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 214.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted by Pippin in *Death and Desire*, 54.

¹⁵⁰ Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xi. He adds that “Revelation’s misogynistic reputation and its penchant for graphic violence” was at first a reason he avoided interpreting the text, but then he realized that he needed to “tell the ‘truth’ about the book’s less than generous characterization of women and its unholy presentation of a violent God bent on revenge” (ibid., viii).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 93.

seeks to ‘persuade’ or ‘motivate’ people.”¹⁵³ Or as Hanna Stenström puts it, “Revelation does things with and to its readers through the power of its mythopoetic language, a language...[that] reaches us at levels deeper than merely intellectual; it shapes our attitudes and influences our actions and choices.”¹⁵⁴ For many interpreters, it is thus both the function and the effects of Revelation’s mythopoetic language that we should be considering. As Shanell Smith summarizes on the text’s misogynistic imagery, “The underlying question...is not whether metaphors matter and affect real women....Rather, the issue is *how to respond and read* for real women in one’s analysis, both historically and theologically.”¹⁵⁵ What, in other words, is “acting right” for Revelation, and is Revelation’s “acting right” right for women readers?

In engaging this type of critical reflection, Stenström follows Pippin’s lead, concluding that “Revelation has no concern for real women.”¹⁵⁶ She asks of herself: “What happens deep down in me, where even I may have internalized the contempt for ‘the Whore’?” When engaging the woman Babylon from the perspective of an African American woman reader, Smith responds with a similar affect: “I was sympathetic and sad....I also know her story, and I empathize with her plight. I was fearful. I know the

¹⁵³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 187. Schüssler Fiorenza contends that John motivates people to “act right,” but as noted above, it is precisely the “acting right” of it that is held in contention amongst scholars.

¹⁵⁴ Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’ Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” 37. Although Stenström arrives at a different conclusion from Schüssler Fiorenza, she credits Schüssler Fiorenza for her work on the power of rhetoric and mythopoeic language in Revelation. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 19-32.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 6. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁶ Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’ Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” 51.

negative connotations associated with her name, *Babylon*, and yet traces of all that she represents are recognizable in me. It is a revelation that still haunts me.”¹⁵⁷

As a fellow woman reader of Revelation, my qualms with Revelation’s visions are many. And to be frank, I agree with Pippin. The way in which the Apocalypse’s sexual rhetoric functions as a method of punishment is harmful, dangerous, and, for me personally, repulsive. We will come to see that, in many instances, the Apocalypse’s humor reflects a negative attitude toward women, contributing in stride to its overarching androcentric and patriarchal vision, which in effect mimics Rome’s own conceptions of full personhood—which is to say, masculine personhood. As Aaron Ricker Parks summarizes in his work on Revelation and American comics, Revelation’s “hallucinatory” imagery functions as pandering payback.¹⁵⁸ “[W]ith its sadomasochistic Christ who submits to fatal torture on Golgotha in order to inflict it more perfectly at Armageddon,” Revelation functions as “revenge fantasy” *tout court*.¹⁵⁹ As Ricker Parks puts it, it reveals not an “escape from the cross,” but rather, a “revenge for the cross.”¹⁶⁰ In so doing, John’s deity becomes the new violent, patriarchal, and androcentric “imperial tyrant,” parading sadistically “in Yahweh’s clothing.”¹⁶¹

Revelation’s revenge fantasy is indeed one of monstrous reversals. Nevertheless, I think there is more to “unveil,” so to speak, by keeping in mind the notion that Revelation, even in its monstrosities, functions as a response to trauma under Empire. In

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 129.

¹⁵⁸ Aaron Ricker Parks, “The Devil’s Reading: Revenge and Revelation in American Comics,” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010), 15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 9.

doing so, we might even realize that the introjection of imperial mores employed by colonized subjects is not only a symptom of imperial trauma, but one that leaves room for a more empathizing understanding of Revelation's textual affect.¹⁶² According to relational trauma therapists, for instance, introjections are part of the recovery work. They enable the client to transfer onto the listener feelings of her own suffering. When done in a therapy setting, the introjections enable therapist and client to co-construct further narrative about the suffering, and to put words to the introjections themselves (for more in this, see chapter two).

In the following section, I will outline the scholarly conversation surrounding the Apocalypse's relations to imperial trauma, which will then be analyzed with theoretical detail in the following chapter.

Revelation's Relations to Imperial Trauma

The apocalypse genre is often associated with literature of the dejected. As Harry O. Maier explains, "apocalypses generally are composed against a backdrop of human suffering."¹⁶³ Rather than wallow in repeated disconsolation, many apocalyptic texts seek to offer imaginative resolutions of real-life problems. They work to "shape one's

¹⁶² By textual affect I mean the emotions exuded in/by the text. For more on textual affect and the emotive power and functions of rhetoric, see Barbara Tomlinson, *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trope of the Angry Feminist* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

¹⁶³ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, xii.

imaginative perception of [the problem] situation,” and in turn, they “lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts.”¹⁶⁴

The meaning of “real-life problems,” however, requires nuance. According to Adela Yarbro Collins, “the crucial element is not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed.”¹⁶⁵ For example, while a PTSD diagnosis for the American Psychiatric Association requires survivors to display the criteria listed in the DSM-5¹⁶⁶ (more on this in Chapter Two), not all persons will display the same symptoms in the same way, even if they experienced the same event. And while some might experience an event as a threat to one’s integrity or sense of personal/communal self (i.e. trauma), others might not experience it as a threat at all. In this way, trauma becomes a relative, subjective,¹⁶⁷ and even individual phenomenon, and we cannot assume too quickly that all apocalypses respond to, make sense of, or deploy a textual affect in the face of imperial oppression in the same way.

¹⁶⁴ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 41–42.

¹⁶⁵ Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 84. A certain ethic of responsibility is required in understanding/unpacking Collins’ statement. Not all oppressions are the same, and we should not assume too quickly that just because someone feels oppressed, it means that s/he does not hold any position of power. The issue is one of systematic subjugation and who explicitly holds the power in a society/culture. This is something that can be evaluated on various levels, including the political and economic spheres. For more on Jewish positions of power in the first century CE, see Chapter Two.

¹⁶⁶ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

¹⁶⁷ I understand subjectivity in the following sense: “The fundamental components of subjectivity are no longer the ego, id, and superego, as in classical structural theory; instead, subjectivity consists of so-called ‘organizing principles.’ These include, for instance, the emotional convictions that the individual has formed throughout his life as a result of his or her experiences with the emotional environment.” See Werner Bohleber, *Destructiveness, Intersubjectivity, and Trauma: The Identity Crisis of Modern Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 6.

That said, general scholarly consensus affirms that Revelation, by and large, deploys a negative affect that is countered by a series of hope-filled self-assurances, including the (illusory) inception of the New Jerusalem.¹⁶⁸ Internal evidence, in other words, suggests that the Apocalypse “feels” the need to identify with those who have experienced emotional persecution and cultural disintegration. As Shane J. Wood puts it, “Throughout the text, Revelation depicts slander, deception, and wealth (re)distribution as...persecutions used against the first century [Jesus-followers] of Asia Minor.”¹⁶⁹ Or as Craig Koester writes, the “eschatological affliction [in Revelation] is a present reality...and will continue until Christ’s final coming to death the agents of evil (19:11–21).”¹⁷⁰ John, in turn, is the “companion” (1:9) to the afflicted; he “shares in affliction for the faith.”¹⁷¹

Such affectivity is evidenced in both John’s letters (1:9–11:19) and his larger cycle of visions (12:1–22:5). The following passages can serve as examples of this:

I, John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the suffering and...the patient endurance (1:9).

I know where you live, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my [Christ’s] name, and you did not deny your faith in me [Christ] even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan lives (2:13).

¹⁶⁸ For more on the illusory inception of the New Jerusalem, see Chapter Five.

¹⁶⁹ Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies & the Book of Revelation*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden, Netherlands and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 146. This becomes most clear in John’s letters. “[I]n the message to Smyrna,” for example, “where it entails denunciation, imprisonment, and possible death (2:9–10),” John writes that they must keep the faith and “show ‘endurance’” in the face of such ongoing evil. And if they do, they will “share [with him] in in the kingdom” of God and Christ. C. Koester, *Revelation*, 250.

¹⁷⁰ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 250.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been because of the word of God and because of the witness they gave. They cried with a loud voice, ‘How long, Oh Master, holy and true, will it be until you judge and avenge our blood, which was shed by the inhabitants of the earth?’ They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little more, until the number of their fellow slaves and of their brothers and sisters, who were about to be killed as they had been killed (6:9–11).

Then [Satan] went to make war...on those who keep the commandments of God [i.e. Mosaic law] (12:17).

[After the enemies of the Earth were defeated, Christ]...showed me the holy city Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal (note that it is only after the enemies of the Earth are defeated that John sees the holy city; see 21:10).

Based on these internal cues, the question for many, then, is to which “backdrop of human suffering” Revelation most acutely responds.

Because Revelation confronts problems within various Jesus-following communities and then attacks more universal forces of evil throughout its larger vision cycle (e.g., 2:20; cf. 17:1–2), many assert that this backdrop is grounded in both local and global conflict. A common assumption on the local front is that Revelation seeks to condemn Jesus-followers who are sympathetic to emperor worship and the Roman imperial court. As Smith notes,

A major polemical target in Revelation was the institution and observance of emperor worship, as evidenced by the prominence of the imperial cult in the text. John’s contentious views about these imperial practices reflect the fact that the majority of the cities in Asia Minor [and members of churches therein] were devoted to [the cult’s] advancements.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 112.

In fact, in Maier's view, countering Roman sympathizers is the entire point of the narrative. "Revelation's preoccupation is...to challenge [Christ-followers] who are too enthusiastic supporters of the economic and military might of the Roman Empire."¹⁷³

On the global front—which is indeed a more complicated conversation—older exegesis typically concludes that Revelation responds to an Empire-wide persecution of Christ-followers. Until the mid-twentieth century, it was generally agreed that Revelation responded to persecution under Domitian. This assumption is based largely on Irenaeus' dating of John's vision to the latter years of Domitian's reign (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3), paired with Eusebius' portrayal of Domitian as a cold-hearted emperor who annihilated Christ-followers (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.17). This assumption has been supported by a counting of the seven kings that renders Domitian the one "who is,"¹⁷⁴ as well the ancient belief that Domitian was like a "New Nero" during his reign (Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.38; Pliny, *Paneg.* 53.3–4). This latter point is perhaps most crucial of all, as it seems to evoke not only Domitian's own tyranny, but also the potentiality of a "second persecution" of Jesus-followers.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, xiii. Some interpreters also focus on the conflict espoused in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

¹⁷⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, for example, argued that, since Caligula was the first emperor to give Jews significant problems, we should begin counting with him—and then skip Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, since they reigned such a short period of time—to arrive at the following ordering: Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. See Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 64.

¹⁷⁵ This questioning is instigated in large part by Melito's second-century CE lost book, *To Antoninus*. According to Yarbro Collins, "It appears that he wanted to show that only those emperors who had a bad reputation among Romans themselves persecuted [Christ-followers], not because [Christ-followers] deserved punishment, but because those emperors were evil. Nero had indeed instigated violence against [Christ-followers] in Rome. Domitian was called a second Nero by some writers, so that it would have been easy for Melito to assimilate the later to the earlier. Once assimilation was made, it seems, it became traditional." *ibid.*, 56.

Recent studies have shown, however, that Eusebius' portrait of Domitian is not historically defensible. There is no evidence to support the claim that Domitian systematically persecuted Christ-followers across the Empire. For this reason, scholars have suggested that we position Revelation against a different backdrop. According to John A. T. Robinson, for instance, Revelation's internal evidence parallels the Neronian persecution of Jesus-followers in the 60s CE:

That violent persecution has already taken place and cries aloud for vengeance is an inescapable inference from such texts as 6:9f.; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20; 24; 19:2; and 20:4. They presuppose that the blood of apostles and prophets and countless [Christ-followers]...had saturated the streets of the capital itself... . The impact of the Neronian terror, already cited from Tacitus and Clement [*Annals* 15; *First Clement*] immediately comes to mind, and one is tempted to ask what further need we have of witnesses.¹⁷⁶

According to Robinson, then, John did not pen his apocalypse at the end of the first century, but rather in the mid-first century as a vengeful response to Neronian terror. This notion is supported by interpretations that render the king who "is" in Revelation 17 the

The notion that Revelation alludes to Nero does not negate a later dating, either. Legends that he survived death were popular throughout the first century, and are even "woven into various apocalyptic texts of the late first century and early second century (*Sib. Or.* 3:63–74; 4:119–124; 138–139; 5:361–365; *Mart. Asc. Isa.* 4:2–8 [Rev. 13:3])." C. Koester, *Revelation*, 74.

¹⁷⁶ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 231. According to Tacitus, Nero persecuted members of the Jesus movement ("*Chrestianoï*") as a means by which to tame the rumors that he had ordered the 64 CE fire that scorched all but four of the Roman districts. Nero is said to have covered Jesus-followers "with the skins of animals and [had them] torn to death by dogs; or they were crucified and when the day ended [they were] burned as torches." Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 42. Nero, put simply, turned his garden into a circus-show, and the demise of Christ-followers became the main attraction. However, while Clement of Rome writes that Christ-followers were indeed persecuted, he does not name specific emperors at fault (see *First Clement*). For an overview of Tacitus' use and meaning of the words "*Christus*" and "*Chrestianoï*," (a likely common misspelling of "*Christianoï*") see Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 29–53, especially 41–45.

emperor Nero,¹⁷⁷ and that the number of the Beast in Revelation 13:18 symbolizes Nero via Jewish gematria (see Chapter Four).¹⁷⁸

Still, there are problems. Research has shown that there is no evidence for mass, systematic persecutions that singled out Christ-followers across the Empire under *either* Nero or Domitian. As Shanell Smith explains, “One would have to go to the empire-wide persecution of Decius in 250, or the Great Persecution by Diocletian in 303, to witness systematic, state-sponsored persecution.”¹⁷⁹ For this reason, Steven J. Friesen argues that “Revelation studies should focus less on alleged excesses in imperial cult under Nero and Domitian and more on the normative character of imperial cult activity.”¹⁸⁰ Some even go as far as to suggest that Revelation does not respond to global hardship at all. On Leonard Thompson’s reading, Revelation’s internal evidence of global crisis does not share external support. “[T]he conflict and crisis in the Book of Revelation between Christian commitment and the social order derive from John’s perspective [and personal evaluation]¹⁸¹ on Roman society rather than from significant hostilities in the social

¹⁷⁷ If one begins counting with Julius Caesar and then continues in consecutive order, the sixth emperor—that is, the “who is” according to Revelation—would be Nero.

¹⁷⁸ For more recent, early dating (i.e., pre 70 CE) hypotheses, see George H. van Kooten, “The Year of the Four Emperors and the Revelation of John: The ‘pro-Neronian’ Emperors Otho and Vitellius, and the Images and Colossus of Nero in Rome,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 2 (2007): 205–248; and Marshall, *Parables of War*.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 111.

¹⁸⁰ Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.

¹⁸¹ At the same time, I do question if John’s evaluation might be enough, even if it differs from others’, including Thompson’s, view of the Roman environment. For more on the subjectivity of environment, particular related to trauma, see footnote 167 and chapter two.

environment. In this regard the Book of Revelation fits the genre to which it belongs.”¹⁸² The persecutions in Revelation are simply a product of the *topos* of unrest intrinsic to the apocalypse genre.

While I agree with Thompson that we cannot link Revelation’s urgency around the issue of persecution to any one, specific instance of global communal trauma, we can associate that urgency with an array of known adversities. In other words, rather than emphasize any one, external crisis, I suggest that, by focusing “more on the normative character of imperial cult activity,” as Friesen so aptly phrases it, we discover that traumatization under Rome happened over time, in both extreme and subtle ways. As Yarbro Collins asserts, the global frustrations to which Revelation responds were likely less specific problems, and more an array of “repressions...that could and did happen at various times in the first two centuries C.E.”¹⁸³ Or as David Carr explains, “All [Jesus-followers] dealt with the endemic suffering characteristic of life [overall] in the Roman world.”¹⁸⁴

Much of the collective trauma endured by Jesus-followers was caused by the colonial conditions of life under Empire. For in addition to their “frequent struggles with sickness, starvation, and loss,”¹⁸⁵ Jews, like Revelation’s John and larger storytelling community, were colonized subjects of imperial Rome. As S. R. F. Price notes, “The civilized, complex cities [of Roman Asia], with their ideals of autonomy and freedom,

¹⁸² Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, 175. See also David Arthur DeSilva, “The Social Setting of the Revelation to John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 273-302.

¹⁸³ Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 104.

¹⁸⁴ David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 239.

¹⁸⁵ Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 239–240.

had to accept subjection to an authority which...was external to the traditional structures of the city.”¹⁸⁶ This meant that they “had to make sense of the [cultural instabilities] that they inhabit[ed]; the emperor, who they had never seen and would never see, had absolute power.”¹⁸⁷ Like other subjugated cities and peoples throughout the Empire, Jews “were always at the mercy of [the Roman gaze],”¹⁸⁸ which is, in addition to the Roman army, “one of the most powerful strategies of imperial dominance.”¹⁸⁹ Such a gaze

implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpellates the colonized subject in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor.... [T]he imperial gaze defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness.¹⁹⁰

The effects of Roman imperialism alone give us reason to suspect that there is an external cause for Revelation’s dominant affect—its “feel[ings]” of oppression, as Yarbrow Collins has it.¹⁹¹ Roman eyes were always watching, contributing to the production of Roman imperial colonization and molding its subjects into deeper subalterneity.¹⁹² This external imperial-colonial “situation,” I propose, “fits [Revelation’s] complex self-

¹⁸⁶ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

¹⁸⁷ Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 111. Here, Smith is in conversation with Price also.

¹⁸⁸ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 2. Price does not engage the language of the gaze here.

¹⁸⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 253.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Yarbrow Collins, *Crises and Catharsis*, 84.

¹⁹² For more on Revelation and the production of knowledge in/and the Roman gaze, see Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

presentation[s].”¹⁹³ Its narrativizing of persecution, abandonment, and a hope for a better future is animated by this repeated imperial subjugation.

I recognize, however, that some may refute my focus on imperial colonization here by stating that colonialism’s roots are in modern European expansionist history, and therefore should not be superimposed onto earlier contexts. As Moore explains:

European colonization was qualitatively different from pre-capitalist colonial enterprises. European colonizers did more than extract tribute and other forms of wealth from subjugated peoples: they restructured the economies of those peoples, enmeshing them in a symbiotic relationship with their own, and thereby ensuring a constant two-way flow of human and natural resources (settlers, slaves, raw materials, and so forth) and a one-way flow of profits into their coffers.¹⁹⁴

Despite colonialism’s heights in the modern period—as well as its modern foundations in capitalism—Moore still surmises that “many earlier Empires, not least those of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean Basin, also engaged in colonization.”¹⁹⁵

Historian David J. Mattingly arrives at a similar conclusion through a basic definition of related terms. As he explains on empire, imperialism and colonialism, “an Empire is the geopolitical manifestation of relationships of control imposed by a state on the sovereignty of others...[whereas *i*]mperialism refers to both the process and attitudes by which an empire is established and maintained.”¹⁹⁶ Colonialism, on the other hand, “is a more restricted term that defines the system of rule of one people over another, in which sovereignty is operated over the colonized at a distance, often through the installation of

¹⁹³ C. Koester, *Revelation*, 251.

¹⁹⁴ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 8.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹⁶ David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2011), 6. Emphasis in the original.

settlements of colonists in the related process of *colonization*.”¹⁹⁷ Based on these definitions and what is known about the Roman cosmopolis, Mattingly concludes that while

some commentators have argued that the *imperium Romanum* was quite distinct from the modern term *imperialism* and, in comparison with modern empires, the Roman Empire was a product of very different political and economic forces...that seems to ignore much about Rome that was exceptional in relation to other states of classical antiquity—the nature of Rome as a cosmopolis or metropolis fits more readily into analysis of imperial systems than of other ancient cities.¹⁹⁸

Ania Loomba contends similarly. In her study titled *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, she writes that

colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods. But colonialism in this sense did not begin with the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa or the Americas from the sixteenth century onward; it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history. At its height in the second century AD, the Roman Empire stretched from Armenia to the Atlantic.¹⁹⁹

She adds, moreover, that while “[c]olonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world...everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history.”²⁰⁰

In making these comparisons, we might even apply to the subjects of the Roman Empire a cotemporary notion of “the colonized,” which, according to Edward Said, has come to include “women, subjugated and oppressed classes, [and] national minorities”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 7. Emphasis in the original. Interestingly, he adds that “both words [colonialism and colonization], derive from the Roman term *colonia*, initially definable as a settlement of citizens in conquered territory” (ibid., 7).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 20.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

that are connected to larger imperial or imperial-like systems of oppression.²⁰¹ While I do not want to insinuate a difference-leveling comparison, I nevertheless think that, like the various “colonized” listed above, subjects under the Roman Empire were susceptible to a variety of systems of oppression endorsed by the imperial center. Like Mattingly, I “believe that there are issues relating to the exercise of power and the responses that power evokes, where it is legitimate to draw comparisons as well as contrasts between ancient and modern.”²⁰² In fact, it is precisely the effects of these comparisons—indeed, the trauma shared between them—that leads me to identify the book of Revelation as a postcolonial text. The Apocalypse, although technically *pre*-colonial and *pre*-postcolonial,²⁰³ nevertheless bears witness to a history of colonial oppression that subtends its cultural and psychological existence while bringing into being imaginatively a “postcolonial” form of community. This postcolonial reimagining is evidenced not only in its claims of trauma and the value of a Jewish cultural self in the face of that trauma—integral parts of postcolonial-posttraumatic repair, as we will see—but also in its erosion of the imperial transcript(s) that have deemed Jews “other than.” In other words, although Revelation’s postcoloniality is not marked by what some might call “postcolonialism proper”²⁰⁴ (i.e., post-1947 responses to colonial imperialism in the Global South—

²⁰¹ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 295.

²⁰² David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*: 5–6.

²⁰³ A historical approach to postcolonialism focuses on “the period of time beginning in 1947 when nineteenth century European nation-states encountered numerous forms of indigenous resistance in the lands they had colonized and subsequently withdrew from formal legal governance.” Susan VanZanten Gallagher, “Mapping the Hybrid World: Three Postcolonial Motifs,” *Semeia* 75 (1996): 230.

²⁰⁴ See Gerald O. West, “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections From a (South) African Perspective,” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in*

responses still fully underway), it still reflects elements of this modern formulation. To quote John Clement Ball once more, “In general, postcolonialism can be seen as a discourse of opposition to and liberation from coercive political structures, epistemologies, and ideologies.”²⁰⁵ It is in *this* sense—this *bearing witness to* and *writing back to* colonial imperialism—that Revelation can be viewed as a postcolonial text.

Looking Forward

Reading Revelation as a Jewish postcolonial text (that which bears witness to and “writes back” to imperial colonialism) that uses humor as a mode of opposition and repair requires theoretical insight from a variety of disciplines. Based on the length at which I have outlined the text’s relations to Judaism and Empire in this chapter, some may assume that my “theoretical modality of choice” is historical criticism. This assumption has merit. Historical criticism seeks to situate biblical texts within their original historical-cultural contexts, so as to “increase our understanding of the social and cultural world of the ‘New Testament and further our understanding of the New Testament itself,”²⁰⁶ which is not far from my objective here. But while historical-critical methodologies also attempt to discover “what actually happened,” or determine “what the author of this book intended to communicate by writing such a work,”²⁰⁷ I am neither interested in making—nor claiming that it would be possible to make—the universal and

Honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2009), 267. For a more thorough engagement of West, see chapter two.

²⁰⁵ Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*, 2.

²⁰⁶ Bruce Chilton, “Historical Criticism,” in *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. Paula Gooder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 5.

²⁰⁷ Mark Allan Powell, “Introduction,” in *Methods for Matthew*, ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

objective claims²⁰⁸ these inquiries require.

Instead, I seek to read Revelation as fluid—as a text that has historical-contextual particularity, but that is also in dialogical relationship with other texts, contexts, and discourses—and not only those that might plausibly be said to have been within the author’s conscious purview. As Warren Carter explains, scholars are coming to find that stories are “more diverse, unstable, multivalent, open-ended, and plural.”²⁰⁹ This finding does not mean that interpreters no longer “seek or claim coherent readings,” but that they “recognize the elusiveness of that unity and coherence and that readings claiming unity and coherency selectively set aside much that belies the claim.”²¹⁰ For example, while Revelation’s Jewish, humorous, and postcolonial/post-traumatic referents are my primary foci here, I recognize that they are fluid and unstable categories. I also recognize that they are not the only referents through which Revelation’s utterances gain meaning. As literary theorist Graham Allen puts it:

Works of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature [and discursive formations]. The systems, codes and traditions of other art forms and of culture in general are also crucial to the meaning of a work of literature...[but they also] lack in any kind of independent meaning.²¹¹

Allen adds that the “act of reading” thus

plunges us into a network of intertextual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something

²⁰⁸ See Fernando F. Segovia, ““And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues’: Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism,” in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 6.

²⁰⁹ Warren Carter, “Narrative Readings, Contextualized Readers, and Matthew’s Gospel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 311.

²¹⁰ Carter, “Narrative Readings, Contextualized Readers, and Matthew’s Gospel,” 311.

²¹¹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 1.

which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext.²¹²

Revelation's relations are not homogenous. Unstable in positionality, it "appropriat[es] and emulat[es] (as well as subvert[s]) a whole array of sociopolitical and cultural forms, stances, and methods simultaneously from a variety of sources."²¹³ While its textual utterances are indeed "social phenomena"—they "gain meaning only as they are contextualized and situated"—they also, to use the words of Kenneth Craig, "reflect non-homogenous social ideological forces."²¹⁴ The complex conscious and unconscious associations between texts are infinite, and a reader's own "interactive, intertextual process of [interpretation]" only adds to this view.²¹⁵

In order to leave room for historical sensibility and multivalence—for coherence and instability—I will provide a postcolonial dialogical reading of the text. This theoretical lens, which I refer to as *postcolonial dialogics*, looks for the intertextual fluidities that shape the theological, historical, and political worlds of Revelation. The purpose of the next chapter is to outline in more detail what I mean by a postcolonial dialogical analysis, particularly with regards to Jewish imperial trauma and an intertextual use of humor.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Kevin Lee Osterloh, "Judea, Rome, and the Hellenistic Oikoumenê," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 172.

²¹⁴ Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 119.

²¹⁵ David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions: A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 44.

Chapter Two

Theorizing Texts and Contexts: Expanding Empire-Critical, Humor-Critical, and Trauma Based Readings

In order to recognize Revelation's textualities while still maintaining coherence and direction, I will implement a postcolonial dialogical reading of the text. This critical optic, which I refer to as *postcolonial dialogics*, is a combination of Bakhtinian dialogism and postcolonial hermeneutics that serves to explore the relationships between Revelation's textual and contextual networks, particularly in and around Empire and Jewish imperial trauma, and extending into Revelation's counter-imperial use of humor. While a postcolonial hermeneutic, for example, will situate Revelation within an ambivalent attraction-repulsion position toward Empire—particularly via postcolonial trauma theory and Bhabhan notions of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence—a dialogical analysis will further illustrate the extent to which Revelation dialogues with Jewish and Greco-Roman texts/context/discourses, including Jewish and Greco-Roman comedic tropes, bringing all of this into its imperial worldview and attempt at communal repair. This theory works not only to build upon Revelation's Jewishness and encounters with imperial trauma (i.e., historical sensibilities), but also to complicate the text's responses to Jewish imperial colonization by bringing it into conversation with notions pertaining to hybridity, introjection, and a dialogical use of humor (i.e., textual instabilities). In what follows, I will provide an overview of postcolonial theory and Bakhtinian dialogism, with trauma theory and humor theory serving as theoretical supports for weaving a more broad-based postcolonial dialogical reading. Because

trauma theory is a relatively new critical optic in the field of biblical studies,¹ I will spend more time introducing it and its relations to postcolonialism and the Bible than other critical optics.

Combining Postcolonial Theory with a Dialogical Optic

From Post-Colonial to Postcolonial Theory

The term “post-colonial” was coined by historians in the aftermath of World War II as a marker of a State’s independence post-colonization.² In building upon the pioneering work of the post-World War II intellectuals in the global South, however, U.S. literary theorists of the 1970s and 1980s began implementing the term to address the effects of colonization expressed in literature. Postcolonial studies did not coalesce fully as an interdisciplinary field until the early 1990s. Scholars typically agree that the term “post-colonial” more readily refers to the periods *after* colonization—perhaps even epochs post WWII specifically—while the term “postcolonial” without a hyphen refers more broadly to the various imperial/colonial legacies found within and across times and spaces. Postcolonial theorists today generally prefer the unhyphenated term as it leaves room to consider the array of historical, cultural, political, economic, and psychological consequences across various colonial systems, including those that are pre-modern.

When attempting to define a postcolonial *optic*—that is, the postcolonial as a *theoretical tool* (both within and outside of biblical studies)—interpreters typically highlight its lack of formal definability. According to Stephen Moore, for instance,

¹ As an index of that relative newness, consider that the first Society of Biblical Literature session on trauma and the Bible was put together only in 2013.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 204.

“Postcolonial criticism is not a method of interpretation (any more than feminist criticism, say), so much as a critical sensibility acutely attuned to a specific range of interrelated historical and textual phenomena.”³ R.S. Sugirtharajah writes similarly that it “is essentially an interventionary tool. Its argumentative and contestatory nature makes the practice defy boundaries and disciplines.”⁴ Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that postcolonialism does have several functions.⁵ According to Ania Loomba, for instance, a postcolonial critical optic works to make sense of the “wide range of practices including trade, settlement, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, and enslavement” caused by colonization, including the writings generated by it.⁶ Sugirtharajah contends similarly, breaking a postcolonial theoretical focus into a threefold paradigm:

- (a) it examines and explains especially social, cultural, and political conditions such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender both before and after colonialism;
- (b) it interrogates the often one-sided history of nations, cultures, and peoples; and
- (c) it engages in a critical revision of how the “other” is represented.⁷

Interrogations of Empire and imperialism are inherently connected with these functions. Because Empire is that which exhibits control over vast nations, cultures, and peoples—while imperialism is the process *by which* an Empire comes to maintain that control—anti-colonial struggles are often packaged as anti-Empire/anti-imperial ones. Postcolonial critics recognize this relationship, and often read postcolonial narratives as that which interrogate and/or mourn the effects of Empire and imperialism. Jean Rhys’

³ Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 7.

⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 20.

⁷ Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 12.

1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is one of the most oft-cited examples in this regard. Retelling the story of *Jane Eyre* in a way that gives voice to the marginalized, Rhys offers a critique of colonial subjugation in the Caribbean.⁸ Anti-imperial struggles, including postcolonial narratives, thus work to “to create new and powerful identities for colonized peoples”—to write back to the systems of oppression that have deemed them “other than” while at the same time putting words to the perspective of the colonized.⁹

Biblical scholars have found that the Bible expresses similar hostility toward imperialism.¹⁰ According to Norman K. Gottwald, in fact, “Early Israel was born as an

⁸ Justin D. Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 54. For more on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, its relations to *Jane Eyre*, and postcolonial conversations surrounding these relations, see *Ibid.*, 54–57.

⁹ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 182–183.

¹⁰ Biblical scholars have recognized the Bible’s imperial origins before the implication of a postcolonial critical optic, but postcolonial biblical criticism, as Shanell Smith puts it, “represents an intensification of such efforts.” Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 44. While some biblical scholars have come to prioritize the ancient past and the imperial *Sitz im Leben* of a particular biblical text (e.g., Warren Carter and Richard Horsley), others have more readily put into conversation such ancient colonizing practices with colonial reception histories of the biblical text and/or contemporary postcolonial contexts (e.g., R. S. Sugirtharajah and Musa Dube). See, for example, Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York, NY, and London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2008); Richard A. Horsley, “Introduction: The Bible and Empires,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, KY, and London, UK: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 1–7, along with R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008); Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009); Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). See also Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*; and Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015).

anti-imperial resistance movement.”¹¹ Rather than adhering to the rules and regulations of such centralized states as Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Rome, ancient Israelites and later Jews, Gottwald argues, aspired to create their own self-regulating communities.¹² Indeed, in reading for such anti-colonial and postcolonial leanings, one finds passages throughout the Bible that counter imperialism, highlight a narrative construction of the Israelites’ and early Jews’ own self-governance, and illustrate the reversal of center/peripheral, colonizer/colonized binary formations. According to Musa Dube, for example, Exodus consists of an “anti-conquest ideology,” with the phrase “Let my people go” operating as its “main theme.”¹³ According to Warren Carter, the Gospel of Matthew reads as “a counternarrative. It is a work of resistance, written for a largely Jewish religious group. It ‘stands and/or speaks over against’ the status quo dominated by Roman imperial power and synagogal control. It resists these cultural structures.”¹⁴ As ex-centric texts, Exodus and Matthew seek to deconstruct center/periphery, Self/Other bifurcations, so as to expose their constructedness, and also offer new “centers of discourse, new subject positions, and new loci of freedom and power.”¹⁵

As noted previously, however, while postcolonial narrative often works to illustrate anti-imperial resistance—and can even work to create new self-governing communities—it also often does so in ways that are themselves imperialistic. As Loomba

¹¹ Norman K. Gottwald, “Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, KY, and London, UK: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 60.

¹⁴ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004), 1.

¹⁵ John Clement Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 2.

explains on the postcolonial state's response to Empire, "[It] often uses an anti-imperialistic rhetoric of nationalism to consolidate its *own* power."¹⁶ In a similar vein, "[postcolonial] literary texts do not simply reflect dominant ideologies [or combat them] but encode the tensions, complexities, and nuances within colonial cultures. Literature written on both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs, appropriates, and inscribes aspects of the 'other' culture."¹⁷ According to Dube, both the Exodus and Matthew narratives—even in their resistance—absorb, appropriate, and inscribe an imperialist agenda. While Exodus, for example, eventually highlights the Israelites' pursuit to conquer land outside of Egypt, Matthew comes to posit its own imperialist gaze upon intra-Jewish rivals.¹⁸ In both cases, then, there is a "deflect[ion]...from the root cause of oppression, the imperialists, and [a] focu[s] instead on other victims."¹⁹

Such deconstructive readings often situate postcolonial studies within a poststructuralist conversation, as poststructuralism focuses on the multiple and contradictory nature of signification. By unmasking internal contradictions and inconsistencies within texts, poststructuralists bring to the forefront the notion that words and texts are not bound to any one signifier/context/discourse; texts evade concretization given the weight of signification and intertextual cues in any given word or phrase—past, present, or otherwise. As Moore notes on the connectivity between postcolonialism and poststructuralism:

Much contemporary postcolonial criticism may be broadly classified as "poststructuralist," or, more narrowly, as "deconstructive," because it entails

¹⁶ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 201.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ See Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 66–70, 134–135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135. Here, she speaks specifically about Matthew, but her analysis of Exodus exudes a similar sentiment. See pp. 66–70.

repeated demonstrations of how texts emanating from colonialist cultures—whether histories, travel narratives, or canonical works of literature (Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, say, or Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, or Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*)—are enmeshed in elaborate ideological formations, and hence intricate networks of contradiction, that exceed and elude the consciousness of their authors.²⁰

Thus, even if postcolonial narratives work to respond to particular historical or political moments, they are still enmeshed in dynamic and dialogical modes of communication (more on this below).

Homi K. Bhabha has been particularly helpful to contemporary postcolonial biblical critics,²¹ due in large part his poststructuralist reflections on colonization. Bhabha’s concept of *hybridity*, for instance, refers to the cross-fertilization of ideas between the ideologies of an imperial/colonizing center and the ideologies of those on the margins—thus undoing the very notion of a monolithic central system. Bhabha’s notions of colonial *mimicry* and *ambivalence* are also intimately bound up in this phenomenon. Colonial mimicry, for example, occurs in the hybrid space between colonizer and colonized. It is in the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized, who, as Moore phrases it, have been “coerce[d],” into “internalizing and replicating” the colonizer’s culture.²² The affect of the colonized can therefore take on a psychic state of deep ambivalence; the colonized depict the desire to, on the one hand, *be like* the colonizers, but on the other hand, to discount them entirely.

²⁰ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 6.

²¹ See, for example, Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009); R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1998); Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*; Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014); Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*; and Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*.

²² Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 26.

According to Bhabha, however, hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence are not entirely deconstructive sites. In his view, they can actually contribute to and/or construct larger discourses and productions of knowledge.²³ Utilizing Renée Green's image of the stairwell, Bhabha argues that liminal spaces initiate new meaning. He quotes Green:

I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such as higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness or whiteness.²⁴

To which Bhabha responds:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.²⁵

In Bhabha's view, then, it is precisely these "hither and thither" moments that leave room for the construction of new subjectivities. "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."²⁶

While the image of the stairwell works well to describe certain power struggles between those who occupy the norm and those who do not, the notion of only two end-

²³ Foucault's work on the production of knowledge is particularly influential for Bhabha (and other poststructuralist/postcolonial thinkers). See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980), 92–102.

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

points—a higher and lower—it is not enough. According to Sugirtharajah, in fact, “The critical categories popularized by postcolonialism—‘mimicry’ and ‘hybridity’—have now almost become clichés.”²⁷ In his view, “[h]ybridity is preoccupied with metropolitan issues only; it overlooks the internal cross-fertilization that takes place within vernacular and regional traditions. Hybridity is seen as one-way traffic.”²⁸ In a similar vein, Fernando F. Segovia writes that: “While postcolonial criticism's principal focus on imperial-colonial frameworks and its intense analysis through a postcolonial optic apply, both have to be properly nuanced.”²⁹ Issues pertaining to “gender, economics, race-ethnicity, and sexual orientation—plus any other dimension of human existence—[have to be recognized] in order to avoid a facile collapse of categories into the single binomial of imperialism and colonialism.”³⁰ In other words, there are deeper networks at play. Postcolonial narratives interact with and are generated by more than just a give-and-take between the colonizer and the colonized.

Sugirtharajah also argues that the scholarly focus on hybridity—and, with it, the move to focus on deeper networks of textuality and intertextuality—has made readers “for[get] the initial and primary tasks of postcolonialism [which are] ‘writing back’ and ‘listening again.’”³¹ Gerald West has suggested similarly. In his 2009 essay, “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections From a (South)

²⁷ Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 25.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Fernando F. Segovia, “Postcolonial Criticism and the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Methods for Matthew*, ed. Mark Allan Powell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 209.

³⁰ Ibid. We also need to keep in mind dimensions of nonhuman existence. Animals and human-animals abound in Revelation. See, for example, Moore's “Quadrupedal Christ” in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 201–223. For a brief annotated bibliography on animality in/and Revelation, see Ibid., 203, note 3.

³¹ Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 25.

African Perspective,” West argues that postcolonial biblical criticism has become diasporic. Rather than recognize the importance of postcolonial materiality—of a textual writing back to imperial centers “@home”³² and the *reasons* for writing back @home—postcolonial critics, who are often writing from Western centers of intellectual elitism, have all too quickly removed postcolonial writings from their “colonized context(s).”³³ As he evocatively phrases it, “Postcolonial biblical studies is now...an industrial enterprise. And the centre of gravity has moved from East to West and from South to North, and the focus from actual struggles to theoretical redescription.”³⁴ When applying postcolonialism to biblical writings we are faced with a similar problem. These texts are not written @home—at least not in West’s sense of the term (i.e., in the Global South)—and so reading an ancient text as postcolonial thus risks an excavation of the specificity of the postcolonial condition to which West speaks.

West’s point is well taken. The modern realities of postcolonial bodies in the Global South must not be overshadowed or removed. Let me be clear when I say, then, that my intention here is not to appropriate the specificity of such modern postcolonialities for Revelation. Instead, my intention is to recognize, as noted previously, Revelation’s shared formulation with contemporary postcoloniality (i.e., its shared bearing witness to and writing back to imperial colonization). In many instances, in fact, it is precisely this “bearing witness to” that I attempt to recover throughout this project. For New Testament studies, like postcolonial studies, has *also* become diasporic.

³² Gerald O. West, “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections From a (South) African Perspective,” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah*, ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2009), 259.

³³ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

As we have seen, New Testament writings have all too often been detached from their Jewish contexts and replaced with Christian ones. To apply the words of West, the New Testament has “moved” from Judaism to Christianity—from what many have described as that which is “lesser than” to that which is “better than.” Part of my work here has been to read Revelation in its Jewish historical context and, in doing so, to recognize the import of its Jewish context. My application of a postcolonial hermeneutic is thus not to erase Revelation’s peripheral “writing back” to Empire—or to erase the realities of contemporary postcoloniality—but to highlight them. Just as we might characterize the postcolonial as the interrogation of colonial imperialism @home, we might read Revelation as a Jewish text that bears witness to the traumatic effects of Jewish imperial colonization at *its* home.

Bakhtinian Dialogism

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, biblical scholars began to recognize the productivity of reading the Bible with a Bakhtinian lens, not only in terms of the Bible’s content, but also its structure. In his 1980 monograph, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomist History*, Robert Polzin utilized Bakhtinian theory to suggest that the speeches produced by the narrator and Moses are foundationally *polyphonic*. As Moses and the narrator echo voices in addition to their own, they, according to Polzin, create space for a layered and even conflicting dialectic.³⁵ Moving

³⁵ Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History. Part 1: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1980). See also his second and third volumes: *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History. Part 2: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989); *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*.

the conversation forward with her 1996 study, “Bakhtin, The Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” Carol Newsom discussed the Bible’s lack of a structural center of consciousness; even the Bible’s multiple strands of authorship reflect an ongoing dialogue betwixt and between the Bible’s sources.³⁶

Leaning on these insights, scholars have continued to apply Bakhtinian theory to canonical and extracanonical texts, often doing so in ways that highlight not only Bakhtin’s readability alongside biblical texts, but also his readability alongside other postmodern analyses. In her 2007 reading of Luke-Acts, for example, Virginia Burrus pairs Bakhtin with Bhabha, emphasizing the ways in which the Pentecost narrative is both polyphonic—containing speeches from multiple characters in multiple spaces, both earthly and elsewhere—and also culturally hybrid:

Perhaps, if we listen very closely, we can even discern in the text a movement toward what Bhabha names a “third” or an “in-between” space of ambivalent signification “that may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not only on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.”³⁷

Part 3: 2 Samuel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993). For further examples of Bakhtinian biblical scholarship, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, Semeia Studies 38 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Roland Boer, ed., *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 63 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Robert S. Kawashima, “Biblical Narrative and the Birth of Prose Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51; Kendra Haloviak Valentine, *Worlds at War, Nations in Song: Dialogic Imagination and Moral Vision in the Hymns of the Book of Revelation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

³⁶ More specifically, she claimed that the Tanakh is dialogic and polyphonic, two terms that, according to Bakhtin, highlight a text’s constant interactions between authors, characters, readers, and their own psycho-socio-political contexts. See Carol A. Newsom, “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 290–306.

³⁷ Virginia Burrus, “The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, 13, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York, NY, and London, UK: T&T Clark, 2007), 148. Here, Burrus is quoting Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38.

More recently, Danna Nolan Fewell has highlighted the importance of Bakhtinian studies alongside poststructural and postclassical narratological readings of biblical narrative.

When attending to the sociality of biblical storytelling, she writes that:

[T]he deep entanglements of storytellers with their environments, stories as tapestries of individual and shared representations and perspectives, suggest that our efforts to distinguish neatly the tellers, their tales, their redactors, and their interpreters—whether we do this as an operation of historical criticism, reader-response criticism, narrative poetics, or ethical reflection—may be misguided. Notions of narrative authorship and authorization that are more dialogical and collaborative in nature may provide us with better models to understand biblical narrativity. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1984a; 1984b; 1986; 1990), whose textual theories are making inroads into biblical studies (see Green 2000 and Boer 2007; Bakhtinian studies of individual biblical texts defy enumeration), is particularly important in this conceptualization.³⁸

Bakhtinian theory, alongside other poststructuralist inquiries, generates an “opening up of” biblical texts. It provides a theoretical model by which to diversify and destabilize biblical narrativity. Like poststructuralism’s aim in textual interpretation (deconstruction), engaging Bakhtinian theory offers a model/method/means through which to expose and explore the multiplicity and instability that inhere in any “text.”

According to Bakhtin, all interaction—whether that interaction is between people, texts, or texts and readers—is relational. Every word, phrase, thought, etc. is inherently connected via personal, cultural, textual relations throughout time and space, and the only way in which we understand those connections is through a shared process of interconnectivity. “There is no word, meaning or thought that does not enter into an

³⁸ Danna Nolan Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19. It is important to recognize that such leanings toward the postmodern occur not only because Bakhtinian theory mirrors postmodern thought, but also—and perhaps more so—because Bakhtin did not become particularly influential to the academic conversation until the late 20th century—that is, after the introduction of poststructuralist and deconstructive theories. Rather than Bakhtin setting the stage, so to speak, for postmodern biblical analysis, Bakhtinian theory added to a stage already set.

interactive relationship with its past, present, and possible future meaning, and with the other words, meanings and thoughts contained in an utterance.”³⁹ To understand an utterance—to give meaning to it—is to dive into its web of interactive relationalities.

The focal means of developing this theory stems from linguistics. While much of Bakhtin’s work became influential in the field of literary criticism, he began as a classicist, which, at the time, meant membership in a field inundated by German philology.⁴⁰ As Michael Holquist explains, “Bakhtin is constantly working with what is emerging as the central preoccupation of [his] time—language.”⁴¹ Echoing Saussurean semiotics, Bakhtin assumed that there was no inherent relationship between the things we name and the names we assign them. For instance, there is no inherent relationship between the letters T-R-E-E and the arborous plant under which my three-year-old dog insists on storing his favorite toys.⁴²

Bakhtin’s understanding of language is multiform. On the one hand, he regards it as tool through which humans create themselves, each other, and their surroundings. On the other hand, he views it as that which is constructed, manipulated, and used differently depending upon the person and/or circumstance. Bakhtin writes:

³⁹ David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions: A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 43.

⁴⁰ Toward the beginning of his career, Bakhtin actually thought more of himself as a philosopher than a literary critic. Michael Holquist, “Introduction,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), xvi and xxiii.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴² Rather than utilizing Saussurean semiotics to read with a structural objectivism, Bakhtin, as explained in more detail below, views all utterances as inherently multivocal and unstable. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1916]).

At any given moment...a language is stratified not only into dialects in the strict sense of the word (i.e., dialects that are set off according to formal linguistic [especially phonetic] markers), but is...stratified as well into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc. This stratification and diversity of speech will spread wider and penetrate even deeper levels so long as a language is alive and still into the process of becoming.⁴³

In this way, discourse—whether a living speech-act or a conversation taking place within a text—is first and foremost social. It is “a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest abstract meaning.”⁴⁴

How does discourse for Bakhtin perform and/or initiate social functions? The answer is: in every way. In Bakhtin’s view, any given utterance—whether from a live speech-act or literary work—carries with it an infinite number of cultural cues and syntactical scripts that make sense only when put into conversation with those cues and scripts. These utterances, in turn, shape the social world in which they are contextualized.

⁴³ Quoted by Holquist, “Introduction,” xix.

⁴⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259. The social implications of Bakhtin’s work should not be overlooked. For even though Bakhtin theorized concepts that, in large part, apply to his understanding of literature—and in particular the novel—his theories apply first and foremost to the interconnected relationships between self, other, and larger social constructs more generally. As Graham Allen explains, there is “[n]o word or utterance from [Bakhtin’s] perspective [that] is ever neutral.” Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 18. In fact, it is only after Bakhtin recognizes a text’s or novel’s social-semantic components—the living discourses surrounding the author(s), character(s), and words themselves—that he analyzes its story. As Bakhtin himself expounds, “[The] internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the *indispensable prerequisite* for the novel as a genre.” Emphasis mine, Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263. For reasons such as this, Ken Hirschkop advises that “[t]he social functions that discourse performs, and the practical effects it initiates, *should* be the object of our inquiry.” Emphasis mine. Quoted by Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, 36.

We use them “to not just represent reality, but to constitute it and construct it.”⁴⁵

Utterances create worlds, and worlds create utterances.

At the same time, however, there is no direct relationship—no one-to-one set of meanings—of the words that float between a given speaker and listener; author and character; story and reader, etc. Even the sound of one’s voice can generate multiple and multivalent understandings pertaining to multiple and multivalent ideas, leading to multidimensional interpretations. Holquist explains:

Implicit in all this is the notion that all transcription systems—including the speaking voice in a living utterance—are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey. My voice gives the illusion of unity to what I say; I am, in fact, constantly expressing a plenitude of meanings, some intended, others of which I am unaware.⁴⁶

The same goes for an author and a text. The idea of authorial intent gives the illusion of unity, as does the seeming stability of words on a page. Any form of discourse—whether living or otherwise—constantly carries with it a complex web of textual and contextual associations that escape any one-to-one system of meaning. While an utterance “requires a context and structure in order to communicate meaning,”⁴⁷ that context and structure is complex, non-homogenous, and multivalent. According to Bakhtin, texts that intentionally set out to undermine monologic discourse—discourse that “attempts to be the only and final word”—represent a more sophisticated and liberating form of discourse.⁴⁸

Certain terms were developed by Bakhtin as a response to this overarching

⁴⁵ Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” 5.

⁴⁶ Holquist, “Introduction,” xx.

⁴⁷ Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

worldview, the most encompassing of which is *dialogism*.⁴⁹ Dialogism, broadly speaking, refers to this notion that every utterance is relational and in constant dialogue with other utterances. David M. Valeta summarizes:

[U]tterances are, in complex ways, always responses to other utterances. Hence, the most appropriate context for the interpretation of a text is the socially determined ideological context that birthed its creation... . [N]onetheless, the rich social diversity in which an utterance is formed encourages the reader to be open and aware of multiple meanings in a given text.⁵⁰

Valeta explains further that, even if we can coherently unearth some of the discursive formations “birthing” an utterance, so to speak, the discursivities discovered are not monological. As Allen puts it, “The word in language is [always at least] half someone else’s [i.e., *double-voiced*].”⁵¹ Even when a text attempts to “deny the dialogic nature of existence and attempt to be the only and final word,”⁵² it is “always already permeated with traces of other words, other uses.”⁵³ In this way, all utterances are also *unfinalizable*. A story’s ending is only seemingly an ending. An Empire’s authority is only seemingly absolute. They are never actually fixed, but rather infer/imply/intersect with a complex web of infinite dialogism, which can, in turn, be subverted by that very dialogism.

⁴⁹ Related terms include hybridity, polyglossia, and heteroglossia. To define the terms briefly: *Hybridity* refers to the idea that there is a mixing of multiple linguistic referents—a double-voicedness—within a single utterance. Rather than focus more largely on the mixture of multiple and even conflicting cultural cues (e.g., center vs. periphery, à la Bhabha), Bakhtin examines such cues linguistically. This is not to say, however, that Bakhtin’s notion of hybridity does not bleed into Bhabha’s own theories, as language in and of itself calls attention to larger cultural scripts. In a similar vein, *polyglossia* refers to the notion that an utterance can invoke two national language systems simultaneously. And, on a slightly larger scale, *heteroglossia* refers to the idea that any utterance will bear a different meaning depending upon the speaker, listener, socio-political conditions, etc. that are set at/in the particular time and space the utterance is made/heard.

⁵⁰ Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 45.

⁵¹ Allen, *Intertextuality*, 28. On double-voicedness, see footnote 49.

⁵² Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 45.

⁵³ Allen, *Intertextuality*, 28.

“Because empires and authoritarian regimes attempt to control speech and thought through the use of the monolog, all instances of dialogism in literature serve to undermine controlling authorities and voices.”⁵⁴ In this way, utterances not only gain meaning contextually, but also signify *beyond* word/phrase/speech to contribute *to* the productions of knowledge⁵⁵—to contribute *to* the discursive contextualities—in which utterances gain meaning.

Dialogism and Intertextuality

These concepts are akin to Julia Kristeva’s poststructuralist conception of intertextuality, a term employed to “disrupt notions of stable meaning” within and across texts.⁵⁶ Utilizing Bakhtinian theory in her own work, Kristeva writes that, “Whatever the semantic content of a text, its condition as a signifying practice presupposes the existence of other discourses... . This is to say that every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it.”⁵⁷ This does not negate entirely a text’s situatedness, however. Again, texts come to life via social contextualization, whatever that may be. Peter D. Miscall writes:

From the perspective of intertextuality, textual authority and status are always in question since texts are interdependent and use each other. No text is an island. Displacement and decentering, rather than replacement and chaos, are two terms and concepts that attempt to express the questioning of authority and status and not the complete loss of either. The text is not undone and replaced. It may have moved elsewhere but it is still somewhere. It does not disappear. To destroy a

⁵⁴ Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 45.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 92-102.

⁵⁶ Allen, *Intertextuality*, 3.

⁵⁷ Kristeva, cited and translated by Jonathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2002), 105. See also Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64–91.

text's center is to reduce it to chaos; to decenter it is to move the center elsewhere, an elsewhere that is no longer an absolutely controlling and dominating site. Textual authority and status are in question because the original text no longer has the necessary site and center to exercise its previous authority. But the authority and status are "in question" and are not totally removed or denied.⁵⁸

In a similar vein, Bakhtinian dialogism highlights the cross-pollination of meaning betwixt and between discursive formations. While dialogism recognizes the displacement and decentering of utterances, the questions of authority, status, and situatedness are at the same time "not totally removed or denied." Where Kristeva and Bakhtin differ, however, is in their focus. While Bakhtin considers *specific* historical, cultural, and social encounters interacting within the dialogic encounter, Kristeva utilizes more general terms, such as "text" and "intertext," in favor of a more unstable textual model. For this reason, some scholars have questioned whether Kristeva implements Bakhtinian theory into her semiotic construct appropriately. She seems to lose, according to Simon Dentith, the importance of the "historical location" of the "dialogic encounter."⁵⁹

Despite this scholarly quandary, Kristeva does share with Bakhtin "an insistence that texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed."⁶⁰ In other words, while there is a specificity in an utterance's social situatedness for Bakhtin, the social situatedness is part of a more abstract textual-intertextual signifying system in a Kristevan model. In the exegetical chapters to follow, I use both Bakhtinian dialogism and Kristevan intertextuality to highlight the interactions between Revelation and other texts. I privilege dialogism, however, due to my particular interest in and emphasis upon the socio-historical milieu in which Revelation was

⁵⁸ Peter D. Miscall, "Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 45.

⁵⁹ Quoted by Allen, *Intertextuality*, 56–57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

written, the traumatic ramifications of Empire upon its implied author and community, and my reading of the text's own Jewish-Greco-Roman situatedness.

There is a certain historical reliability to a dialogical preference. As Andrew Jacobs explains, the Roman world was a product *of* cultural hybridization, a cultural effect *of* various dialogical associations; none more pervasive as its relationship to Greece:

Greek language and literature became the cultural spoils of Rome, but were never fully internalized—that is, Greek culture had to remain legibly “Greek” in order to retain value within the logic of Rome’s empire. At the same time, Romanness—defined through cultural domination—exists only by virtue of the legible Greekness within... . To be Roman, in this sense, is to possess Greece, maintaining its discrete otherness within.⁶¹

Austin Busch has also recognized the historicity of biblical dialogical analysis. In his study, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” Busch argues that ancient authors were trained in the art of dialogical analysis and intertextual writing—of “possession,” as Jacobs would have it. “By stressing literary imitation, emulation, and various forms of rewriting, Greco-Roman rhetorical training encouraged writers to foster radically revisionary relationships to earlier writing.”⁶² Known as *paraphrasis*, rhetoricians were trained to revise, transform, improve—*indeed dialogue with*—other literary texts, genres, themes, and styles. Literary dialogism was “ubiquitous” in the ancient Greco-Roman world, engaging “ultimately [in] an act of assimilative amalgamation rather than cataloging.”⁶³ Quoting Seneca, Busch adds: “We too ought to

⁶¹ Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 9.

⁶² Austin Busch, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

imitate these bees... . [W]e are out to conflate the various things we have extracted...so that it may still appear to be something other than its source, even if from where it was obtained will be apparent” (*Ep.* 84.5).⁶⁴

Revelation’s extraction of Jewish and Greco-Roman texts is perhaps most evident in its wild mixing of Jewish scriptural and Greek mythological elements in its tale of the woman clothed with the Sun in Rev. 12 (see Chapter One). But as Busch and Seneca point out, intertextualities can be minimalist and difficult to identify. Revelation’s use of humor is at times dependent on a more subtle dialogism—a dialogism that includes broad literary and cultural resonances without direct citation or quotation—but that nevertheless maintains a similar form and style to those of its Jewish and Greco-Roman intertexts. Even if these subtleties are only referential for the modern reader, their/this referentiality indicates in and of itself a framework worth considering, all the more so when we are reading an ancient text whose author and audience would have been particularly attuned to such literary devices/linguistic modalities/semiotic complexes. Busch continues:

[W]e must conclude that [ancient writers and readers] would have been far more sensitive to subtle invocations of pagan Greek texts than most readers are today. If a plausible case can be made for even faint echoes of these writings in New Testament narratives, and if it can be demonstrated that their recognition deepens our understanding of the texts in which they appear, we ought to acknowledge that we have belatedly hit upon a semiotic complex that largely ceased to be recognized.⁶⁵

A dialogical reading thus does not preclude a culturally or historically sensitive reading of the text, but rather supports the historical-critical project while allowing for/highlighting (textual) fluidity and instability.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶⁵ Busch, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” 67.

Postcolonial Dialogics

Like postcolonial criticism, postcolonial dialogics is a “critical sensibility acutely attuned to a specific range of interrelated historical and textual phenomena,”⁶⁶ emphasizing both the postcoloniality of dialogical utterance and the dialogism of any postcolonial utterance. This includes phenomena related to Empire, colonialism, and imperialism, as well as the layers of dialogical intersections therein. As Burrus explains in her own work on Bhabha and Bakhtin, a dialogical reading of the postcolonial condition recognizes “a ‘polyglot consciousness’ resulting from *layered* histories of conquest and colonization that produce complex intersections of culture.”⁶⁷ A postcolonial dialogical reading practice thus leaves room to “*think beyond* storytelling as autonomous individuals speaking to their audiences”⁶⁸ while at the same time *recognizing* “postcolonialism’s eponymous focus on historical, political, and socio-economic factors in processes of colonization and decolonization.”⁶⁹ This model proves especially applicable to the book of Revelation, which is often read as: 1) a response to colonial imperialism; and 2) a text that encompasses a wild amalgamation of ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman intertexts.⁷⁰

While others have also found it beneficial to integrate postcolonial hermeneutics and Bakhtinian dialogics (as evidenced in Burrus’ claims above), I have attempted to offer a more thorough explication of the commonalities between the two and to set up a comprehensive exegesis that applies both. Instead of relying, like Bhabha, on Green’s

⁶⁶ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 7.

⁶⁷ Burrus, “The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles,” 147. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” 18. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ Irene Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 3 (July 2011): 273.

⁷⁰ See Introduction on genre and chapter one on Revelation’s relations to Judaism and Greco-Romanness.

stairwell metaphor to describe solely the fluidity of power within and between various colonizer/colonized groups, I consider Bakhtin's theorizing of utterance to be of greater benefit when interpreting a text such as Revelation, as it can be used to better describe both the *multiple* networks of textuality that operate in and around the "histories of conquest and colonization,"⁷¹ as well as the ways in which these textualities *also always already* are produced by and write back to their social worlds.

Rather than one stairwell, a dialogical approach to storytelling identifies many pathways in constant motion, which move up and down, side to side, pathways that spiral and even slide. As Bakhtin himself explains, even seemingly monological storytelling is, like language, unstable; stories dialogue with other texts and contexts in unforeseen and sometimes unrecognizable ways. A postcolonial focus on a dialogical network of cultural textuality is thus reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldúa's famous lines:

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture and into another,
Because I am in *all* cultures at the same time.⁷²

Like Anzaldúa's theory of the *mestiza*, a postcolonial dialogical framework highlights a confluence of cultural, linguistic, ideological, racial, psychological, and economic (the list can go on) factors that not only play into one's personal and collective consciousness, but that are also expressed in and through—with or without intent—the stories that s/he tells.

Utilizing Bakhtinian theory alongside a postcolonial hermeneutic provides another venue and vehicle by which to discuss these walkways—to talk about

⁷¹ Burrus, "The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles," 147.

⁷² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1987). Emphasis mine.

Revelation's multidirectional hybridities and "gestures of communication"⁷³—with clear vocabulary and theoretical sophistication. Even though Revelation is typically read as an anti-Roman text, it also carries with it a discursive heritage of Greco-Romanness and also of Jewishness (e.g., Jewish storytelling and repeated Jewish imperial subjugation); in turn, these layered discursivities bleed into conversations pertaining to the construction of Self and Other, imperial introjection, ambivalent attraction-repulsion toward multiple assemblages—including those of the in-group—and other cultural-linguistic intertextualities.⁷⁴ A postcolonial dialogical reading of Revelation assumes the existence of multiple "cultural-linguistic heritages"⁷⁵—both the recognizable and the unrecognizable—but focuses on the ways in which they function in and around, and write back to, colonialism and (seemingly monological) systems of imperial oppression.

In the chapters to follow, I appeal to the historicity of Jewish imperial subjugation during the dominance of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean⁷⁶ and incorporate ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman utterances of humor as Revelation's humor-based intertexts. The coherence of my reading will, I hope, be found in the following conclusions:

1. Revelation's humor is dialogically associated with ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman comic forms, which
2. are used as modes of opposition and repair in the face of imperial trauma, and are also implemented as a means by which to engage in a *post*-colonial vision, which

⁷³ Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," 18.

⁷⁴ For more on intra-communal debate in a colonial context, see chapter three.

⁷⁵ Burrus, "The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles," 147.

⁷⁶ This will be paired with narrative/communal postmemories of other imperial subjection; see "Trauma Theory" below.

3. inevitably attaches back onto the text, thereby ultimately making Revelation the unwitting butt of its own joke.

In order to further set the stage for this reading, an overview of trauma theory and humor theory is first needed.

Trauma Theory

As noted in the previous chapter, the apocalypse genre is often associated with literature of the dejected. To quote Harry Maier once more, “apocalypses generally are composed against a backdrop of human suffering.”⁷⁷ However, while scholars are in broad-based agreement that Revelation responds to communal hardship—trauma, even⁷⁸—I have yet to find a thoroughgoing reading of the text through the lens of trauma theory. In order to advocate for a trauma reading of Revelation, I will first provide a basic overview of trauma definitions and theories, focusing in large part on communal trauma, which will then be followed by an explanation of its relations to postcolonial contexts, including the book of Revelation, and biblical humor.

Theoretical Starting Points

Suffering of the traumatized is typically marked by an erosion of personal or collective self-states.⁷⁹ According to Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, for example, trauma is

⁷⁷ Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), xii.

⁷⁸ See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 99–107; and David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 239. Maier also argues in *Apocalypse Recalled* (15) that the trauma evoked throughout Revelation gives voice to other traumatic events.

⁷⁹ For more of self-states, see Philip M. Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces: Essays on Clinical Process Trauma and Dissociation* (New York, NY, and London, UK: Psychology Press, 2001), 12–13. See also footnote 108 on dissociation.

signified in the shattered assumption that the world is safe,⁸⁰ and that those around us will always be “honest and reliable.”⁸¹ Sociologist Kai Erikson has argued similarly, writing that communal trauma “is a form of shock...a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.”⁸² Or as sociologist Jeffrey Alexander explains it, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”⁸³

Based on the nature of its impact, trauma often leaves survivors with feelings of lost control and vulnerability.⁸⁴ Regardless of whether a survivor remembers the trauma

⁸⁰ This theory is discussed throughout her book, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸² Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 154.

⁸³ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

⁸⁴ Traumatized persons can also live in a paradoxical state of sensitivity, as explosive reactions can be paired regularly with a “numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm.” Kai T. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 184. This heightened state of sensitivity can stem from the traumatic event(s) itself. As Judith Herman writes: “The ordinary human response to [trauma] is a complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both mind and body. [Trauma] initially arouses the sympathetic nervous system, causing the person in danger to feel an adrenalin rush and go into a state of alert. Threat also concentrates a person’s attention on the immediate situation.” Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 34. Studies on memory similarly indicate that the brain remembers events more clearly when they are experienced under stress or anxiety. “Stress exposure results in alterations in the laying down of memory in normal human subjects. Certain events that are surprising and consequential (emotionally charged) lead to an enhancement of

in great detail or suppresses the memory of it—“it” being a singular event or traumatic impacts occurring over time—she can become, as Erikson explains, “stripped of the ability to screen out signs of peril...the world [becomes] a place of unremitting danger.”⁸⁵ Once trauma makes its impact, it “blows apart”⁸⁶ one’s understanding of the world and one’s place in it, making it that much more difficult for the trauma to be effectively “grasped by the conscious mind.”⁸⁷ To use the words of psychiatrist Judith Herman, traumatic events are such “violations of the social compact” that they become “unspeakable.”⁸⁸ The brain cannot put *words* to what has happened, because it cannot make *sense* of what has happened.

Many survivors allude to this sensation in their own storytelling attempts. As Elie Wiesel writes in the preface of *Night*:

Convinced that this period in history [the Holocaust] would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but

memory for personal circumstances surrounding the event.” Douglas J. Bremner, “Traumatic Memories Lost and Found: Can Lost Memories of Abuse Be Found in the Brain?,” in *Trauma and Memory*, ed. Linda Williams and Victoria L. Banyard (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 218. When persons experience something traumatic, the brain associates that event with feelings of alertness. It tells the traumatized to avoid, if possible, the circumstances leading to the trauma. Of course, avoidance is not always possible, and trauma can hit people in unexpected and unforeseen ways.

⁸⁵ Kai T. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 195.

⁸⁶ Erikson writes further that trauma “is the result of a blow from the outside. When there is no blow, there is no trauma.” Erikson, *Everything In Its Path*, 254. See also Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 183.

⁸⁷ Lindsey Moore and Ahmad Qabaha, “Chronic Trauma, (Post)colonial Chronotopes and Palestinian Lives: Omar Rombert Hamilton’s *Though I Know the River Is Dry*/Ma’a Anni A’rif Anna Al-Nahr Qad Jaf,” in *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance*, ed. Abigail Ward (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18.

⁸⁸ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

in those times, they meant something else. Writing in my mother tongue—at that point close to extinction—I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure of other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what exactly was “it”?⁸⁹

In short, because there is no story with which to compare it, no language with which to describe it, and no means by which to absorb it, trauma often resists assimilating into narrative—whether personal or otherwise.

Such shattering linguistic effects of trauma, however, do not necessarily end in the total, immutable deconstruction of one’s personal or collective consciousness.

“[Such] atrocities refuse to be buried.”⁹⁰ The brain becomes “possessed,” as Cathy Caruth puts it, “by [the traumatic] image or event.”⁹¹ Such possessiveness often hits the traumatized belatedly and unexpectedly—typically via flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, numbing, violent enactments, or other disruptive experiences⁹²—leading theorists to conclude that “traumatic symptoms have a tendency to *become disconnected from their source* and to take on a life of their own.”⁹³ In fact, it is precisely trauma’s deconstructive tendencies that leaves Caruth questioning the validity of traumatic recall

⁸⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2006), viii–ix.

⁹⁰ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2.

⁹¹ Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” Part 1, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

⁹² Some survivors of trauma may leave or numb their bodies (see footnote 108 on dissociation) to such a degree that the trauma becomes hidden from the conscious mind. If this is the case, later triggers and cues may be confusing and incomprehensible. Others still may remember the trauma entirely, but dissociate from the emotions accompanying it. As Herman explains, “The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why.” Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association named this array of disruptive responses to trauma “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” otherwise known as PTSD.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis mine.

experiences over others. For even though trauma erodes a process of signification, traumatized persons can experience a sense of “realness” in their unprocessed flashbacks, hallucinations, and/or other dissociative responses. Caruth thus writes that “the transformation of trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.”⁹⁴

Despite what some may consider the beauty of a traumatized person’s raw and authentic affect, recovery nevertheless requires connections to be made and stories to be told.⁹⁵ As Herman expounds, “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections.”⁹⁶ Because of this, she names owned reconstruction an integral part of the recovery process.⁹⁷ “[The traumatized] must be the author and arbiter of her own story.”⁹⁸ This means putting words to the flashbacks, to the dreams, hallucinations, enactments, or seemingly uncharacteristic thoughts and actions that haunt the traumatized. By putting words to these experiences, the traumatized is given a vehicle by which to create a narrative, offering her the opportunity both to process the event itself and to construct newly integrated self-states (indeed, newly constructed versions of her very Self). By narrativizing her trauma, she may be able to create a narrative that puts back together the pieces of herself that have fallen, including the ones that have torn apart her or her

⁹⁴ Caruth, “Introduction,” Part 2, 153.

⁹⁵ Caruth herself agrees. See *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

community's states of consciousness.

In a similar sense, Jeffrey Alexander argues that, in order for a massive disruption to be rendered traumatic for the society, a narrative “claim” must be made and accepted by the larger community.⁹⁹ “The cultural construction of trauma begins with [people’s] claim[s]”¹⁰⁰ and, if they are “successful, the members of [the] originating collectivity become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event.”¹⁰¹ While claims can also be made without such conscious effort—as Erikson notes, communal trauma can already “damage the connectivity between group members and/or contribute to a new communal mood, discourse, and ethos” at the moment of impact¹⁰²—we will find that this notion of “claiming” is particularly important for survivors of imperial trauma, as the colonized’s claiming of a communal past and present becomes key to surviving the imperial transcript through which her/his communal past and present has been deemed “Other than.”

⁹⁹ See Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 17. According to Alexander, claim makers—or what he calls “carrier groups”—can consist of religious clergy, political leaders, or even marginalized members of the wounded society. Considering the discursive influence of computer-mediated networking in many communities today, we might add social media users to this list of potential—and in many instances powerful—claim makers as well. The power distribution among these groups, however, does “affect how trauma is or is not represented in a culture.” Shelly A. Wiechelt and Jan Gryczynski, “Cultural and Historical Trauma Among Native Americans,” in *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research*, ed. Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandell (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012), 197. Sometimes carriers can be “instigators” of further trauma and traumatic recall (e.g. not accepting a claim or altering a claim, etc). *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 190.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that cultural trauma impacts a survivor “in his or her singularity *and* as a member of wider communities,”¹⁰³ and that the determination of an event *as* traumatic is subjective.¹⁰⁴ Whereas one community member may perceive a collective/communal event to have been traumatic and experience belated traumatic effects (what Erikson calls an “enduring state of mind”¹⁰⁵), another may not.

Simply experiencing an event such as those described in the SDM-IV-TR...does not mean that an individual [or collectivity] will perceive the event as being traumatic or experience traumatic effects. Research suggests that it is likely that an interaction between the pretrauma characteristics of the individual, the nature and severity of the traumatic event, the individual’s perception of the event, and posttrauma experiences interact in ways that determine the nature and severity of traumatic reactions to the event or lack thereof.¹⁰⁶

For these reasons, trauma therapists often concede that, while there are “universal, inevitable long term consequences” of trauma, they must still “remain open to the *singularity* of [traumatic] experiences, the different ways in which individuals *and* cultures cope in the throes of social violence, and the unpredictable ways in which mourning memory and...transmission make their appearance.”¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, we must remain open to the singularity of narrative formations. Creating a narrative claim ranges from the personal—that is, a member of the community creating a personal

¹⁰³ Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 9. Emphasis mine. While Durrant here is speaking of the postcolonial narrative and the singular/communal aspects of readers, his associations with the postcolonial narrative and trauma lead me to extrapolate his theory onto the reception of trauma proper.

¹⁰⁴ See chapter one, footnote 167 and conversation therein.

¹⁰⁵ Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 185.

¹⁰⁶ Wiechelt and Gryczynski, “Cultural and Historical Trauma Among Native Americans,” 193.

¹⁰⁷ Chana Ullman, “Introduction to Panel: Dissociation, Enactment and Collective Trauma: The Role of Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 24, no. 4 (August 7, 2014): 443.

narrative account of the communal trauma experienced—to the communal. Revelation is one text—one claim—amidst a range of colonial responses that bear witness to imperialism.

In sum, narrative reconstructions/responses/mournings of trauma leave room for the traumatized not only to better understand the trauma proper, but also to establish a present and future less controlled by harmful dissociative self-states,¹⁰⁸ traumatic recall, and the dominating scripts perpetuating the trauma in the first place. By naming, shaping, and giving words to traumatic experiences, storytelling becomes an act of processing—an act that seeks to make sense of and survive the many haunting associations and dissociations that, paradoxically, signify events which exceed categorized signification.

The Postcoloniality of Trauma

Social psychology and literary theorists have started to investigate the psychosocial effects of colonial power. According to clinical psychologist and social theorist Ashis Nandy, for example, colonialism is, in and of itself, “a psychological state.”¹⁰⁹ Colonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon writes similarly that it creates a “massive psychoexistential complex.”¹¹⁰ Thus, Abigail Ward writes:

¹⁰⁸ Dissociation refers to double consciousness with the self. While we all operate in dissociative states to varying degrees—we zone out, we daydream, we perform one version ourselves for families and another for colleagues, etc.—dissociation becomes problematic and pathological for the traumatized, in that it is typically accompanied by a lack of integrated self-states. As psychoanalyst Phillip Bromberg explains, “It becomes pathological to the degree that it proactively limits and often forecloses one’s ability to hold and reflect upon the different states of mind within a single experience of ‘me-ness.’” Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted by Abigail Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Post/Coloniality and Subjectivity, 33, no. 3 (August 2013): 172.

¹¹⁰ Quoted by Ward, *Ibid.*, 174.

The application of psychology to the study of postcolonialism offers a deeper understanding of the effects of the psyche of not only those who experienced colonial traumas (including slavery and indenture, forced migration, and colonization) and their decedants but also those connected to more recent 20th- and 21st-century sites of trauma in the postcolonial worlds, such as natural disasters, wars, genocides, asylum, and displacement.¹¹¹

Ward is not alone in her contentions. Scholarship on cultural trauma and postcolonial studies are more often recognizing racism, colonization, and imperial violence as traumatic experiences that have lasting psycho-social effects. As Milena Bubenechik explains, “[T]he colonial situation itself is inherently traumatizing and has pathological consequences on the psyche of the colonized.”¹¹²

Despite these insights, however, there remains a lack of scholarly consensus concerning the relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial studies. As Irene Visser puts it, the question remains “whether trauma theory can be effectively ‘postcolonialized’ in the sense of being usefully conjoined with or integrated into postcolonial literary studies.”¹¹³ The most commonly noted issue in this regard is the Western focus of trauma theory and PTSD diagnoses. For example, whereas the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* focuses on belated trauma systems such as dissociations, flashbacks, or self-disruptive behaviors that develop in response to traumatic occurrences, it does not name experiences of racism or colonization as psychological traumas.¹¹⁴ Even though trauma studies situates itself within an ethical

¹¹¹ Ibid., 171.

¹¹² Milena Bubenechik, *The Trauma of Colonial Condition: In Nervous Conditions and Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Hamburg, Germany: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013), 3.

¹¹³ Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” 270.

¹¹⁴ See Lisa B. Spanierman and V. Paul Poteat, “Moving Beyond Complacency to Commitment: Multicultural Research in Counseling Psychology,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 33, no. 4 (July 1, 2005): 514.

conversation—“bridging” worlds cross-culturally, as Cathy Caruth would have it¹¹⁵—the theory itself is so grounded in a Euro-American context that, “instead of promoting solidarity between different cultures, trauma studies risks producing the very opposite effect as a result of this one-sided focus.”¹¹⁶ Even if the *DSM* named colonization and imperialism as a trauma cause, it would be difficult to diagnose non-Western subjects with its PTSD model. As Stef Craps points out, the manual’s individualistic focus may “be at odds with the local culture.”¹¹⁷ Or as David Carr writes, “many non-Western societies lack the mind-body dichotomy so prominent across much of Western culture. When they discuss intense suffering, it is generally located in a part of the body. There is no exclusively ‘mental trauma.’”¹¹⁸

There are other issues, too. While trauma theory focuses on that which is unnarratable, postcolonial traumas are “historically concrete, knowable, and [have an] external causation.”¹¹⁹ For this reason, Visser writes that trauma theory’s “lack of historical particularity sits uneasily with postcolonialism’s eponymous focus on historical, political, and socio-economic factors in processes of colonization and decolonization.”¹²⁰

Visser’s hesitations are grounded in Freudian conceptions of trauma, mourning, and melancholia. In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argued that

¹¹⁵ Quotation by Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, who summarize Caruth in “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (Spring 2008): 1.

¹¹⁶ Craps and Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” 2.

¹¹⁷ Stef Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,” in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 50.

¹¹⁸ Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 268.

¹¹⁹ Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” 273.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

mourning works to forget the ceaseless remembering of melancholia—forget the histories—which as Abigail Ward writes, “has proved highly fertile to those working in trauma studies.”¹²¹ According to postcolonial trauma theorist Sam Durrant, in fact, the major difference between postcolonial narrative and therapies of trauma lies precisely in the relationship between these two terms. Whereas psychoanalysis, on Durrant’s reading, seeks to rid one of the “painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity”¹²² that Freud associates with posttraumatic melancholia, postcolonial narrative seeks to live with them.¹²³ In response to Freud’s conceptions, Visser writes similarly that the future of postcolonial trauma theory may need to “depart” from Freudian psychoanalysis in order to “invite further expansion as well as emendation to enable an opening towards non-western, non-Eurocentric models of psychic disorder and of reception and reading processes.”¹²⁴ For in addition to wanting to live with traumatic affect, postcolonial narrative seeks to unhinge self/other bifurcations and stereotypes, such as the very terms Freud uses to describe the melancholic state. “That the notion of a melancholic, chronically *weakened*, socially *divided* postcolonial collective racial identity is rejected so vigorously may be because it

¹²¹ Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” 173.

¹²² Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 244.

¹²³ See Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 8-9. Despite the unnarratability of postcolonial trauma, he, akin to Herman, writes that “Nevertheless ... ‘some kind of tomorrow’ is contingent on being able to transform a surplus of yesterdays if not into a conventional historical narrative, then at least into *some kind of story*.” Emphasis in the original. *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁴ Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” 280.

is reminiscent of Eurocentric Orientalist notions critically scrutinized in postcolonial studies since the 1970s.”¹²⁵

Nevertheless, despite these issues, many postcolonial literary theorists have continued “to give the suffering engendered by colonial oppression its ‘traumatic due.’”¹²⁶ In so doing, scholars have “suggested theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation.”¹²⁷ According to Bubenechik, for example, while traditional trauma theories often focus “on a single shocking and personally upsetting event which causes a psychopathology referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the victims...the traumatising effects of colonialism...encompas[s] a series of traumas...a continuous accumulation and enhancement of traumatic stressors.”¹²⁸ According to Leela Gandhi, the results of colonial systems of oppression—which, she adds, are “grotesquely unfair”¹²⁹—demand “an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past.”¹³⁰ Postcolonial theory must therefore “commi[t] itself to a complex project of historical and psychological ‘recovery.’”¹³¹

I find Durrant’s understanding of colonial traumatization to be particularly helpful

¹²⁵ Ibid., 277. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁶ Craps and Buelens, “Introduction,” 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Bubenechik, *The Trauma of Colonial Condition*, 4.

¹²⁹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7. Here, she is quoting Edward W. Said. See Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 294.

¹³⁰ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 8.

¹³¹ Ibid. See also David Lloyd, who writes in conversation with Gandhi, “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 214.

in this regard. On his reading, colonial trauma occurs primarily in the form of “negat[ing] the humanity of the Other.”¹³² For example, the imperialist expansion of the Nazi regime, as well as the racialized sentiments behind it, were fueled by “the Forgetting of Jewish humanity.”¹³³ So too, he explains, were the “monstrous histories of slavery [and] colonialism.”¹³⁴ “At the heart of [these] histories...[is] an act of exclusion that has ‘pathological’ consequences precisely because it introduces an internal exception into the category of the human.”¹³⁵ Through various imperial power systems, including war, racism, displacement, slavery, subalternity, etc., subjects become objects. Selves become Others. And Others become lost.

Trauma Under Rome

Colonized subjects of Rome lost their humanity through a variety of violent and oppressive means. As David S. Potter has shown, Rome, by and large, functioned as violence personified, merely coated in the “façade of civil government.”¹³⁶ He writes, “Rome’s subjects would never forget that its army was there even as it transformed itself from a symbol of conquest to one of protection.”¹³⁷ In a similar vein, Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig have argued that “many subjects under the Romans lived with chronic worry of the often haphazard violence perpetrated by ruling authorities.”¹³⁸ The Roman Empire,

¹³² Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 4.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ David S. Potter, “Introduction,” in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter and David J. Mattingly, New and expanded (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig, *Re-Reading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 151.

put simply, was run by an oligarchical, tyrannical, and power-driven system that devalued the lives and livelihood of the many in favor of the few. If persons did not abide by Roman standards, they could be executed in the streets and theaters and gardens and pools as a form of public entertainment and imperial subjugation. Potter adds:

The [Roman] governor was himself in constant motion, traveling from district to district within his province to hold court [against rivals of the State]. He...brought the reality of Roman power before the eyes of Rome's subjects with special force. Trials were public events, and the torture of defendants in criminal cases was routine and did not take place in a dungeon, removed from public view.¹³⁹

Rome's forgetting of Jewish humanity took form in a number of oppressive developments, not the least of which was an encoded deferment of subjectivity. In addition to postmemories¹⁴⁰ of the Assyrian onslaught, Babylonian captivity, and the reign of Antiochus IV—or, closer to Revelation's own time, mass crucifixion of Jews in Judea in the 1st century CE (including Jesus' crucifixion),¹⁴¹ the anti-Judean riots in Alexandria, Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome, Nero's persecution of Jesus-followers after the fire in 64 CE, the Jewish-Roman wars, Jewish slavery¹⁴² and

¹³⁹ Potter, "Introduction," 10.

¹⁴⁰ See pages 161-163 on transposition and postmemory.

¹⁴¹ Jesus' death provides another example name-calling objectification. Crucified and mocked as "King of the Jews," Jesus was turned into an object primed for Roman public consumption. According to M. A. Screech, gentile viewers likely laughed at Jesus as he hung in anguish on the cross. Quoting the Gospel of Matthew, he exegetes, "He trusts in God! Let him deliver him if he will have him!" Even in the translation [of Matthew 27:43] the sneering laughter comes across like a slap on the face." M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁴² Jews were slaves prior to 70, but likely not for ethnic reasons. Dale Martin writes, "Jewishness itself had little if any relevance for the structures of slavery amongst Jews. Jews both had slaves and freedpersons and were slaves and freedpersons. Slavery among Jews of the Greco-Roman period did not differ from the slave structures of those people among whom Jews lived. The relevant factors for slave structures and the existence of slavery itself were geographical and socio-economic and had little if anything to do with ethnicity or religion." Dale B. Martin, "Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family," in *The*

Hadrian's attempted erasure of Judeanness after 70 CE, reliefs and coinage of Jewish subjugation, etc.—the Roman gaze on Jews often manifested itself in various forms of ridicule and mockery. Even when the Romans permitted Jews to continue their traditions, they still often “had a field day” mocking Jewish traits and customs.¹⁴³ According to Horace, for instance, Jews are “bob-tailed” creatures (1.9.69–70). Contrastingly, Martial writes that a Jew hid his circumcision with a sheath that was “sufficient for the whole tribe of comic actors” (*Epigrams* 7.82). According to Petronius, “a talented Jewish slave...has but two faults: he is circumcised and he snores (never mind that he is cross-eyed)” (*Satyricon* 68.4–8).¹⁴⁴ Juvenal adds that Judea is where pigs get to live to “a ripe old age” (6.159–160).¹⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Plutarch writes that pork must make Jews shrink (*Questionum convivialum* 4.5.2-3). Pliny the Elder remarks that he knows of a river in Judea that runs dry on the Sabbath, thereby proving that “even the rivers rest one day a week.”¹⁴⁶

On Erich Gruen's reading, mockeries such as these are examples of what Jews experienced on a bad day:

Writers scoffed and laughed...But they did not lead to bile, and they did not provoke hostilities. The preserved comments, even in the aftermath of the Revolt, convey mockery rather than malignancy. Jews...did not require protection or

Jewish Family in Antiquity, ed. by Shaye J. D. Cohen (Brown Judaic Studies 289. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). For more on Jewish slavery of Jews, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 2005.

¹⁴³ Gruen, *Diaspora*, 49.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49. For more on these and other comedic representations of Jews, See Gruen, *Diaspora*, 45–53. See also Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA., Los Angeles, CA, and London, UK: University of California Press, 1999), 40–41.

promotion by Gentiles, not even “toleration”—just disregard and detachment. That is what they got. And it was enough.¹⁴⁷

According to Fanon, however, the scoffing at the marginalized can, in and of itself, be a source of trauma. In his now seminal work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon illustrates the means by which joking, heckling, and various sorts of name-calling strip people of their subjectivity; the black man, for instance, “becomes conscious of himself as merely an object ‘in the midst of other objects’”¹⁴⁸ created by white people. Name-calling is not disregard and detachment, but rather, another form of objectification. As Durrant writes on the Holocaust, “What is unrepresentable or unnarratable about the Holocaust is not so much the details of the extermination camps but the Forgetting of Jewish humanity that allowed the Holocaust to take place in the first place.”¹⁴⁹ Jokes, as we will see in more detail below, participate in this form of forgetting.

While Jews in antiquity were given certain privileges—in many instances, far more than colonized slaves or prisoners of Nazi concentration camps—they were nevertheless an ethnic minority group who had to abide by the rules and regulations of the imperial center.¹⁵⁰ On a daily basis, they would have been reminded of their forgotten

¹⁴⁷ Gruen, *Diaspora*, 53.

¹⁴⁸ See Abigail Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” 174. Here she quotes Fanon, 1952/1986, p. 109 Cf. Gruen, *Diaspora*, 53.

¹⁴⁹ Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 5–6.

¹⁵⁰ While Revelation’s author was also a man who could read and write, and therefore someone who occupied a space of certain privilege compared to many of his Jewish counterparts, he still occupied a space of marginalized Otherness. For this reason, I agree with Fanon when he writes that to pretend as if colonization is wiped clean the moment an Other is granted privilege is problematic. As he writes on the recognition of black humanity: “As times changed, we have seen how the Catholic religion justified, then condemned slavery and discrimination....Scientists reluctantly admitted that the Negro was a human being; in vivo and in vitro the Negro was identical to the white man....But I was soon disillusioned.” Prejudice still reigned, and memories of traumas past made the

status. Implied readers of Revelation would have seen “the temples, the theaters, the monumental municipal buildings, crowded with statues...depicting the triumphs of the Roman gods [and emperors].”¹⁵¹ For Jews like them, the depictions “displayed not simply...imperial propaganda but...demonic parod[ies] of God’s truth, picturing rulers like Augustus, Nero, and Tiberius, under whose reign Jesus was crucified, as divinely ordained—by gods whom John loathed as demonic powers.”¹⁵² Moreover, these demonic powers were revealed not just in the content, but also through their impending gaze; you look at them, but they also look at you—triumph over you—and work to position you within an even deeper subalternity. Roman statues, and temples, and theaters, in addition to imperial festivals and ceremonial displays, were “symbolic forms by which the local populace of free men and slaves, townsmen and peasants, reaffirmed their relative positions and their subordination, however they perceived it, to their distant emperor.”¹⁵³ In short, Jewish agency and selfhood was defined by a system that was not their own. And while we may be able to list the various material realities of Jews under Empire, it is

new outlook “too late” for blacks like him. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), 99–100.

I also do not think that we should assume too quickly that marginalized persons who “blend in” somehow had it easy. As Elle Dowd so aptly phrases it, “[T]he horrible thing about ‘passing privilege’ is the closeting, the erasure.” Revelation, like so many texts born out of trauma, articulates a need to be seen. The potential moments in which Jews “passed” and had “privilege” need not—nor should not—closet or erase *ipso facto* the Apocalypse’s own traumatic rhetoric. See also Elle Dowd, “Biphobia and the Pulse Massacre,” Medium (blog post), June 15, 2016, <https://medium.com/@elledowd/biphobia-and-the-pulse-massacre-add1dd9b27be#.5rywj27hv>.

¹⁵¹ Pagels, *Revelations*, 11.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 12–13.

¹⁵³ Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 210.

the forgetting of Jewish humanity that allowed these materialities to take shape in the first place that might be characterized as most “unnarratable” of all.

We see such deferral of subjectivity across systems of oppression. According to James Scott, “With rare, but significant, exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful.”¹⁵⁴ By appealing to the expectations of the powerful—being “who” and “what” and “when” and “why” and “how” the powerful deems fit—the subordinate becomes consumed by, *defined by*, the powerful. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains on patriarchal subjectivities, unless women work *within* the production of narrative, *within* the system deciding what is what should be, they will be “possession[s]” of androcentric and patriarchal constructions of them.¹⁵⁵ Or as Fanon writes on racial constructs, unless systems of racial oppression change, including the voices that control the systems, “the black soul” will continue to be a “construction by white folk.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, unless Revelation’s community of storytellers overturned the Roman power gradient, they, too, would be defined by it. When the Apocalypse was being written, Rome had possession over them. The Roman Empire marked them as being Other than, lesser than, marginalized, an inconsequential colonized body. As a

¹⁵⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁵⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21.

¹⁵⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xviii. Fanon also notes that, when a black man wishes to be white, in that “betterness” has been constructed as whiteness, he says that the first step is to recognize that it is the social structures—not the black man—that needs to change (*Ibid.*, 80).

marginalized, Jewish, Jesus-following subject of Rome, their humanity was in many instances “forgotten.”¹⁵⁷

Narrating the Unnarratable

For this reason, I am particularly drawn to Visser’s postcolonial trauma theorization. Pairing Herman with Caruth, she contends that Herman’s push to speak about the unspeakable—to develop an “organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content”¹⁵⁸—“may hold out a more sustainable perspective for a postcolonial trauma theory, not only because it entails an openness to the structuring of narrativization, but also because it allows a historically and culturally specific approach to trauma studies.”¹⁵⁹ In fact, relational psychoanalytic approaches to storytelling are not far off from Durrant’s view of postcolonial narratology. According to Durrant, while trauma recovery seeks to forget the past, postcolonial narrative works to remember and recall. The latter is “confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform formless into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapacity to recovery history.”¹⁶⁰ It “presents itself as a mode of mourning, as a way of consciously working through history.”¹⁶¹ Relational applications of trauma theory, however, reject the classical Freudian model that to recover is to forget. Many relational theorists even argue that trauma survivors cannot forget—nor should they. Whereas classical trauma theorists contend that historically and culturally focused

¹⁵⁷ See Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 4, 5–6.

¹⁵⁸ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 177.

¹⁵⁹ Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” 274.

¹⁶⁰ Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

work obfuscates the definition of trauma proper (i.e., that which is unnarratable), relationalists work *with* the contradictions (i.e., *with* the histories).¹⁶²

In a relational model of mourning, narratives are created to reshape the past in order to live in a more integrated self-state.¹⁶³ Rather than narrate to *forget* past experiences, storytelling works to consolidate past experiences with new ones. In a relational view, then, it is precisely the integration of past, present, and future that fosters the recovery process. There is no burying of the trauma. Trauma, contra Freud, cannot die. Relation psychotherapists thus encourage their patients to create a prolonged and ongoing dialogue with their trauma, which in effect works to give meaning to the trauma, eliminate intrusive posttraumatic responses, and leave room for survivors to imagine alternative futures and reconcile future needs.¹⁶⁴ In this model, the relationships between the known and unknown, the speakable and unspeakable, and the belated and historical become key to trauma survivorship in both personal and communal realms.

Craps and Buelens, however, raise another interesting point in response to the narrativization of the unnarratable. On their reading, to focus on “the psychologization of

¹⁶² “Contemporary psychoanalysts, particularly those whose theory base is object relations, self psychology, and relational psychoanalysis, have largely abandoned Freud’s psychological model [of mourning]....Several of the new mourning theorists...have each argued that the emphasis on relinquishment has so dominated the psychoanalytic perspective that normal processes of preservation and continuity have been neglected, if not pathologized.” See George Hagman, “Beyond Decathexis: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Understanding and Treatment of Mourning,” in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, ed. Robert A. Neimeyer (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 19–20, 21. He quotes psychologist Ester R. Shapiro, “Grief is resolved through the creation of a loving, growing relationship with the dead that recognizes the new psychological or spiritual (rather than corporeal) dimensions of the relationship.” See *ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁶³ See footnote 108 on dissociation.

¹⁶⁴ See Ron Eyerman, “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 63.

social suffering”—the “gaining [of] linguistic control over [a community member’s] pain”—is not enough, as it “encourages the idea that recovery from the traumas of colonialism is basically a matter of the individual witness.”¹⁶⁵ On their reading, healing from colonial trauma requires reparation of not only the individuals that make up the colonized culture, but also, and perhaps more so, the “wounding political, social, and economic system.”¹⁶⁶ While this point deserves more space in studies that seek to undo the Euro-American individualistic approaches to trauma and recovery, the plights to maintain a sense of self within systems of oppression, and to also *change* systems of oppression, begin with stories of exposure. According to Fanon, in fact, healing requires an affective understanding of Self and Other, which works to repair both the self and the system from which the trauma was generated. On a patient’s desire to be white in response to colonial racial traumatization, he writes:

My patient is suffering from an inferiority complex. His psychic structure is in danger of disintegration. Measures have to be taken to safeguard him and gradually liberate him from the unconscious desire [to be white]... . What emerges is then a need for a combined action on the individual and the group.¹⁶⁷

Fanon goes on to explain that he must help his patient become aware of his unconscious desires—to *narrate* the unnarratable¹⁶⁸—which in turn leads the patient to understand how his desires are integrated within a racial system of oppression. Once his patient understands this connection, Fanon gives him a choice to act: “[O]nce his motives have been identified, my objective will be to enable him to *choose* action...with the real source

¹⁶⁵ Craps and Buelens, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 80.

¹⁶⁸ To “*consciousnessize*” the unconscious, as Fanon puts it (*Ibid.*).

of conflict, i.e. the social structure.”¹⁶⁹ By unpacking the larger story lingering betwixt and between the patient’s unconscious desires, the patient, in turn, can “act along the lines of a change in social structure.”¹⁷⁰

To expand the theory further, we might even recognize Fanon’s explanations as another narrative construction that works to change oppressive social systems. His *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* are considered revolutionary in colonial/decolonization discourse, which have in turn impacted an array of intellectual traditions, liberationist movements, and other revolutionaries, including Malcolm X and members of the Black Panther Party.¹⁷¹ To Craps and Buelens’s point, in other words, storytelling—whether individual or based in collective claims—is a political act and does help expose and reconstitute systems of oppression. They work not only to maintain a sense of self and community, but to *reclaim* and *counter* damaging narratives with narratives of their own. The sub-title of Abigail Ward’s edited volume on postcolonial trauma theory—*memory, narrative, resistance*—works well in this regard, as stories of postcolonial becoming often work both to narrate the memory of, and simultaneously to

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ The power of storytelling on larger social discourse should not go unrecognized. As socio-narratologist Arthur Frank writes, “stories animate human life.” Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3. According to Fewell, they “focus our collective attention, fostering sociality and collaboration (Boyd 2009), which in turn enhances our chances for survival....They allow us, through comparison and contrast, to evaluate our current behaviors and circumstances and to see the world from multiple perspectives, not just in terms of actualities, but also its possibilities.” Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” 10. And on the importance of storytelling for “subaltern cultural forms,” Neil Lazarus writes that narratives, whether put to music, accompanied by dance, performed on stage, or simply read aloud, enable colonized groups to “retain both their traditionality and their autonomy from most forms of [colonial and national] culture.” Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 90.

resist the ideology of, imperial/colonial subjugation. By opposing the colonial project in a way that gives voice to the subjugated, postcolonial storytelling works to create new subjectivities while also validating the affect associated with historical colonization.

From Biblical Trauma to Biblical Humor

In 2013, the Society of Biblical Literature held its first annual session on trauma studies and the Bible, which, among other things, focused on the ways in which “biblical texts may evidence narrative repair following highly traumatic historical events.”¹⁷²

Because trauma theory did not emerge as an area of study until the 20th century, however, scholars have started to question whether it is anachronistic to read the Bible with trauma theory in mind. As David Carr writes, “After all, there was no concept of posttraumatic stress disorder in the biblical period.”¹⁷³

Like postcolonial approaches to biblical narrative, I suggest that biblical texts know trauma’s psycho-social affects. Although not written in the wake of capitalist-based colonial enterprises, they still respond to similar imperial-based systems of oppression. And although not written in the wake of the DSM manual, they still bear witness to the traumatic wounds of repeated colonial subjugation. My work here thus aims to put postcolonial trauma theory into conversation with a more broad-based postcolonial biblical analysis. If postcolonial biblical theorists recognize biblical texts as generating and being generated by imperial-colonial networks, then the issue of imperial and colonial trauma should be part of a postcolonial biblical interpretive agenda.

¹⁷² Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Biblical Lamentations and Singing the Blues,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 553.

¹⁷³ Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 254.

Although he does not engage postcolonial theory, Carr himself takes a similar approach. In his work on biblical trauma, he writes that he is “acutely aware, of course, of differences between ancient Israelite experiences of suffering and contemporary experiences labeled traumatic. Still, humans started experiencing trauma a long time before trauma studies began.”¹⁷⁴ Carr carries this sentiment throughout his 2014 monograph, *Holy Resilience*. When looking to ancient Israelite and early Jewish history, for example, he highlights the repeated devastation that nearly destroyed entire communities. On his reading, the Assyrian conquest, Babylonian captivity, Seleucid onslaught, and Jewish-Roman wars “shattered the identities of whole groups, requiring them to come to new understandings of themselves, understandings now inscribed and fixed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.”¹⁷⁵ In his reading of Lamentations,¹⁷⁶ for example, Carr notes that we find dissociative qualities. By characterizing the fallen Southern Kingdom as gendered female (“the daughter of Zion”) in the wake of Babylonian captivity, the author of Lamentations finds a way for the Babylonian exiles—and in particular the elite, male readership—to disconnect from their pain. “Insofar as women were more vulnerable to trauma in the ancient world (as in the contemporary one), the feminine gender of the Daughter Zion image made that image a particularly powerful expression of the suffering, dissociated ‘self’ of the Babylonian exiles.”¹⁷⁷ Paul too, he writes, was a traumatized apostle. “Imprisoned, whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, in constant anxiety, Paul presents himself...as a model of a suffering

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷⁶ For another trauma-based reading of Lamentations, see Smith-Christopher, “Biblical Lamentations and Singing the Blues.”

¹⁷⁷ Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 80.

individual.”¹⁷⁸ But rather than wallow in his repeated diminishment, he attempted to survive his pain by associating own experiences with Jesus, his messiah, and a fellow sufferer: “Paul, interpreting his own experiences of suffering, came to see the essence of Jesus Christ in one main thing: Jesus’ miraculous transformation of humiliation on the cross into ultimate glory”¹⁷⁹ (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 4:8–11).

Studies on the book of Esther similarly acknowledge, even if indirectly, the text’s traumatic origins. According to Timothy Beal, for example, “The book of Esther is about surviving dead ends: living beyond the end determined for those projected as quintessentially not-self.”¹⁸⁰ Whereas the Jews at the beginning of the narrative are persecuted for their ethnic origins, they respond with a force so strong that their neighboring gentiles eventually revere them in fear of consequential death. In so doing, the text highlights the power of Jewish humor and wit. According to Kathleen O’Connor, “The Persian king and his allies are as farcical as a set of Keystone Kops in a slapstick.”¹⁸¹ Such humorous depiction, she adds, “functions in Esther as a survival tactic of the Jewish community as they face exclusion and genocide in the post-exilic Diaspora.”¹⁸²

In a similar vein, Kotrosits and Taussig argue that Mark’s Gospel “is by turns arresting, tender, and sometimes darkly satirical.”¹⁸³ Written in the midst of the Jewish-

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 191.

¹⁸⁰ Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), 107.

¹⁸¹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Humour, Turnabouts, and Survival in the Book of Esther,” in *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2003), 56.

¹⁸² Ibid., 53.

¹⁸³ Kotrosits and Taussig, *Re-Reading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma*, 3.

Roman War, it “is a story very much in process, perpetually unresolved, and always pointed back to its own complicated retelling.”¹⁸⁴ On their reading, Mark functions as a narrative “bricolage”—a story pieced together by loss, but also animated by a persistence to heal.¹⁸⁵ Although Mark appears in many instances to be a “paranoid narrator”—highlighting everyone’s inability to “get” who Jesus “is or what he means”—he does so in a way that is “inflected with humor, taking a kind of pleasure in irony in a way that often cuts through its angst.”¹⁸⁶ The Gospel in turn “relieves its own paranoid reductions with surprising experiential encounters, healings, and extravagant feasts at unexpected moments.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. David Janzen also reads the Bible for trauma, but rather than recognizing the potentiality of narrative processing and/or repair, he argues that trauma is always unassimilatable, in both theory and in practice. As he writes, it always “resist[s] incorporation into a textual narrative precisely because it resists incorporation into personal narratives.” David Janzen, *The Violent Gift: Trauma’s Subversion of the Deuteronomistic History’s Narrative* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2012), 35. Because of this, Janzen focuses on the unassimilated, subversive qualities of PTSD within biblical texts. In Deuteronomy–2 Kings, for example, he argues that the effects of trauma, such as the effects of exile outlined *ex eventu* in Deut. 28, subvert the master narrative, much like a nightmare, flashback, or hallucination subvert a survivor’s ability to live in cohesive self-states. “As the trauma repeats into or beside the master narrative, it envisions suffering without explanation and punishment for no reason, and so subverts the language of God, justice, punishment, and so on that the master narrative uses to explain and ethicize the exile” (ibid., 62). He writes further: “No conclusions as to history, God, Israel, justice, punishment, and so on are available to trauma, and in the final chapters of Kings, where we might expect to find the narrative’s clearest explanation of the exilic community’s trauma— since these chapters deal with the actions that lead directly to the trauma of 586—we encounter merely ambiguity. By the end of the History, that is, the narrative itself finally and ultimately collapses through trauma’s subversion of it...Trauma’s suggestion here, uncannily anticipated at earlier points in Dtr, is that there simply is no logic in history and thus no explanation for trauma” (Ibid., 62–63).

While I agree that biblical narratives in many instances reveal the types of disruptive and intrusive posttraumatic responses outlined by trauma theorists and/or the DSM manual, which includes the unassimilatable qualities of traumatic experience, I

Following these leads, we can read biblical texts as often taking part in Herman's first step to recovery (i.e., developing narrative). To use the words of Hilde Lindemann Nelson, the Bible offers "narratives of repair"—narratives that "resis[t] an oppressive identity and attempt[t] to replace it with one that commands respect."¹⁸⁸ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher has suggested something similar in his 2016 essay on Lamentations: "[M]emories, especially those that are constitutive of a national or communal narrative, are actually critical to the rebuilding of a person, and a people... . Is [Lamentations] attempting to heal the cultural narrative of the Hebrew people?"¹⁸⁹ Steven Weitzman would argue that the answer is "yes." Although not engaged in trauma studies proper, he suggests that Jewish stories give us a "glimpse [of] Jewish culture struggling to survive."¹⁹⁰ Biblical narratives, on his reading, embody the "arts of cultural persistence"¹⁹¹—the capacity to "reshape the past to accommodate present needs, to transcend the constraints of visible reality, and to conjure invisible allies."¹⁹² Akin to the Passover Seder, in which the reading of the *haggadah* and the reenactments performed throughout the festive meal "both recalls and makes present the exodus liberation of the

nevertheless read the construction of narrative—including trauma's subversion of that narrative—as part of an attempted recovery process. By taking into consideration the application of trauma theory to therapy, in other words, I read literatures of trauma as attempted expressions of incorporation, *even in their disruptions*, and even in the paradox of incorporation and trauma definition. For more on this, including the healing effects of narrating the unnarratable, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. See also Conclusion on trauma enactment.

¹⁸⁸ Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 6.

¹⁸⁹ Smith-Christopher, "Biblical Lamentations and Singing the Blues," 553.

¹⁹⁰ Steven Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 9.

children of Israel from bondage in Egypt,”¹⁹³ biblical storytelling works to confront trauma and wrest survival from it.¹⁹⁴

Humor has its place here, too. As Lindemann Nelson explains, the stories we tell “expan[d] or contrac[t] one’s ability to exercise moral agency,” and the comic mode often interacts with this type of expansion and contraction. Biblical scholars, as evidenced in the readings Esther and Mark above, are coming to find that humor not only emphasizes joy and laughter, but also, and perhaps more so, has a role in the making, shaping, and reconfiguring of social structures and communal self-states in and behind biblical texts. While humor can be used by the powerholders to foster harmful systems of oppression, it can also be used by the subjugated to critique and survive those systems. As Amy-Jill Levine so aptly phrased it, “[Humor] is...a central weapon in the arsenal of the subaltern. The joke can always be turned...and aimed, like bare teeth...at the perpetrator.”¹⁹⁵ In the following section, I will outline the Bible’s relations to humor and humor theory, focusing not only on the ways in which scholars read for humor, but also on humor’s role in expanding agency and fostering cultural persistence.

¹⁹³ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 19. It is also common, like biblical stories, for Seders to engage memories and postmemories of multiple traumas. Many *haggadot*, for instance, allude to the Holocaust. Some also allude to black slavery, sex/gender discriminations, and other social justice issues, either in the *haggadot* proper or in *haggadot* supplements.

¹⁹⁴ See Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 118-120.

¹⁹⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, “Women’s Humor and Other Creative Juices,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Yehuda T. Radday (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 126.

Humor Theory

Humor Theory and the Bible

When reading the Bible for humor, scholars typically focus on such literary elements as U-shaped plotlines, hyperbole, wordplay, irony, parody, sarcasm, and topsy-turvy character dynamics. In their reading of the Book of Daniel, for example, David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell argue that the text is marked by comic hyperbole. “The characterization of Nebuchadnezzar in this story is...a parody of this ruthless King. The narrator’s repetitious style and love of tedious detail set a tone of ridicule and absurdity.”¹⁹⁶ Hiddenness, trickery, and surprise are noted regularly as comedic markers, particularly in the book of Esther. By keeping her Jewish identity from the dimwitted king and wicked Haman, Esther is able to enact a reversal of fate for the lowly. As Melissa Jackson puts it, Esther “work[s] from within the system and maintain[s] it, while finding a proper place within it.”¹⁹⁷

Violence and the grotesque, too, are common intersecting themes of study. In his analysis of Judges 3, for instance, Ferdinand Deist focuses on the comic incongruity of a left-handed Benjaminite slaughtering the gluttonous King Eglon (*e-g-l* means “calf” and, paired with the King’s gluttony, implies the descriptor “fat calf”).¹⁹⁸ In his reading of the book of Judith, Erich Gruen similarly highlights the comic topsy-turviness of a Jewish woman luring the oblivious Holofernes, an Assyrian-Babylonian enemy,¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993), 175.

¹⁹⁷ Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 217.

¹⁹⁸ Note the elements of hiddenness and surprise in Ehud’s trickery. Ferdinand Deist, “‘Murder in the Toilet’ (Judges 3:12–30): Translation and Transformation,” *Scriptura* 58 (1996): 263–272.

¹⁹⁹ Judith fights the Assyrians who are ruled by Nebuchadnezzar. This historical incongruity in itself gestures that we have entered the comic realm.

into bed by dressing as a prostitute, only to then chop off his head in one blow.²⁰⁰

Despite the fact that Judith is a woman without a husband, she becomes the hero of the story, while the once-manly general becomes her loot. In many instances, the Bible's humorous turnabouts are the result of repetitive onslaught—monstrosities that are so extreme that they, too, appear ridiculous.

There is seriousness to this use of humor, too. As humor “superiority,”²⁰¹ “incongruity,”²⁰² and “relief”²⁰³ theories indicate,²⁰⁴ the comic cannot just highlight the

²⁰⁰ Gruen, *Diaspora*, 158–170.

²⁰¹ In the mid-20th century, D. H. Monro surveyed popular philosophies of humor, including those of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Freud, and sorted them into the three overarching categories: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. See D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1951).

The superiority theory highlights the psychological and social effects of humor. More specifically, it focuses on the superior feelings one can experience while laughing, and in particular when such laughter is directed at the “butt(s)” of joking. Humor critics typically credit Plato as the earliest thinker to contribute to this viewpoint. In *Philebus*, Plato contends that spectators laugh at the ridiculous qualities of comedic characters—their ignorance, lack of reason, etc.—and, in turn, feel superior to them. Through the mouth of Socrates, he writes: “Then the argument shows that when we laugh at the folly of our friends, pleasure, in mingling with envy, mingles with pain, for envy has been acknowledged by us to be mental pain, and laughter is pleasant; and so we envy and laugh at the same instant (48–50).” Aristotle also defines the comic similarly to Plato. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle contends that it highlights characters of lesser moral standards. It is “an imitation of characters of a lower type” (*Poetics* 2,4;5.1), and spectators laugh at the particular ugliness of comedies’ ridiculous characters. Although Plato and Aristotle share similar arguments, Aristotle differs from Plato in his nod toward the positive effects of laughter. Rather than engaging the appetites, Aristotle claims that the pleasure derived from laughter alleviates the dangerous effects of mimicking the ridiculous. The comic performance, rather than guiding spectators to engage in buffoonery, teaches spectators how *not* to act. See Jan Walsh Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique* (Madison, NJ, and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 27. For more primary sources generally read as contributing to a “superiority theory,” see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, vol. 1 (Seattle, WA: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011 [1651]) and Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesely Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008 [1900]).

²⁰² The incongruity theory was pioneered by James Beattie in the late 18th century. In his view, “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or

incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage.” James Beattie, “On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition,” in *Essays: On Poetry and Music as they Affect the Mind*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh and London, UK: William Creech E. and C. Dilly, 1776), 347. While Beattie was the first to employ the term “incongruity” in his analysis, the major premise behind his theory stems from previous thinkers. In the mid-18th century, Francis Hutcheson wrote that “the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea.” Quoted in John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 32. And as early as the 4th century BCE, Aristotle recognized the connection between humor and the violation of expectation. (See *Rhetoric* 3.2). Cicero also remarked that it is the deviation from the norm that makes us laugh (*On the Orator*, 2.255-260). Such major thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Schopenhauer have adopted and expanded upon these understandings. Of particular note is anthropologist and humor theorist Elliot Oring’s modification of the theory as “appropriate incongruity”—that is, incongruity that is somehow *recognizable* to the audience. See Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 1.

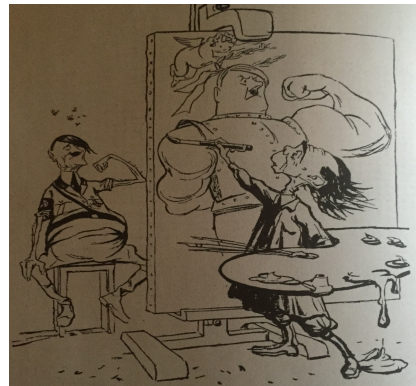
²⁰³ The relief theory focuses on the physiological and psychological effects of laughter. Its origins are traced to Lord Shaftesbury, who in the 18th century wrote that humor relieves people from societal constraints. Herbert Spencer followed suit in the 20th century. In “On the Physiology of Laughter,” he argued that laughter frees us from excess nervous energy. “Nervous excitement always *tends* to beget muscular motion....The excess must therefore discharge itself....[T]here results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter.” Herbert Spencer, “On the Physiology of Laughter,” in *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2009), 583, 595. One of the most oft-cited thinkers of the relief theory is Sigmund Freud, who takes a more social approach to laughter. In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud explains that humor gives people permission to say what is not allowed in polite discourse: “The pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place.” Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York, NY, and London, UK: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960), 143. In other words, relief comes from disregarding societal conventions and norms. In humor, repressed thoughts and phrases can finally come out—and be out—if only for the moment in which humor is entertained.

²⁰⁴ Scholars today continue to refer to humor via these categories, and often converse with them—even if their objective is to deconstruct them—rather than vie for a new classification system. It is important to note, however, that while they offer distinct insights into the comic realm, they do not necessarily contradict each other. As Victor Raskin explains, “they seem to supplement each other quite nicely.” Quoted by John Morreall in John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 7. In addition, rather than offering finite definitions of the comic or distinct traditions of thought, they function more broadly as a catalogue of scholarly inquiry. According to humor critic and religion scholar John Morreall, the

fun and funny. As O'Connor explains, humor can take on the “highest seriousness. More than a pleasurable feature of [a] text...humor [can take on] the work of political satire, a survival tactic, and an act of hope.”²⁰⁵ Comic incongruities, for instance, can often trigger responses of superiority and relief. To laugh at incongruous depictions of one’s enemy (the “butt” of one’s joking) can make one feel superior to him, and in turn, can help one experience emotional relief from the conflict. As Freud famously wrote, “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter.”²⁰⁶ We see this in the following depictions of Adolf Hitler²⁰⁷:



Bernard Partridge, 1934



David Low, 1940

superiority, incongruity, and relief theories are better understood as “term[s] of art” (ibid., 6). They illustrate features of the comic shared by humor theorists across time and fields, instead of “names adopted by a group of thinkers consciously participating in traditions” (ibid., and see ibid., 9).

²⁰⁵ O'Connor, “Humour, Turnabouts, and Survival in the Book of Esther,” 53.

²⁰⁶ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 122–123.

²⁰⁷ All Hitler cartoons and cartoon descriptions are from Tony Husband, *Propaganda Cartoons of World War II* (London, UK: Arcturus Holdings Limited, 2013).



Viktor Deni, 1942

Not only are viewers (i.e., Freud’s “third person[s]”) invited to feel superior to Hitler alongside the artists, and perhaps to even experience relief from feeling superior to him, but they are also invited to laugh at the incongruous juxtaposition between the person Hitler *thinks* he is and who, at least within the confines of the artwork above, he *actually* is. According to Melissa Jackson, this type of humor “aids survival.”²⁰⁸ That the subjugated can take the upper hand in comedy, “keeps alive the promise that surviving real life is also possible.”²⁰⁹

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl has argued similarly. In his view, humor can aim to counter trauma, if only momentarily: “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds.”²¹⁰ Violent humor is not excluded from this claim.

Another trauma survivor shares:

²⁰⁸ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 27.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²¹⁰ Viktor Emil Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Part I, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 43.

For years I used humor to deflect the pain and the shame I felt talking about incest. The humor was, of course, the gallows variety.^[211] It often pointed out the absurdity of the American Ideal, the family surrounded by a white picket fence—with blood dripping down the painted slats where the daughter had been sacrificially skewered. It was my way of telling the truth about something I wasn't sure anyone would believe if they hadn't lived through it.²¹²

Even in its violent forms, humor can give voice to the voiceless, a narrative to the unnarratable. It can expose “the deficiencies of this world”²¹³ and expand agency for those who have been wronged.

We see a similar use of humor in other anti-Hitler cartoons:



“What Hitler wants and what he’ll get”
Mikhail Cheremnykh,²¹⁴ 1941



“I started up like this but ended up this way”
The Kukryniksy collective, 1943

To quote Freud once more, these jokes are “tendentious.”²¹⁵ They are “aimed and fired at a specifically chosen target in the hopes of drawing blood,”²¹⁶ while also drawing a line

²¹¹ Freud’s gallows humor is often paired with traditional renderings of the relief theory. See his 1927 essay, “Humour,” and footnote 203.

²¹² See Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, 3rd ed. (Santa Cruz: Harper Collins, 1994), 51.

²¹³ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 2012, 243.

²¹⁴ Cheremnykh was the co-founder of the satirical magazine *Krokodil*.

²¹⁵ See Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*, 20.

between those who share in their laughter and those who do not. “To laugh at the cartoons is to imagine [in addition to rising above the perpetrator] other laughers like oneself.”²¹⁷

Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque and the carnivalesque tap into this type of humor. On the carnivalization of literature, Bakhtin writes that there is a central focus on the grotesque body. Rather than adhere to proper dietary or bodily practices, the carnivalesque invites participants to over-eat, over-drink, and adorn ugly guises. The relief here comes from the parading itself; that which is horrendous is celebrated and laughed at, to the point that it appears ridiculous. Through parody and pageantry, participants in the carnivalesque can “enter the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”²¹⁸ In ancient Rome, the Saturnalia festival, invoked regularly by ancient Roman writers, fits most directly with Bakhtin’s sense of the carnival.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Oring, *Engaging Humor*, 56–57.

²¹⁸ Pam Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 196–197. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123–24.

²¹⁹ Bakhtin makes the connection between the carnival and the Saturnalia himself. See *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 129. Mary Beard offers a counter-commentary to reading the Saturnalia as carnivalesque, suggesting that the Saturnalia was likely less topsy-turvy than thinkers (including Bakhtin) typically suggest. She writes, “The first problem is a specifically classical one: namely, Bakhtin’s reconstruction of the Roman festival of Saturnalia as an ancient ancestor of carnival, and so a key component in “laughterhood” of ancient Rome ...though, the idea of role reversal, so characteristic of carnival, is a much flimsier construction [of the Saturnalia] than is usually allowed.” I suggest, however, that even if masters did not cater to their slaves, as Beard remarks later, the notion that slaves and masters could still eat together at the festival illustrates in and of itself a major aspect of the carnival scene—namely, the deconstruction of established mores. Although this activity may not have been a *complete* inversion, as Beard notes, normative eating practices were still being subverted and inverted to a large degree. See Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 62–64.

Martial even dedicated one of his epigrams to the free-spiritedness of the Saturnalia, writing: “But I want this whole book to laugh, outdoing all the bawdy books....These are Saturnalian verses” (Book 11.15).²²⁰

The carnivalesque has a subversive quality to it, too, in that the grotesque body mocks the proper order of things. As Jonathan Ball writes, “The ingesting, defecating, urinating, fornicating body of the open apertures, where the physiological self proclaims its incompleteness by flowing into and out of the world. This conception of the unfinished body... challenges the bourgeois ego’s self-image of containment and completion.”²²¹ According to Kenneth Craig, in fact, the book of Esther’s grotesque depictions of the wicked Haman and its over-the-top war scenes are indicative of a carnivalistic spirit. Despite the fact that the wicked Haman plots to kill the Jews, for example, it is his head in the end that hangs on the gallows fifty cubits high. Even in its grotesqueries, the inversion invites “[t]he folk of [the] unofficial culture [to] celebrate their freedom from institutionalization; they celebrate the survival and renewal of their spirit over the stifling forces of official order.”²²²

Although many scholars recognize the survival-like qualities of biblical humor, the fact of the matter remains that reading for humor can differ greatly from one interpreter to the next. There exists no set method or theory pertaining to the comic, nor any systematic reading technique from which biblical scholars can pull and draw

²²⁰ See Martial, *Selected Epigrams*, trans. Susan McLean (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 87–88.

²²¹ Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*, 120.

²²² Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 49.

conclusions.²²³ A primary reason for this has to do with the complex dynamic between one's own cultural, social, and personal biases that become triggered when reading. As Radday notes, "Personal experience confirms that nothing separates people (and peoples) from each other as much as what they consider humorous."²²⁴ Even more pressing is the Bible's own historical groundedness. In addition to humor's subjectivity, a number of biblical texts were written *prior* to the most influential ancient conceptions of humor. The origins of comedy as genre, for instance, are traced to 5th century BCE Greece.²²⁵ The

²²³ Humor critics typically agree that no overarching analysis can give adequate space for the "multitude of specific insights" humor entails. Scott Cutler Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 3–4.

²²⁴ Yehuda T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York: The Almond Press, 1990), 24. At the same time, it is important to remember that "texts do not *have* humour any more than they *have* meaning." Philip R. Davies, "Joking in Jeremiah 18," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York, NY: The Almond Press, 1990), 191. Meaning is made. As Davies writes further, "For all that the critic may try to establish that a text is funny or even that its author was trying to be funny, the *sine qua non* of such arguments is that the reader finds humor—Freud: 'Wit is made, while the comical is found'" (Ibid.) Postcolonial dialogics as a reading practice assumes similarly that meaning is extrapolated and produced by interpreters. Texts *gain* meaning from "[t]he systems, codes, and traditions" from which they come and *through* which they are read. Allen, *Intertextuality*, 1. For comic-attuned readers, humor becomes part of these systems—part of a text's network of textuality.

²²⁵ The term comedy "derives from *komodia*, the song of the *komos*, which was the frenzied group participating in the Dionysian rites." Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 16. Responding to social and political issues of their day, the *komos* gathered in the streets at public festivals to sing, dance, and participate in political and social expression. According to Mary English, "Scholars have long debated exactly how the institution of the *komos* blended with [earlier literary forms] to produce the genre *old comedy*." See Mary C. English, "Greek Comedy," in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 364. Their use of humor, she writes, must have "somehow combined with the festivities of the *komos* and the already flourishing genres of tragedy and choral performance to produce the first

origins of satire as genre are traced to 3rd/2nd century BCE Rome.²²⁶ For reasons such as this, Whedbee writes that, “The persuasiveness of any interpretation of the Bible in terms of a comic vision depends on the degree to which one can argue comic forms that are congenial and congenial to the biblical texts within their native Hebraic and Near Eastern setting.”²²⁷

Scholars tackle this need in a number of ways. Ze’ev Weisman, for example, stresses the importance of style over defined genre, contending that elements of various writing forms do, indeed, prefigure the genres themselves. For while satire is a Roman invention—deriving from the Latin term *satira* (medley)—it nevertheless operated as a mode of expression far before its originations at Rome. As Daniel Hooley explains, satire is “one of the fundamental modes of human expression. It is always with us, and has left its traces in artistic, and artless, expression throughout human history.”²²⁸ Weisman agrees, and concludes that:

[T]he features which characterize satire as a literary phenomenon did exist in the Bible, hundreds of years before satire was fashioned as ‘genre’ in the classical world. The tracing of the pre-literary and pre-generic layers of satire by means of a philological and literary study may [even] shed some light on the psycho-social origin of satire as a social and cultural phenomenon.²²⁹

comic scripts” (ibid.). These comic scripts officially entered into the City Dionysia—the most elite dramatic festival in ancient Athens—in 486 BCE.

²²⁶ Satire’s beginnings are credited in part to Ennius (239–169 BCE), and more directly to Lucilius (ca. 168/7–102 CE). “All three major ‘hexameter’ satirists, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal, refer to Lucilius as the authorizing inaugurator of their craft.... Lucilius invents a genre to be developed and altered in Horace, Persius, and Juvenal (and others lost), so that we have by Juvenal’s death a rather neat, entirely Roman package.” See Daniel Hooley, *Roman Satire* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 14, 20.

²²⁷ J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

²²⁸ Hooley, *Roman Satire*, 1–2.

²²⁹ Zeev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 4.

Whedbee responds similarly to his own claim, engaging both biblical and post-biblical texts in a manner akin to Bakhtinian dialogism:

[A] large comparative context embracing the relationship between the Bible and its complex, continuous roles within Western culture can also illumine the whole spectrum of biblical and post-biblical texts. Going back and forth between the Bible and its varied dramatic, literary, and religious “afterlives” may open up the possibility for fresh insights into both the original biblical texts and later works which have been influenced by the Bible. In sum, though caution must be exercised against the threat of anachronistic and alien readings, careful attention to the full network of possible intertextual linkages can extend and deepen the range of potential comic resonance within the texts and their multiple contexts and subtexts.²³⁰

Although Brenner addresses similarly pre-classified literary techniques and dialogical analyses, she also takes a more historical approach in her rationalization of biblical humor. Looking, for example, to Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*, Brenner contends that Josephus’ removal of humorous passages actually proves its existence: “In short, Josephus goes out of his way to minimize [stories such as a] foreign ruler’s sinister and comical properties,”²³¹ so as not to associate his allies with the biblically lampooned.²³² Josephus “certainly sides with the foreign power, politically if not religiously. The configuration that represents foreign rulers as comical, sexually motivated morons prefigures the zealot’s ideology, but does not serve Josephus’ purposes.”²³³

In line with Brenner’s historical reconstructions, reading the New Testament for humor does raise certain historical possibilities. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, which in many instances is difficult to date accurately or with historical detail, we can locate New

²³⁰ Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 6.

²³¹ A. Brenner, “Who’s Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who’s Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19, no. 63 (1994): 52.

²³² In this case, Josephus’ allies would be the Romans. Josephus was in a peculiar position, in that he was Jewish soldier in the first Jewish-Roman war, but was then saved by the Romans after military defeat.

²³³ Brenner, “Who’s Afraid of Feminist Criticism?”, 53.

Testament writings within the first two centuries CE, in the ancient Near East. For this reason, Austin Busch claims that New Testament scholarship needs to be more open to Greco-Roman intertextualities.²³⁴ In his view, even if a text posits clear allusions to previous biblical texts, it does not preclude an invocation of Greco-Roman scripts (nor, I would add, does it preclude the very Greco-Romanness of certain biblical texts). While “New Testament authors show much less deference toward classical Greek literature...allusions to Greco-Roman literature...surface frequently in the New Testament narratives, and scrutiny of them can generate significant interpretive insights.”²³⁵ This is important for readers interested in the sociality of a dialogical reading practice. Though Greco-Roman references may be subtle to the modern reader, Busch argues that even the slightest referentiality is worth considering, particular given the heightened sensitivity of ancient ears.²³⁶ Although the exact dating of Revelation is disputed, it was nevertheless written not only at a time in which humor was used as a means to make, shape, and reconstruct Roman societal norms, but also at a time in which humor was a known literary/philosophical entity. And while scholars certainly reconstruct the Greco-Roman world and conceptions of ancient Roman humor with differing nuance, we can nevertheless read Revelation with an adequate level of historical sensibility. In order to read the book of Revelation for humor in all of its intertextual capacities—*particularly* its dialogical capacities—an overarching understanding of Greco-Roman humor is needed.

²³⁴ See Austin Busch, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016)

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

Greco-Roman Humor

In her study on ancient Roman laughter, classicist Mary Beard explains that there were certain “key figures” and “key themes” implemented by Greek and Roman humorists, regardless of genre.²³⁷ Stock characters, such as the meddler, the freeloader,

²³⁷ See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 19. When conducting research on ancient Roman humor, a common place to begin is the comedy genre. Although Roman comedy most typically refers to the plays produced by Plautus and Terence in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, the genre’s roots go back to ancient Greece and the Greek Old, Middle, and New comic plots.

Greek Old Comedy (ca. 440–380 BCE) was exceedingly impudent. Old comic poets often utilized sex and the grotesque as literary tools through which to simultaneously entertain and expose social dissatisfaction. The most famous old comic poet is Aristophanes, due in large part to the fact that his comedies are the only comic scripts to survive from this era fully intact. In addition to his use of parody and the obscene, Aristophanes utilized the stage to “vent his frustrations” concerning Greece’s ongoing political concerns, and in turn, to create a fantasy world in which these concerns were no longer an issue. English, “Greek Comedy,” 367.

Greek Old Comedy was followed by Middle Comedy, which spanned from Aristophanes’ death in ca. 385 BCE to Menander’s work in the 320s BCE. There are so few surviving fragments of Middle Comedy that scholars find it difficult to reconstruct its character and content. What seems clear, however, is that comic poets of this time focused less on the fantastic political schemes of Old Comedy, and more on stock characters and domestic situations.

Greek New Comedy (ca. 322–250 BCE) followed in this pursuit, focusing even more on individual characters and the domestic sphere. Here, plot structure and stock character types such as “the soldier, young lover, strict father, rustic, *hetaira*, pimp, parasite, flatterer, cook, and cunning slave” were “firmly established.” Adele C. Scafuro, “Comedy in the Late Fourth and Early Third Centuries BCE,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 201.

Despite its multivalent forms, it is precisely this new type of comedy—particularly the works of Menander—with which scholars most consistently associate Roman Comedy. For a summary of its forms, see Wolfgang David Cirilo De Melo Wolfgang, “Plautus’ Dramatic Predecessors and Contemporaries in Rome,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 447. Plautus’ (ca. 254–184 BCE) and Terence’s (ca. 190–159 BCE) work are often described as being full adaptations—copies, even—of Greek New Comedy and the Menanderean style. Some, however, do question the ease with which we might associate Roman comic scripts with Greek New Comedy. Antonis Petrides, for example, illustrates the ways in which Plautine scholarship post-1960 has more readily refuted these simplistic assumptions, particularly

when it comes to recognizing Plautus' affinities with comic forms outside of New Comedy. In his view, Plautus' comedies were likely shaped by more than just New Comedy and the works of Menander. Other theatrical traditions, such as Greek Old Comedy, Atellan farce, and mime also likely impacted Plautus' works. Antonis K. Petrides, "Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 426–427. Although Terence copied Greek New Comedies with more precision than his predecessor, both he and Plautus had access to varying techniques and comic subjects. Roman comedy did not operate within a social vacuum. Plautus and Terence were shaped by the nuances of their surroundings and other comic forms. As C. W. Marshall puts it, all of the ancient comic genres "were fair game for a playwright seeking to create a hybrid performance style that would entertain all levels of Roman society." Christopher W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15. Or as Jeffrey Henderson explains: "The ancient tripartition of comedy into Old, Middle, and New eras, an evolutionary model defined at either end by the paradigmatic status awarded to Aristophanes ("political") and Menander ("domestic"), has tended to focus attention on salient trends and change, and to play down variety and continuity; but even in antiquity, this model was at best a blunt heuristic tool. In recent decades, closer study of the fragments themselves has revealed a greater variety of themes and subjects in each era, and no revolutionary breaks between the eras." See Jeffrey Henderson, "Comedy in the Fourth Century II: Politics and Domesticity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 181.

The issue of satire is particularly indicative of this. As a genre, it was considered a particularly Roman invention—Quintilian himself writing, "Satire is wholly ours" (*Institutiones Oratoris* 10.1.93). Deriving from the Latin term *satura* (meaning "full" or "medley"), satires were known for being "stuffed-to-the-gills," often infused with humor, poetry, invective, political criticism, moral philosophy, and more. See Hooley, *Roman Satire*, 115.

In terms of its "wholly Romanness," satire corresponds most acutely with the Latin hexameter verses crafted by Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. See Hooley, *Roman Satire*, 3. As a more general attitude, however, it is often expanded to include Greek and Latin Menippeans, humorous texts that carried a similar blame and "lampooning intent." Paul Allen Miller, "Introduction," in *Latin Verse Satire: An Anthology and Reader*, ed. Paul Allen Miller (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 2. Based on the wide usage of a satiric attitude, in fact, David Konstan argues that scholars should be more free to implement satiric terminology in analyzing ancient Roman texts, regardless of style. On Plautus' *Truculentus*, for example, he writes that "The *Truculentus* is not merely satiric comedy, it is comic satire as well." David Konstan, *Roman Comedy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 164. And on the issue of genre, he expounds: "Now, I do not wish to dispute that for the Romans the word satire denoted a particular department of literature, defined by certain formal properties; but this department of literature was understood to serve a proper, that is to say, satiric content. When Juvenal exclaimed 'it is hard not to write satire!' he was not expressing a

and the overeater were common. According to Beard, the “economy of laughter” was often expressed through the “economy of food,”²³⁸ and these were the types to “earn [their] place at the dinner table” by either laughing at their patrons’ jokes or being the source of laughter for their patrons’ guests.²³⁹ In many instances, the food itself turned into joke. At the Roman dinner table, for example, freeloaders were sometimes presented inedible objects instead of food (*Augustan History; The Satyricon*, fragments 26–78). According to Beard, these meals might have been made of wood or other inedible materials, and directly contrasted the delicacies served to the more elite crowd. She writes, “Part of the joke here rests on the idea of imitation and mimicry: something is pretending to be food when it is not... . But the more sinister side of the joke is that it writes in stone (or wax or wood) the inequities of the imperial dinner table.”²⁴⁰

Roman satirists in particular had a field day with food by lampooning their rivals for food that they ate.²⁴¹ In Satire 2.2, for example, Horace gibes: “Notice how green they all look as they come away from the problem meal! Worse still, the body, heavy from yesterday’s guzzling, drags down the soul and nails to the earth a particle of the

compulsion to write hexameter verses, but rather to portray an imaginative world for which hexameter verses had become the appropriate literary vehicle” (Ibid.). Konstan’s argument is not without historical merit. Even Horace—who, like Quintilian, recognized satire as a wholly Roman form—recognized its dialogical associations with other genres. In *Satire 1*, he writes, “The poets Eupolis and Cratinus and Aristophanes and others...on these men Lucilius [the father of satire] hangs entirely” (*Sat.* 1.4).

²³⁸ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 148.

²³⁹ See Ibid., 148–149.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 148.

²⁴¹ Food talk is particularly befitting of satire, as the genre, by definition, refers to that which is mixed and miscellaneous—like foods made of multiple ingredients. See Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 125, n. 65. For more on food talk in satire, see also Nicola A. Hudson, “Food in Roman Satire,” in *Satire and Society in Ancient Rome*, ed. Susan H. Braund (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1989).

divine spirit.”²⁴² Juvenal, in fact, wrote an entire satire on how turbot functions as a symbol of tyranny. In Satire 4, otherwise known as “The Emperor’s Fish,” he ruminates:

Here is Crispinus (indeed I shall often be bringing him onto the stage), a monster of vice without a redeeming virtue, a sickly fob, though strong when it comes to lechery; only the unmarried are spared his lewd attentions....He purchased a mullet for six thousand—in fact exactly a thousand a pound, As those who go in for fishing stories would probably put it. I’d happily praise his clever move, had he used the present To grab the most favoured place in the will of a childless dotard, Or (a better ploy) had given it all to a high-born mistress Who rode in a cavernous litter with screens on its picture Windows. Nothing like that; he bought it for himself.²⁴³

Topsy-turvy characters, such as slaves who outsmart their masters, eunuchs who experience sexual feelings, or humans who turn into animals, are also well attested. In Plautus’ *Psuedolus*, for example, a slave outwits his superiors by tricking them into freeing a prostitute. In Terence’s *Eunuch*, a love-sick boy pretends to be a eunuch so as to earn the favor of a pretty girl. In Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, the bumbling Lucius turns himself into an even more inept ass-man. Games and festivals similarly highlighted the juxtaposition—or even the play—between human and animal. Criminals, for example, were sometimes fitted wings at public executions so spectators could point and laugh as the soon-to-be executed failed to fly. Art historian John Clarke gives the following example:

Imagine seeing a nude male criminal fitted with wings made of wax and feathers hoisted high above the floor of the Colosseum and then dropped.

²⁴² All Horace translations are from *Horace: Satires and Epistles*, trans. John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁴³ All Juvenal translations are from Juvenal, *Juvenal: The Satires*, ed. William Barr, trans. Niall Rudd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Gowers writes that “[f]ood appears, as a rule, in texts which are mixed and miscellaneous, and set themselves up as trivial or parodic; it tends to be absent, except in its most solemn, sacred, and undefined terms, from the higher genres.” See *The Loaded Table*, 22.

During Roman times, this is not imagination but a public execution. Myth becomes fact—and therefore hilarious—as a human being tries to flap his artificial wings like [the winged] Daedalus.²⁴⁴

Criminals were tortured violently in the streets, often in ways that mocked popular plots and scripts. Animals and gladiators were thrown, burned, and chopped into pieces as a form of fun at the Roman festivals and *ludi*. All Rome was a stage, and in these comic moments, the victims of violence were the stars.

Ancient humorists also found humor in disfigured, handicapped, or otherwise physically abnormal people, and their gestures. Those who exhibited loss of hair or experienced bodily swelling produced hearty laughter, as did persons with unsightly facial features, dirty mouths, or small figures.²⁴⁵ Orators were especially known for their use of “puns, jokes, [and] witticisms,”²⁴⁶ which were implemented in many cases as a means by which to mock an opponent’s physique, diction, mannerisms, or expressions.²⁴⁷ In addition to pointing out physical deviations, orators “often accused opponents of effeminacy by calling attention to their gait, dress, or grooming.”²⁴⁸

Ancient Roman graffitists practiced a similar sense of wit. At Pompeii, we find images of persons with bald heads, abnormally shaped faces, animal-like features, and even phalluses penetrating persons’ mouths.

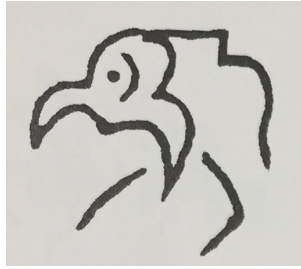
²⁴⁴ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 23.

²⁴⁵ For more on this, see *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. The ways in which the orator had to go about constructing such witticisms needed to be “just right.” Both Cicero and Quintilian, for example, express their anxieties about humor in professional settings, as the overuse of things such as wit, mimicry, and jest might make one resemble more a clown or actor than a professional speaker. Even Cicero, the most infamous jester of Roman oration, writes that humor—though a necessary part of proper oration (1.17)—must be “sprinkled, like a little salt, throughout [one’s] speech” (1.159).

²⁴⁷ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 17–19.

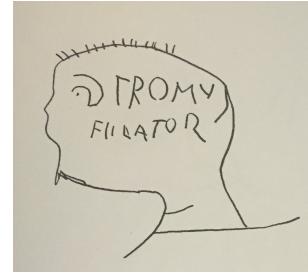
²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.



*Astyle Dormi(en)s*²⁴⁹



*Fab. Rufo*²⁵⁰



*Promus fel(l)ator*²⁵¹

Throughout the ancient Mediterranean, we also find graffiti that caricaturizes opponents in more descriptive terms, such as “Kar[m]idianos is queer.”²⁵² Or, “Cosmus, slave of Equita, is a great *cinaedus* and a cocksucker...with manly calves apart.”²⁵³

Women and women’s bodies, too, were mocked regularly, often simply for the fact that they were not men or men’s bodies.²⁵⁴ In addition to his satire on fish, for example, Juvenal dedicated an entire satire to women. In *Satire 6*—which is described by Paul Allen Miller as “without doubt one of the most misogynistic poems ever produced”²⁵⁵—Juvenal writes: “Can you bear to be the slave of a woman[?]...Don’t you think it better to sleep with a little boy-friend?” (6.29, 6.34).

It is important to note that these types of characters, images, and statements were rendered humorous precisely *because* they did not comply with normative social values. According to Cicero, the art of humor was really an art of deviation: “Our own deviation

²⁴⁹ From Martin Langner, *Antike Graffitzeichnungen: Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2001), no. 237.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 301.

²⁵¹ From Clarke, *Ibid.*, 46–47.

²⁵² Angelos Chaniotis, “Graffiti in Aphrodisias: Images–Texts–Contexts,” in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, ed. Jennifer Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 204.

²⁵³ Peter Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 265.

²⁵⁴ See Amy Richlin, “Invective Against Women in Roman Satire,” in *Latin Verse Satire: An Anthology and Reader*, ed. Paul Allen Miller (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 377–389.

²⁵⁵ Paul Allen Miller, *Latin Verse Satire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 271.

naturally amuses us / So when we have been deceived, as it were, by our own expectation, we laugh.”²⁵⁶ When characters were overindulgent, gluttonous, or oversexed, they transgressed social values of moderation and self-control. When persons were rendered unsightly, monstrous, or grotesque, they became “laughable physiognomies.”²⁵⁷ Because Roman piety was constructed upon a cosmic, hierarchical gradient in which self-mastering deities and the male, Roman elite ranked toward the top, and women, slaves, and irrational beasts ranked toward the bottom, to mock the physique of one’s enemy meant to outwit him and throw him down the power gradient. To laugh at women meant to keep her gender positioned below her fellow men. To call a man a “*cinaedus* with his calves apart” meant to associate him with the lesser, effeminate gender—the one that was penetrated, rather than penetrator. Humor thus often functioned as a “self versus other” dialectic that impacted societal norms and, in turn, lived experience.

Looking Forward

The book of Revelation is now typically read by postcolonial and empire-critical scholars as quintessentially hybrid. While it reflects an anti-imperial, anti-Roman agenda in the service of constructing a new Christ-centered selfhood, it at the same time reflects a cross-fertilization of Roman imperial ideals. In constructing its New Jerusalem, for example, Revelation victimizes Rome and Roman sympathizers, thereby reflecting a

²⁵⁶ Translation from Beard. See *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 117. In response, Beard writes, “This is the closest we ever come in the ancient world (and it is very close indeed) to a developed version of the modern incongruity theory,” *ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 45.

Bhabhan “almost the same, but not quite” trope.²⁵⁸ Revelation comes to mimic the Roman imperial order, but with a marginal, Jewish twist.

This dissertation’s point of departure from common postcolonial readings can be seen in its focus on a Jewish postcoloniality, and through its investigation of humor and trauma as postcolonial dialogical intersections of inquiry. On the latter point, my reading shares much in common with John Clement Ball’s work on the postcolonial novel, in which he reads satire as a mode of opposition in postcolonial storytelling.²⁵⁹ Akin to Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s work on narrative repair, Ball suggests that satire can resignify power structures and positions of selfhood. Even in its grotesque forms, it can work as “an optimistic expression of becoming, renewal, and freedom.”²⁶⁰ Although he does not engage with trauma theory or humor theory more broadly, he nevertheless argues a thesis similar to mine, which is that the realm of the comic both fosters postcolonial resistance and contributes to the making of a colonized agency.

In a similar vein, trauma theory reveals that stories impact our ability to process loss by helping us generate new self-states and reconstruct our shattered consciousness and/or communities. As noted above, scholars are coming to find that ancient Jewish texts carry with them memories of Jewish subjugation and the work to survive them. I suggest that Revelation takes part in this type of construction. Like the Passover Seder, “the Apocalypse deploys memory” and creates, through humor, visions of an alternative

²⁵⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.

²⁵⁹ See Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

reality so as to both “re-create the present” and foster communal identity.²⁶¹ To apply the words of Fewell, Revelation represents a

stammering attempt to bring trauma’s truth, with all its variations, into the open. Moreover, [it] along with others scattered throughout [the Bible], provide[s] resources for interpreting the open ending to [the Bible’s repeated stories of trauma]. By drawing on prior episodes, the storytelling community is allowed a number of ways to thicken and complicate communal identity and, ultimately, to complete the story for themselves.²⁶²

By both drawing on and reconstituting traumatic episodes such as Israelite slavery in Egypt (Rev 8:6-9; 11:6; 16:1-21, cf. Ex 7-12), subjection under Babylon (Rev 13, 14:8; 16:9; 17-18), subjection under Rome (Rev 1-4; 6:9-10; 12-13; 17-18);²⁶³ Christ’s crucifixion (Rev 1:5; 5:6; 7:14; 12:11; 13:8; 19:13), Jewish martyr stories (Rev 1:9; 2:10-11; 2:13; 6:9-11; 7:13-14; 11:7-9; 12:11; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4; cf. 21:2-4; cf. 2 Macc 7:1-42; Matt 23:30, 35; Luke 13:34; Heb 11:26-38; *Liv. Pro.* 1:1; 2:1), and potentially even the destruction of the Temple (Rev 11: 13; 21:22; cf. Mark 13), Revelation’s community of storytellers thickens their communal identity *and* completes the stories of trauma for themselves. Known as transposition or postmemory —i.e. “a cumulative [and trans generational] emotional and psychological wounding”²⁶⁴—trauma

²⁶¹ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 19.

²⁶² Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” 15.

²⁶³ Arguably, Revelation 1-22.

²⁶⁴ Wiechelt and Gryczynski, “Cultural and Historical Trauma Among Native Americans,” 198–99. Here they are quoting M.Y.H. Brave Heart, “The Historical Trauma Response among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35, no. 1 (March 2003): 7. See also Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); along with Judith Kestenberg, “Transposition Revisited: Clinical, Therapeutic, and Developmental Considerations,” in *Healing Their Wounds: Psychotherapy With Holocaust Survivors and Their Families*, ed. Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg (New York: Praeger, 1989), 67–82 and Dori Laub,

fills the book of Revelation through its negotiations of prior Jewish subalternity and present colonial subjugation. Its imaginings of an alternative future, moreover, work to give voice to the subjugated and, in the words of Philip Chia, “erode the colonizer’s ideology by which [Jewish identity] had been devalued.”²⁶⁵ Through its dialogism with ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman comic forms, the Apocalypse creates a comic counterworld that is designed to *resist* Roman imperialism, *persist* in the making of a (particular) Jewish self-governance, and, in turn, offer an “optimistic expression of becoming, renewal, and freedom.”²⁶⁶ In sum, the book of Revelation seeks to both remember Jewish imperial subjugation and rewrite the dominant imperial transcript in which Jews are designated an inferior Other.

In the following chapters on local and global villains, I will read Revelation with the grain of the text, highlighting its construction of a communal self, and resistance to Roman imperialism and imperial sympathizers, through its use of humor. This study will then be followed by a reading of Christ-as-Lamb, which undermines Revelation’s counter-imperialism through the Lamb’s introjection of imperial mores. As we will see in the conclusion, this type of introjection is particularly common for the colonial subject, and can, through a relational psychoanalytic understanding of projective-introjective identification, be viewed as a productive stage in the recovery process. For now, however, I turn Revelation’s construction of a Jewish self—the beginnings of its Jewish postcolonial becoming.

“Testimonies in the Treatment of Genocidal Trauma,” *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 4 (2002): 63–87.

²⁶⁵ Philip Chia, “On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 173.

²⁶⁶ Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*, 120.

Chapter Three
The Comic Truth:
Claiming a Jewish Cultural Self Through Humor

What forbids one to tell the truth while laughing?

-Horace¹

In conversation with Frantz Fanon, Philip Chia writes that, in order for colonized subjects to reclaim agency and identity—to effectively create narratives of repair, as we have been calling them—the colonized must first reclaim a colonial past/present in a way that gives voice and value to the subjugated.² As Fanon himself writes on the making of a Negro identity in the face of colonial subjugation, “He must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists.”³ The Negro culture must be remembered, legitimated, and given value.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Revelation attempts to create a Jewish subjectivity in the face of imperial trauma through a dialogical use of humor. As we will see, Revelation narrates the traumatic past/present with a construction of a Jewish cultural “self.” This construction, however, does not embody a broad-based, “all Jews are welcome” approach, but rather promotes a particular understanding of a Jewish self/community—a “true” Israel, as Revelation has it (5:5; 7:4-8; 14:1; 21:12; cf. 2:9, 14; 3:9).

¹ Book 1.1.24-25

² Philip Chia, “On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 173.

³ Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 38.

While this type of negotiation was common for Jews in the early centuries BCE and CE (ancient Jews debated regularly about their God-Temple-Torah, as we saw in chapter one), we also see negotiations of a “true” communal identity in expressions of communal repair. Postcolonial theories show, for instance, that when it comes to writing back to oppressive imperial centers, colonial “struggles are usually not only between the colonizer and the colonized but also between various interest groups of the latter, which try to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized.”⁴ Revelation, I contend, takes part in this struggle for self-definition. By mocking those who have defined Jewish cultural identity as that which absorbs Greco-Roman practice, the Apocalypse, to use the words of Stephen Moore, “holds up for emulation a [Jewish] practice that is at once peripheral and pure.”⁵ It self-identifies as thoroughly ex-centric, standing vehemently against a “co-constitution and reciprocal creation of colonizer and colonized.”⁶

In what follows, I will focus on John’s letters to the assemblies in Roman Asia and how they work not only to claim a Jewish subalternity, but also to build a particular Jewish identity in the face of that Jewish subalternity. Implementing a postcolonial dialogical hermeneutic—i.e., a lens that recognizes at outset the layers of discursivities lingering among and between histories of imperial subjugation and networks of textuality—I will argue that Revelation relies on a dialogical use of humor to make its anti-imperial-assimilationist claims. By mocking local adversaries through humor,

⁴ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 127.

⁵ Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

Revelation not only thickens the communal identity of those who align with its ideological worldview, but also creates a boundary between in-group constituents—an internal “us” versus “them” dividing line.

Claiming Trauma, Claiming Self

Already in chapter 1, Revelation makes a claim of communal trauma. John writes plainly, “Grace to you from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead. . . . I, John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the suffering [θλίψις] . . . and the patient endurance” (1:5, 9). By recalling Christ’s crucifixion, John not only alludes to Jewish subjection under Empire (i.e., the death of Jews and his Jewish messiah under Rome), but also makes clear that Christ-followers continue to live in the wake of Jesus’ death. This is evidenced not only in the allusion to Jesus’ death and Jewish suffering, but also, as Harry Maier has shown, in Revelation’s continual past-to-present narration:

“Grace and peace from the one who was, who is, and who *is coming*; Behold, *he is coming!*” (1:4, 7 – present participles); “these are they who have come out of the great tribulation. . . . Therefore they *are* before the throne of God . . .” (7:14-15). . . . Even the reference of Rev. 1:9 to John’s sharing “the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance” . . . read[s] as a marking out a present that John insist all those ‘in Jesus’ share.

It is precisely through this “bridging” between Christ’s crucifixion and present Jewish suffering that John constructs its narrative claim.⁷ For Revelation, “[l]iving into the present means living into Jesus’ death,”⁸ and living into Jesus’ death means living into Jewish affliction. There is hope, however. So long as readers adhere to Revelation’s claim and partake together (συγκοινωνός) in the suffering of Christ, they will be

⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 17.

⁸ Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 19.

rewarded in the end times. Have “endurance,” writes Christ through the mouth of John (See 2:2-3, 10, 13, 19; 3:10). Those who endure “will surely conquer. I will give them permission to eat from the tree of life that is in God’s paradise” (2:6).

In reconfiguring a cultural identity in which its trauma claims are heard, understood, and given value, Revelation also imagines an alternative future in which survivors are given value. This value takes place in the end times. Implied readers will continue to suffer (“Beware, the devil will throw some of you into prison; 2:10), but they will also be given the “wreath of life” in God’s paradise (2:6, 10). This is a crucial point of the text’s “becoming” that should not go amiss. Rather than succumb to the pain of Jesus’ death and imagine a foreshortened future⁹—akin to Jesus of Nazareth’s—Revelation conceives the opposite, or a sort of opposite. The Apocalypse struggles with the fear of continued suffering (the foreshortened future) but also *at the same time* attempts to counter its fears by imagining a future *otherwise* (the counternarrative of repair). Its message of endurance serves as a method of survival: “Hold onto our claim,” we can hear John say, echoing the import of trauma narration. “Be faithful to our truth,” he says once more. “We will soon be given the wreath of life” (2:10b).

That Revelation weaves its visions of communal suffering with visions of communal repair indicates that this is a story in process—an attempt both to name Jewish suffering and to, eventually, see things differently. This process coincides with Judith Herman’s first stage of recovery. As she makes clear in her groundbreaking *Trauma and Recovery*, “The fundamental stages of recovery are . . . reconstructing the trauma, and

⁹ A common response to trauma in its own right. See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC, and London, UK: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 272.

restoring the connection between survivors and their community.”¹⁰ This takes time. By consciously living into the trauma—feeling it, reconstructing it, naming it—survivors and their communities can, eventually, “reclaim [their] present and [their] future.”¹¹ As explained in the prior chapter, recovery takes place not in the burial of the trauma, but in living into it through narrative. Revelation calls implied readers to live into the death of Christ—to live into the wor(l)ds Revelation is constructing—and to, in doing so, trust in its attempt at repair: “I know [our] affliction. . . . I know [we] will suffer . . . but be faithful [to our claim] . . . [we] will not be harmed by a second death but will be given the wreath of life” (2:9, 10b-11).

Jesus’ death, however, is not all that is claimed in Revelation’s early chapters. Throughout John’s letters to the assemblies in Roman Asia, we learn of the Christ-followers’ present troubles (2:1); their continued affliction and poverty (2:8); their lack of power (3:8); and also of Antipas,¹² a Christ-follower who was killed for proclaiming his commitment to Jesus (2:13). A few chapters later, we discover that Antipas was not alone in his persecution. In Revelation 6:10, we hear the cries of his fellow *μάρτυρες*: “How long, Oh Master, holy and true, will it be until you judge and avenge our blood, which was shed by the inhabitants of the earth?”

These claims of trauma do not stand on their own. As stated earlier, Revelation combines a narrativizing of a traumatic past/present with claims of a communal self. This self not only shares with John the pain of Jesus’ death and continual suffering (1:5, 9), but also recognizes the import of a halakhic following of Christ. Revelation makes this

¹⁰ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Antipas is the only named martyr in Revelation.

clear through its divisions of “us” and “them,” with a primary focus—as we will see—on “them.” Samuel Huntington has shown that this is not an uncommon method of self-definition: “Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: ‘Who are we?’ . . . We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.”¹³ In Revelation, those who are “us” are halakhic followers of Christ, because those who are “them” are not. Those who are “us” are the “true Israel,” because those who are “them” are not.

We learn about Revelation’s “them” primarily in John’s letters to Pergamum and Thyatira. For it is in these letters that John not only names the local adversaries, but also does so in a way that makes clear *why* they are so adversarial: Christ-followers must not abide by “the ‘works’ and teaching of ‘the Nicolaitans’ (2:6, 15), the teaching of ‘Balaam’ (2:14; cf. Num 22-21; 31:8, 16; Deut 23:4-5; Josh 24:9-10; 2 Pet 2:15-16; Jude 11), and the teaching of ‘that woman Jezebel’ (2:20; cf. 1 Kgs 16:31; 18:1-19; 19:1-3; 21:23, 25; 2 Kgs 9:22, 30-37),”¹⁴ who teach local Christ-followers to practice idolatry, perform non-halakhic sex acts,¹⁵ and eat food that is unclean.

Revelation’s letters to Pergamum and Thyatira outline the grotesque “threat of hybrid”¹⁶—an internal threat of willful and repulsive assimilation¹⁷—perpetuated by false teachers of Christ. Because they practice idolatry, fornicate, and eat foods that are unclean, they represent for John non-halakhic, Greco-Roman-sympathetic followers of Christ. “The world, for this group, [is] . . . standing less *against* the larger culture than *in*

¹³ See Chia, “On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1,” 182.

¹⁴ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32.

¹⁵ Unless their sexual immorality is read as a metaphor for idolatry.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷ Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?: Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132.

it.”¹⁸ Their assimilationist views and practices are so vile, in fact, that they become “co-constitution[al]”¹⁹ “*figures of hate* (‘you hate [*miseis*] the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate,’ 2:6).”²⁰ We see this hatred reflected in their punishments. Christ-followers who adhere to the assimilationist teachings of Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans will be tortured unless they repent for their wrongdoings: “Repent. If not, [Christ] will come to you soon and make war against [you] with the sword of [his] mouth” (2:16); “Beware, I am throwing Jezebel on a bed and those who commit adultery with Jezebel will be thrown into terrible affliction” (2:22).

While Jezebel’s and Balaam’s relationships with co-constitutional “figures of hate” are found in a number of canonical and extracanonical sources,²¹ the Nicolaitans are unknown outside the book of Revelation. Scholars such as R. H. Charles, Colin J. Hemer, and D. F. Watson claim that they are associated symbolically with Balaam, based on etymological associations. When broken down, Nikolaus [νικᾶ λαόν] means “conquer the people” and Balaam [בלע עם] means “he has consumed the people.”²² Others, such as

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 31.

²⁰ Ibid., 168. Emphasis in the original.

²¹ On Jezebel, see 1 Kgs. 16:31; 18:1–19; 19:1–3; 21:23, 25; 2 Kgs. 9:22, 30–37; Josephus Ant. 8.371, 220, 224, 256, 9.47, 109, 122, 124; Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 10.2ff. On Balaam, see Deut. 23; Num. 22–24, 25:1–2; 2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11; Philo (Cher. 32.1; 33.1; Det. 71.1; Immut. 181.1; Conf 159.2; Migr. 113.1, 115.2; Mut. 202.4) and Josephus (Ant. 4.104, 107–11, 126, 157); Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10.2; *Aboth* 5.19. Extrabiblical citations credited to John W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 128, n. 11–16.

²² See R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 52; D. F. Watson, “Nicolaitans,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman, vol. 4 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 1106–1107; Colin J. Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 11 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 89. For more on this notion and the

Heikki Räisänen and David Aune, contend that the Nicolaitans follow an actual person (Nikolaus),²³ making the point that John’s use of metaphorical naming elsewhere need not be attributed to all names in all places. But even if a man named Nikolaus founded and/or led this group, not much is known about him. While some contend that the group share ties with the Nicolaus of Acts 6:5, or is perhaps akin to Corinthian Christ-followers who thought that eating food sacrificed to idols gave them extra *gnosis*—or further, is perhaps still associated with gentile Judaizers—specific claims about the Nicolaitans and their leader are not stable. For reasons such as this, Craig Koester asserts that “it is enough to associate the views of the Nicolaitans with those of the people at Pergamum and Thyatira, who were willing to eat meat from offerings made to Greco-Roman deities in most if not all circumstances.”²⁴

In addition, while scholars have previously understood Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans as constituting three separate groups, “Jezebel” is now more commonly viewed as a Nicolaitan prophet, and “Balaam” as a parodic element of Nicolaitan practices. As Moore explains, “the phrase ‘the teaching of Balaam’ would appear to be a synonym for ‘the teaching of the Nicolaitans,’”²⁵ thereby making it seem as if Balaam is associated with the Nicolaitan group. “[T]he content of [Jezebel’s] teaching (‘teaching and beguiling my slaves to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols,’ 2:20) is

scholarly conversation surrounding it, see Marshall, *Parables of War*, 129. See also Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 263.

²³See Heikki Räisänen, “The Nicolaitans: Apoc. 2; Acts 6,” *ANRW* II.26.2 (1996): 1068; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, vol. 52A, *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1997), 148; See also Marshall, *Parables of War*, 129, n. 20.

²⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 264.

²⁵ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32.

[also] described in terms identical to that of the Nicolaitans (2:14–15).”²⁶ Most contemporary scholars of Revelation thus read “Jezebel” as a code name for a historical individual contemporary with Revelation—a female Christ-confessor and rival prophet—but do not tend to read “Balaam” as a code name for a specific contemporary of the Apocalypse. Instead, “Balaam” tends to be read merely as a polemical trope deployed by the text to deride the group to which it is opposed (the group of which “Jezebel” is most likely the leader, and which it terms “the Nicolaitans”).

Regardless of who the Nicolaitans were, or who was or was not “real,” scholarly consensus remains that Balaam and Jezebel are “surely symbolic names employed by John to associate his adversaries with negative figures in the Hebrew Bible.”²⁷ This symbolism thus opens the text for a dialogical reading; the Balaam trope and Jezebel prophethood carry with them the remnants of Hebrew Bible personas through their Jewish network of textuality. In order to explore the dialogical meaning of Revelation 2, we need to move between it and its dialogical subtexts.²⁸ In the following sections, I will “trace the relations” between Revelation 2 and its Hebrew Bible intertexts, focusing first on Balaam (including his relationship with Balak; Rev. 2:14) and then more specifically on Jezebel, the text’s local whore. In each case, I will highlight Revelation’s dialogical use of humor, and in so doing will explain in more detail how the Apocalypse constructs “a comic counterworld in juxtaposition with grotesquely distorted reality.”²⁹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 127.

²⁸ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 1.

²⁹ Bernhard Zimmermann, “Aristophanes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro, trans. Carolin Hahnemann and Zachary P. Biles (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150.

Balaam and Balak

In Revelation 2:14, we learn that there are Christ-followers in Pergamum who “hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication.” Readers familiar with Revelation’s dialogical “systems, codes, and traditions”³⁰ recognize that this Balaam has been given that pseudonym in reference to a previous Balaam, a divine seer who cursed the Israelites with King Balak to commit idolatry and intermarry in the book of Numbers (Num. 22:15-24:25). Because Balaam and Balak are associated with these stumbling blocks in both Revelation and a previous narrative, we are led to assume that Revelation plays with previous narrative to make its claims.

By way of background, Balaam and Balak appear in Numbers 22, a text in which humorous incongruities abound. According to Anthony J. Petrotta, for instance, while the narrative “is not marked as a joke with recognizable visual cartoon or verbal opening (‘Have you heard the one about . . .’),” it might as well be.³¹ The narrative “has a classic escalating triad structure and a [comic] likelihood factor with which a reader must reckon.”³² King Balak asks Balaam to force the Israelites to leave his territory. God sends an armed angel to stop Balaam from forcing the Israelites to leave King Balak’s territory. But despite the fact that Balaam is a *seer*, he *cannot see* the angel. Balaam’s she-ass, however, can, and in fear of the angel’s sword, runs off of the road. Balaam, of course, has no idea why his donkey runs off the road, and so assumes in the end that she has lost

³⁰ Allen, *Intertextuality*, 1.

³¹ Anthony J. Petrotta, “A Test of Balaam: Locating Humor in a Biblical Text,” in *Probing the Frontiers of Biblical Studies*, ed. J. Harold Ellens and John T. Greene, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 111 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 292.

³² *Ibid.*

her mind. The scenario continues multiple times, thus evoking not only the comic mode of repetition, but also a stunningly daft itinerary for the story's protagonist: Step 1: Watch donkey go crazy. Step 2: Get mad at donkey for going crazy. Step 3: Hate donkey for going crazy. Step 4: *Beat* donkey for going crazy. Step 5: Forget donkey went crazy. Step 6: Repeat.

This cycle, however, does not go on forever. Eventually, God gives the donkey power to speak, and with it, the ability to tell Balaam why she keeps stopping in the middle of the road. But instead of wondering *why* the donkey is speaking or *how* the donkey is speaking, Balaam acts as if having a conversation with his own ass is in no way out of the ordinary:

The Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you? Why have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have mocked me! If I had a sword with me, I would kill you right now!" But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this very day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?" And he said, "No." (Num. 22:28-30)

Despite the fact that Balaam needed God to stop him from repeating the same mistake on the road, he needed only one pointed question from his donkey to lower his sword. But what is perhaps most humorous about this entire episode is the fact that Balaam is actually correct: He *has* been mocked, just not in the way he thinks. In other words, Balaam is parodied not because his donkey is halting in the road, but because he is unable to see why his donkey has stopped. As R. P. Carroll writes, "The great seer is reduced by this story to the level of a blithering idiot arguing and fighting with his she-ass over something which, although quite evident to the animal, he could not see."³³ Or as J.

³³ R. P. Carroll, "Is Humour Also Among the Prophets?," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York, NY: The Almond Press, 1990), 173.

William Whedbee puts it, “Balaam the diviner-seer is satirized as a blind fool in contrast to his talking ass that has super-vision.”³⁴

The satirical tone of this encounter becomes even clearer later in the narrative, when we learn that Balaam—in overturning Balak’s commission to curse the Israelite’s by actually attempting to *bless* the Israelites (Num. 24:1)—unintentionally performs a *double turn* by cursing them instead. In Numbers 24:17-24, Balaam predicts the destruction of the Israelites’ enemy nations—including the Moabites, the Shethhites, the Edomites, the Amalekites, the Kenites, the Ashurites, and the Kittim—but instead of his prediction coming true, the Israelites begin to fornicate with foreigners and eat food sacrificed to idols (Num. 25:1-2; cf. Num. 31:16). The characterization of Balaam in the earlier Numbers cycle “sets up” this later undertaking. By the time we read of Balaam’s failed attempt to bless the Israelites, we are not surprised by his ineptitude. We already know that he would be unaware of how ridiculous his hyperbolic “blessings” really are. This humor undoes Balaam. His blessings *curse* Israel, so much so that he is eventually killed for his wrongdoings (see Josh. 13:22). The depictions of him legitimate the punishment for his wrongdoing. They “veer towards the ‘scorn, ridicule’ pole, that is, the tendentious and even cruel and bitter [classification of humor] rather than the merry facet of humor.”³⁵ This “contentious/subversive kind [of humor]. It undermines convention and [Balaam’s] authority” as a divine seer.³⁶

³⁴ J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge, UK, and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8. See also David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, *Brown Judaic Studies* 301 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 29-41.

³⁵ Athalya Brenner, “On the Semitic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and

Numbers also “uses distorted personal names” to convey its disparagement and mock the characters.³⁷ Balaam, for instance, means: “he has consumed the people”—or as Radday translates it, “[he is an] abuser of a people.”³⁸ The narrative’s use of the word (התעללה) 22:29) also lends insight into the tendentious aspects of the text. Translated as “mock” on page 174 above, התעללה can also mean “fool” or “to make sport of.” The same word, for example, is used in the Exodus narrative when God hardens Pharaoh’s heart: “I have ‘made fools’ of the Egyptians” (Exod. 10:2). It is used also in 1 Sam. 31:4, in which Saul is wounded and pleads for death so the Philistines will not “‘make sport’ of [him].”³⁹ What is interesting about התעללה is that it can also be translated as “abuse,” such as in common translations of Judges 19:25: “They raped [the Levite’s concubine] and abused her all night long until morning” (JSB, NRSV, KJV, NIV, to name a few).⁴⁰ In Numbers 22, התעללה indicates that the Balaam narrative is “funny” with purpose: it is a game of winner and loser. Balaam, who thought he was in the lead, is outwitted by an ass. The

Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York, NY: The Almond Press, 1990), 42.

³⁶ Athalya Brenner, “Who’s Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who’s Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19, no. 63 (1994): 41.

³⁷ Yehuda T. Radday, “Humour in Names,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York, NY: The Almond Press, 1990), 63.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ These focus texts and translations are from Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 163–164.

⁴⁰ I refer here to the Hebrew vocabulary given the Semitic style of Revelation’s Greek (see chapter one). The Septuagint term is *empaizow*. For a reading of humor in Judges 19, see Stuart Lasine, “Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (June 1984): 37–59. On Lasine’s reading, the butt of the joke is on the Levite for not realizing his own absurdity. There is double irony in this sense, I would add, in that the Levite is really the one being mocked (Hebrew *alal*; Greek *empaizow*), not the concubine.

“seer”, moreover, is the narrative punchline; his response illustrates the abuse he feels, so much so that he is ready to take up arms in response.

King Balak, too, is the butt of such joking. According to Petrotta, Balak is a “caricature of a monarch.”⁴¹ Although “it is quite likely that we don’t have the linguistic and cultural competence to say what a verbal [joke] opening would look like to an ancient Israelite,” the juxtaposition of his actions with those of Balaam’s begs the question of comic intent.⁴² For example, while Balaam eventually sees the angel and decides to bless the Israelites instead of curse them (Num. 23:7-10), Balak, in response to Balaam’s newfound Yahwism, falls into a frenzy: “What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!” (Num. 23:11). In fact, rather than end things there, Balak repeats his itinerary for a second and third time: Step 1: Ask Balaam to curse the Israelites. Step 2: Make sure Balaam has everything he needs to curse the Israelites. Step 3: Panic as Balaam blesses the Israelites. Step 4: Forget that Balaam has blessed the Israelites. Step 5: Repeat. Unlike Balaam, “Balak is blindly determined”—mechanical to the point of being absurd.⁴³ In the end, Balak wins nothing, and the Israelites prosper once again.⁴⁴

Revelation, I argue, carries with it the humor of the original Balaam and Balak narrative via dialogical subtext. By associating its local adversaries with Balaam and

⁴¹ See Petrotta, “A Test of Balaam: Locating Humor in a Biblical Text,” 292, n. 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 296–297.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 297. For the classic view of humor in/and the mechanical, see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesely Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008).

⁴⁴ This is undermined once we learn that Balaam’s blessings were unintentional curses. See Num. 25:1-2.

Balak, it both invites readers into the realm of the comic and molds its latter-day⁴⁵ Balaam and Balak as its dialogic punchlines. Those who follow the grain of Revelation's joking—who understand the text's comic double-voicedness—know that Revelation's "Balaam" is a seer who cannot see. They know that Revelation's "Balak" mirrors more a mechanical "thing" than a self-aware ruler. We may even insert humor theorist Henri Bergson as an implied interpreter here: "The more paltry and uniformly repeated [one's] claims of the body [and mind], the more striking will be the result. . . . *We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being [morally and physically] a thing [i.e., mechanical].*"⁴⁶ By associating its adversaries with idiots of lore, Revelation makes clear that its own "Balaam" and "Balak"—and their followers—are a "them" that cannot be "us."

Jezebel

Why She Is Hated Most

When comparing Jezebel to the Nicolaitans and the Balaam trope, Jezebel is more reviled. To the messenger of the assembly in Thyatira, John writes:

I know your works and your love and your faith, and your service and your endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: You tolerate the woman Jezebel, the one who calls herself a prophetess, and who is teaching and misleading my slaves to commit whorings^[47] and to eat foods scarified to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent of her whorings. Behold, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her and do not repent, I am throwing into great distress.

⁴⁵ I borrow this "latter-day" phrasing from Steve Friesen, who uses it humorously with regard to Jezebel in "Sarcasm in Revelation 2–3: Churches, Christians, True Jews, and Satanic Synagogues," 134.

⁴⁶ See Bergson, *Laughter*, 30, 33. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁷ I borrow the use of "whorings," as a parallel translation of "fornication," from John W. Marshall, "Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John's Anti-Imperial Apocalypse," in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 17–32.

And I will strike her children with death. And all the assemblies will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts. I will give to each of you as your works deserve. (Rev. 2:19-23)

On the one hand, the text here is describing yet another issue of cultural boundaries. As Pamela Thimmes explains, anthropological studies reveal that “[f]ood and sex are aspects of bodily culture, the backdrop against which play out an assortment of associations, symbols, human interactions and cultural boundaries.”⁴⁸ They are linked with cultural rules and taboos that regulate and are regulated by the social order of things.⁴⁹ The local villains Revelation derides are thus led by a woman who crosses boundary lines; she ingests foods that are unclean, commits sexual profanities, and encourages Christ-followers to perform collaboratively with the larger imperial order. As John Marshall puts it, her unclean practices serve as “a divider, a litmus test of the authenticity of Judaism.”⁵⁰ In this sense, she is not much different from her previously mentioned male counterparts.

On the other hand, the description of Jezebel is more “affect intensive” than those who precede her (i.e. “Balaam” and other “Nicolaitans”).⁵¹ While the practices of Balaam and the Nicolaitans are described as equally intolerable—and are described, like those of Jezebel, to deride the Nicolaitan group Revelation opposes—it is the woman Jezebel whom the text vilifies as the leader of the Nicolaitan group and its most hated local enemy. Not only are the unclean foods swirling in her mouth paralleled to the sustenance squirted in and through her genitals (“she eats foods unclean” while teaching Christ-

⁴⁸ Pamela Thimmes, “‘Teaching and Beguiling My Servants’: The Letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2.18-29,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2009), 85.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” 25.

⁵¹ See Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 164, 167.

followers to “practice her whorings,” 2:20), but her grotesqueries are pronounced contagious to those who follow her. Unlike Balaam’s non-halakhic practices, the vile behavior endorsed by Jezebel sticks onto her followers; “She puts filthy, defiling flesh in her body, and the practice is contagious.”⁵² Those who behave like Jezebel thus “pollute” like Jezebel, and her “pollution [is] intolerable.”⁵³

According to Gilbert Desrosiers, Revelation’s description of Jezebel is cheap rhetoric. “Instead of dealing with [the prophetess] fairly, John resorted to insults.”⁵⁴ In addition to being thrown on a bed—a “possible veiled threat of [sexual] violence” (see below)—she is “pejoratively called Jezebel.”⁵⁵ Even more than Balaam, there is tactical reason for this. While the former tends to be read as a trope used to undermine the Nicolaitans, “Jezebel” is read as a specific person within this group. “She *is* a code name for a [Christ-following] prophet at Thyatira,”⁵⁶ who appears in a variety of sources as a dialogical figure of hate. To use the words of Melissa Jackson, “Even women who are hazy on who [Jezebel] was or unable to recount what she did are still aware that they would not like to be one of her: a Jezebel. ‘No woman (or man) in the Hebrew Scriptures endures a more hostile press than [she does].’”⁵⁷ The Apocalypse thus abuses the prophetess in code, so as not only to strip her of her real name, but moreover to associate her negatively with further subtext.

⁵² Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 167.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gilbert Desrosiers, *An Introduction to Revelation: A Pathway to Interpretation* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Continuum, 2005), 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32; emphasis in the original.

⁵⁷ Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 171. Here, she is quoting Phyllis Trible, “Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers,” *JBL* 114 (1995), 3–19 (4).

The subtext of Revelation's Jezebel is found primarily in 1 and 2 Kings. Here, Jezebel is the non-Israelite wife of King Ahab. She is associated with false gods, false prophets, and those who do not worship YHWH. According to the Deuteronomist, "Four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah . . . eat at Jezebel's table" (1 Kgs. 18:19). That is a lot of false prophets! But in addition to associating personally with false prophets and false gods, Jezebel persuades her husband to enforce worship of Baal and Asherah throughout the northern Kingdom of Israel. Along the way, she persecutes many of YHWH's prophets, and in turn becomes the prophet Elijah's "sworn enemy."⁵⁸ Via dialogical transcript, John is saying that the "Jezebel" of Thyatira, like the Jezebel of 1 and 2 Kings, is dangerous to those who practice proper halakha. Because she encourages those around her to embrace the non-halakhic customs of the larger Greco-Roman world, Revelation likens her to a woman who led the Israelites astray by similar means.

I think there is further reason, however, that John likens Thyatira's stumbling block to the queen of the Northern kingdom of Israel, which seceded from the Davidic monarchy under Jeroboam's reign in 930 BCE. Although my focus here is on halakha and Revelation's rejection of Gentile practices, the Apocalypse's adversaries are not solely those who reject its halakhic ways. Anyone who combats the inauguration of the messianic age is also an enemy. As John Collins writes, "The apocalyptic visionaries, by definition, wanted something more. . . . The only adequate fulfillment of apocalyptic hopes would be a city where the role of the temple was filled by the actual presence of

⁵⁸ Desrosiers, *An Introduction to Revelation*, 80.

God.”⁵⁹ To a large degree, this is the whole point of John’s Apocalypse: to bring about the עולם הבא. Collins writes further that “much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature was inspired by three major crises that befell Jerusalem and its temple.”⁶⁰ Whereas Collins names the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians, the corrupt leadership under the Hasmonean priesthood, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, I would further subtexts: The divided Kingdom perpetuated by Jeroboam in the 10th century BCE, followed by the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE. A major reason for this is that the literature written in response to the Assyrian conquest perpetuated particular notions of the Davidic monarchy and, by proxy, that of Jeroboam. Parallel passages in Isaiah and 2 Kings, for example, indicate that the reason Jerusalem survived the Assyrian assault is because of David and David’s relationship with Zion: “Thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: ‘I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David’” (Is. 37:33-35); “Thus says the Lord concerning the King of Assyria: ‘I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David’” (2 Kgs. 19:32-24). Although not directly related to the Assyrian conquest (which did not occur yet in the chronology of the Tanakh narrative), 2 Samuel says much the same: “David’s house and David’s kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; David’s throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16; cf. 1 Sam. 25:28). Ideas such as these infused the communal memory of Second Temple and post-Temple Judaism, so much so that messianic expectations relied on them. According to Bart Ehrman, Davidic messianists understood through these texts that “[a]nointed one

⁵⁹ John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 177.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

was still to come—a future king like David, one of his descendants, who would reestablish the Davidic kingdom and make Israel once more a great and glorious independent state, the envy of all the other nations.”⁶¹ In short, David and *Davidness*,⁶² which included a relationship *with* Jerusalem, became paramount.

We see this in the book of Revelation. The Apocalypse’s messianic vision comes to fruition through Jesus as the Davidic messiah. This is made clear by Jesus’ own “self-designation”: “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16; see also 1:1; 2:12; 5:5, 16), which is added to his earlier messianic title as, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5; cf. Gen. 49:9-10).⁶³ In short: Jesus as Davidic messiah will destroy Israel’s enemies, so as to establish a new monarchy where the role of temple is filled by the Israelite God, in the New Jerusalem. Revelation believes that messianic end-times will center in Jerusalem. Christ will fulfill the messianic expectation by creating a *unified kingdom* (implied by the 144,000 sealed out of *every* tribe of Israel; Rev. 7:4-10) of Jewish Jesus-followers *in Jerusalem*. Although many Israelites in the 10th century BCE were not happy with the unified monarchy’s taxations and centralized power systems—thus leading, for example, to the Northern kingdom’s separation from it—Jezebel, from the perspective of a first-century Jew, operated against two major tenants of Davidic messianism: the centrality of the Davidic monarchy and Zion theology. Revelation names the charlatan of Thyatira “Jezebel” as a means by which to not only highlight the prophetess’ own non-halakhic ways, but also to highlight her as a stumbling block for future messianic fulfillment.

⁶¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014), 115.

⁶² For more on Davidic messianism, see chapter five.

⁶³ See Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 176.

Still, there is more. In addition to naming the prophetess symbolically—as one associated with poor eating habits and a divided Kingdom—she is charged with “committing whorings” (πορνεῦσαι; Rev. 2:20-21). Although many scholars note that this is likely a metaphor used to indicate Jezebel’s positive attitude toward Greco-Roman practices, it still brings Jezebel’s sexed body into the foreground. This is the *woman* Jezebel (γυναῖκα Ἰεζάβελ), and her womanly parts (seem to) be showing. Feminist readers thus find themselves asking: Does Jezebel’s womanly body (or status) contribute in any way to John’s “othering” of her?

According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the answer is no:

It is obvious that Revelation’s “othering” and vilifying invectives are hurled against *both* wo/men and men. Insofar as John uses the same expression “practicing immorality or fornication” to refer to the followers of “Jezebel” and to those of “Balaam,” he does not vilify her alone. He does not accuse her of moral depravity because she is a “woman” but because he disagrees with her theological stance.⁶⁴

Schüssler Fiorenza is right. Balaam *is* charged with whoring/fornication also: “But I have a few things against you: You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who [led people to] . . . commit whoring[s] (πορνεῦσαι; Rev. 2:14). Schüssler Fiorenza argues further, however, that because John uses the same language for men and women in his attacks, John’s issue is not against women of power, either. “John does not argue against the wo/man prophet ‘Jezebel’ because she usurped prophetic office and leadership *as a woman*, but because he did not agree with her teachings.”⁶⁵ On her reading, John’s vilification of Jezebel actually indicates that women held leadership roles in early Christ-centered groups, which in turn transforms John’s negative rhetoric into something more

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 223.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

positive: Women in early Christ-centered communities were not only *there*, but also *important*. “Read against the grain, Revelation tells us that one of the renounced leaders of the churches in Asia Minor was a wo/man who could claim the official title ‘prophet.’ Such a reading is possible because, unlike in Rev. 17–18, the text refers here to an actual wo/man.”⁶⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins contends similarly, writing that “John’s name-calling has obscured the fact that we have here an important indication of the leadership of women in the early church of this region.”⁶⁷

While Schüssler Fiorenza and Yarbro Collins highlight the historical plausibility that women took charge in early Christ-centered communities, others emphasize that Jezebel’s womanly status is still problematic for John. Her sex still *adds* a particular method of forcefulness to her demise. As Pamela Thimmes makes clear, “There are some striking differences” between Balaam and Jezebel.⁶⁸ “John does not refer to Balaam as a prophet, and he does not use the sexualized and violence-laden language in describing Balaam’s threat in Pergamum that he does with Jezebel’s threat in Thyatira.”⁶⁹ Tina Pippin argues much the same thing, contending that Jezebel, unlike Balaam, is the object of male sexual gaze; she is an “erotic imag[e] with erotic power over men.”⁷⁰ In other words, it is *Jezebel* who is thrown on a bed and tortured: “Beware, I am throwing *her* on a bed, and those who commit adultery with *her* I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of *her* doings” (emphases mine; Rev. 2:22). Knowing this, the question

⁶⁶ Ibid., 222.

⁶⁷ Quoted by Desrosiers, *An Introduction to Revelation*, 80.

⁶⁸ Thimmes, “‘Teaching and Beguiling My Servants’: The Letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2.18-29,)” 78.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Pippin writes this of “all the apocalyptic females.” See Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 73.

returns: Might, indeed, John's issue with Jezebel be heightened *because* of her female status?

Revelation, unfortunately, does not say. And neither does Jezebel. Throughout the Apocalypse, Jezebel is voiceless, unable to respond to and defend herself against the text's attacks.⁷¹ But while the level of Revelation's misogyny may not be known, the image of a voiceless Jezebel being thrown onto a bed certainly insinuates a misogynistic undertone. In reading the passage, I find myself asking: Is Jezebel being punished via Levitical code—"Fornication for fornication," or worse, *forced* fornication for fornication (Exod. 21:24-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21; cf. Matt. 5:38-39)? Tina Pippin has argued that a feminist critical optic may require such a view. In *Death and Desire*, she writes, "The feminist reading I am doing . . . sees women as marginalized . . . and/or used as sexual objects and abused."⁷² The image of Christ, with "eyes like the flame of fire" (2:18) thrusting Jezebel on a bed (2:22) certainly raises issues of sexual humiliation.⁷³ And,

⁷¹ Thimmes, "Teaching and Beguiling My Servants': The Letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29)," 79. Even if given a voice, though, the fact of the matter remains that the author (presumably John) is in control, which only furthers the argument that this is not a text for women. It is John who writes the character, and therefore John who would write the response. As Thimmes argues, the women in Revelation "are John's women . . . for he has constructed them and controls them" (ibid., 70).

⁷² Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 53.

⁷³ Most interpreters take an apologetic approach to 2:22. Koester provides a typical example of this in the following explanation: "The use of the word 'bed' (*kline*) plays on several aspects of meaning. First, Jezebel's accommodation of Greco-Roman religious practice is compared to immorality and adultery, which were actions committed in bed (Sir 23:18). Second, the sexual imagery is used metaphorically for eating food that has been offered in sacrifice to various gods. Those dining at meals held in honor of a deity often reclined on a couch, which was also called a *kline*, so the word could have both sexual and meal connotations. Third, the expression 'put to bed' could mean contracting severe illness (1 Macc 1:5; Jdt 8:3; cf. 2 Kgs 1:4; Ps 41:3; Matt 9:2), thereby showing symmetry in divine judgment: Jezebel teaches that it is acceptable to recline on a bed or couch at meals honoring other deities, which is like going to bed in a kind of religious adultery, so the judgment is to be put to bed with illness. Fourth, people might die in bed

given that the immediate context is full of references to fornication and adultery, reading for rape does seem appropriate. To use the words of Marshall, “The action from which Jezebel was, according to Rev. 2:21, formerly given time to repent is her πορνεία. At its root, the term indicates the commerce of prostitution. . . . By accusing Jezebel of πορνεία, Revelation casts her as a prostitute.”⁷⁴ To put it otherwise, she is the local whore. The threat of violence against her thus mirrors the sexual threats she has brought upon Revelation’s implied community (again, perhaps representing a Levitical “sexual violation for sexual violation”). Moreover, in actually viewing Revelation 2:22 as a fantasy of sexual revenge, readers notice that it is a punishment reserved for Jezebel alone. Other villains may be “thrown into great distress” or “struck dead” (2:22-23), but it is solely the *woman* Jezebel who is thrown violently onto the bed. Balaam is not. Other Nicolaitans are not.

Making a Mockery of Her

In addition to depicting Jezebel as a sexual object of disgust, Revelation makes a mockery of her. For implied readers in particular—i.e., halakhically-oriented readers familiar with the text’s dialogical cues—Revelation’s attacks yield a certain sense of wit.

(Gen 49:33; 2 Chr 6:14), and ancient funerary monuments often pictured a dead person reclining on a *kline* as a person would do at a banquet. Working with all four meanings, Revelation likens festive dining on a couch to sexual infidelity in bed, while intimating that it is a form of religious infidelity, which will lead to being put to rest through sickness and death.” Koester, *Revelation*, 299. The likelihood that Jezebel is being thrown on a sickbed (as opposed to being sexually humiliated) seems very slim to me, given, as stated above, that the immediate context is full of references to fornication and adultery. It should not go unnoted, however, that “fornication” can also be a metaphor for eating the meat sacrificed to other gods, which ostensibly acknowledges those gods as the source of life. Cf. Hosea 1-3 to see how “covenant” is construed through images of marriage and adultery/“harlotry.”

⁷⁴ Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” 22.

We see this already in the name: Ἰεζάβελ. In addition to referring to the wicked queen of ancient Israelite history, “Jezebel” carries with it a slew of parodic signification. When vocalized, the Greek Ἰεζάβελ associates dialogically⁷⁵ with Hebrew phrases such as “where is the prince?” (*Izebul*) and “no nobility” (*I-zebul*), and an Arabic cognate for “dung” (*Zebel*).⁷⁶ Naming the prophetess “Jezebel” thus functions as comedic wordplay that, in effect, reveals a hidden incongruity: Jezebel is not who she thinks she is. For all intents and purposes, she is a piece of shit—always already devoured, digested, and excreted by dogs (see below)—and readers privy to Revelation’s humorous paronomasia are invited to see her as the “dung” she really is.

The humor evoked here is dependent on an even deeper dialogism, however. Revelation, I suggest, envisages a joke within a joke within a joke. For not only does the use of the name “Jezebel” mock the prophetess in its own right—creating for implied readers a vision of someone who is *not* righteous in the minds of *real* Israelite prophets—the stories with which she dialogues add other comical dimensions to the text. The fact that Revelation introduces Jezebel via the Balaam association is striking in this regard, as the original Balaam narrative is filled with humorous incongruities. To quote Moore once more, “[T]he content of [Jezebel’s] teaching (‘teaching and beguiling my slaves to practice fornication and to eat food scarified to idols,’ 2:20) is [like Balaam] described in terms identical to that of the Nicolaitans (2:14-15).”⁷⁷ In other words, because Jezebel is associated specifically with Balaam by way of her similar non-halakhic actions, Jezebel, too, is associated dialogically with the Balaam intertext. That the original Balaam

⁷⁵ Akin in particular to Bakhtin’s *polyglossia*, see chapter two, footnote 49.

⁷⁶ See Gale A. Yee, “Jezebel,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3, 848. See also Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 172.

⁷⁷ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32.

narrative employs elements of the comic (e.g., incongruities, reversal, repetitions, etc.), moreover, signals to us that we have entered the realm of the comic in Revelation's Balaam/Balak/Jezebel narrative. In sum, because Revelation introduces us to Jezebel in parallel and with the same descriptors as Balaam and Balak (they all worship idols and practice fornication), the humorous play associated with Balaam and Balak expands into its view of Jezebel also.

If this dialogical association does not suffice, there is humor in Jezebel's original story, too. Although not necessarily bursting with wit, "the comic," according to Melissa Jackson, still "breaks through" in the story of Jezebel in 1 and 2 Kings.⁷⁸ In her view, the inversion of gender roles functions as one of these breakthroughs. Jezebel is the "take-charge woman,"⁷⁹ she writes, leaving Ahab the fool who always follows his wife's demands.⁸⁰ In other words, although Ahab is King, it is really Jezebel who "wears the crown." We see examples of this inversion throughout the 1 Kings narrative. In 1 Kings 21, for example, Ahab arrives home feeling defeated and unwilling to eat because Naboth would not give him his vineyard. Jezebel responds: "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful" (1 Kgs. 21:7). According to Jackson, Jezebel's tone here "drips with sarcasm."⁸¹ In actuality, Ahab has no idea how to govern, so much so that Jezebel is more likely saying, "Asherah Almighty! Can you not do *anything*?" Ahab's inability to rule even over those around him is mirrored in his inability to rule over his own stomach. He cannot feed himself, and must rely on his wife's commands for sustenance: "Get up. Eat. Stop whining."

⁷⁸ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 171.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

At first blush, King Ahab appears to be the text's sole comic butt. As Brenner writes on humor-based incongruity:

Humour consists in the way that incongruity is suddenly recognized, and the recognition will extend to the cultural or physical norms that are breached. In this way humour can undermine the given world. The comic juxtapositions of ineffectual male ruler, his irregular sexuality/bodily functions and the nature of his affinities with females on the one hand, and of female aptitude on the other hand, are easily recognizable as inappropriate or ambiguous—hence comical—in an utterly patriarchal culture. The implied analogy between ruling but incompetent male, subordinate but competent female, signifies the ruler's virtual impotence.⁸²

For a Jewish first-century reader attuned to humor, however, Jezebel's relationship with Ahab not only mirrors the types of topsy-turvy character dynamics that were mocked regularly by biblical and Greco-Roman humorists, but also the types of women ancient humor texts warned against. On Roman satire, for example, Amy Richlin writes that satirists constructed themselves textually as the “normal male,” and in so doing ridiculed anyone who did not comply with his “desired social norms,” including especially his “societal notion of women.”⁸³ In 1 and 2 Kings, Ahab is akin to the dimwitted “man” of the house, while Jezebel mirrors the nagging wife which satirists notify against (cf. Prov. 21:9, 19; 25:24). In his *Satire 6*, for example, Juvenal even insists that it is better for men to engage in homoerotic sex than to have to answer to women like her: “Can you bear to be the slave of a woman[?] . . . Don't you think it better to sleep with a little boy-friend?” (30-34). For Revelation's implied reader, Jezebel echoes the take-charge women Juvenal satirizes, and Ahab mirrors the men Juvenal critiques for falling for them.

⁸² Brenner, “Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism?,” 43.

⁸³ Amy Richlin, “Invective Against Women in Roman Satire,” in *Latin Verse Satire: An Anthology and Reader*, ed. Paul Allen Miller (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 377.

Throughout the 1 and 2 Kings intertext, Jezebel also plays the trickster, a key character trait to both biblical and Greco-Roman humor.⁸⁴ Like Ehud in Judges 3 or the clever slave in Plautus' *Pseudolos*, Jezebel drives the plot through deception—that is, by pretending to be someone she is not. This is seen most clearly in her plot to steal Naboth's vineyard. After Ahab arrives home unable to eat, Jezebel writes letters to the elders and nobles in Ahab's name: "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Take them out, and stone him to death" (1 Kgs. 21:9-10). Jezebel thus tricks the elders and nobles into thinking that *she* is Ahab *and* that Naboth was unfaithful. Her trick appears to be a success: The men stone Naboth, and Ahab takes the vineyard.

As the plot moves forward, however, readers learn that the joke inevitably falls on Jezebel. According to Helena Zlotkin, this functions primarily through the theme of

⁸⁴ "The term *trickster* is used by anthropologists and folklorists to describe a particular character who appears in the lore of various cultures . . . [a character who is a] deceiver, creator, acculturator, unmasked liar, survivor." Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 45. Jackson summarizes Niditch's five-step trickster pattern as follows: "(1) the hero has low status, so (2) enacts a deception to improve her/his status. (3) The successful trick leads to improved status for the hero. (4) However, eventually the deception is revealed, and (5) while surviving, the hero is returned to marginal/outsider/reduced status." Jackson, however, pushes back on Niditch's fifth point, arguing that reduction need not happen in all cases. See Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 44 and 49. On the sociality of the trickster motif—and in turn the productivity/sans reduction of the trickster—Jackson adds that tricksters "expose social deficiencies." As such, they "and their stories—if allowed—function as social correctives, as society can choose to cease endorsing those deficient values brought to the fore by the rule-breaking, boundary-crossing trickster. As symbols of marginalization, outcast tricksters have much to offer society's *actual* outcasts. They offer a form of defense and resistance. . . . Tricksters offer hope for these marginalized persons, as they promise that a measure of success is possible and that, at the very least, survival is probable" (ibid., 46). For more on the trickster type, its prominence in biblical texts, and a bibliography of trickster-focused studies, see ibid., 41-66.

fasting and feasting.⁸⁵ Even though Jezebel pushes Ahab to feast rather than to fast, both she and Ahab, in the end, are the ones who are feasted upon.⁸⁶ In 1 Kings 22, Ahab dies from a battle wound against the Arameans, and the dogs lick up his blood. And in 2 Kings 9, the new King, Jehu, orders Jezebel's eunuchs to throw her out the window. Jezebel dies and, as Jehu feasts post-murder, so too do the dogs upon Jezebel's body. In an ironic turnabout, the Deuteronomist⁸⁷ outwits Jezebel at her own game. But there is more. According to Francisco O. García-Treto, this is more than just irony. It is grotesque and carnivalesque. For not only does the Deuteronomist decrown the normative ruler(s), so to speak—an important aspect of carnivalistic pageantry—but he (they)⁸⁸ does so by “highlighting the ‘lower bodily stratum’”⁸⁹:

[The Queen] is in the end the subject of a sudden and drastic “uncrowning.” From below, Jehu calls for her overthrow. . . . What Bakhtin calls the “lower bodily stratum” becomes suddenly dominant at this point in the narrative. Jehu goes in to eat and drink, to feast, that is, to fill his belly, quite literally over Jezebel's dead body, which concurrently is transformed into excreta.⁹⁰

In sum, the grotesque does not negate the humor here; rather, it adds to it. The trickeries, reversals, and ironies used throughout are comical, and they invite implied readers to laugh at the King's⁹¹ and Queen's defilement and demise.

Intertextuality constructs Revelation's Jezebel as “one of . . . the most booted antiheroes.”⁹² By introducing the “so-called prophet” via Deuteronomistic subtext, the

⁸⁵ Noted by Jackson, *ibid.*, 173.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ I do not read “the Deuteronomist” as a sole author or editor of Deuteronomy–2 Kings, but rather as “Deuteronomistic discourse”—an editorial school of thought influenced by a shared network of discursivity.

⁸⁸ See footnote 87.

⁸⁹ Francisco O. García-Treto, “The Fall of the House: A Carnavalesque Reading of 2 Kings 9 and 10,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 46 (February 1, 1990): 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 173.

Apocalypse makes clear that it is mocking its adversary via wit and wordplay. But in addition to borrowing the Deuteronomist's Evil Queen, Revelation borrows its sense of humor also. In John's letters, it is as if Revelation is metaphorically grabbing the congregation microphone for the following roasting:

Check. Check. Hey, we all know the woman who is going around talking to your kids and your wives and your townsmen, and telling them that she knows the "deep things of God."⁹³ And hey, she's getting a pretty good following! [Booing in the background.] I know, I know, I can't believe it either. I really can't believe it. But what gets me every time I see her telling people *what to do* and *how to do it* is her unsightly familiarity with that other "ruler." Oh, you know who I'm talking about [beat] *ie-zebel*. [Laughing in the background.] It's like whenever I see people eating with her I can't help but picture piles and piles of shit on their plates. [More laughing.] Hey, don't pretend you're all innocent here. I see you in the back, "Mr. Ahab!"

For implied readers—those familiar with the Deuteronomistic transcript—Revelation's name-calling is what ushers in the humor of the original Jezebel story, making it doubly clear that the Thyatiran "prophet" is not who she thinks she is. She is Jezebel, monster of lore.⁹⁴

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ This is a play on the "deep things of Satan." For a reading of this line as irony, see Rev. 2:24 with David Frankfurter's note on the verse in "Revelation," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 471. See also Koester, who reads "the deep things of Satan" as a parody of "the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10; cf. Rom. 11:33). Koester, *Revelation*, 263, 300.

⁹⁴ Revelation's use of physical and sexual humor is also informed by other Jewish texts. The book of Esther is perhaps the most commonly cited text with regard to biblical humor, primarily for its use humor against Haman. Toward the middle of the narrative, for example, Esther invites Haman to a two-day drinking party, thereby setting the stage for eating to excess and drunken debauchery. Upon accepting the invitation, Haman announces with pride that only he, in addition to the King, was invited. Recounting to his family the splendor of his riches, he added "Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared!" (Est. 5:12). But rather than celebrate with Haman at the party, Esther tricks him by telling Ahasuerus that he is a threat to her Jewish people. Realizing his offence, Haman does all he can to rectify the situation. In his drunken state, he decides it wise to lie prostrate on the sofa upon which

Making a Mockery of Him

I suggest there is more to Revelation's subtext than dialogical name-play, however. Because Revelation uses code so clearly, it invites readers to question whether it is "coding" more than just her name. In other words, while Schüssler Fiorenza accentuates Jezebel-as-woman, marking John's use of the feminine article and noun in his depiction of her (τὴν γυναῖκα; Rev. 2:20)—I question if this might be all too easy. I do not know if we can be sure, in other words, if Jezebel is a woman at all.

Revelation would not be the first biblical text to blur gender lines as a means of

Esther reclines and beg for forgiveness. Rather than earn the King and Queen's favor, however, Haman's positioning leads Ahasuerus to believe that he is about to seduce his wife. In the end, Haman is sentenced to death.

When comparing the use of humor in Esther and Revelation, we notice that Haman, like Jezebel, is unaware of his own ineptitude. First, Haman thinks he is being treated at the Queen's banquet for his good works. Then, he attempts to earn the Queen's favor through seductive supplication—not a good idea. Time and again, "Haman reveals himself to be the unwitting court fool whose every scheme recoils . . . on his own head." Celina Spiegel, "The World Remade: The Book of Esther," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Celina Spiegel and Christina Buchmann (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1995), 199. Because of his incompetence, he, like Revelation's Jezebel, finds himself lying prostrate on a piece of furniture. In the face of his own egoism, he and his children, like Jezebel and her children, are sentenced to death. On the gallows 50 cubits high, Haman is hanged for all to see.

The book of Judith also uses a similar type of humor. In order to save her town of Bethulia, Judith marches into the enemy camp under the false pretense that she will help Holofernes defeat her people. Enamored by her beauty, Holofernes welcomes Judith's aid, and eventually invites her to stay the night with him in his tent. But while Holofernes assumes that he will be seducing Judith that evening, it is actually the other way around. As Holofernes consumes all the food and wine he can stomach, Judith waits patiently for the perfect opportunity to kill him. And soon, she does. Holofernes passes out from over-intoxication, enabling Judith to grab the sword atop Holofernes' bed and cut off his head.

Like Haman and Jezebel, Holofernes' obliviousness, over-sexualized conduct, and gluttonous demeanor leads to his demise. Like Haman and Jezebel, he is turned into spectacle, murdered on a bed. To be sure, the scene of his death is violent and grotesque, but that does not mean it is devoid of the comic.

attack. The “pornoprophetics”⁹⁵ of the Hebrew Bible repeatedly represent (androcentric) Israel as a sexually dissolute female. In Hosea, for example, Israel is described as a cheating wife who has broken her covenant with YHWH. In Ezekiel 16:35-37, Jerusalem is similarly scorned for being a “whore” who “whores with lovers.” Scholars have argued that Revelation does much the same thing when it comes to Rome/Babylon. In Revelation 17, a male-centered power system (i.e., Rome) is mocked as “the mother of whores” so as to unravel Empire’s male bravado (for more on this, see chapter four). According to Caroline Vander Stichele, the pornoprophetics of Revelation “move” Rome from a virile city to a feminine whore.⁹⁶ If an ostensibly masculine power is lampooned as feminine later in the text, might “Jezebel” of Revelation also function as a derisive cipher for a rival *male* prophet?

My uncertainty concerning Jezebel is intensified when I take into consideration that fact that, in the Greco-Roman world, sex assignments did not necessarily correspond with genitalia, but rather with gender performance. In simplest terms, to be “male” in first-century Rome meant to demonstrate masculine virility, and to be “female” meant to perform effeminate and/or cowardly qualities. Gender disposition and demonstration were thus innately unstable. Women could take on the heroic qualities of men, and men could take on the un-heroic qualities of women. Polemo, a physiognomist from the second century CE, explains how persons are associated with a particular sex:

⁹⁵ See Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and “Sexuality” in the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 26 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 153–174.

⁹⁶ Caroline Vander Stichele, “Re-Membering the Whore: The Fate of Babylon According to Revelation 17:16,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 109, see also pp. 109–114.

You obtain physiognomic indications of masculinity and femininity from your subject's glance, movement, and voice, and then, from among these signs, compare one with another until you determine to your satisfaction which of the two sexes prevails. For in the masculine there is something feminine to be found, and in the feminine something masculine, but the name 'masculine' or 'feminine' is assigned according to which of the two prevails. . . . The male is physically stronger and braver, less prone to defects and more likely to be sincere and loyal. He is more keen to win honor and he is worthier of respect. The female has two contrary properties: She has but little courage and abounds in deceptions. Her behavior is exceptionally bitter and she tends to hide what is on her mind. She is impulsive, lacks a sense of justice, and loves to quarrel: a blustering coward.⁹⁷

Although Polemo wrote after Revelation was written, his explanations echo earlier conceptions of gender and sex, including Aristotelian physiognomic principles. In a number of ancient materials, men were depicted in feminine terms—identified as women, even—as a means by which to highlight their unworthiness. There were also instances of women defined in male terms, sometimes to denote their masculine heroism, and, at other times, to denote their monstrosity. In other words, while masculinity was indeed superior to femininity—and while women could indeed take on the qualities of a man—women who were *too* “masculine, unnatural, lawless, [and] licentious” were also often rendered “monstrous.”⁹⁸

Because we, ultimately, cannot look up Jezebel's skirt to solve the matter of her anatomical sex, I suggest we entertain Jezebel's character from both angles. What might we notice if she is imagined as an anatomical woman? What might we see if we imagine her as an anatomical man? Let us continue with Jezebel as woman—which, indeed, is

⁹⁷ For more on Polemo, physiognomy, and gender, see L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 28–29.

⁹⁸ Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, IL, and London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 50. See also Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997); and Brent D. Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1996).

how most critical scholars imagine her to be—and then transition to reading Jezebel as a man.

Playing With Gender, Playing With Sex

As noted in chapter two, women and women’s bodies were often mocked simply for the fact that they *were* women and had women’s bodies. According to Amy Richlin, “Repulsive women populate the pages of satire: why? The poet and audience must take pleasure in examining them and proclaiming their disgust.”⁹⁹ Even a woman’s laugh was mocked regularly as reflecting the “roaring of the animal kingdom,”¹⁰⁰ unlike the more sophisticated laugh that came from men. But there is more. According to John Clarke, sexualized and gender-based humor permeated the Greco-Roman world often in the form of breaking the norm. Eunuchs who married were funny *because* they were eunuchs. Women performing “manly” tasks were humorous *because* they were women. Men performing “womanly” tasks were comical *because* they were men. To watch as someone climbed up or fell down the gender gradient, in other words, was all part of the fun. In this way, perhaps Jezebel of Revelation is actually being *ridiculed*, contra Schüssler Fiorenza, *because* she is a take-charge woman—*because* she takes on qualities of a man—*the* man, as we will eventually see: “She calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and deceiving [Christ’s] slaves” (2:20; see also chapter five). After all, this, too, is part of the humor in 1 and 2 Kings: “Jezebel is the strong, dominant, take-charge woman (complete with lackeys), leading Ahab, who is portrayed as a weak, sulking, man.”¹⁰¹ In fact, if we read Jezebel of 1 and 2 Kings as a manly woman, we recognize that she is not

⁹⁹ Richlin, “Invective Against Women in Roman Satire,” 378.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 157.

¹⁰¹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 172.

the *heroic* manly woman, but the monstrous one. For instance, unlike many biblical stories of other “comic ‘not-hero’ protagonists”¹⁰² (e.g., women, disabled persons, or other marginalized persons), the joke in the end remains on Jezebel. Whereas Sisera in Judges 4 becomes the punchline because he is duped *by* the comic not-hero (Jael, a foreign woman), or whereas Pharaoh becomes the butt of Exodus for being duped by the typified underdog (a stuttering Israelite) this is not the story of Jezebel in 1 and 2 Kings.¹⁰³ Jezebel’s manliness is ultimately undermined, as she is pushed out the window by eunuchs and then eaten by dogs. She climbs up the gender gradient only to fall back down again.

Perhaps Jezebel of Revelation thought she, too, could “play the man,” but in the end is really the butt *taken by* the man (“[Christ] is throwing her on the bed . . . giving [to her] what her works deserve,” Rev. 2:22-23). For all we know—and certainly when considering the hegemonic gender gradient of ancient Rome—it is Jezebel, on John’s reading, who “wears the pants”—monstrously so—and her followers who wear the feminine garb. I can almost hear a Juvenalian echo permeating the Thyatiran assembly, targeting Jezebel’s followers: “You *used* to be sane, no doubt about that. . . . [C]an you [really] bear to be the slave of a woman[?] . . . when those vertiginous-to-floor windows are standing open[?]” (*Satire* 6, 30-34). To which Revelation’s implied readers might well respond, in a comical reenactment of 1 and 2 Kings: “Let’s throw her out.”

But what if Jezebel is a man, anatomically speaking (i.e., a human with a penis)? Recognizing the fluidity of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world, this could indeed be

¹⁰² Ibid., 100.

¹⁰³ For more on the productivity of the ‘not-hero’ in biblical texts, including tricksters, see Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*.

the case. As Stephen Moore explains, “Roman masculinity was [also] always tenuous, fragile, fluid, always threatened, always incompletely achieved, ever under siege, ever liable to lose its footing on the greased gender gradient sloping precipitously down to femininity and hence irrevocable shame, irredeemable disgrace.”¹⁰⁴ To maintain “true” masculinity meant to hover, in just the right way, at the top end of the gender gradient. In the words of Maud Gleason, “Manliness was not a birthright.”¹⁰⁵ To which Chris Frilingos remarks, “It was work.”¹⁰⁶

Masculinity was also a goal. As L. Stephanie Cobb expounds, “Maleness . . . was not an arrived-at-state but rather a goal of a lifelong quest that required self-control, wisdom, and virtue. Although anatomically sexed males were closer to the perfect state of masculinity [than anatomically sexed females], they, too, had continuously to strive to be men.”¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, differentiations of sex were inherently intertwined with differentiations of gender—moreover, *were defined by* differentiations of gender—which existed upon a slippery and hierarchically constructed slope. Depending upon one’s gender performance, one could climb the gradient toward masculinity, or fall down toward the less privileged feminine space.

¹⁰⁴ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 141.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted by Chris Frilingos, “Wearing It Well: Gender at Work in the Shadow of Empire,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, Biblical Interpretation Series 84 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 349.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 28.

Although there is evidence of women leaders and prophets in Jewish culture,¹⁰⁸ John's description of Thyatira's evil prophet as a female whore may actually be a means by which to undermine a male charlatan via wit and satire. Jezebel, in other words, might be more akin to the effeminized and sexually humiliated Jerusalem of Ezekiel 16:35-37—or to the effeminized and sexually humiliated Rome of Revelation 17—than the more typical, literal renderings of the Jezebel character. “He” tells everyone that “he” is a prophet, but in reality “he” is no better than a woman, and one thrown out the window and devoured by dogs at that.

We certainly see this type of mockery in 1 and 2 Kings. While Jezebel is lampooned for being a monstrous woman, Ahab is satirized for being an effeminate man. Again, even though Ahab is King, he cannot even rule his own stomach. But this type of humor also permeated Greco-Roman humor. Stories of Hercules in drag, for instance, illustrate a similar sense of wit. Roman poets often describe Hercules as exchanging clothes with Omphale, queen of Lydia, and then performing Omphale's own “womanly tasks.”¹⁰⁹ Lucian even adds to this comic scene by having Omphale beat Hercules as she puts on his clothes and armor.¹¹⁰ In his comic counterworld, Omphale becomes more manly than a demigod. The joke here, it seems, is primarily on Hercules. The standard

¹⁰⁸ For more on this, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. Brown Judaic Studies 36 (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982); Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001); Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); 499-518; Judith Lieu, “The ‘Attraction of Women’ In/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 72 (December 1, 1998): 5–22.

¹⁰⁹ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 173.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

hero is the weak one—“the failed woman,” as John Clarke has it¹¹¹—stuck at home spinning the wool:



Pompeii VIII, 4, 34, tablinum 4, north wall (lost)¹¹²

According to Juvenal, in fact, effeminate-looking men were not only ridiculous in appearance—“laughable physiognomies”—but also not to be trusted:

Little by little you will come to be welcomed within the houses of characters wearing bonnets with flowing ribbons, and chokers around their necks. These placate to Bona Dea with a young sow’s belly and a generous bowl of wine. But inverting the normal custom, they drive all women away, and forbid them to enter the doorway (*Satire 2*, 83–88).

Juvenal writes elsewhere that, while male prostitution is a disadvantaged trade, sexual deviants who pretend to maintain proper masculine virtue should be a source of mockery.

Juvenal’s *Satire 9* opens with the satirist asking Naevolus why he sulks whenever they meet:

Tell me, Naevolus—why, whenever we meet, do you wear a gloomy scowl[?] . . . Why do you have the expression that Ravola had when I caught him with his

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹¹² This image and description is from Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 178. Hercules is second to the left; Omphale is sitting with her hand to her chin to Hercules’ right. Hercules here is “in full female drag—even to the point of wearing a tiara with a veil that cascades down his shoulders. There’s a bracelet on his left wrist. Instead of wearing his lion’s skin, he sits on it; next to it rests his club” (*ibid.*, 177).

beard still damp from brushing Rhodope's crotch, and I gave him the kind of thrashing one gives to a slave found licking a pastry? (1–5).

As the satire continues, we learn that Naevolus has become a male prostitute, and that he disdains his client Virro for the sexual acts he makes him do. But rather than satirize Naevolus for his sexual misconduct, Juvenal lampoons Naevolus' patron for forcing Naevolus to take on the active role in sex with him (for paying Naevolus to impregnate his wife for him). The problem for Juvenal, in other words, is the rich Virro who, quite plainly, purchases a masculine façade from the prostitute. While his Roman counterparts assume that he has sex with his wife and is able to father children, he does not and cannot. Virro is the real effeminate whore and, on Juvenal's reading, should be stripped of his false armor. He is dangerous because he pretends to be someone that he is not.

Might John of Revelation be painting similar scenes? Might he be dressing a rival, male prophet in feminine garb—and name-calling him “prophetess”—as a means by which to strip him of his male armor? Might John, in naming his rival “Jezebel” be saying: “You say you are a ‘real’ man of Christ, but rather a sexual deviant—an effeminate whore—at which to point and laugh”?

Jezebel's Thinkery

Despite the fact that we, again, cannot look up Jezebel's skirt to solve the matter of her anatomical sex, what we do know is that s/he *thinks* s/he is the hero. On Jezebel's reading, s/he is a spokesperson, a leader akin to Jael or Moses or Hercules *sans drag*, and self-designates as such (“she calls herself a prophetess,” 2:20). In Jezebel's view, s/he is a righteous follower of her deity. S/he thinks she eats foods that are clean. S/he thinks there is no need to repent. S/he reclines willingly on the beds before her, perhaps even in celebration of her/his self-described connection with the divine.

Revelation uses humor to counter Jezebel's claims of prophetic aptitude. "*How stupid can s/he be?*" we can hear John say from behind the page. "Does s/he not know that to be a *true* Christ-follower, one needs to actually to *follow* Christ's commands?" In fact, while the imagery of Jezebel thrown on a bed might not be received as comical for most modern readers, it is worth noting that Greco-Roman humorists constructed scenes of rape in a similar style. In Roman satire, adulterers were punished via an array of humiliating inflictions, including rape.¹¹³ "[A] commonly described form of revenge for adultery is to have your servants rape the offender. Within the Roman sexual system, the humiliation would be double [if the adulterer was a man]¹¹⁴: the adulterous man is penetrated like a woman and subjected by his social inferiors."¹¹⁵ If Revelation's "Jezebel," is indeed an anatomical man, already humiliated through "his" "encase[ment] in female flesh,"¹¹⁶ "he" would be humiliated all the more through forced penetration by God's servant, Christ. We might even imagine Jezebel cognates coming into play here. Whenever John says "Jezebel," he is actually making an ironical claim: "*Izebul, Izebul?*

¹¹³ Mime actors were famous for committing sexual offences on stage (particularly adultery), and would even be mocked and tortured as part of comic plots. In Roman comedies, it was also common for the protagonist to rape his love interest, and to then force the woman to marry him. In a similar vein, perhaps Revelation, in addition to lampooning Jezebel, is attempting to make the whore "stick" to her rapist for all eternity. Through rape, perhaps Jezebel will finally see (feel?) the true ways of Christ, and therefore follow his halakhic worldview all the way into the New Jerusalem.

¹¹⁴ In Greco-Roman humor, punishment for anatomical women adulterers is rarely mentioned.

¹¹⁵ Paul Allen Miller, *Latin Verse Satire* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 122.

¹¹⁶ I borrow this terminology and imagery from Shanell T. Smith, who writes that Revelation "encases [the city of Babylon/the city of Rome] in feminine flesh." See Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 131.

Where is the prince?”¹¹⁷ Jezebel may think s/he is worthy of such a masculinized exaltation, but “the prince,” in Revelation’s view, is nowhere to be found. S/he is hunched over, taking it like a comic butt. That some people are willingly following this “prophetess” only adds to the text’s humorous banter. They, like Jezebel, are the punchlines of Revelation’s roasting, and will meet their own demise unless they recognize the foolishness of their actions (Rev. 2:24). Like Balaam, Jezebel is a seer who cannot see. And so too, it seems, are her (his?) followers.

Looking Forward

Survival of imperial trauma requires a narrativizing of the colonial condition, which, in turn, works to create new self-states, to erode the harmful ideological systems of oppression, and to weave past, present, and future into a cohesive framing. Revelation’s letters to the local communities animate this type of work. Its letters to the assemblies in Roman Asia not only work to claim Jewish subalternity through a remembering of Christ’s death and a narrativizing of communal θλίψις, but to also construct a new Jewish self-state in the face of such subalternity.

In construction of self-states, however, colonized subjects can often disagree over “who” they are, and “who” they should be. As Frantz Fanon explains, while the colonized can experience a “demand for a . . . culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture,” they can also, in making their “claims” to a cultural self, experience a development of political “offshoots.”¹¹⁸ Colonized subjects can thus find themselves, in writing back to Empire, “try[ing] to gain power to define the national cultural identity of

¹¹⁷ As noted above, *Izebul* means “Where is the prince?”

¹¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture,” 53.

the colonized.”¹¹⁹ We see this in Revelation. In “building up” to its narrativizing of a halakhically oriented עולם הבא (Rev. 21–22), Revelation’s messages to the assemblies in Roman Asia work to bring the threat of “the wrong cultural self” into readers’ purview—to narrate the problem of a halakhically impure and assimilationist Jewish culture—and to, in turn, define, thicken, and affirm the *correct* culture and colonized self.¹²⁰

Humor plays a role in this work. Throughout this chapter, I have explored Revelation’s use of humor as a method of anti-assimilationist resistance. Resonating with Jewish and Greco-Roman comic traditions and motifs, the Apocalypse’s messages depict “the wrong” Christ-followers as the butt of its joking. This humor works to create groups of insiders and outsiders, both within and outside the text’s imaginary. “Jezebel” and those like her (e.g., “Balaam” and “Balak”) are not on the same side, so to speak, as the implied author and reader. The humor helps draw the line; those who *are* insiders (halakhically oriented Christ-followers; i.e., “true Israel”) are not mocked, while those who are not halakhic Christ-worshippers *are*. Even though Revelation’s false teachers are successful in leading God’s people astray, readers familiar with the dialogical cues know that they are really the comic butts. By lampooning “Balaam,” “Balak,” and “Jezebel’s” teachings and associations with the colonizer, Revelation erodes their assimilationist ideologies. In the next chapter, I will explain how this use of humor expands into Revelation’s visions of global adversaries, not only as a means to survive the trauma begotten by the colonizer, but also to construct an even deeper divide between the implied “us” and “them.”

¹¹⁹ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 127.

¹²⁰ See *ibid.* See also Danna Nolan Fewell, “The Work of Biblical Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

Chapter Four

The Trick Revealed: A Dragon, Two Beasts, and a Whore

Comedy works...as a means of revelation...not only in exposing the “bleak” reality seen in “the dark sides of the story,” but in pushing past this negative aspect of self and society to envision this reality transformed.”

-Melissa Jackson¹

Revelation continues to thicken a halakhically oriented, Christ-centered ideology through its depictions of global adversaries. By satirizing Rome and Roman imperial leaders, the Apocalypse constructs a comic counternarrative—one in which Rome and Roman imperial rulers are fools, and Revelation’s community of storytellers “reign supreme.”² Weaving once again past/present memories and postmemories of imperial trauma with a dialogical and mordant wit, Revelation shows that it can not only “write back” to the dominant transcripts that have deemed Jews “Other than,” but can do so in a way that turns those scripts—especially those of Rome—on their own heads. The end of days is near, and the Apocalypse uses humor to resist a world constructed from the perspective of its perpetrators.³

¹ Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 243. Within the citation, Jackson is quoting Mark E. Biddle, “Humor,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 2nd edition, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 916.

² Antonis K. Petrides, “Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 428.

³ See Philip Chia on Daniel in, “On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 173.

Hidden Transcripts, Hidden Tricks

We meet Revelation's first global adversary, a dragon, in Revelation 12. This dragon appears to be an ancient serpent—a “deceiver of all the world”—who has seven heads, ten horns, and answers to the names “Satan” and “Devil” (12:9). Among the Dragon's⁴ confidants are: 1) a seven-headed, ten-horned sea beast; 2) a two-horned land beast; and 3) a drunken whore, who, along with the Dragon and Beasts, succeeds in deceiving many of the earth's inhabitants (13:1-18; 17:1-18).

Consensus remains that these characters are symbolic personifications of the Roman Empire and its imperial rulers. That the Whore is clothed in purple and scarlet (17:4), called “the great city” (17:18; 18:18), and seated atop the “seven hills, where she oversees a seaborne commercial empire and rules many nations” (17:9, 15) leads interpreters to believe that she represents the city of Rome. The Sea Beast and Land Beast are no less symbolic. Recalling Rome's control over the Mediterranean basin, as well as Daniel 7, in which a series of empires are described as beasts rising from the sea (Dan. 7:2-8), the Sea Beast represents the power of many empires packaged into a Roman reality. Performing signs and wonders on behalf of the Sea Beast (13:11-18), the Land Beast represents supporters of the imperial cult, perhaps even members of the Roman imperial priesthood, who promote the Empire's authority and power. While the Land Beast serves the Sea Beast (13:12), the Sea Beast serves the Dragon (13:4), making it clear that, ultimately, both adversarial monsters—and therefore Rome and Roman leaders—receive their power from Satan. To summarize: The end of days is near, and the Empire's satanic associations are the effective cause of the world's destruction.

⁴ I capitalize “Dragon,” Whore,” “Beast,” “Kings,” etc., with the article when referring to them as characters.

As noted in the introduction, these symbolic representations of Revelation's global adversaries likely function as a method of hidden resistance. By referring to its enemies in code, the Apocalypse capitalizes on its ability to perform "full-throated expressions"—as James Scott phrases it—which in turn subverts the public (i.e., dominant) transcript of imperial Rome.⁵ Compare, for example, Josephus, who is often noted as being unreliable because he writes *about* Rome, *for* Rome, with Revelation's offstage narrativizing:

But now, what did most elevate them in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth." The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. Now, this oracle certainly denoted the government of Vespasian, who was appointed emperor in Judea. . . . But these men interpret some of these signals according to their own pleasure; and some of them they utterly despised, until their madness was demonstrated, both by the taking of their city, and their own destruction. (*The Wars of the Jews*, 6.312)⁶

Come here, I will show you the judgment of the Great Whore, the sittings on many waters, and with whom the kings of the earth committed whorings, and with the wine of whose whorings the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. . . . [This Whore] was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and stone and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her whorings; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, Mother of Whores and of earth's abominations." And I saw

⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 120. By calling Rome a "Whore" through the code name "Babylon," Revelation's storytelling community can express more freely their opposition and anti-imperial revolt. As Catherine Keller explains, "The book of Revelation . . . counts in Bible-based cultures as the master script of the hidden transcript. So it will be worth noting that the book itself, with its darkly cryptogrammatic symbolism already functioned in its own historical *Sitz-im-Leben* and 'rhetorical setting' as a countercultural code for dissent." Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 10. See also Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies and the Book of Revelation*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 47–55.

⁶ Translation from Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987). Compare also with Athalya Brenner's argument on the lack of humor in Josephus in chapter two.

that the Whore was drunk with the blood of the saints and the witnesses to Jesus.
(Rev. 17:1-2, 4-6)

Indeed, if John had exclaimed his views of Rome publicly—e.g., given his text *to* Roman leaders, shouted *to* the Roman authorities that “Come here! Listen! Rome is the mother of Whores and the earth’s abominations!”—he would have likely been killed on the spot. At least, that is what Cassius Dio reports on his own subversive view of (i.e., laughing at) the emperor Commodus: “Many would have been put to death on the spot by the sword for laughing at [Commodus] . . . if I had not myself taken some laurel leaves from my garland and chewed on them, and persuaded the others sitting near me to chew on them too—so that . . . we might hide the fact that we were laughing.”⁷

There is something to Dio’s story, however, that should not go amiss. Akin to Revelation, Dio “hides” his laughter from his superior—in this case, the Emperor himself—but also does so in a way that is, on its own, humorous. For readers who understand Dio’s tricks—his veiled opposition via chomps and chews—the story is funny. We “get” what Dio is doing: “This glimpse of life in the dangerous front lines of Roma imperial politics is one of the rare occasions where, across almost two thousand years, Roman laughter seems to come truly alive. . . . Replace laurel leaves with candy, and it is one of those moments when the Romans seem just like us.”⁸

Hiddenness in itself can function as a method of humor. Comic storytellers can choose to conceal knowledge from certain characters or audiences as a form of comic deception. In many instances, it is up to the audience to perform a “sensitive and suspicious . . . ‘read[ing] or listen[ing] between the lines’” in order to get the teller’s

⁷ Cassius Dio translations are from Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 2–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

joking.⁹ As we saw in the prior chapter, a comic teller may reveal hidden “truths” about communal selves and society via irony, sarcasm, code, or wordplay, thus leaving it up to the audience to decode this deceptive language—to decode who is “in” and who is “out.”

But humor’s hiddenness can also work at a more “corporate” level. “With respect to society, humour can work similarly to expose . . . injustices, shortcomings, [and] deficiencies.”¹⁰ Befitting for Revelation, Melissa Jackson refers to the “getting” of humor’s tricks as the “revelation” of humor.¹¹ While part of the revelation refers to the resolution of comic incongruity¹²—the “getting” of humor’s ironies and wordplays—another refers to an exposure of society and self.¹³ When readers unhinge a text’s comic codes, for example, they can begin to see themselves, their society, and their society’s future—for better or for worse—transformed.¹⁴ Especially for those who align with the joker and/or have been subjugated *by* the joker’s targets, humor’s revelations can be refreshing—rehabilitating, even. It can offer a voice to the subaltern—a claim to the subaltern’s experiences—and with it, a vision of an oppressive reality undone.

There is a nuance to this, however, that should not go unnoticed. Although there is hiddenness in humor, that which is hidden does not always take place offstage, at least not in Scott’s sense of the term. In many instances, comic codes of dissent correspond more acutely with what Scott names a “thinly veiled dissent”—a dissent that may not be endorsed by the public transcript but that is nevertheless seen by it, felt by it. Consider

⁹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 19. Here, she is in conversation with M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 8th ed. (London, UK: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24, 47, and 242–243.

¹² For more on the resolution of comic incongruity, see Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 1–2.

¹³ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 242.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

these lines from the book of Revelation: “The Great Whore who is seated on many waters . . . [and a beast with] seven heads that are seven mountain . . . Babylon the Great . . . seated [on] peoples and multitudes and nations and languages . . . is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:1, 5, 18). It is not difficult to decipher this for the city of Rome and, by extension, the Roman Empire. The key word “Babylon” indicates that we are talking about an Empire, as does Babylon’s sitting atop multitudes of peoples and nations. Rome itself was also known for its control over the Mediterranean basin (the many waters), so much so that the Empire nicknamed the sea *mare nostrum*, “our sea.”

As we comb through Revelation’s representations of global adversaries, we will come to find that some of the Apocalypse’s codes and transcripts appear thinly veiled—just enough to maintain ambiguity. Some of its comic tricks, in fact, are even *borrowed* from the public transcript, thereby making the comic codes likely appear even more familiar to Roman readers. Although the book of Revelation is ex-centric—self-understood as standing “at once peripheral and pure”¹⁵—it is also a hybrid text, enlisting and constructing comic motifs and genres familiar to Judaism *and Rome*. It is thus up to the reader to get the dialogism and double-voicedness of the ironies, puns, cues, and jokes—to get the revelation of the tricks *all the way down*. If the dialogism is missed, the joke is missed, thereby making it easy for Revelation’s non-Jewish targets to be caught by them.¹⁶

In the following sections, I will focus on Revelation’s unveilings of its global adversaries via a dialogical network of textuality, exegeting first its play with the Dragon and beasts, particularly its Sea Beast, and will turn to its primary target: Babylon, the

¹⁵ Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 32.

¹⁶ Compare with Beard’s reading of *Pseudolus* in *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 17.

Great Whore. In my analysis, I will discuss the elements of the comic that deepen Revelation's critique of them, and will conclude with an exploration of *catachresis*—that is, a Jewish retooling of Roman humor for Revelation's own gain.

The Satan-Dragon

Revelation casts Satan as a “great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and ten diadems on its heads” (12:3; cf. 13:1).¹⁷ We meet him for the first time in chapter 12, as he stands before the laboring Woman of the Sun to snatch the Woman's baby, and then eat him (καταφάγη; 12:4). Once the baby arrives, however, God saves the baby by taking him to his throne, and then helps the Woman of the Sun seek refuge in the wilderness. Michael and his angels then throw the Satan-Dragon down from heaven and onto the earth. In chapter 20, a fire comes down from heaven, and throws the Dragon into the lake of fire and sulfur so that it will be tortured forever and ever (20:10).

Like the Apocalypse's depictions of Balaam and Jezebel, the story of Revelation's Dragon is associated dialogically with a number of Jewish and Greco-Roman scripts. Revelation's image of the Dragon, for instance, is borrowed from biblical representations of Leviathan (Ps. 74:13-14; Job 40:25), Daniel's many-headed monster (Dan. 7:2-8), Job's “accuser” (Rev. 12:10; cf. Job 1:6-12), Ezekiel's depiction of Pharaoh (Ezek. 29:3), Jeremiah's description of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 51:34), and the deceptive serpent of

¹⁷ By pairing the dragon's many heads (a symbol of threat), with many diadems (a symbol of broad-based power), the text suggests that Satan is attempting to illegitimately claim power and authority. This notion is heightened when comparing Satan to Christ in 19:12, in which Christ, too, is depicted as wearing diadems on his head. While Christ is depicted as the legitimate holder of authority and power, Satan is characterized as the unlawful abuser of authority and control. For more on this, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2014), 545.

Genesis 3:1-7 (cf. Rev. 12:9). Additionally, the story of triumphing over the Dragon (Rev. 12:9; cf. 20:2; 20:10) reflects the popular Greco-Roman myths of Python/Leto/Apollo and Seth/Isis/Horus, in which the power of good (in Revelation's case, those on the side of God and Christ) overcomes the power of evil (those on the side of the Dragon).¹⁸ In constructing this tale, Revelation thus not only works with a complex web of dialogical associations, but also works to thicken the communal identity of those who are on the side of the triumphant. By recalling memories of Jewish pain and suffering through the image of the laboring woman—an image that is often used to describe a suffering Israelite nation (cf. Isa. 7:14; 26:17; Jer. 4:31; 6:24)¹⁹—and the wickedness of *many* adversaries through the Dragon's physique, character, and attacks against the text's Jewish savior (cf. Mt. 2:16; Exod. 1:22), Revelation claims a traumatic past/present. In doing so, however, it counters that traumatic past/present by making the Jews triumphant.²⁰

Double Duping

The story of Revelation's Satan-Dragon works to counter a traumatic past/present via a double trickster tale. As is well known, Rome often implemented the Python/Leto/Apollo and Seth/Isis/Horus stories as a way to thicken *its own* communal identity. Casting the Roman emperor as the heroic Apollo and anti-Roman rivals as the defeated Python/Typhon, the Empire both constructed and preserved an ideology of a

¹⁸ For more on this, see chapter one.

¹⁹ The woman's writhing in labor pains, like the nation of Israel (12:1-6; cf. Isa. 7:14; 26:17; Jer. 4:31; 6:24), and fleeing to the desert for safety, like Israel (12:13-17; cf. Exod. 16:4), leads me to believe that she most likely represents the nation of Israel, from which a Jewish messiah is born (12:4).

²⁰ Cf. Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

Roman superiority of Self—one that is always already hovering over an anti-Roman, un-Roman “Them.” Harry Maier has shown, however, that some Romans countered the standard appropriation of these myths by suggesting the empire was really the agent of chaos. “The brute realities of imperial rule were . . . readily apparent, and it was easy to lampoon [the emperor] as Typhon [or Python].”²¹ We see such humorous counternarratives, he explains, in Pseudo-Seneca’s *Octavia*, where Nero is branded as Typhon, in Dio Chrysostom’s *Oration 1*, where Domitian is likened to Typhon, and in Revelation, where Roman imperial power is pilloried as the Typhon and Python monsters who *will* be defeated.²² Should the humor of this trickery be lost on the modern reader, imagine, for instance, a contemporary adversary comparing himself to the mythic Pan, and then reading a counterstory that casts him instead as Mary Martin’s queer-comic Hook dancing the Tarantella.²³

Still, there is more. Revelation’s textual and contextual networks include a dialogical crossing of *both* Jewish and Greco-Roman scripts. This is an important detail Maier seems to overlook. For rather than simply reverse Roman imperial propaganda to suggest that Rome is the chaos monster to be defeated, Revelation constructs a counterworld in which Mosaic followers and a crucified Jew take the spotlight. While the dragon of Revelation 12 symbolizes Roman authorities through their Typhon/Python associations, we cannot forget that its pseudo-Leto is played by a Jewish nation (12:1-2;

²¹ Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 180.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For more on queer comedy and its subversive qualities, see Ken Feil, “Queer Comedy,” in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 477–492.

cf. 12:17),²⁴ and that its pseudo-Apollo is played by a Jewish crucified Christ (12:4; cf. 19:15; Ps. 2:9).²⁵ The normative heroes of the dominant transcript are thus: 1) duped by being cast as the defeated Python/Typhon; and 2) duped by *being defeated by* the cultural “not heroes”—i.e., Jews.

Double duping is an important part of biblical trickster tales. The Bible’s comic incongruous plots are not just about heroes of the dominant transcript *being* duped, but about the normative “not heroes” becoming the textual heroes who do the *duping*. Trickster tales, writes Susan Niditch, are “underdog tales.”²⁶ Rather than adhere to this motif upfront, however, Revelation does so through hidden transcript. If readers do not recognize Jews as the story’s heroes, then they miss the topsy-turvy ethos of the scene. In this way, we might even say that this is a triply trickster tale. Should an implied global adversary happen upon this story and not recognize he is the Dragon being outwitted by Jews, then he, too, becomes the butt of its joking.

Thus, through a combination of Greco-Roman story and Jewish descriptors, Revelation 12 constructs a trickster plot. It borrows comedy’s method of “indirect deception” so as to turn the “normal and usual . . . on [its] head.”²⁷ To use the words of Maier, Revelation 12 is a praise of folly—a praise of hidden and “divine incongruity”²⁸—but one that is nevertheless crafted to show those who can read between the lines that

²⁴ See footnote 19.

²⁵ Consensus remains that the male child is Jesus, who, at other points throughout the narrative, is depicted as bloodied and slain (e.g., Rev. 5:6; 19:13). To add to the Jewish ethos of the scene: Those who keep Mosaic law (12:17) are also described as being in kinship with the chapter’s pseudo-Leto and pseudo-Apollo. In chapter 12, Revelation’s pseudo-Leto and pseudo-Apollo are also saved by a Jewish God and Jewish angels (12:5, 7-9; Jesus takes on the character of himself at other points in the narrative).

²⁶ Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 22.

²⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 47.

²⁸ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 177.

Jewish self and society matter.²⁹ Revelation's Jews may be attacked by "[imperial] beasts . . . [who] threaten and delude the earth"³⁰—a likely commentary on Jewish trauma under Empire—but they are also depicted in Revelation as having the power to outwit the beasts. By casting Apollo as a marginalized/colonized Jew, and chapter 12's most immediate heroes as celestial beings from Jewish myth (i.e., God, as well as Michael and the angels; 12:5, 7-9), implied readers—those who understand Revelation's tricks—get to envision the colonized subverting and defeating the colonizer.

The Sea Beast

The Sea Beast is described as a water monster with ten horns, seven heads, and ten diadems on its heads (13:1-2; cf. Rev. 12:3; Ps. 74:13-15; Job 41; Dan. 7:2-8).³¹ The Beast's heads are representative of various kings and emperors: "Seven heads are seven mountains [i.e., Rome] . . . also, they are seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while" (17:9-10).³² Thus "κεφαλή of State, κεφαλή of animal," a witticism, it seems, Revelation makes clear right from the start.³³

²⁹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 242.

³⁰ David Frankfurter, "Revelation," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 483.

³¹ Like the Satan-Dragon, the Sea Beast's diadems signify its illegitimate power, while its heads represent its "threatening qualit[ies]." See Koester, *Revelation*, 545.

³² Suffice it to note that the latter half of this passage remains one of the most disputed lines of the entire Apocalypse. Who are the kings? Who has fallen? Who is living? Who is yet to come? The idea is that, if we can somehow match a particular emperor to the one "who lives," then we can assume a particular backdrop—that is, a particular date—for Revelation. Steven Friesen summarizes this issue well when he writes: "The vision of Revelation 17 has affected discussions about the date of the text. . . . As the angel interpreted the meaning of the woman and the seven-headed Beast, John learned that the seven heads represented not only hills but also emperors. He learned that of the seven emperors, 'Five have fallen, one is alive, the other has not yet come. And when he comes he must remain a little while' (17:10). Commentators have attempted to discern the

While each of the heads likely represents a different Caesar³⁴—which Caesars, we cannot be sure—there is indication that the Sea Beast, overall, mirrors in some way the emperor Nero. This is evidenced in large part by the Beast’s ruling head—the one fatally “wound[ed]” but then “healed” (13:3; cf. 17:8, 11)—and the number the Beast bears, which is also the number of a man (ἄνθρωπου): six-hundred sixty-six (13:18).

On the Beast’s ruling head—the one that was “wound[ed]” but then “healed”—scholars typically allude to the events surrounding Nero’s death. On June 9, 68, Nero was overthrown by the Roman Senate. The next day, he committed suicide by ordering his private secretary to slit his throat. Because so few actually saw Nero’s corpse, however, rumors developed that he did not actually die, and that he would return to Rome to wreak havoc on the Empire (e.g., Suetonius *Nero* 57; *Sibylline Oracles* 4.119-122, 137-139).³⁵ This myth, otherwise known as the *Nero Redux* (Nero “returned”), eventually developed into the *Nero Redivivus* (Nero “living again”) myth, which claimed that Nero, though

identity of the sixth emperor—the one ruling at the time—to ascertain the period when the author of Revelation was writing. The effort to list these seven has been complicated by two issues: it is not clear which ruler should be the starting point for enumeration or whether every consecutive emperor should be included. Scholars who conclude that Revelation was written in the late 60s start with Caesar or Augustus and exclude no one. Those who conclude that Revelation was written in the last years of Domitian’s reign begin with other emperors and often omit emperors for different reasons.” Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 140. For more on this conversation, see chapter one.

³³ The term “κεφαλή” was used in antiquity, like to today, to refer to both the “head” of a person and a prominent person. See, for instance, Vettius Valens’ *Anthology* 74.7.

³⁴ They likely also, at the same time, represent various empires through the image’s associations with Daniel 7:2-8.

³⁵ According to David Aune, the oldest version of this myth appears to have developed in Asia. It postulated that Nero would first conquer the East, and then, as the head of a Parthian army, retake the throne in Rome. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, World Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 739. See also *Sibylline Oracle* 4.138-139. For more on the Neronian myth and its different forms, see *ibid.*, 737-740.

dead, would come back to life and threaten his enemies. Although each myth comprises a slightly different telling of Nero's demise—one in which Nero dies, one in which he does not—the point is that, in both versions, Nero's "fatal wound" is somehow not *really* fatal at all. For some interpreters, then, the Sea Beast's resurrected head mirrors the myth of Nero's "death," leading them to believe the Sea Beast is, in some way, a personification of Nero.

The most viable supporting argument for a Neronian "666" is that the number is gematria for קסר נרון.³⁶ In the ancient world, people would assign letters of the alphabet particular numbers, and then interpret words and phrases based on their numerical significations. The practice of adding up and interpreting the numbers of words and phrases became known by the Hebrew term *gematria*, which derived from the Greek term γεωμετρία ("manipulating numbers"). When applying this practice to Revelation 13:18, the numbers most easily add up to קסר נרון: *Qof-samekh-resh* (Caesar/קסר) = 100+60+200, *nun-resh-vav-nun* (נרון) = 50+200+6+50; add them together and we get: 666. This gematria technique also works with ancient manuscripts that say the Sea Beast's number is 616. "If the final 'nun' is omitted, spelling 'Nero' rather than 'Nerōn,'" which matches the Latin spelling of the Emperor, "the numbers add up to 616."³⁷

Even for those who focus more on the Sea Beast's embodiment of multiple evils through its multiple heads (cf. Dan. 7:2-8), the consensus remains that "666" represents the Beast's inherent lack of perfection, as each of its digits rests just below the perfect

³⁶ The other option would be Domitian, who was considered a "new Nero" (Juvenal *Satire* 4.37-38; Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 53). For other interpretations of 666, see Koester, *Revelation*, 538–540.

³⁷ Frankfurter, "Revelation," 485.

number seven.³⁸ Those who follow the beast are also marked with the number 666, which juxtaposes the 144,000 followers of Christ and their seal (7:3). “By way of contrast, the [666] is based on twelve halved, which is six, and the sixes are multiplied by ten and a hundred, not by a thousand. The impression is that being marked with the beast’s 666 is a debased alternative to belonging to [Christ’s] 144,000.”³⁹ While those who bear the seal of Christ will enter the kingdom to come, those who bear the mark of the Beast—along with the Beast itself—will not.

Jewish Practical Joking

While the Beast’s number is an indication of its imperial satanic associations, it is also tongue-in-cheek humor. For what makes the number particularly incongruous for implied Jewish readers is the placement of it upon the Beast’s followers—the arm and forehead. While followers of Christ will be sealed (σφραγιῖδα) on the forehead (μετώπων; 7:3; 9:4), thus evoking “amuletic practices like the placement of ‘tefillin,’”⁴⁰ followers of the Beast will be marked with the number 666 on their right hand or forehead (13:16), evoking, by contrast, imagery of improper amuletic practice.⁴¹ On tefillin in antiquity, Seth Schwartz writes:

[A]ncient Jewish sources describe two distinctively Jewish items of clothing: tzitzit and tefillin. . . . The Pharisees and other pietists in the land of Israel . . . wore tefillin in public, usually called “phylacteries” [cf. Matt. 23:5]—small leather

³⁸ See chapter one, footnote 21.

³⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 598.

⁴⁰ Frankfurter, “Revelation,” 476.

⁴¹ In Deuteronomy 6:8, worshippers of the Israelite God are told that verses of the Shema prayer should serve as a symbol tied to their hands/arms and bound between their eyes. According to Bernard Levinson, this is more than mere metaphor. “It is possible, even likely, that the authors [of Deuteronomy] expected their audience to wear portions of the text upon the body.” Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 381.

containers strapped to the head and arm and containing several excerpts from the Torah, notably the Shema and (in some versions) the Ten Commandments. Tefillin have been discovered at Qumran.⁴²

I suggest that Revelation's implied readers would have recognized the juxtaposition between the Beast's blasphemous lists and the proper amuletic practice, as the use of tefillin in Jewish circles is well-attested in this time period.⁴³ I argue, moreover, that the placement of the number upon the Beast's followers is humorous, and works to make Revelation's global adversaries appear ridiculous—stupid, even. Practical joking was well-known in antiquity (the whoopee cushion itself being a Roman invention),⁴⁴ and this seems to fit well with that genre of humor. To give context, imagine, for instance, school children giving their teacher an apple that will make her teeth turn red. Or even more to the point, imagine a bullied student, sneaking to her snoozing taunter at the school sleepover, and then writing in permanent marker all over her face. Revelation, as we have seen, is just as much a book about defeating adversarial monsters as it is about claiming the import of a halakhic selfhood. What better way to mock the powerholders than to advertise their inability to “do it” right? What better way to juxtapose the halakhic Jews'—the underdogs'—connection to the divine realm than with the adversaries' *lack* of connection? What better way to highlight the inversion of the dominant script—the one that says Jews are Other, Jews are strange, Jews “look

⁴² Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA; and London, UK: University of California Press, 1999), 33. As noted in chapter one, it is likely that not every Jew actually wore tefillin, as Roman sources do not mention Jewish difference based on clothing items. Evidence of amulets have also been found that date as far back to the 7th and 6th centuries BCE; see Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” 381.

⁴³ Marking the body was also against halakhic code (Lev. 19:28), as opposed to bearing the seal or sign of God (Ezek. 9:4-6; Gen. 4:15; cf. Rev. 7:3; 9:4).

⁴⁴ Or, at least, first mentioned in Roman literature. See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 128.

weird”—than to make the Roman look the fool? While the Beast and its followers may envision a version of a perfect “seven” stapled across their bodies—and, indeed, they likely did, for the diadems on the Beast’s heads are also a representation of imperial self-glorification⁴⁵—implied readers are invited to smirk at the incongruous “666” plastered across their bodies.⁴⁶

The humor of the scene, I suggest, is solidified in the sarcasm and mockery of the following claims: “In *amazement* [note the sarcasm], the whole earth followed the Beast. . . . [A]nd they worshipped the Beast saying, ‘*Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?*’ [note the mockery]” (13:3-4). In the context of a narrative of victory, this “amazement” and mockery work to ridicule the Beast and those who follow it. Not only are the Beast and its followers left out of the New Jerusalem because of the mark that they bear (as opposed to the 144,000 halakhic Christ-followers who are sealed with the sign of Jesus; 7:4, 14:3-4) but they are also excluded from Revelation’s own community of laughers.

Jewish Animal Humor

What stands out the most about the Sea Beast, however, is its animal-like physique. Depicted as a leopard-like monster (παρδάλει) with ten horns, seven heads, a lion’s mouth (ὡς στόμα λέοντος), and a bear’s feet (οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ ὡς ἄρκου), Revelation’s Sea Beast is surely alarming (Rev. 13:1-2). Daniel, in fact, has a similar vision of imperial adversaries (Dan. 7:2-8), which he also describes as “dreadful” (לִּפְתָּ, 7:7) and “terrifying” (לִּהַבֵּ, 7:15):

⁴⁵ See footnote 17.

⁴⁶ Compare with the political cartoons of Hitler in chapter two.

I, Daniel, saw in my vision . . . four great beasts coming out of the sea. . . . The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings Another a second beast appeared that looked like a bear another appeared, like a leopard by night a fourth beast, [it was] terrible. . . . [I]t had ten horns. (Dan. 7:2-8)

But there are other things—humorous things—that are described as equally “terrifying” in Daniel. In Daniel 2, for instance, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which an idol statue, made from clay and four different types of metal, falls to the ground in pieces. According to Daniel, the image is a “dreadful” (לָפֶתֶחַ, 2:31) representation of the Empire’s destruction (2:31-45):

After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours, and then a third of the kingdom of bronze, which shall rule the entire earth. And then there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, just as iron crushes and smashes, everything, it shall crush and shatter all these. (2:39-40).

Despite the relationship between this statue and the Babylonian kingdom’s destruction, however, Nebuchadnezzar erects an idol ninety-feet by nine feet—“a top heavy statue if ever there was one”⁴⁷—made of metal. His statue is, like the Sea Beast, ridiculous in appearance and later paralleled in the King’s equally absurd and grotesque decree that his subjects must fall down and worship the statue, lest they should to be thrown into a fiery furnace (see 3:1-6). While, as Danna Nolan Fewell remarks, Nebuchadnezzar’s statue and later command indicate to readers how the king “wants himself and his reign to be perceived, both now and in the years to come,”⁴⁸ they also, and perhaps more so, indicate that “the stupid king has totally missed the point.”⁴⁹ Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a statue

⁴⁷ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993), 175.

⁴⁸ Danna Nolan Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty: Plotting Politics in the Book of Daniel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 39.

⁴⁹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 175.

identified by Daniel as representative of the King's destruction, and Nebuchadnezzar decides to build the same statue anyway.⁵⁰

Nebuchadnezzar's visions do not end there, however. In Daniel 4, he dreams that an image of an imperial "tree of life" is cut down to a stump, and then transformed into an animal that must graze the earth for seven years (4:10-16). For Nebuchadnezzar, it is "dreadful" (דָּרָא, 4:5). According to Daniel, it is a "terrifying" (בְּהַל, 4:19) indication of the King's collapse:

My King, may the dream be for those who hate you! May its interpretation be for your enemies! . . . But, Oh King, it is *you!* . . . You will be driven away from humans to live with beasts. You will eat grass like cattle and will be made wet with the dew of heaven. And seven years will pass before you recognize that [it is my] God who is the God of all people. (4:19-25)

Daniel's interpretation is right. In 4:33, we see the King hunched over like a cow, chewing heaps of grass. His hair has grown as long as an eagle's feathers, and his nails as long as a bird's claws.

Despite the "dreadful" qualities of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, and the "terrifying" image of the King grazing on all fours, scholars have recognized the humor at play. According to Gunn and Fewell, for instance, Daniel's "sculpting" scene is "a parody of a ruthless king."⁵¹ Edwin M. Good has argued similarly. The book of Daniel is comedy, he writes, akin to an Aristophanic inversion of hierarchical scripts. "There is . . . surely, humor in contemplating the great king, with hair like eagles' feathers and fingernails like birds' claws, subsisting on grass for seven years."⁵² Because of his wrongdoings,

⁵⁰ On the connection between the two statues, see Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty*, 38–39.

⁵¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 175.

⁵² Edwin M. Good, "Apocalyptic as Comedy: The Book of Daniel," *Semeia*, no. 32 (January 1, 1984): 52.

Nebuchadnezzar is turned into animal personified, left to consume the joke food set before him. Indeed,

[t]he scandalous scene of a monarch munching vegetation on four appendages is one of the most ludicrous stories of Daniel. . . . These scenes are plainly designed to violate and denigrate royal etiquette. This is a tragic-comic portrait of a regent who claims absolute power but whose actions repeatedly reveal his impotence and beg for his further humiliation.⁵³

At the end of his monograph on Daniel and satire, David Valeta questions whether the successive beasts of Dan. 7:2-8 might actually be viewed as “intensifications of the[se] [humorous] counterparts.”⁵⁴ I find this suggestion intriguing. For example, if the hybrid statues and absurd animals in Daniel 4 teeter into the comic realm—even when characterized as “dreadful” and “terrifying” by characters within the text—can we not read the grotesque images of Daniel 7 as containing elements of the comic, too? Might the four successive beasts of Daniel 7:2-8 be *hyperbolic* representations of the *already hyperbolic* beasts, and therefore enter the *hyper-hyperbolic* (i.e., comic) realm? After all, is it not the fourth beast (i.e., the “exceedingly terrifying” one; 7:19) that is depicted as a “little” (זַעֲיָרָה) phallic horn that talks?: “[The little horn] will speak words against the Most High, and will harass the holy ones of the Most High” (7:8, 25). If the image of an enemy nation/king “harassing” the holy ones in the guise of a “little” phallic horn is not representative of humor’s incongruity theory, than I do not know what is.⁵⁵

It certainly seems to be the case that Revelation, a text dialogically associated with Daniel by any account, borrows this type of humor. Instead of the body of an ox, the

⁵³ David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions: A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 122.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁵ Another incongruity in Daniel 7 is the fact that, although Daniel has been reciting and interpreting the King’s dreams up until this point in the narrative, he, here, cannot interpret his own.

Sea Beast has the body of a leopard. Instead of an eagle's wings, the Sea Beast has a lion's mouth. Instead of a bird's claws, the Sea Beast has a bear's feet. Although it is customarily noted by commentators that the Sea Beast of Revelation 13:1-2 amalgamates the four successive beasts of Daniel 7:2-8, the Beasts of Daniel 7:2-8 also amalgamate, to varying degrees, the images of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:31-45 and 4:10-33. The hybridity of the statue in Daniel 2 teeters into the hybridity of the animal-King in Daniel 4; the animality of the animal-King in Daniel 4 teeters into the animality of the four Beasts in Daniel 7; the four Empires of the statue in Daniel 2 teeter into the four Empires of the Beast's in Daniel 7. All of these representations are grotesque. From the statue, to the animal-King, to the four beasts, to the Sea Beast, to the amalgamations of them—all are “dreadful.” Why can they not all be funny? Have traditional illustrations of Daniel 7 and Revelation's Sea Beast completely clouded our ability to see them differently? *Surely* there is humor, as Good writes on Daniel, in imagining “great leaders” refurbished as animals:



Viktor Deni, 1942⁵⁶

⁵⁶ See Tony Husband, *Propaganda Cartoons of World War II* (London, UK: Arcturus Holdings Limited, 2013), 115.

Roman Animal Humor

The negotiation between human and animal is not lost on humor critics.

According to Simon Critchley:

Humour is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories. We might even define the human as a *dynamic* process produced by a series of identifications and misidentifications with animality.⁵⁷

Reminiscent of Cicero, who writes that the deviation from the norm is that which amuses us, (*On the Orator*, 2.255-260), Critchley adds: “What makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal and the elevation of the animal to the human.”⁵⁸

Roman authors were also interested in this negotiation. In conversation with Critchley, Beard writes that the juxtaposition between the human and the animal was a “key promp[t] to Roman laughter,”⁵⁹ likely due to the ambivalent negotiations between them, and, I suspect, the brittle, unstable nature of the Roman conception of full personhood—which is to say, masculine personhood. Indeed, Roman masculinity was always threatening to teeter over into femininity—a “key prompt to Roman laughter” (as discussed in the previous chapter and more below), and beyond that, into animality. We see evidence of this teetering in the play between the Latin terms for laughter (*ridet*) and a donkey’s bray (*rudet*). Ovid writes, “There is one kind of girl who distorts her face with a frightful guffaw; there’s another you’d think was crying, when she is actually creased with laughing. Then there’s the harsh noise without any charm—laughing like an ugly donkey brays as she goes round the rough millstone.”⁶⁰ The humor here is in the parallel between words. These girls look like asses and sound like them too (a humorous image in

⁵⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 29.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 160. On Jewish animal humor, recall also Balaam’s ass. Note, also: Hamor means ass; Jael means mountain goat; Caleb means dog; etc.

⁶⁰ Translated by Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 158.

its own right), but this is highlighted all the more through Ovid's use of wordplay (how easily the *ridet* slips into the *rudet*).⁶¹

Men, however, were not immune to this deflation. In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, we are invited to watch as the bumbling Lucius attempts to turn himself into a bird, but instead rubs, by mistake, an ointment over his body that turns him into an ass:

I seized the [ointment] and kissed it, praying that it would grant me good luck on the wing; then I tore off my clothes, and plunging my hands into it scooped out a generous portion of the ointment and rubbed it all over myself; then I flapped my arms up and down in imitation of a bird. But no down or feathers appeared; instead my hair became coarse and shaggy, my soft skin hardened into hide, my fingers and toes lost their separate identity and coalesced into hooves, and from the end of my spine there protruded a long tail. My face became enormous and my mouth widened; my nostrils dilated and my lips hung down; and my ears became monstrously long and hairy. . . . I looked myself over and saw that I was now no bird, but an ass (3.24-25).⁶²

The incongruity of what Lucius expects to happen and what actually happens encourages us to laugh—and to laugh *at* him—our own chuckles perhaps working to mock the sound of his own brays.⁶³ The Emperor Nero, too, was characterized in such a manner.

Mirroring Petronius's Trimalchio in the *Satyricon*, the Emperor becomes nothing short of a centerpiece pig. Critchley writes, “[I]n ‘Trimalchio’s Feast’ . . . the slave Trimalchio—himself a sort of twisted reflection of Petronius’s employer, the Emperor Nero—appears like a great, shining pig.”⁶⁴ While Critchley moves on to analyze Trimalchio’s epitaph—which, he explains, in reference to Samuel Beckett, was written in a type of “pigsty Latin,”⁶⁵ we can also analyze Trimalchio’s relationship with the massive hog on dinner table. As Trimalchio inspects the pig, he notices that it has not yet been gutted. We then

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, 158–159.

⁶² Translation from Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. E. J. Kenney (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1998).

⁶³ See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 184.

⁶⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

read as the pig's insides—its bowels, blood, and guts—are removed from the hog, which represents for Petronius the grotesqueries and gluttonies of the Roman Empire. This commentary on Rome continues through Trimalchio's actions. Once Trimalchio's chef disembowels the pig, Trimalchio continues to tell stories about his own wealth—a satirical overture, likely, for Trimalchio's, and, by extension, Nero's, overindulgences. The humor here lies not only in the relationship between the human and the animal, but also, *through* that relationship, the exposure of Trimalchio's ineptitude. Trimalchio, in the end, is “blind to [his] own moral bankruptcy and unaware of that [his] snobbish pretensions...are ensnared in [satire].”⁶⁶ Thus with the use of his wry pen, paired with the image of the chef's carving knife, Petronius casts Trimalchio as another gutted, grotesque, and, ultimately, exposed hog.

Indeed, human-animal comic incongruity was often used not only to highlight the ambivalent negotiations between human and animal, but also, and perhaps more so, to ridicule a subject's character. Playwrights, graffitists, and public executioners also often lampooned their targets through humor, which included allusions to the human-animal

⁶⁶ Victoria Rimell, “The Satiric Maze: Petronius, Satire, and the Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*, ed. Kirk Freudenburg (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 167. By “satire” here, I mean something akin to a “satiric mode” or “attitude,” as Petronius's *Satyricon* is not understood as a Roman satire by classicists, but, rather, as that which is “parasitic on almost every known literary form, from the Greek romans (which is often said to parody) to epic, historiography, New Comedy, Roman erotic elegy, the Milesian tale, and Greek and Roman mime.” Even “the question of whether the *Satyricon* should be counted as Menippean satire has troubled critics since the Renaissance, when the term Menippean was first used.” See *ibid.*, 160 and 164. While Northrop Frye's classifications of plot structures (e.g., a “satiric mode”) have been scrutinized by scholars for being too narrow, I understand “satiric mode” or “attitude” in this case as fluid—as that which has contact with multiple types and genres but that also takes on the wit and attitude known to Roman satire. For more on Frye's taxonomies, see Northrop Frye, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). For more on the specificities of Roman satire yet also the more general “attitudes” therein, see chapter two.

divide. Recall, for instance, the image of the Roman criminal who was fitted with wings like Daedalus, lifted in the air, and then watched as he plummeted to his death, thus failing to fly.⁶⁷ Or recall the caricatures at Pompeii, in which humans were deflated for their un-human (e.g., animal-like) characteristics. Here we see a hybrid human/bird face covered in a bonnet:



*Astyle Dormi(en)s*⁶⁸

Even in the Roman courtroom,⁶⁹ subjects were, akin to modern political cartoons, turned into “laughable physiognomies,”⁷⁰ debased by their bizarre appearances and gestures. In his oratory jabs, Cicero calls Piso a dog (*Against Piso* 23) and pig (*Against Piso* 19, 37), and mocks Verres for his name, which meant “boar” or “swine”: “And so there were those people who were found to be even ridiculous in their grief. Some of

⁶⁷ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 23.

⁶⁸ From Martin Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen: Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Ludwig Reichert, 2001), no. 237.

⁶⁹ Unlike the actor, who like prostitutes and gladiators was considered *infamis* in ancient Rome, the orator occupied elite status (See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 119). What is interesting about the orator, then, is that he had to go about constructing his witticisms in a way that was *just right*. Both Cicero and Quintilian, for example, express their anxieties about humor in professional settings, as the overuse of things such as wit, mimicry, and jest might make one resemble more a clown or actor than a professional speaker. As Clarke writes, “Laughter could win over a judge or audience. But it could also backfire and discredit the speaker” (Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 17). Even, Cicero, perhaps the most “*infamis*” jester in Roman oration, writes that humor—although a necessary part of proper oration (1.17)—must be “sprinkled, like a little salt, throughout [one’s] speech” (1.159).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

them, as you've often heard, used to say that it was no wonder that the pork gravy [i.e. Verres] (*ius verrinum*) was so bad" (*Against Verres* 2.1.121).⁷¹

Roman satirists also implemented animal humor into their work. In Martial's 10.90, for instance, a "woman is reproached for depilating her crotch, and told . . . not to 'pluck the beard of a dead lion'" (Mart. 10.90.10). In Horace's *Epode* 8, a hag's anus is compared to a cow with indigestion:

You, foul by your long century, ask
what unmans my strength,
when . . . between your dried-out cheeks gapes filthy
an asshole like a dyspeptic cow's?⁷²

To borrow the words of Critchley, the animal humor here worked to produce "a comic disgust with the species" and in turn, a comic disgust with the satirist's target. "[W]hen the human becomes animal, the effect is disgusting,"⁷³ and it leaves a mark on the subject lampooned. Should we follow the grain of the jokers, we are encouraged to laugh at the "them" who so easily slip into the realm of the animal, not "us." Indeed, it is "you," writes Horace, who is foul with age and incontinent like a dyspeptic cow, not "me."

Revelation knows this use of humor. Its depictions of the Sea Beast work to highlight the absurdities of imperial rulers and, more specifically, those of Rome. In Revelation 13, we learn that Empire/Rome is not only obscene in body—this crossing the human-animal divide so familiar to the comic forms outlined above— but also in character. It is blasphemous (13:1, 5), it is illegitimate (13:5), and it holds captive the

⁷¹ Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 92. See also Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 1983), 100. Richlin adds that Cicero's play with specific animals is rare (*ibid.*), but points out that animals were still a referent for humorous ridicule.

⁷² Translation from Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 110.

⁷³ Critchley, *On Humour*, 33.

saints and martyrs (13:9-10). Thinking with John Clarke’s “laughable physiognomy” phrase, we can even compare Revelation’s Sea Beast with descriptions of animal bodies in ancient physiognomic handbooks.⁷⁴ According to Ps.-Aristotle, “ill-proportioned men are rogues . . . whereas the well-proportioned are likely to be just and manly.”⁷⁵ And “[f]or Polemon, as for Ps.-Aristotle, [the leopard] is the stereotype of the feminine . . . [and] Polemon evidently hated what he saw as deviation from the male standard.”⁷⁶

While the Sea Beast’s physique thus renders it ill-proportioned and hybrid—taking on the image of not just one, but many animal types (leopard, lion, bear)—its overall, leopard-like form renders it oddly effeminate, a disgusting “deviation from the male norm.” As such, the Beast and the Whore are a pair, both feminizing lampoons of ostensibly hypermasculine Empire/Rome (more below).

Although Ps.-Aristotle and Polemon do not seem to reference bears in their physiognomic treatises, later physiognomic practitioners understood the animal to be deceitful, clumsy, and absent-minded.⁷⁷ If this is the view of Revelation’s author, then his construction of the Beast’s feet make the Beast overall appear that much more inept. In

⁷⁴ “The . . . pseudo-Aristotelian tractate, *Physiognomica*, claims: ‘The physiognomist takes his information from movements, shapes, colors, and traits as they appear in the face, from the hair, from the smoothness of the skin, from the voice, from the appearance of flesh, from the limbs, and from the entire stature of the body’ (806a28-34). This method is based on the assumption that ‘soul and body react on each other; when the character of the soul changes, it changes also the form of the body, and conversely, when the form of the body changes, it changes the character of the soul’ (808b12-15). This is the gist of physiognomy as understood and practiced in the ancient world.” Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 14.

⁷⁵ Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 90.

⁷⁶ Simon Swain, “Polemon’s Physiognomy,” in *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam*, ed. Simon Swain (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 189. In Ps.-Aristotle, the leopard is described as the most feminine type of all the animals rendered “brave” (See 810a).

⁷⁷ See, for example, Adamantius the sophist or Islamic physiognomic material.

fact, the only thing contextually “manly” about the Sea Beast is its lion’s mouth, but even that becomes tainted through its mixture with lesser physiognomic types. Revelation, for all intents and purposes, has turned imperial adversaries into a “laughable physiognomy” incarnate. Yet instead of mirroring Horace’s cow-lady, or Apuleius’ ass-man, Revelation turns them into the comic criminal *tout court*. Like the winged Daedalus above, imperial “heads” are dressed in animal skins. They are prepped for their execution, and will later be hunted down as prey animal by the rider on the white horse (19:11, 20). In Revelation’s alternative future, implied imperial oppressors, including those of Rome, are nothing more than comic spectacles.

The Land Beast

The Land Beast is frequently taken to symbolize Behemoth, who, in Jewish tradition, “was separated from Leviathan on the fifth day of creation and assigned to the land (1 Enoch 60:7-11, 22; 4 Ezra 6:47-54; 2 Apoc. Bar. 29:4).”⁷⁸ Considering the Land Beast’s particular role in Revelation, however, it is also often taken to represent promoters of the imperial cult. In Revelation 13:2, for instance, we learn that the Land Beast works for the Sea Beast by encouraging the inhabitants of the Earth to worship it. The Land Beast’s support for the Sea Beast—a Beast who has clear Satanic associations (13:1; cf. 12:3)—leads John to associate it with the tradition of false prophets (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), which parallels supporters of an illegitimate (i.e., false) imperial system. Some interpreters have even surmised that the Land Beast signifies the imperial

⁷⁸ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 52B, 756.

priesthood—that is, priests and priestesses responsible for organizing and implementing the imperial cult in the province of Asia.⁷⁹

The humor associated with the Land Beast works mainly in the form of mockery. He has two horns like a lamb, and speaks like a dragon. According to ancient physiognomic treatises, the lamb is one of the most effeminate animals in the animal kingdom. Ps.-Aristotle writes, “The most timid of animals are deer, hares, and sheep, and they have the softest coats; whilst the lion and wild-boar are bravest and have the coarsest coats” (806b6).⁸⁰ Juxtaposing the Land Beast’s effeminate qualities with the traditional Jewish view that prophets and kings are shepherds (Num. 16-23; 2 Sam. 5:2; Isa. 63:11; Jer. 17:16; Mt. 2:6; John 10:11; cf. Ps. 23:1)—shepherds who *lead* the sheep—we learn that the Land “prophet” is, like Jezebel, nothing more than a prophet fraud. In fact, rather than bear witness to the signs and wonders of God—which is the sign of a true prophet⁸¹—Revelation’s Land-Lamb spits frogs from its mouth (13:12; 16:13). The comic incongruity in Revelation 13 thus works to not only parody the prophet—perhaps even aligning him with the frog-covered Pharaoh of the Exodus narrative (“I [Moses] will plague your whole country with frogs. . . . They will come up to your palace and to your bedroom and to your bed” [Exod. 8:1-15])—but to highlight the gullibility of the Beast’s

⁷⁹ According to Aune this is the most likely representation. *Ibid.*, 756. Other possibilities, as Koester explains, are: 1) the elite supporters of the imperial cult; 2) the provincial council of Asia; or 3) Christ followers who adhered to Greco-Roman practice. See Koester, *Revelation*, 589.

⁸⁰ Ps.-Aristotle translations from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁸¹ According to Koester, performing signs “[does] not prove that someone is a true prophet. The touchstone for true prophecy is whether it moves people to worship the true God or a false god. Regardless of the number of signs performed, one who directs people to worship a false god is not a true prophet (cf. Deut. 13:1-11; 1 John 4:1-6).” Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 130.

sympathizers: “In *amazement*[!], the whole earth followed the Beast [for whom the prophet worked]” (13:3). The humor here would be particularly clear from implied Jewish readers, as,

[Jews] stood in a tradition that considered idol worship to be absurd. The book of Isaiah contains a rollicking satire in which a pagan craftsman uses half of a tree for cooking fuel and the other half to make the image of a god. The craftsman cooks his supper over the fire that he kindles with half of the tree’s wood, then he turns around and worships the image that he fashioned from the other half of the wood. Like Isaiah, [Revelation’s implied readers] would consider it ridiculous to cry out to an image that cannot hear or see, ‘Save me, for you are my God!’ (Isa. 44:9-20).⁸²

The very notion of an idol having life would have registered to Jews as something that “one [would expect] to find at a sideshow in a traveling circus.”⁸³ Revelation 13, in other words, works to not only mock the Land prophet, but also those who follow it and its master. Those who think the Land Beast’s “puppet” from the Sea is real, writes Revelation, are total idiots.

The Whore of Babylon (Or, the Bigger the Whore, the Bigger the Butt)

The Whore of Babylon recalls the wickedness of the Babylonian Empire and, more directly, the wickedness of Rome. “The [Whore] you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” who sits atop “seven mountains” (17:18, 9).⁸⁴ Through its

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Babylon is not the only woman-city to appear in traditional Jewish narrative. In the Hebrew Bible, “Jerusalem (Isa 1:21) and the people of Israel (Jer 3:6-10; Ezek 16:15-22; 23:1-49; Hos 4:12-13; 5:3) were called prostitutes because their worship of various deities was considered religious promiscuity. It violated the covenant relationship with God, which was comparable to a marriage (Hos 2:5; Jer 2:20; 3:1-14; Ezek 16:36)” (Koester, *Revelation*, 671). Athalya Brenner refers to this as the “pornoprophetics” of scripture. Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and “Sexuality” in the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 26 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 153–174. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, androcentric cities and nations are

satiric depictions of Babylon, Revelation works to counter not only the Babylonian imperial transcript—the one that forced Jews into subalternity through their destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE—but also, and more so, the oppressive gaze of the Roman Empire.

In addition to reading the Whore as an amalgamation of Empires, we can also consider her to be a kind of mirror image of Jezebel.⁸⁵ Jezebel is a little whore; Babylon is The Great Whore. “Jezebel . . . is a figure for what contaminates within, Babylon is a figure for what contaminates without.”⁸⁶ Jezebel is the antithesis of Revelation’s John, God’s true prophet; Babylon is the antithesis of God, John’s true Lord.⁸⁷ Jezebel is representation of one person, together with the followers of that person; Babylon is representative of an entire city, and, indeed, an entire empire. We might even say that the Whore and the Beasts, in John’s mind, are also two sides of the same counterfeit coin.

called “whores” as a way to show ridicule. Revelation borrows the pornoprophetics of Ezekiel 16 in particular. In Ezekiel 16:35, Jerusalem is described as a female whore. In 16:39, she is stripped of her clothing. In 16:40, she is stoned and cut into pieces. And in 16:41, her houses are burned. See Caroline Vander Stichele, “Re-Membering the Whore: The Fate of Babylon According to Revelation 17:16,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), 110. To use the words of Vander Stichele, “Both [Jerusalem] being made naked and the burning of her houses correspond to elements in Rev. 17:16” (ibid.). Babylon, too, was also already represented as female throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isa. 47:1-15; Jer. 50:9-15; Zech. 2:7; cf. Rev. 17:6, 9, 18; 1 Pet. 5:13; 4 Ezra 3:1-2, 28-31; 2 Baruch 10:1-3, 11:1; 67:7; see also *Sibylline Oracles* 5:143, 159). She “comes already sexed and gendered in the tradition that John of Revelation inherited and internalized. . . . Babylon being a feminine noun in both Hebrew (*bābel*) and Greek (*babylōn*).” See Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 126. Moore adds that, aside from Jeremiah 50:12a, Babylon is not an object of sexual shaming in Hebrew scripture. “Revelation’s pornoprophecy . . . is John’s own distinct concoction” (ibid., 127).

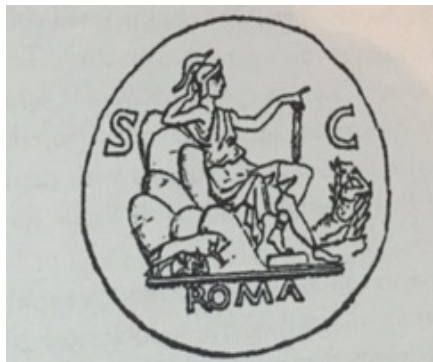
⁸⁵ For comparisons of Jezebel and Babylon, see especially Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?: Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 83–96.

⁸⁶ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 173.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 127.

Each epitomizes Rome and imperial power, but—more important for my topic—each also holds up laughingly and derisively to Roman power the two perpetual threats to hegemonic Roman manhood, feminization and animalization, threats that, as we have seen, were standard fodder for Roman humor itself.

In the first century CE, Rome was “already represented as female in the cult of the goddess Roma, [which had] deep roots in Roman Asia.”⁸⁸ This is interesting, because even though “Roma” was depicted as a female, she was still “masculine on the level of ideology, or, alternatively, rhetoric. . . . The word *Roma/Rhōmē* itself [was] grammatically feminine but rhetorically, ideologically, and conceptually masculine” mainly because Rome was epitomized by its ostensibly irresistible military.⁸⁹ A coin minted in Roman Asia in the year 71 CE offers us a good example of this gender paradox:⁹⁰



Here, the goddess Roma is adorned in battle garb, wearing a combat helmet, sitting atop/conquering the seven hills of Rome, steadying her gaze, and holding a sword in her left hand. Rome sees herself as not just any man, but the best man. She is a hypermasculine super-warrior, *virtus* personified.

⁸⁸ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 126.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 140–141.

⁹⁰ The image comes from Koester, *Revelation*, 685.

This is the Rome that oppresses, conquers, kills, denies, forgets, and traumatizes its Others. This is the Rome that Revelation associates with Babylon, which also oppressed, conquered, killed, denied, and forgot Others, not the least of whom were Jews. This is the Rome that Revelation thus seeks to expose—and erode—in its quest for repair and self-definition.

And that it does. For when we first meet the Whore, we see that Rome has not only stripped her of her battle garb, but her masculine prowess, too:

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names. . . . [She] was wearing purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication, and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: “Babylon the Great, mother of whores and the earth’s abominations.” (Rev. 17:3-5)

While Revelation may, at first blush, appear to be describing a sophisticated woman (she wears purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls), we quickly learn that this is not the case.⁹¹ Revelation’s derision for Rome and Roman prowess is evidenced most immediately by the descriptor Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν. (“Babylon the Great, Mother of Whores”). Whereas some scholars may equate πόρνη with ἑταίρα (courtesan), Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen Moore and have shown the noun refers more appropriately to an ancient “street walker,” “brothel worker,” or “brothel slave.”⁹² “If the ἑταίρα belonged to the symposium, the πόρνη belonged to the streets.”⁹³ The description of Rome as ἡ πόρνη ἡ μεγάλη (“The Great Whore”) designates Rome as

⁹¹ See also Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 146.

⁹² Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore’?,” reprinted as “The Empress and the Brothel Slave” in Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 103-123. Here Glancy and Moore also unpack the tensions between the Whore’s elegant dress and prostitution.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 107.

neither a warrior nor a man, nor even a female courtesan, but as a nameless, faceless, streetwalking harlot. She is not the owner of Others, but the one who is owned—the one who is penetrated and degraded as she sits it utter squalor. Echo, Horace: “[Rome] stands for sale in the foul smelling brothel (1.2.30).”⁹⁴

Babylon on Stage

In his *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, Stephen Moore focuses on the negotiation between Rome’s self-definitions and Revelation’s caricature of her. Drawing on Judith Butler’s understanding of gender as performance in *Gender Trouble*, in which she uses the tradition of drag as a primary example of gender performativity, Moore argues that the goddess Roma is akin to a man dressed as a woman, dressed as a man; “Roma is Rome in double drag.”⁹⁵ In Roman imperial ideology, it is *she* who is the warrior, *virtus* personified. In Revelation, however, the text strips Roma of her masculine garb, as we have seen, thus putting her triply in drag: “phallic masculinity figured as female and clothed as virtuous and victorious warrior, then reclothed as degenerate and defeated brothel slave” (more on this below).⁹⁶

While Moore’s analysis focuses on “the celebration of masculinity”⁹⁷—the masculine Revelation “outmaning” the feminized Rome (more on this “outmaning” in chapter five)—I wonder if it might also be a celebration of performative wit. My question becomes intensified when I imagine Revelation actually being performed. For while texts

⁹⁴ The original has “a woman.”

⁹⁵ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 146.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–47.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

are indeed performative, and therefore function as performance discursively⁹⁸—which in turn contributes to audiences’ own states of becoming—I question what we might notice if we, like Butler, recognize body performance as also being a place of discursive productivity. The Apocalypse certainly seems to support such a musing. According to Lynn R. Huber, for instance, Revelation’s “vision-laden language”—its consistent *showing* and *seeing* (see, e.g., Rev. 1:1-2)—invites readers to “think of the narrative as something to see,”⁹⁹ and even “points to the importance of attending to the visual for understanding Revelation’s interpretations.”¹⁰⁰ What if we imagine this showing actually taking place on stage?

My question is not incongruous historically. It is possible that the Apocalypse was enacted by various Christ-following communities. David Rhoads explains:

The overwhelming majority of first century [Christ-followers] (perhaps 95%) experienced their traditions—including gospels, letters, and apocalypses—only in some form of oral performance. Performances were a central and integral part of the early [Christ-following] experience of the compositions that have now come down to us in written form in the Second Testament. The collection of Second Testament writings we now have are records of what early [Christ-followers] experienced in speech by performers in the community.¹⁰¹

Biblical performance critics suggest persuasively that, in sharing New Testament stories (and/or versions of them), actors and audiences were present.¹⁰² Rhoads goes as far as to say, “These compositions *were* oral presentations.”¹⁰³ In his view, “there was a performer

⁹⁸ For more on this and its relations to Revelation, see Harry O. Maier, “Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 2 (1997): 143–47.

⁹⁹ Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 12.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I,” *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (2006): 118.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

or storyteller. They were heard/experienced rather than read. There was a communal audience. There was a physical location and a socio-historical circumstance that shaped the performance and the reception.”¹⁰⁴ That John’s Apocalypse was performed in part or in full amongst Christ-followers in the first century is thus possible—likely, even.

When considering Revelation as performance, I question: Based on Roman stagecraft, what might the scenes look like? What might the Whore of Babylon look like?¹⁰⁵ Thinking with the grain of socio-historical normativity—that is, normative stagecraft and performance in first-century Roman Asia—the answer is, at the very least, incongruous. Because acting was a profession designed for men,¹⁰⁶ Revelation’s Global Whore would have likely been played by an anatomical man. Thus with a high-pitched voice (and simulated female pudenda),¹⁰⁷ we can imagine a Jewish male actor strutting center stage proclaiming, “It is I! The *Great Whore of Babylon!*”

While the image of a fabulous man-in-drag may be funny in its own right, the humor of the scene penetrates into its anti-imperial subtext. It is important to keep in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Suffice it to note that, when considering the socio-historical framing of Roman performance, we must consider the comic form. Comic plots, after all, were enacted in theaters, amphitheaters, dinner parties, festivals, funerals, streets, games, etc. Entertaining the masses was part and parcel of Roman dominance and expansion; John’s audiences were likely familiar, at least in part, with the norms of Roman comic stagecraft and performance.

¹⁰⁶ Mime was one of the only acting forums that allowed women actors.

¹⁰⁷ Male actors of Aristophanic comedy would wear strap-on phalluses on stage. According to Marshall, actors may have worn fake phalluses for Roman plays, although perhaps not in the Greek style, which had padded bodysuits. See Christopher W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 62–66. Mime actors were also known for highlighting the pubic area, likely wearing tights to give the effect of nudity. It is also likely that mime actors at times used real nudity, particularly for private performances (ibid., 8–9). If performances of Revelation followed a mime routine and used women as actors as well as men, the comic performance would likely mirror the nude (or seemingly nude) and crude performances of women acting nude in mime.

mind, for instance, that our actor in drag would have been considered “less manly” by Roman standards than the Goddess Roma. Jews in antiquity, as we have seen, were considered to be particularly effeminate by the Roman narrative. But the cities of Roman Asia, too, were particularly feminized—indubitably “soft”—as Craig A. Williams describes it, contra the hypermasculine “hardness” of Rome.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the Jewish, Christ-following male from Roman Asia—the one who was regularly mocked *by* the Roman dominant transcript—does not embody the Roman notion of masculinity. Following Moore’s logic, then, the Jewish performer becomes *quadruply* a figure in drag: A colonized Jew, dressed as *virtus* figured as a female dressed in warrior attire, then reclothed as a prostitute.

Akin to queer comic camp, this scene is one of “undoing.” By “playing” Rome, Revelation works to expose the very performance of Romanness and thus the superficiality of it. This exposé, moreover, is crafted by the Other, using the Otherness of the Other. In other words, it is precisely through the performance of the Other playing Rome, in all her forms, that Revelation shows the low can play the high and thus undo the very binary Rome has positioned between that low and high.¹⁰⁹

This “undoing” of Roman prowess continues throughout the performance. We see in the script:

Rome: “It is I! The *Great* Whore of Babylon!”
 John: “When I saw her, I was *greatly* amazed!” (17:6)

This is sarcasm. By combining Roman self-designations (i.e., Rome is “great”) with the image of Rome as Whore (i.e., Rome is not “great”), Revelation makes clear its own

¹⁰⁸ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, second ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 148.

¹⁰⁹ Feil, “Queer Comedy,” 481.

disbelief in the lines. Knowing also that John has made it clear elsewhere that he finds imperial Rome and Romanness to be *not* amazing, we can deduce that he is not being serious. His “when I saw her, I was greatly amazed!” line is likely more a mockery of those who actually did find the Whore to be “amazing.” Compare this to Freud’s famous words, written in response to the Nazi regime:

To Whom It May Concern:
I can heartily recommend the Gestapo to anyone.
Sigmund Freud¹¹⁰

Apparently, Freud wrote this under to noses of the Third Reich. It was a hidden transcript within the public transcript, the kind that, as John Morreall puts it, “went right over [the Nazis’] heads.”¹¹¹ Should the irony of Revelation go over our heads, however, the text adds the foolproof line:

Angel: *Why are you so amazed* by the Whore? [With an implied echo:
Seriously—*WHY?*] (17:7)

In fact, just to make sure members of the in-group “get” the text’s joking—and, thus, to continue thickening the communal belief that Babylon/Rome is, indeed, *not* amazing—the angel proceeds to unravel all that is “great” about her. In point-by-point detail, he describes the Whore’s grotesqueries and demise:

Angel: The Whore rides a Beast who is about to go into destruction. She and those who follow her are not written in the book of life. All who follow her will turn against her. She will be devoured by the Beast she rides—its horns will make her naked, devour her, and burn her up with fire. This woman you saw? The “great” one? She may be a city who rules over kings, but she is a city that will surely fall. (17:7-18)

¹¹⁰ See John Morreall, “Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions,” in *Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations*, 1997, <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/humor-in-the-holocaust/>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Rome is thus stripped once more, made naked and desolate, to be devoured and burned.¹¹² She has reached the “second phase” of degradation. “No longer the emblem of self-autonomy, she no longer belongs only to herself. No longer is her body a consummate instrument of control; now it is at the disposal of others.”¹¹³ The angels explanation that the “great” one will fall also has its parallel in John’s pronouncement in 14:8: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” The point is that Babylon is not great; if she were, she would not fall. If she were, she would not be laid waste and become the object of other men’s gazes. While Rome sees herself as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18)—a goddess packaged as a hypermasculine, military superpower—Revelation turns her self-descriptions on their head by juxtaposing her “greatness” and “awesomeness” with depictions of her as a drunken, naked, and hypershamed Whore.

You Are What You Wear

I suggest we stay with the metaphor of performance for just a bit longer. For if there ever was such a thing as a Biblical Academy Awards, Revelation would have surely received an Oscar for costume design. As Huber so aptly phrased it, in the Apocalypse of John, “you are what you wear.”¹¹⁴ Much of the text’s depiction of Babylon, as we have seen, “focuses upon her attire, reflecting a traditional metaphorical connection between identity and appearance (IDENTITY IS APPEARANCE) which can be understood as a more specific iteration of the mapping THE INTERNAL IS THE EXTERNAL.”¹¹⁵ Again,

¹¹² Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 147.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹¹⁴ Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, 67.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

when we look at Babylon, we see that she is also clothed in a purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and pearls and jewels, as hyperbolic, and likely sarcastic, emblems of her authority (17:4). This works not only to parade her appearance, but also to highlight her love for luxury—a “concurrent criticism,” Maier has shown, in Roman Satire.¹¹⁶ In *Satire 3*, for example, Juvenal writes:

It’s hard for people to rise in the world when their talents are thwarted
by living conditions of cramping poverty. At Rome, however,
their task is particularly hard; dingy lodgings are costly . . .
[yet] [h]ere the style of people’s clothes is beyond their means. (164-166, 180)

And in *Satire 6*:

“How [do] such monstrous [women] arise,” you ask? “What source do they
come from?”
In earlier days the humble position of Latium’s women
kept them chaste. Their tiny cabins were saved from corruption
by heavy work, short hours of sleep, and hands that were chafed
and calloused . . . More deadly than armies,
luxury has fallen upon us, avenging the world we conquered.
(285-289, 292-293)¹¹⁷

In Revelation, luxury indeed has fallen upon us. In addition to wearing gold and jewels and pearls, Rome/Babylon is depicted as spending money on cargo of fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet, scented wood, ivory, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, ointment, frankincense, wine, oil, flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, carriages, slaves, and lives! “Human souls!” the angel exclaims (18:11-13). Even as she burns, it is her spending, not her being, that her followers mourn: “Alas, alas! The great city! Oh, her fine linen, her clothes of purple and scarlet, her gold and jewels and pearls! Oh, alas—the pearls!” (17:16).

¹¹⁶ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 181.

¹¹⁷ I owe the finding of these sources to Maier, *ibid.*, 244, n. 42.

Rome and her followers have lost their self-control, so much so that their love of luxury bleeds into excess. The constant reminder of Rome's wealth and "things" is overkill, thus teetering into the comic realm. We might even add the accessory of the Beast itself, the one upon which Babylon sits—an equally hyperbolic monster with seven heads and ten horns, as if nine weren't enough. Horace tells us these types of images are humorous, even in their monstrosity:

If a painter decided to place a human head on a horse's neck, and add many colored feathers to different limbs, collected from everywhere, so that the top of a beautiful woman would disgracefully end in a black fish, would you then, when allowed admired this, be able to hold back your laughter, my friends? (*Ars Poetica* 1-5)

By overrunning the boundaries of Rome's own hierarchical standards—of order, of virtue, of what "is" and what "should be"—The Whore of Babylon, like Horace's black fish woman, becomes another comic butt. That the Whore is accessorized with the epithet, "Babylon the Great, Mother of Whores" only adds to the sense of wit and banter. The practical joking etched into her face pushes her, alongside the Sea Beast, down the gradients of both Roman and Jewish standards of self. It highlights not only her profound grotesqueries, but also her Otherness when compared to the 144,000 Jews who will enter the world to come. That the Whore and the Sea Beast have no lines on the matter only adds to the text's sense of wit and banter. To apply the words of Maria Plaza, "Monsters are usually big, aggressive, and unintelligent, which gives the satirist excellent opportunities to play the fearless little fighter who challenges and overcomes a seemingly attacking enemy with the help of his sharp wit."¹¹⁸ They may look frightening from afar, but once you get close, you realize how funny they actually are.

¹¹⁸ Maria Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 310.

Moreover, as Glancy and Moore have shown, Babylon's non-halakhic forehead accessory also mirrors the tattoos of brothel slaves. "With her name emblazoned on her forehead, she is implicitly marked as a slave, thereby sharing the status [all the more] of so many flesh-and-blood brothel workers of the empire."¹¹⁹ In case we were unsure of Rome's sex-slave status, Revelation is clear on this point. Rome is the purchased, sex-slave whore. It is Rome's life that has officially been bought. Whereas some violent comedy can be more benign—evoking humor through an exaggerated aesthetic of violence that is juxtaposed with a lighthearted message and tone—the violence here is not innocent. It is "tendentious,"¹²⁰ as Freud would say. Revelation's joke is "aimed and fired at a specifically chosen target in the hopes of drawing blood."¹²¹ For implied Jews working to erode the dominant transcript—the one in which Rome subjugates Others—Revelation's depiction of her as a subjugated Whore arouses pleasure, and hope, even when that hope is only in imagining a future that is *otherwise*.

You Are What You Eat

The Whore's love of luxury also teeters into her love of lust and decadence. She is drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs, and has fornicated with all the kings of the earth: "[T]he Great Whore who is seated on many waters [is the one] with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk . . . and she holds in her hand a golden cup

¹¹⁹ See Glancy and Moore, "The Empress and the Brothel Slave," 123. See also C.P. Jones, "Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, no. 77 (1987): 151, and Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 138–139.

¹²⁰ See Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 20.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

full of abomination and the impurities of her fornication” (17:2, 4). We may as well insert Babylon into Juvenal’s following lines:

Every crime and act of lust has become familiar
since the demise of Roman poverty . . .
and by that city of garlands—drunken, licentious . . .
Flabby riches have rotted our age
with revolting decadence. When [Babylon]¹²² is drunk she’s open to
anything. (*Satire* 6, 294-230)

It appears as if Juvenal and John agree that two vices we must abhor, and therefore mock, and therefore stand over and against, are Roman “greed [or gluttony] and sexual incontinence.”¹²³ Indeed, if Rome/Babylon were not so drunk, perhaps she would recognize the epithet “Whore of Babylon” plastered across her face (17:5).

There is something particularly Jewish about Revelation’s construction here, too. For in addition to looking ridiculous alongside the 144,000 Jewish amuletic masters, the Whore violates the central Jewish law to not consume another’s lifeblood. We read in Deuteronomy, “Be sure you do not eat the blood, because blood is the life” (Deut. 12:23; cf. 9:4). Yet she is “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6). Even if the Whore is attempting to go around the Deuteronomy transcript by way of metaphor, perhaps akin to the Gospels (“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (John 6:5; cf. Mk. 14:22-23; Mt. 26:26-27; Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), she is doing it wrong. She is not drinking in remembrance of Christ, but in spite of Christ. While this, at first blush, appears monstrous, it turns into joke food once we recall the import of halakhic observance in the end of days. As we have seen, those who do not abide by the text’s halakhic standards are not invited into Revelation’s עולם הבא. Revelation thus satirizes Babylon not simply because she eats too

¹²² The original is “Venus.”

¹²³ Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*, 333.

much, but because of the *type* of food she ingests. She is consuming, unbeknownst to her, the very food that inverts the inequities of Rome—the food that leaves *her*, once again, out of the end of days.¹²⁴

There is something even more obscene about this image, though, that should not go unnoticed. According to John Marshall, “In Revelation’s cycle of woes and judgments purity and impurity spring from a variety of sources, but they attach to characters on the basis of the judgment that the text explicitly or implicitly pronounces on those characters.”¹²⁵ We see this with the life-blood cup. For according to Revelation, the blood of saints and martyrs is mixed with the impurities of her fornication (17:4, 6), and the “the wine of her fornication” is what has made the inhabitants the Earth drunk (17:2). The life-blood the Whore drinks, in other words, becomes attached to the Whore’s whorings, and moreover, to those who take part in them. Revelation thus mocks Babylon for the food she ingests, and for the people with whom she fraternizes. She drinks the blood of the saints and martyrs, infecting her lovers and draining her enemies.¹²⁶ To think she is empress is merely a game of dress-up, and Revelation mocks her turpitude unrelentingly.

These misconducts also serve to caricaturize Rome’s inability to abide by Revelation’s sexual ideals. As Frankfurter writes, “[T]he halakhic necessity for [Revelation is] eschatological celibacy,” not overt promiscuity (e.g., 14:4).¹²⁷ Rather than drink from the same non-halakhic tumbler (17:4), however, Rome’s sympathizers are depicted as drinking straight from the source: The prostitute “has made all the nations

¹²⁴ See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 148.

¹²⁵ John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London, UK, and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 29.

¹²⁶ She is, indeed (with apologies to Bram Stoker), a veritable Countess Dracula.

¹²⁷ Frankfurter, “Revelation,” 489.

drink of the wine of the wrath of *her* fornication . . . with the wine of *her* whorings the earth's dwellers have become drunk" (14:8; 17:2). Thus, while the Whore's genital fluids are paralleled with the repulsive liquid she ingests, her "customers" are depicted as being all-too-willing to kneel and guzzle from her "own cup" (cf. 17:4). Like so many humorists who lampoon their opponents for what they chose to suck and swallow, Revelation satirizes both Rome and Roman followers.

The humor here becomes even more apparent when taking into consideration *even further* Revelation's play with gender roles. Martial, for instance, does something similar to Revelation in his epigram 4, where he scorns Coracinus for performing cunnilingus:

I never said you were a fag.
Absolve me of that uncouth tag.
If I said that, let me drink poison
Or herbs of most imperiled poison.
I swear I did not, come what may.
Let lightning strike without delay.
This is, of all my gibes, the brunt:
I only said you lick cunt.
(4.43)¹²⁸

The humor here is in the incongruity. While the epigram, at first glance, appears to take the form of apology, we soon discover that the apology sets us up for a surprise attack—an attack worse than the one for which he apologizes in the first place. As John Clarke expounds, "In the hierarchy of Roman sexual debasement the man suspected of performing cunnilingus was even more defiled than a man who was penetrated by another man," primarily due to the fact that "cunnilingus makes women active and men

¹²⁸ From Garry Wills, trans., *Martial's Epigrams: A Selection* (New York, NY: Viking, 2008).

passive.”¹²⁹ Clarke explains this notion further through an analysis of “a visual version of a Coracinus.”¹³⁰



Pompeii, Suburban Baths¹³¹

“What is unusual about [this] image is that the woman is the ‘star’ of the action.”¹³²

According to the normative sex and gender roles, women were supposed kneel before men, not the other way around. As we will come to see in more detail in the next chapter,

“[M]asculinity was the quality of being in control of, exercising dominion over others and also oneself, while femininity was the quality of ceding control to others.”¹³³

According to Clarke, then, this image is humorous:

The parody...focus[es] on the different statuses of the men and women performing the act. It is not hard to imagine [persons] of both sexes laughing at the role reversals encoded in the painting, for the artist knowingly played with a deeply ingrained Roman attitude to produce side-splitting parody... it is “woman on top” taken to the extreme.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 198.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 199.

¹³² Ibid., 198.

¹³³ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 142.

¹³⁴ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 201.

Not only is the woman towering over the guzzling man, but the man, in all his eagerness, is “not even fellated in return for licking the woman’s genitals.”¹³⁵ The frieze, on Clarke’s reading, is funny precisely *because* it highlights gender reversal, while also making the man—the normative “star”—look like a total idiot.

As we have seen, Revelation employs a similar reversal. But unlike the heroine of the Pompeii frieze, the Apocalypse makes clear that the subversive “star” reeks of consumption-in-excess. Not only do Roman sympathizers perform the womanly task of “ducking and sucking,” but they do so by feasting on the body of an illicitly stuffed Whore. The non-halakhic content of the Whore’s cup drips through her, infecting the bodies of those who kneel before her. The Apocalypse has spread Rome’s legs for all to see,¹³⁶ leaving ample room for onlookers to stare, point, and laugh as her followers kneel before her grotesqueries—as Rome’s masculinity has been turned into perverse femininity. Like Juvenal in *Satire 3*, Revelation is saying to the implied readers, “Do we really want to be *slaves* of *this* woman?” (6.34). Hypermasculine Rome teeters over into femininity in Revelation’s comic representation of it as a sexually dissolute, drunken woman.

While these caricatures may not seem fun or funny to modern ears, Mary Beard assures that ancient readers would have laughed at the image of such a grotesque and gluttonous body. She writes that the emperor Elagabalus, for instance, was known for “us[ing] laughter to humiliate,”¹³⁷ and even had the habit of inviting fat men to dinner so

¹³⁵ Ibid., 198.

¹³⁶ Glancy and Moore note that Roman prostitutes had a high level of visibility. See “The Empress and the Brothel Slave,” 108–109.

¹³⁷ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 77.

as to “raise a laugh from everyone, as they could not fit on the same couch.”¹³⁸ Indeed, even though Romans, in certain settings, polluted their bodies in ways that were more light-hearted and even socially warranted,¹³⁹ humorists often found eating in excess to be affectively and morally repulsive, so much so that food, food-talk, and the over-consumed body became a prototypical image through which humorists could engage the ridiculousness of—and also laugh at—their subjects.¹⁴⁰ Horace went as far as to say that overeating “drags down the soul and nails to the earth a particle of the divine spirit” (2.2)¹⁴¹ Even Rome herself was criticized for “expanding with self-fueled greed.”¹⁴² According to Petronius, Rome acquired “the whole world, sea and land and the course of sun and moon. But [she] was not satisfied.”¹⁴³

As the Whore drinks from her non-halakhic life-blood cup, she, too, becomes the glutton—the parasite—the self-humiliating, over-consuming harlot who expands like a leech with self-fueled greed (recall her clothes) and self-fed grotesqueries (recall her food). For Jewish ears, this is particularly amusing, as it works to not only depict her as

¹³⁸ Ibid. Beard is quoting from the *Augustan History*.

¹³⁹ At the Saturnalia festival, for example, participants could eat in excess without fear of breaking societal norms. Akin to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, the Saturnalia offered Romans space to undo the standard style of things via over-the-top performances, including feasting. Examples of this carnivalistic sensibility permeated the Roman dinner table, where diners would eat in excess, often to the point of vomiting. Hosts would take pleasure in watching their guests stuff their bellies, often times with grotesque representations of the food itself. This gaiety is reflected in the famous dinner scene of Petronius’ *Satyricon*. As alluded to above, Trimalichio’s estate, guests dine over live birds that are sewn inside a pig and a stew-like imitation of feces (literally “crap stew”). Throughout the scene, “we see the Romans at ease,” which, according to Emily Gowers, invites us to consider the type of situations in which Romans could dismiss the *Via Romana* in daily life. See Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 12–13.

¹⁴¹ Nicola A. Hudson, “Food in Roman Satire,” in *Satire and Society in Ancient Rome*, ed. Susan H. Braund (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1989), 86.

¹⁴² Gowers, *The Loaded Table*, 12–13.

¹⁴³ Quoted by Harry Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 181–182.

grotesque, but to also deny her entry into the world to come. Despite her elite status, she is a figure of *both* Roman *and* Jewish failure, epitomized as the mother of the earth's βδέλυγμα: "nausea, sickness, filth, nastiness, defilement, abomination; disgusting, abhorrent, detestable, loathsome; feel a loathing for food, feel a loathing at, cause to stink, make loathsome or abominable . . . [i.e.,] the fountain of all uncleanness."¹⁴⁴

Compared to how Rome presents herself, she appears here to be the stock freeloader. She is the "Great" Whore. The "Amazing" idiot. The "Magnificent" dud. It certainly seems to be the case that, in Revelation, you are not only what you wear, but also what you eat. Thus we might say: The bigger the whore, the bigger the (comic) butt.

Catachrestic Humor and Looking Forward

In this chapter, I argued that Revelation implements a deeper dialogism to "write back" to the dominant transcript. By combining Roman humor with a Jewish comic twist, Revelation "catches" its global adversaries in its comic tricks. Through Revelation's humor, which is again weaved with a narrativizing of past/present subjugation, implied readers can experience a "signal of transcendence . . . a different reality in which the assumptions of ordinary life—[colonized life]—are suspended."¹⁴⁵ While Revelation's implied audience "reigns supreme,"¹⁴⁶ its implied adversaries become the comic Other(s).

My focus on double-duping and double-voicedness in Revelation's parodying of global adversaries parallels the deconstructionist notion of *catachresis*, associated

¹⁴⁴ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 166.

¹⁴⁵ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin, Germany, and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 205.

¹⁴⁶ Petrides, "Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments," 428.

especially with postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.¹⁴⁷ Meaning “to misuse” in Greek (καταχρησθαι), the term most directly applies to the misuse of words or phrases. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida extends this idea by suggesting that catachresis applies to *all* systems of meaning; any given word or phrase is assigned abstractly to things, objects, people, etc. without “real” association.¹⁴⁸ But Spivak also expands upon this notion to suggest that catachresis can refer to the uncomfortable and even dangerous position of the marginalized and colonized. In her view, even words such as “marginalized” and “colonized” are created by those in power. When we categorize, label, and identify persons on the margins—as if the very term “margins” was created *by* those “on the margins”—we are actually contributing to a postcolonial-colonial construction of identity. When using these terms, we do not represent the truly marginalized, for they have not spoken for themselves. As Robert Young puts it, postcolonial peoples must “inhabit the conceptual and ideological legacy of colonialism inherent in the very structures and institutions that formed the conditions of decolonization.”¹⁴⁹ As such, catachresis becomes “a space that the postcolonial does not want, but has no option, to inhabit.”¹⁵⁰

However, Spivak notes that catachresis can also function as a tool for resistance, in that colonized subjects can *purposefully* misuse the colonizer’s language, culture, and

¹⁴⁷ Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 37; Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 22.

¹⁴⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 255.

¹⁴⁹ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 418.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

ideologies for their own gain.¹⁵¹ In this way (and blending Spivak with Bhabha now), hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence can function as a method of survival. As Moore explains, catachresis becomes a “creative appropriation, a retooling of the rhetorical or institutional instruments of imperial oppression that *turns those instruments back against their official owners.*”¹⁵² We see this in the book of Revelation. Even at the outset, readers notice that Revelation’s Greek is written in a “Semitic” style, thus begging the question of assimilation and even subversive catachrestic intention. Although some contend that John’s writing style was unintentional and unpreventable—arguing, for instance, that John’s first language was Aramaic, and that he wrote in Greek as best he could (see chapter one)—Allen Dwight Callahan utilizes Bhabhan theory to explain it differently. As noted previously, he reads John’s Greek as doubly hybrid. Not only does it illustrate a mixture of both the colonizers’ language and that of the colonized (i.e., a “Semitizing” Greek), but it is also *purposefully* hybrid for political gain.¹⁵³ According to Callahan, John could have written in a more stylized Greek, but he chose instead to betray Greek syntax as a form of resistance, thus further illustrating Spivakian catachresis and Bhabha’s “almost the same, but not quite” trope.

As it happens, the realm of the comic operates regularly within a hybrid-ambivalent-catachrestic space. By mimicking, mocking, and parodying aspects of ones

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 111; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Identity and Alterity: An Interview (with Nikos Papastergiadis,” *Arena* 97 (1991): 70; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “More on Power/Knowledge,” in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerard Maclean (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 145–154.

¹⁵² Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 106. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵³ Allen Dwight Callahan, “The Language of Apocalypse,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 04 (1995): 453–470.

own culture(s), humor can expose the ridiculousness of various normativities with that/those culture(s). The very notion that Revelation utilizes aspects of Roman humor *to defeat* Rome—whether via satire, role reversals, joke food, “laughable physiognomies,”¹⁵⁴ or other popular humor forms—is a powerful example of this. Rather than a Roman Gentile mocking a Jew for, say, his strange eating habits, as we saw in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Convivales* 4.5.2, or for his obsession with circumcised penises, as we saw in Martial’s *Epigrams* 7.30.5 (see chapter two), it is the Jew of Revelation who mocks Rome via a hybrid (and, I suggest, dialogic) combination of Roman and Jewish comedic modes. In sum, while Revelation’s comic codes are not simply straightforward resistances in all areas (how can they be if they also enlist Romanness?), the Jewish elements of them work to write back to Empire, and to catch Empire in its catachrestic tricks. In the next chapter, I will perform a double reading of text—a reading with and against the grain—to question if Revelation, too, might be “caught” in its tricks.

¹⁵⁴ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 45.

Chapter Five

I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb:¹ Humor, Hybridity, and a Reading Against the Gaze

Humor plays so large a role in social relations in part because it conveys value judgments implicitly, seductively. Within many comedies, as we have seen, a struggle rages between characters or groups of characters to establish whose suffering will be taken seriously and whose will be a laughing matter.

-Paul Lewis²

I have been suggesting that Revelation “writes back” to Empire and, in doing so, erodes the dominant imperial transcript through its use of humor. When reading with the grain of the text, Revelation maintains a theology of messianic optimism. It creates a comic counter-narrative that not only makes visible the import of a halakhically observant, Christ-centered ideology in the face of Jewish sublaternity, but also works to overcome Jewish subalternity through its claims. Based on internal evidence, we might even suggest that Revelation’s retelling is built on top of a profound cognitive dissonance.³ To appropriate the words of Samuel Johnson, “[Revelation] is the triumph of hope over experience.”⁴ Despite the text’s claims of imperial corruption, subjugation, and death at the hands of Empire, Revelation

¹ I titled this chapter before learning of the contemporary Christian song by Ray Boltz, “I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb.” I intend no comparison.

² Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 67.

³ See Harry O. Maier, “Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 2 (1997): 134. Studies also show that cognitive dissonance and optimism can function similarly as a method for survival. See Tali Sharot, *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 183-185.

⁴ The original line is, “remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience.” See Sharot, *The Optimism Bias*, 190.

ultimately invites us to see a different reality—a *New Jerusalem*—in which the Roman imperial order is replaced by a God/Christ-ordained, Jewish center: “And I [John] saw the holy city coming down from God in heaven....nothing cursed will be found there anymore.” (Rev 21:2; 22:3). In sum, Revelation not only reclaims a colonial past and interrogates a colonial present, but also offers an alternative, *post-colonial* vision.

But this is how (postcolonial) narratives of repair work. They require a redefining of a past and present in which the subaltern have been deemed “Other than.” To use the words of Hilde Lindemann Nelson, “They take a story that has (for the moment at least) been determined, undo it, and reconfigure it with a new significance.”⁵ By giving voice to the subjugated, making visible the import of the subjugated, and creating a narrative in which the subjugated are characterized differently—with agency and self-definition—narratives of repair, even in the face of oppression and subalternity, can *repair* identities.⁶

It is precisely this aspect of narrative repair—this need for agency—that I will focus on in this chapter. For in order to gauge fully the effectiveness of Revelation’s comic counterstory, we must ask ourselves: Does Revelation, in countering the dominant transcript and reclaiming a Jewish self/culture through humor, do so in a way that gives voice to its implied subaltern audiences without reconstituting its own,

⁵ Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 18.

⁶ Even, also, if that repair comes only from within. Narratives of repair are not always recognized by the larger culture.

hierarchical script?⁷ Or does it do so by holding others “hostage”⁸ with a “negative laughter”⁹—a laughter that subjugates its enemies so that *it* can be the sole arbiter of self-reflection and self-definition?

The answer, I argue, is the latter. As we will see, the text’s ultimate hero, the Lamb (a.k.a. the Son of Man; a.k.a. Christ), mirrors more the subjugating Caesar—and his kingdom, the subjugating Rome—than the text might otherwise like us to imagine. It is his gaze, in the end, that penetrates the bodies of his adversaries, forgets the humanity of his adversaries, thus “confirm[ing their] subalternity and powerlessness”¹⁰

In order to demonstrate this, I will provide a double reading of the text. I will begin by following the narrative grain—or, rather, the narrative gaze—that is, the gaze of the Lamb, and, by proxy, Revelation’s ostensible authorial intentionality. As I proceed through my reading, however, I will move from highlighting not only the humor we see *through* the Lamb’s gaze, but also, and perhaps more so, the humor we begin to notice when we shift *our* gaze to look back at *it*. The juxtaposition of these readings will bring to the surface the tensions lingering between Revelation’s authorial intentionality and trans-authorial textual effects—tensions, as we will see,

⁷ This is what Nelson terms the “moral agency” of narrative repair. See Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, xi-xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁹ This is a term used by Bakhtin to refer to a monologic, “us” verses “them” laughter, in which the “us” stand ostensibly above the “them.” See pages 293-294 below.

¹⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 253.

that take the form of unintentional hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry of imperial mores.

Reading With the Gaze: Beasts, Whores, and Other “Inglourious Basterds”

While we have been following the narrative through the eyes of John—our text’s self-proclaimed “seer”—he is actually not the only one who invites us to “see.” As Christopher Frilingos so aptly puts it, “The book of Revelation privileges sight.”¹¹ The four living creatures at the throne are depicted as having eyes all around their bodies (4:6-8). The Son of Man, too, has eyes that are “like a flame of fire” (1:14; cf. 19:12 and “the watchers” in Daniel), which only intensifies when he transitions into the Lamb: “Then [I saw] a Lamb, standing as if slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes” (5:6). Throughout Revelation, in fact, it is the Son of Man who is depicted as the “ever watchful deity”¹²—perhaps even the *ultimate* seer—who is the one inviting John, and therefore us, to gaze upon the destruction of local and global adversaries: “Write what you have seen,” said the Son of Man, to a wide-eyed John—which is to say, “so that others might see it, too” (1:19; cf. 1:11).

What else might the Son of Man, who is really the Lamb, wish us see that has not yet been covered? Let us go through the list: 1) After we are introduced to the local and global adversaries, we are invited to watch as seven angels process from heaven to cast a series of plagues onto the Earth (Rev 15-16; cf. 8-9; Exod 7-12). As

¹¹ See Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles Of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, And The Book Of Revelation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 39. See also Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 67.

¹² Frilingos, *Spectacles Of Empire*, 41.

the plagues evoke the memory of the Exodus narrative—the trauma of slavery and the survival of it—we see members of the in-group singing hymns of praise to Moses, God, and the Lamb: “Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!...You are just, Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things; because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink!” (Rev 15:3; 16:5-6). 2) We are then invited to watch as the Whore—in addition to being lampooned—is tortured, burned, and eaten alive by the Beast and its horns: “Fallen is the Babylon the Great!” (18:2). The Beast and its horns have made her naked; they will eat her flesh, and “burn her with fire” (17:17). 3) After Babylon falls, we are asked to gaze upon the Beast, its prophet, and the Satan-Dragon as they are thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where they will be tormented “day and night forever and ever” (19:20; 20:10).

All of this occurs in name of the Lamb. As it is written, “Those who worship the Beast and its image, and receive the mark on their foreheads or on their hands...will be tortured with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (14:9-10). The Beast and its horns will “make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). According to Frilingos, while the Lamb may not kill anything with its bare hooves, it certainly seems to conquer through sight: “The Lamb’s gaze, like the fire and the sulfur bubbling in the background, serves as an instrument of torture...The lamb may not directly pierce its enemies, but the creature’s set of seven eyes...invades

the bodies of the damned,”¹³ turning enemies into spectacles, and spectacles into smoke (see 14:10-11).

To be sure, the Lamb’s supervision of the burning of the adversaries is violent. Carline Vander Stichele has gone as far as to say that we may as well be watching a Hollywood hit. She writes that what we see through the Lamb’s gaze “could be shot from an action movie such as *End of Days* or *Terminator*.”¹⁴ This is perhaps most clear in the Lamb’s supervision of the Whore. For example, while we are left to question what it means for Jezebel to be “thrown onto the bed,” the Whore’s death is made “explicit.”¹⁵ “Ἐπεσεν, ἔπεσεν, is Babylon the great” (18:2). Once stripped of her clothes, she will be eaten by the Beast and its horns, “a reversal of similar scenes from Ezekiel, where the beast itself, representing Pharaoh/Egypt, is eaten (Ezek. 29.3-5; 32.2-8; 39:17-20).”¹⁶

Even in violence, however, humor has its place. As noted previously, jokes can be “‘tendentious’...aimed and fired at a specifically chosen target in the hopes of drawing blood.”¹⁷ In line with Vander Stichele, we might even say that Revelation shares a similar vision to that of Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*. In this revised Holocaust narrative, Hitler, like Revelation’s enemies, is depicted as inept, absurd, and easily outmatched. Throughout the film, we watch as American soldiers

¹³ Ibid., 82-83.

¹⁴ Caroline Vander Stichele, “Re-Membering the Whore: The Fate of Babylon According to Revelation 17:16,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 107.

¹⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20.

carve swastikas into Nazis' foreheads, marking their bodies with the sign of the Third Reich Beast. Then, toward the end of the film, a Jewish woman tricks Hitler into attending a movie premiere so that she can fulfill her revenge fantasy of setting him on fire. As Hitler laughs at the performances on screen, he is completely oblivious to the fact that the woman is 1) Jewish; and 2) planning to kill him. Not long into the screening, Hitler, like Babylon, is burned alive, leaving our own screens marked with the implicit question, "Who is laughing now?"

For the implied viewer—one who sympathizes with Jewish cultural memory and takes pleasure in mocking Nazis—Tarantino's depiction of an inglorious Hitler can evoke laughter—joy, even. According to actor Eli Roth, for instance, the film functions as "kosher porn."¹⁸ "It's almost a deep sexual satisfaction of wanting to beat Nazis to death, an orgasmic feeling."¹⁹ Tarantino's producer, Lawrence Bender, even thanked Tarantino for the film, saying, "As your producing partner, I thank you, and as a member of the Jewish tribe, I thank you ... because this movie is a fucking Jewish wet dream."²⁰ For some viewers, the film's comic reversals and exaggerations stroke the fantasy of not only a new, somewhat amusing Hitler, but a new world order in which the Jews can become overlords and Hitler, to use the words of Jeffrey Goldberg, can become their "little Nazi bitch."²¹ As Tarantino himself admitted, "Holocaust movies always have Jews as victims... We've seen that story before. I want to see something different. Let's see Germans that are scared of Jews. Let's not

¹⁸ See Jeffrey Goldberg's film review, "Hollywood's Jewish Avenger," *The Atlantic*, September 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/09/hollywoods-jewish-avenger/307619/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

have everything build up to a big misery, let's actually take the fun of action-movie cinema and apply it to this situation."²² In recalling the deaths of six million Jews in the Holocaust, *Inglourious Basterds* not only works to remember Jewish suffering, but also works *write back* to the Nazi transcript with a scalpel, a carving knife, and a hyperbolic middle finger.

Although written much earlier, we see this type of humor in biblical narrative. In Judges 3, the left-handed Ehud shoves a dagger so deep into Eglon's stomach that Eglon's feces fall out and onto the floor. In the book of Judith, the trickster heroine chops off Holofernes' head in a single blow—wearing a gown, no less—and then brings his head back to her community. Scholars have recognized the humor in these texts as a method of survival. According to Toni Craven, stories like these “inspire[e] the people to annihilate the enemy and to sing a new song to God.”²³ That the underdog can win, she adds, encourages listeners to “smile under [their] tears.”²⁴

There are two Jewish texts in particular, however, that I think carry a particular dialogical weight in relation to Revelation's doomsday scenes. The first is the book of Exodus. Although I have yet to come across a reading of Revelation that recognizes the humor of the Exodus subtext, consensus remains that the plagues fired at God's adversaries in Revelation closely resemble those from the Exodus narrative, as does the song the angels sing to commemorate the deeds of Moses and the Lamb

²² Ibid.

²³ Here she is writing on Judith in particular, although her point applies to her reading of other texts. See Toni Craven, “Is That Fearfully Funny? Some Instances from the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,” in *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 75.

²⁴ Craven is quoting Freud. See *ibid.*, 76.

(15:3; 16:5-7; cf. Exod 14:30-15:21). Indeed, through its reconfiguring of the Exodus narrative, Revelation draws a deeper line between “us” and “them.” The “us” of Revelation is the Jewish subaltern—the halakhically pure—who shares memories and postmemories of Jewish triumph over imperial evil. In Revelation’s revised plague scene, then, they learn all the more that those who hate God, hate the Lamb, and refuse to repent of their hatred will be subjected to divine torture and demise. Like Exodus, the Apocalypse casts plague after plague so as to both “carr[y] out divine justice,”²⁵ and thicken the communal identity of the halakhically pure.

Humor is part of this. According to J. William Whedbee, in fact, there is humor in the dialogical subtext. In *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, he writes that “[i]f comedy revels in opposites, spotlighting unexpected turns in the major story line, then Exodus surely deserves such a characterization.”²⁶ While Moses is the typical “not hero”²⁷—the Israelite who can barely speak—he is the one who comes to defeat the wicked Pharaoh. And while Pharaoh is the contextual “hero”—the contextual “high and mighty”—he comes to represent the comic fool.

But Exodus’ plagues, too, carry with them a sardonic wit. As Whedbee explains, they represent the climactic “face-off”—the comedic dual between Moses and Pharaoh in which hyperbole and reversals abound.²⁸ When the blood, frogs, and gnats fill the rivers, streets, ovens, and beds, for instance, Pharaoh and his magicians emerge as the text’s comic butts:

²⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 149.

²⁶ J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 160.

²⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 17.

²⁸ Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 161.

Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made *fools* of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am Yahweh. (Exod 10:1-2)²⁹

For the implied reader, imagining Pharaoh repeatedly dumped on and duped is part of the fun. As Whedbee puts it, “The result will be a compelling story to narrate to children in the future who will take delight in Yahweh’s glorious victory over the foolish Pharaoh.”³⁰

Whedbee is right on this point. Songs commemorating the Israelites’ triumphs are often sung at the Passover Seder with an affect of glee and gibe. As one popular children’s song goes:

One day king Pharaoh awoke in his bed
There was blood in the Nile, it was thick and red
Blood in the water and blood in the tea
Blood here, Blood there!
Blood was flowing everywhere!...

This is violent humor, to be sure—tragic, even, by the time singers get to the final stanza, in which the slaying of the first born is exclaimed—but the juxtaposition of disturbing images with an upbeat melody, which is also paired with the overall ethos of Passover as a bittersweet “comedy of deliverance”³¹—leads singers to focus on the ridiculousness of the song rather than bemoan the interludes of death and the dying. In other words, Exodus, like Judges and Judith and the Passover tune, contains elements that are dark and light—fearful and funny—and the intermingling of them

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 163. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

does not take away from its comic visions. As Jackson writes on Esther, it “is *both* frightening *and* funny, from the first verse to the last, the fright and the fun occurring together hand in hand, not separated by an artificially constructed partition.”³²

I suggest Revelation borrows Exodus’ use of humor. We might even imagine members of the in-group singing their songs of praise to the Lamb with a gleeful smirk as blood falls to the Earth:

They shed the blood of saints and prophets
So the angels gave them blood to drinketh
Blood in the rivers and blood in the springs
There was blood here, blood there!
Blood was flowing everywhere! (see Rev 16:5-7)

In fact, the extent to which we are consistently reminded of adversarial demise furthers the notion that this is comical. In chapter 16, for instance, we learn that seven angels are commanded to pour seven different bowls of wrath onto the Earth. The first angel pours sores onto those who bear the mark of the Beast (16:2). The second pours blood “like that of a corpse” into the sea (16:3). The third pours blood into the rivers and seas (16:4) while the angel of the water responds in song: “You are just, Oh Holy One!” (16:5-7). The fourth angel casts a scourging heat onto people who curse the Israelite God (16:8). The fifth pours darkness onto the Beast’s kingdom (16:10). The sixth pours a bowl that dries up the river Euphrates (16:12). And the seventh casts hail onto the earth, and violent earthquake to split the city of Babylon/Rome into three parts (16:18-21).

But that is not all. Even though Babylon “is shattered by an earthquake” in

³² Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 198. Emphasis in the original.

chapter 16, Revelation “doubles back,” as Koester has it, to humiliate the city once more.³³ In chapter 17, the city of Babylon (i.e. Rome) is again alive and well, cast as the “Great Whore.”³⁴ The satire and sarcasm of Revelation 17 then culminates in a description of Babylon’s (second) death on repeat: “Fallen, fallen, is the Babylon the Great!...she will be burned with fire...the kings of the earth with weep and wail over the smoke of her burning...Babylon Babylon the great city!...alas alas the great city!...her gold and jewels and pearls!...alas alas the great city...they cried as they saw the smoke of her burning...what city was like the great city?...alas alas the great city...the smoke goes up from her forever and ever...Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns” (Rev 18). Finally, the Beast and the False Prophet fall into the lake of fire (19:20)—thrown, more like it (ἐβλήθησαν)—followed by Satan-dragon (20:10; ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν λίμνην), and then followed by anyone else who does their bidding (20:15; ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν λίμνην).

According to Northrop Frye, humor’s repetition is “[r]epetition overdone or not going anywhere.”³⁵ Considering, for example, the fact that Babylon “fell” (*epesen*; 16:19) in chapter 16, I do not think a chapter devoted to her second (and third) “falling” (ἔπεσεν, ἔπεσεν, 18:2) is entirely necessary. Instead, it seems likely that Revelation’s repeated onslaught is for comic effect. By the time we witness the Beasts and Dragons demise, the image of demise-by-fire becomes so unreasonably replicated that we can assume this to be comic hyperbole. The ironical juxtapositioning of the repeated phrase, “great city,” with the recurring image of the

³³ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 154.

³⁴ Or perhaps the “Great” Whore, as we saw last chapter.

³⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 168.

Whore's and her followers' burnings only adds to this use of humor. Like with Christ's messages to the churches in Roman Asia (see chapter three), we are invited to follow the gaze of a sarcastic seer. Babylon and her comrades may think she is "great"—perhaps even in "the bloom of life and health"—but the Lamb knows she, too, is really "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked" (3:17), destined for divine defeat.³⁶

This leads me to Revelation's second doomsday intertext—the book of Daniel. For just after King Nebuchadnezzar builds his statue, he proclaims that those who do not worship it will be thrown into the fiery furnace, and a parallel focus on fire and flame abounds. David Valeta observes:

The recurrence of [the] image of being thrown into the fire in vv. 6, 11, 15, and 20; the repetition of the references to the red-hot blazing furnace in vv. 17, 21, 23, 26; the mention that the furnace is superheated extraordinarily high in vv. 19 and 22; and the give repetitions of fire (*nora*) in vv. 24, 25, 26, and 27 (2x); all make the furnace with its fire the predominant image in this chapter.³⁷

This image, moreover, is humorous. Valeta explains further that the repetition of the King's decree must serve a rhetorical purpose; there is no need to repeat the same thing over and over again for "factual verisimilitude."³⁸ When the King's soldier's are swallowed by its flames instead of the three Jews who were supposed to be killed (but were saved by God instead), the image becomes grotesque and parodic: "The

³⁶ See Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 172.

³⁷ David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions: A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 82. See also David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993), 175.

³⁸ Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 81.

superheating of the oven”³⁹ causes super fantastic deaths, but for the wrong group. Nebuchadnezzar’s men die, while those who refused to bow to his statue are saved.

In Revelation, we see a similar use of comedy’s repetition and hyperbole. As we have seen, those who refuse to bow down to the Beasts and Whore are saved in the end of days, while the Beasts and the Whore are burned to the point of Frye’s “repetition overdone.” While implied Jewish readers have been “burned” repeatedly under the gaze of Rome—whether via joke or physical flame (recall chapter one)—they are invited, within Revelation’s narrative of repair, to watch alongside the Lamb as their adversaries are set on fire in a magnificent and satirical style: “Alas, alas the great city! . . . her gold and jewels and pearls! (Rev 18:16)”—all burned to the ground, over, and over (and over) again.

In recognizing Revelation’s and Daniel’s parallel use of humor in their burning scenes, however, a major issue seeps into our purview: In Daniel, the hyperbolic “demise by fire” works to not only insinuate that we have *entered* the realm of the comic, but to, moreover, *dupe* the story’s *maker* of the hyperbole. The fiery furnace of Daniel, in other words, is related to *Nebuchadnezzar’s* crazy decree. While we are invited to laugh at the burning of his court officials, it is still *his* hyperbolic orders and *his* hyperbolic character that are the primary targets of the text’s joking. As Valeta explains, “In the book of Daniel, few royal behaviors are normal or measured responses in kind. Kings lack emotional control, and their distorted responses to events stand in sharp ironic contrast to the control and authority

³⁹ Ibid., 85.

supposedly inherent in royalty” (cf. 4 Macc 9:1-10:2)⁴⁰ Nebuchadnezzar is depicted as so out of control, in fact, that his face physically contorts when he learns that the three Jews who disobey his orders refuse to defend themselves (or apologize) for their deeds. “Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage...that his face was distorted” (3:19).

Is it possible that Revelation’s flames blow back onto the text, burning not only the adversarial monsters but its own vision, too?⁴¹ Moreover, if Revelation’s distorted rage is enacted in the name of the Lamb—and the Lamb’s violence and lack of emotional control mirrors that of Nebuchadnezzar’s in Daniel—could the Lamb be a reflection of Daniel’s Nebuchadnezzar, at least in this regard, even if John doesn’t intend it, his hyperbolic text now spinning out of his control? In order to answer these questions, I suggest we start from the beginning—that is, the beginning of the scene in which we first meet the Lamb.

Reading With and Against the Grain and Gaze

Meeting The Lamb

We are introduced to Revelation’s Lamb in the throne scene of chapter five. Here, we watch as heavenly dignitaries carrying harps and incense gather around the one seated on the throne, all in preparation for the opening of the scroll and its seven

⁴⁰ Ibid., 83–84.

⁴¹ I have made similar arguments for the book of Esther in a paper I delivered at the 2015 national SBL conference in Atlanta, Georgia, titled, “Trauma and Counter-Trauma in the Book of Esther: Reading the Megillah in the Face of the Post-Shoah Sabra.” For lack of space, however, I have decided to leave an intertextual reading of Esther and Revelation for another book project, as it requires lengthy argumentation for both sources.

seals, which contains information about the end of days. As David Aune has shown, the scene represents a heavenly version of Roman imperial court and cult ceremonial.⁴² Dignitaries prostrating before a heavenly deity, singing hymns while carrying harps and incense, and gathering round to read a decree all mirror Roman court and cult.

In fact, it is precisely through these connections with imperial court ceremonial that we can recognize further humor at play. For despite the fact that Revelation's dignitaries are dressed in *royal garb*, working *in heaven*, embodying *divine status*, representing *God's* imperial cult and court, none of them are able to open the scroll. Reminiscent of Daniel in which Nebuchadnezzar's royal advisors are unable to interpret his dream, we are left to wonder who is really running this place, and if the fecklessness of God's trustees will transfer onto God himself.⁴³ And to an extent, indeed, their inability to open the scroll *may* be said to have transferred onto God. The most obvious question about this scene never seems to be asked by commentators: Why doesn't the one on the throne open his own scroll? There is a certain paradoxical, powerless ineptitude at the center of the grand spectacle of power that is the heavenly throne room.

John, however, finds nothing about this paradox funny. Instead, he "weeps bitterly because no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll" (5:4). Reading with the grain of the text, we are indeed set up to sympathize. As Maier puts it, "Having witnessed with John all the splendor of the heavenly

⁴² See David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *Biblical Interpretation* 28 (1983): 5–26.

⁴³ See Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, 74.

emperor, we readily sympathize that none can be found worthy to break the seven seals of the heavenly imperial decree and to read it.”⁴⁴ In verse 5, one of the elders even offers a heavenly sleeve: “There, there, John. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered. Surely *he* can open the scroll and seals” (see 5:5).

This is a huge endorsement. As David Clines has shown, Davidic messianism necessitated a particular kind of military prowess. “The essential male characteristic in the David story is to be a warrior, a man of war...It is essential for a man in the David story that he be strong, which means to say, capable of violence against other men and active in killing other men.”⁴⁵ We see a striking example of this in the anti-Roman, pre-70 CE *Psalms of Solomon* 17:21-22, which gives explicit expression to the militarized masculinity of the David messiah: “Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king, the son of David, at the time known to you, O God, in order that he may reign over Israel your servant. And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers, and that he may purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample (her) down to destruction.” Indeed, for a text consumed with hyperbolic gender designations, Revelation’s “supreme warrior” will certainly mirror this “ultimate icon of masculinity.”⁴⁶ Considering the lengths to which the Apocalypse goes elsewhere to overturn Rome and Roman sympathizers through its feminization of them, the Lion, surely, will embody nothing short of a Davidic masculine ideal. We are thus on our toes in Revelation’s throne scene, peeking our heads above God’s dignitaries so as to

⁴⁴ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 174.

⁴⁵ David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 216–17.

⁴⁶ Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 46.

get a better glimpse—to better see this amazing lion, our fervent male warrior—our Davidic messiah entrusted to overthrow the powers that be.

By verse six, we are rubbing our eyes in disbelief. This lion is nothing more than an itty-bitty, slaughtered sheep (τὸ ἀρνίον, the diminutive of ἀρήν). While Christ “shimmers uncertainly for a moment, taking the form of a Lion (5:5)...[he] then trots through most of the remaining narrative,”⁴⁷ mirroring, if nothing else, an effeminate crucifixion personified. Loren Johns paints the irony well when he writes, “But wait!” Instead of a “lion-like powerful messianic ruler...[w]hat John sees is a *lamb*.”⁴⁸ And, indeed, not just any Lamb, but a diminutive Lamb, a Lamb that looks more effeminate, and therefore more pathetic, than the idiotic Land-Lamb we saw last chapter. Akin to the Davidic myth, ancient physiognomic principles indicate that the lion represents the most perfect male type (809b15). It symbolizes masculine courage and strength, while the lamb—its opposite—signifies effeminate softness and cowardice: To quote Ps.-Aristotle once more, “The most timid of animals are deer, hares, and sheep, and they have the softest coats; whilst the lion and wild-boar are bravest and have the coarsest coats” (806b6). Contrary to the lion, who was the active hunter, the lamb was the quintessential hunted—the one defenselessly penetrated by the teeth of animals and human-animals alike.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 208. See also n. 19.

⁴⁸ Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origins and Rhetorical Force* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 168. Quoted also in Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 165.

⁴⁹ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 136–38.

But maybe that is part of the point. After all, Jesus of Nazareth, Christ's human counterpart, *was* slaughtered, and therefore penetrated, and therefore effeminized, like a helpless sheep. As Colleen Conway, among others, has shown, "In the ancient context, the crucified body was a violated or penetrated body. It was a body subjected to the power of others, and thus an emasculated body."⁵⁰ The crucified body, in fact, was not much different from that of a lamb's, so much so that Justin Martyr compared Christ's crucifixion to a lamb roasted on a spit: "For the lamb [that is Christ], which is roasted, is roasted and dressed up in the form of the cross. For one spit is transfixed right through the lower parts up to head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 40). And, indeed, it is precisely through Jesus' crucifixion that Christ became known as the "lamb of God"—the new (roasted) Passover offering—leading many to reevaluate the meaning of a Christ-like submission and a willingness to die (cf. Exod 12:8-9; Isa 53:7; more below).

Thinking with this grain of the text—as well as with humor as a mode of postcolonial "writing back"—I question if Revelation's ἀρνίον works to somehow mock the Roman power holders. Some interpreters, for instance, have argued that Revelation's Lamb works to spread a message of non-violence, which, as Conway points out, could be a way to resist the status quo of a violent Empire⁵¹—and, perhaps, the status quo perpetuated by the other Lamb, that is, the Land-Lamb. We see implicitly this type of writing back already in Revelation 5; despite the Christ-Lamb's submissive "on-death's-door" appearance, attendants of the heavenly court

⁵⁰ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 67.

⁵¹ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 166.

bow down in worship: “Worthy is the [Christ-] Lamb!,” the dignitaries sing, “the Lamb *that was slaughtered!*” (5:12).

The problem with this view is that the overall ethos of Revelation does not seem to spread a message of nonviolence. Even the Lamb, as we have seen, seeks vengeance, torturing its enemies with its fiery gaze. Again, those who worship the Lamb’s enemies “will be tortured with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torture will go up forever and ever” (14:10-11).

But maybe this, too, is part of the point. Perhaps Christ as *violent* Lamb functions as subversive ploy, reminiscent of Aristophanic “inversions or even destructions of the normal order (old – young, man – woman, human – animal, individual – society, outside – inside),”⁵² in an attempt to both remember and erode. Indeed, one here may think, perhaps, of the violent bunny in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, like the Lamb an altogether incongruous killer, and one that, similarly, succeeds in overturning societal expectations. Perhaps Revelation, then, in elevating the Lamb from penetrated to penetrator, attempts to say: “the crucified has become the crucifier; This Lamb is not like the others.” Perhaps akin to the ancient comic plots in which a slave, freeloader, or left-handed Benjaminite outwit their ostensible superiors, Revelation is illustrating that Rome is just too stupid to realize her own inability to rest atop her own gender gradient. Even this itty-bitty, crucified lamb—a

⁵² Bernhard Zimmermann, “Aristophanes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro, trans. Carolin Hahnemann and Zachary P. Biles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150.

lamb that *Rome herself* once thought could be destroyed—can climb above her and subdue her.

Conway has offered a similar view. On her reading, Revelation's reclaiming of Christ's crucifixion in and of itself works to masculinize the Lamb. As Brent Shaw has shown, masculinity was evaluated not only by one's strength, virility, and activeness but also through one's ability to maintain "an economical control of the self, a mastery over the body."⁵³ In the Roman world, self-mastery, endurance, and a willingness to die also fell under the masculine economy of self-control, and early Christ followers homed in on this ideology. Thus through his sacrificial death, Christ came to signify a particular kind of nobility for early Christ followers.⁵⁴ And when reading the Revelation's throne room chants in full, we see that they rejoice in this type of nobility: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive *power* and *wisdom* and *might*" (5:12).

The masculine nobility of the Lamb continues throughout the narrative, as Christ crucified, even *in* the form of a slaughtered lamb, is also always already Christ resurrected. He is slaughtered *to receive power*. He is slaughtered *to receive might*. The reception of glorification thus occurs *after* death, and the Lamb, although bloodied, *stands* to receive these virtues. As Conway observes:

[An] unusual aspect of this lamb is the fact that it is 'standing' as if slaughtered. Being slaughtered and standing do not typically go together, unless this slaughtered state is a thing of the past, which it decidedly is in Revelation...[T]he image of the standing-as-if-slaughtered lamb is one of the *resurrected* Jesus.⁵⁵

⁵³ Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 272.

⁵⁴ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 167.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

Reading in this way, then, the irony of Revelation's throne room comes to work in the Lamb's favor. "[T]he audience *knows* it is through Jesus' death that he conquers."⁵⁶ Those who get the revelation of the trick *know* that the Lamb was never meant to be read as a "symbol of weakness,"⁵⁷ but rather one of masculine endurance—of *virtus* personified—thus echoing the narrative claim: "You thought I was weak, but I am strong."

Christ, however, is not depicted as solely a Lamb throughout the narrative. As Frilingos explains, Revelation contains a "trilogy of messianic figures."⁵⁸ Christ is represented as "the one like a son of man," the "rider on the white horse," *and* the Lamb "standing as if slain."⁵⁹ Perhaps, then, in order to understand the fullness of Christ's character—and thus the fullness of the Lamb—we need to go back to when we first meet him, *before* he is transformed into the Lamb, that is, to when he was just a man.

The Son of Man

Writing on the face and physique of Jesus, Stephen Moore has remarked that many expect Jesus "to look like a movie star."⁶⁰ One of his former students even commented that "the real Jesus would have had neat hair and a good build."⁶¹ At first blush, the Son of Man seems to fit this movie star mold. When we meet him

⁵⁶ Ibid., 168. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁸ Frilingos, *Spectacles Of Empire*, 86.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Stephen D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 25.

⁶¹ Ibid., 125.

Revelation 1, his face shines like the sun with full force (1:16), exceeding even the radiances of Moses atop Mount Sinai (Exod 34:29-35).

As we begin to focus our gaze, however, we notice a small—shall we say—peculiarity. Not to put too fine a point on it, Revelation’s Christ has boobs: ὁμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου, ἐνδεδυμένον ποδήρη καὶ περιεζωσμένον πρὸς τοῖς μαστοῖς ζώνην χρυσαῖν (1:13; cf. Dan 10:5). The primary gender paradox of this passage is fully revealed, however, only when the first part of the line is combined with the last: the “Son of Man” (υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου; cf. Dan 7:9; 7:13) has “breasts” (μαστοῖς). Although translators and interpreters often render Christ’s μαστοῖ as a man’s “chest”—Aune, for instance, translates the verse: “The Son of Man [is]...wearing a long robe with a golden sash encircling his chest”⁶²—the term μαστός, to Greek listeners, would be distinguished from στῆθος (“chest”). This image of a male Christ sporting a female bosom is then paired with the detail: ἐνδεδυμένον ποδήρη καὶ περιεζωσμένον...ζώνην χρυσαῖν (“he was clothed down to the feet and girded...with a golden sash”).

Despite traditional assertions that Christ’s clothing represents priestly garb (cf. Exod 28:4-5; Zech 3:4), or that Christ’s sash is really a dagger-sheath, neither claim seems to hold much weight. Christ, for one thing, is never referred to as a priest in Revelation (only his followers are; Rev 1:6; 5:10). In addition, as Aune points out, the most common word for a high priest’s robes in the Hebrew Bible is *מחלצות*, which is

⁶² David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, vol. 52A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997), 93. Cf., NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, and NAS translations, to name a few. The God’s Word Translation seems to omit the upper body entirely, writing, “There was someone like the Son of Man among the lamp stands. He was wearing a robe that reached his feet. He wore a gold belt around his waist.” See further Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 150, note 54.

typically translated in the LXX as χιτών, not ποδήρης.⁶³ Finally, the word ζώνη alone does not seem to give us enough information to imagine anything other than what it is: a “sash” or “belt” or “girdle” draped around Christ’s breasts. “And I [John] turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw...one like a Son of man clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle,” is how the KJV aptly captures the scene⁶⁴ —and, indeed, how ancient Greek listeners would have likely captured it, too.

When gazing upon this Son of Man, I for one see a Christ in drag. And, apparently, I am not alone. When I read the ekphrastic KJV translation to artist Rob Sample, he responded with this:



Sample, 2015

I quite like Sample’s image, which represents Revelation’s Christ with breasts, wearing a formal gown and mirroring a woman performing at a Miss Universe competition. In fact, given the content, context, and reception history of

⁶³ See Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 52A:93.

⁶⁴ Referenced also by Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 150.

Revelation, Christ competing for the male gaze certainly seems appropriate: “[E]very eye will see him,” as John himself says (1:7).

Paralleling the Son of Man with the Lamb, we can indeed surmise, alongside Moore, that “it is not only imperial Rome, Revelation’s villain, that is figured in terms that elide the distinction between the animal and the human [and the woman and the man]. Revelation’s hero, its messianic protagonist, also slips in and out of humanity [and in and out of gender distinctions] as the narrative unfolds.”⁶⁵ In 1:13, we have a comic-queer Christ, one who will have to “stri[p] off his/her ankle-length gown and golden bra”⁶⁶ before trotting along through the rest of the narrative as a sheep.

And, yet, just as soon as I begin to question the Son of Man’s resemblance to the Whore, and just as soon as I start to envision the Lamb trotting alongside the Beast of the Sea, I wonder whether subversion is not also at work here. Could this image represent another inversion of the Roman gender gradient? Could the Son of Man be hiding in effeminate garb so to later grab his sword unexpectedly and gorge on the flesh of his enemies (1:16; 2:16; cf. 19:21) in an evocation of not only the Roman subaltern/effeminate depiction of him (i.e., the claiming of a colonial past/present), but also an offering of a reversal of it (i.e., the eroding of the dominant imperial view)? This, after all, would mirror what we see with Jezebel. For as we saw in chapter three, it is the phallic Christ—who is really the female-breasted Christ—who throws Jezebel onto the bed. We are thus, again, set up to watch the *effeminate*

⁶⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Christ, a mirroring of the dominant transcript's *normative* valuation of him, conquer his adversary as a means by which to both claim and erode subalternity.

The Lamb, Again

The text does seem to point in this direction. Or, at the very least, Christ seems to make up for this effeminacy as he trots through the narrative. For in the place of the female-bosomed "Son of Man" come not only images of a "standing" (erect?) Lamb, but a Warrior Lamb who makes others fall on their faces before him: "Fall on us, and hide," every human screams to the mountains, "for the great day of [the Lamb's] wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (6:17). This is later followed by images of the Lamb penetrating the bodies and souls of his adversaries: "Everyone who worships the Beast and its image...will be tortured with fire and sulfur in the presence [gaze] of the Lamb" (14:9-10). According to Frilingos, in fact, it is here that the Lamb "realizes manhood."⁶⁷ Indeed, to "exac[t] divine vengeance upon the bodies of the condemned" certainly seems to mirror a more traditional Davidic/military/penetrating masculine ideal.⁶⁸

And yet, considering the power of the Lamb's gaze, it is interesting to discover that it is Christ-the-Rider, not the Christ-the-Lamb, who finishes off the Beast's followers. Toward the end of the narrative, we see coming down from heaven "a white horse [and] its rider...[his] eyes were like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems...he is clothed in a robe dipped in blood...and his name was the Word of God" (19:11-13; cf. 2:18). The Son of Man's once elegant gown is now stained

⁶⁷ Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

with blood (19:13), perhaps representing the blood of the Lamb's own slaughter,⁶⁹ or (and?) the blood of his adversaries. Indeed, even more pointed than Christ's own breasts (1:13) is the sword with which he thrashes his enemies: "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations" (19:15). We can hear the words of Isaiah in the background: "I trampled them in my anger...and their blood spattered my garments" (63:3).

Nevertheless, despite the rider's fierceness and fervor, we eventually discover that it is the Lamb all along who is Revelation's "king of Beasts."⁷⁰ As Moore has shown, Revelation's "anthropomorphic [hypermasculine] warrior" may have followers (19:14), but it is still the Lamb who has "followers (14:4) and adorers. It is the Lamb, not the Man, that is the object of mass adulation, mass adoration, for 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth' (5:13; cf. 5:8-14; 7:9-10)."⁷¹ In fact, when we finally see Revelation's New Jerusalem, we learn that "the throne has become 'the throne of God and the Lamb (τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀρνίου, 22:1, 3; cf. 3:21), the Lamb now lording it with God over humans, who have now become its slaves (δοῦλοι, 22:3), even as it has become unequivocally divine."⁷² Indeed, with the New Jerusalem prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband (21:2), we are left to believe that we have reached the end of our comic U, as our two

⁶⁹ The traditional interpretation is that the blood is Christ's/the Lamb's, although others have suggested it is the blood of Christ's/the Lamb's enemies. For two expositions on this debate, with differing conclusions, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1057; and Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 756.

⁷⁰ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 209.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 210.

heroes—Christ, and the personified heavenly new city—wed in the end of days, leaving the Lamb to reach “the signal performance of manhood,”⁷³ in the consummation that the Lamb’s implicit entry of the bride/holy city brings.

Too Manly a Lamb

On the performance of manhood in marriage, suffice it to say that, in ancient context, marriage revolved around men. Referring to gender roles in Roman wedlock, Lynn R. Huber writes that the “ideal Roman wife modeled her life in relation *to* that of her husband.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, while Roman marriage was typically a social and ontological transition for women rather than men (the woman cleaves to her husband, remodels her life for her husband, etc.),⁷⁵ this not does seem to be the case for the Lamb and his Bride. For in the biblical context, Zion has always modeled her life in relation to that of her husband (cf. Ezek 16; Hosea 1-2; Isa 61:10). In other words, what seems to have changed in Revelation’s case is not the gender dynamic between husband and wife—nor even the name of the wife (aside from the accolade “New”)—but rather the name, identity, and status of the husband. With the help of God and a few horsemen, it is the Lamb *who takes over* as the bride’s new center—as husband of a personified Zion—and, in the process, *replaces* God as the implied community’s *paterfamilias*: “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (cf. Ezek 16; Hosea 1-2; Isa 61:10). While the bride has simply transferred her *ketubah* onto that of the Lamb, the Lamb’s story ends with a massive insertion of steroids and

⁷³ Frilingos, *Spectacles Of Empire*, 87.

⁷⁴ Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

testosterone.

In fact, thinking dialogically—that is, with the Roman gender gradient and other texts/contexts in which masculinity is part of the text’s ideological discursivity—Revelation might actually over-expose the Lamb’s masculinity to the point of creating a hyperbolic, seven-eyed monster. In their reading of 4 Maccabees, for instance, Stephen Moore and Janice Capel Anderson show that King Antiochus loses his masculinity precisely because of his hyperbolic state. Unlike the Jews in the narrative whom he seeks to punish for refusing to relinquish their halakhic customs, King Antiochus has no self-control. The Jews’ physical endurance and cultural steadfastness is made clear throughout the narrative while the king, in deep contrast, continually loses his masculine gait. As the Jews maintain their willingness to die, the King loses his self-mastery and, with it, his manliness. In a fervent rage to prove that *he* is in charge and that *he* is the real hero, the King orders the Jews to be roasted one by one (4 Macc. 9:1-10:2). Like the effeminate Lamb of Revelation 5 or the Christ in drag of Revelation 1, “[t]he irony of 4 Maccabees is that a feeble, flabby old man, a gaggle of boys, and an elderly woman—all persons who should rate low on the hierarchical continuum of (masterful) masculinity and (mastered) femininity—triumph over [Antiochus] who should be at the privileged end of the continuum.”⁷⁶

We have seen this behavior before. In Daniel, we watch as Nebuchadnezzar becomes fanatical in proving that he is the manliest of men to the point that his masculinity unravels before him. Like in 4 Maccabees, the penalty for not obeying Nebuchadnezzar is so ridiculous (recall the fiery furnace, the furnace with fire) that

⁷⁶ Stephen D Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, “Taking It Like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 273.

the King appears a comic fool. Conway, in conversation with Moore and Anderson, suggests that we see this in Revelation, too. In her view, the Lamb embodies the rage of 4 Maccabees' Antiochus, so much so that he sows the seed of his own undoing. Contra Frilingos, she concludes that "the [L]amb moves not *from* effeminacy to masculinity, but rather in the reverse direction. If [the Lamb's] conquering death made him a manly lamb, his vindictive rage moves him down the gender hierarchy, closer to the uncontrolled emotions of the 'unman.'"⁷⁷

Possessing seven eyes and seven horns, the Lamb not only proves itself equal in grandiosity and grotesqueness to any Empire—undoing the ruling classes of Rome through its own embodying of godly imperial forces—but also serves as the primary “instrument” through which audiences witness the torture and demise of the text’s adversaries.⁷⁸ Through its overzealous need to obliterate Rome, the Lamb becomes the new Antiochus (and, thus, the new Nebuchadnezzar), seeking to inflict egregious pain upon his enemies.⁷⁹ Conquering for the Lamb, in fact, becomes so paramount that the Lamb pauses his nuptials so as to continue his battle. For just as soon as we see him ready for marriage in 19:7 (“let us rejoice...for the marriage of the Lamb has come”), he is off again, “thundering...to slay the adversaries of God,”⁸⁰ reminiscent, once again, of hyperbolic comic camp. The New Jerusalem Bride waits idle from 19:7 to 21:2—*one thousand years* in the world of Revelation—for the battle between “good and evil” to end and for the wedding processional to finally begin: “And I saw

⁷⁷ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 170-171.

⁷⁸ Frilingos, *Spectacles Of Empire*, 82.

⁷⁹ See Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 58-66.

⁸⁰ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 171.

the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2).

Arbeit Macht Frei in the New Jerusalem

As we finally watch the Bride—the New Jerusalem—descend from heaven, we are again set up to experience nothing short of perfection. We are even told by the one who sits on the throne that the New Zion will be the eternal home of God among mortals, a home where God wipes away the tears of his people and declares death and sadness a thing of the past: “God will dwell with them, they will be his people, and God will be with them, and he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (21:3-4).

But as I wander around this New Jerusalem I, again, am rubbing my eyes in disbelief. For in a kingdom measuring just over half the continental U.S. (twelve thousand stadia in length and width), it is certainly strange that we find only one river, and one tree (22:1, 2).⁸¹ But even stranger, at least to my mind, are the groups of Gentiles (τὰ ἔθνη) standing close behind, the ones walking by the city’s light. (21:24).⁸² As I approach them, I ask, “Have you changed your minds? Do you now willfully submit to the Lamb and God,⁸³ having seen their power and their ultimate

⁸¹ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 237.

⁸² According to Aune, “The term ‘light’ was frequently used in the OT and early Judaism as a metaphor for the ‘law of the Lord’ or ‘Torah’ (Ps 119 [MT 118]: 105; Prov 6:23; Wis 18:4; Sir 32:16; 45:17; 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 17:4; 59:2; *Bib. Ant.* 15:6; 19:4; 33:3; 4 *Ezra* 14:20-21; T. *Lev.* 14:4; 19:1),” which, to my mind, may indicate that the surviving nations are now, in addition to worshipping God and the Lamb, abiding by Revelation’s halakhic codes. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 52C:1171.

⁸³ Both the Lamb and God sit on the throne in the New Jerusalem (22:3), but it is a singular “he” and “him: that follows: “*His* slaves will worship *him*,” leading scholars

glory—are you god-fearers of the end of days?”⁸⁴ In Koester’s view, this indeed the case. While Revelation 21:24 (“[T]he kings of the earth will bring their glory into [the city]”) and 21:26 (“People will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it”) recall such texts as Isaiah 60:11 and 1QM XII, 13-15 in which the kings and nations are *subservient* to God, Revelation also inverts the script: “[I]n Revelation the nations [and kings] *willingly* honor God.”⁸⁵

Internal evidence, however, leads me to question this assertion, at least as far as the Gentile Kings are concerned. For while we have seen some ἔθνη glorify Christ earlier in the narrative (“I [John] saw a great multitude...of all ἔθνη before the Lamb”; 7:9),⁸⁶ the kings of the earth are never described in such terms. Instead, we are told that they fornicate with the Great Whore (17:2); that they will be eaten by birds for their fornications (19:18); and that they will be killed by the sword of the rider because they refuse to see Christ’s/God’s ways (19:19-21). If the kings of the earth will not bow down to the Jewish God, why are they in the New Jerusalem? Is it

to question if the New Zion is more the Lamb’s kingdom or God’s kingdom, or if it belongs equally to both.

⁸⁴ The motif of Gentiles worshipping God in the end of days was an important part of the messianic expectation (although some versions did envision the Gentiles annihilated instead.) On Gentile annihilation, see, for instance, *Jub* 15:26; *4 Ezra* 12:33; 13:37-38; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 40:1; 1QM XV, 2; XVIII, 12). The motif of Gentiles worshipping in the end of days was understood in a variety of ways, including 1) forced submission (e.g. Isa 18:7; 49:22-26; 55:5; 56:6-8; 60:1-22; 61:5-6; Micah 7:17; Zech 14:14; *Pss Sol* 17:30-31; 1QM XII, 13-14); and 2) willful praise (e.g. Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4; Jer 3:17; *Pss* 22:27-28; 86:9; 138:4). For more on this, see Koester, *Revelation*, 822; Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1171-1173; and, perhaps especially, E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 212–18. See also chapter one.

⁸⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 822. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁶ For more on this, see chapter one.

possible that they are here to fulfill a version of the messianic expectation that envisioned Gentile rulers *forced* into submission in the end of days?

Kings...will bow down to you with their faces to the earth and lick the dust of your feet...And all those who despised you will bow themselves at the soles of your feet; And they will call you the city of the LORD, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel...You will eat the wealth of nations, And in *their* riches you will boast (Isa 49:23, 60:14, 61:5-6).

As I continue to look around the New Jerusalem I start to suspect the likelihood of this latter possibility. The foundation of Zion's walls are, for one thing, adorned with every jewel: jasper, sapphire, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst (21:19-20). And the gates, too, although never closed (21:25), are made of pearl, while streets are also encased in gold (21:21). Have we have seen these riches—"their riches"? (Isa. 61:5-6)—somewhere before?

In an effort to put name to place, I begin to recall Jezebel, and Babylon. I recall their demise. I remember their torture. I imagine Babylon's nakedness—her being "devoured by hairy and horny beasts"⁸⁷—and question, alongside Smith, if she

would have felt the lingering gaze on her naked body...mentally raping her as they stare...[if she] would have felt the agonizing pain as her flesh was being ripped from her body to be consumed as if she had a sign on her that said, "This is my body. Take. Eat all of it."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 76.

⁸⁸ Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 132.

Was Jezebel penetrated by their gaze, too? Was her flesh left for consumption on the bed upon which she was violently thrown? With Smith, I say, “I wonder if they will remember her.”⁸⁹

And, then, I look back to the Kings. I see their forearms and I see their markings—the numbers tattooed near their wrists (13:16; 14:9)—and all I think is that this is nothing new, we have been here before, we are camped in another imperial Reich. I then watch the slaves (οἱ δοῦλοι) get marked on their foreheads (22:3-4) to do the Lamb’s bidding, and all I hear is the imperial echo. “*Arbeit macht frei*,” I hear the Lamb say. “In fear of my iron rod (19:15), you will do my bidding (21:24). And in fear of the sword of my mouth (19:15) you will bring honor to me (21:24). Do you see the smoke? The smoke of your people burning (14:11; 17:16; 18:8-9, 18; 19:3)? Do as I say, for you now belong to me.”

Even if not an anticipatory Third Reich, the New Jerusalem certainly seems to be a Christ-centered version of the Roman Reich. Like Caesar, the Lamb sits on the throne (with God; 22:1), and stands superior to his hordes of slaves (22:3). Like Rome (and the Whore), the New Jerusalem is affixed with jewels and pearls and gold, recalling indeed Isaiah 61:5-6: “And in *their* riches *you* will boast.” The irony of the New Jerusalem, then, is that not much of it is really “new.” To use the words of Robert Royalty, “Only names and labels are changed.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 246.

All is Fair in Comic Parody

Maier, among others, has also recognized this textual confusion. In his view, the Apocalypse's construction of a Jerusalem-Rome/Christ-Caesar complex is part of its textual parody. "Parody imitates," he writes, "it does not merely quote."⁹¹ Quoting Bakhtin, he adds, "Parodying ...is the creation of a *crowning double*; it is that same 'world turned inside out.'"⁹² Thus in order for Revelation to *be* a parody, on Maier's reading, Revelation *needs* to crown the Lamb a Roman double.

Although Maier does not say this upfront, his reference to Bakhtin is really a reference to carnival. As noted previously, Bakhtin surmises that the carnival produces a "second life"—a life in which societal norms and hierarchies are inverted, mocked, and ridiculed. In addition to highlighting bodily grotesqueries, carnival pageantry undergoes the crowning of a "mock double"—or rather a "mock king"—which not only *uncrowns* the real king, but also, by proxy, the entire social order.⁹³ The crowning of a double thus works to dismantle the normative crown—to undo "its hierarchical ornamentation," as Bakhtin would have it—and invite participants to live in a world turned upside down and inside out.⁹⁴ Through carnival's embodiment of

⁹¹ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 183.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 124.

⁹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. J. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23–24. Bakhtin also emphasizes the carnivalesque's deep ambivalence. For while the carnival is, on the one hand, for all the world—performed for and celebrated by persons of opposing statuses equally—the configuration of normative power dynamics, on the other hand, resumes after the carnival's end. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 124–126. The "real king", in other words, resumes the crown as soon as the carnival king's short-lived reign concludes. Because of this, Bakhtin writes that "absolute negation, like absolute affirmation, is unknown to carnival." *Ibid.*, 125. Although some scholars focus in particular on this point,

such incongruity and its inversion of inferior-superior categories, the typified “inferior” body is invited to deconstruct hierarchical scripts and, in turn, to experience release and relief in carnival’s deconstructive ethos. As Bakhtin puts it, carnivalistic crowning “celebrates [the crown’s] *shift*, the very *process* of [its] replaceability.”⁹⁵

According to Tina Pippin, the book of Revelation knows the carnival sense of the world. In *Death and Desire*, she writes that “Everything is turned inside out in [Revelation’s] carnival: the Whore is ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus’ (17:6 and 18:24); the nations are drunk from fornicating with the Whore; the nations in turn feast on the Whore’s desolate body (and in the process lose all their delicacies; 18:11-17; and finally, the birds of heaven

noting, for instance, the carnival’s *lack* of liberating absoluteness—or even its lack of liberating ethos more generally—the carnival scene still *at some point* disrupts social hierarchy. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Here, Stallybrass and White consider theorists such as Kristeva as having a too positivistic understanding of the carnival. For a thorough summary of this conversation, see Clair Wills, “Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria, and Women’s Texts,” in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 85–108, and in particular pages 85-93. For reference, see also Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 65-80, and in particular pages 78-80.

Even if the carnival ends with the renewal of hierarchical standards—and even if the carnival itself is approved by those who set such hierarchical standards—it still creates a world that, if only for a moment, is *otherwise*, which deconstructs the notion of normative absoluteness and a normative “essence”. As Bakhtin puts it, “The carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of conclusive conclusion: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again.” Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 165.

⁹⁵ Emphases mine. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 125.

feast on the nations.”⁹⁶ The Whore of Babylon is dethroned, and, with it, “[t]he dominant ideology of power and oppression.”⁹⁷

But what of the Lamb? And what of the Lamb’s New Kingdom? Revelation, on the one hand, takes on a carnivalesque inversion of hierarchical scripts—the Jew becomes Self and Rome becomes Other—but also, on the other hand seems to construct a Lamb and Jerusalem that *take on* the very normative center it attempts to dismantle. According to Maier, this is all part of the irony. Revelation, he writes, is “‘an irony all the way down’—an irony [that] never concludes in a manifesto or a blueprint for achieving a utopian order.”⁹⁸ “By developing a *sustained unstable irony* John challenges *any* straightforward notion of what it means to be powerful, to fight, and to build the city of God.”⁹⁹

Bakhtin’s carnivalesque would seem to work well in this regard. For in Bakhtin’s view, everyone laughs in carnival. The carnival sense of the world, he concludes, is inherently ambivalent in that it is both derisive and universal in scope: “[I]t is gay triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives...it ma[kes] a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect.”¹⁰⁰ Carnival laughter, he adds, is opposed to the one-sided laughter of the satirist “whose laughter is negative”—who

⁹⁶ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville and Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 68.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁸ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 197.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11–12, 13.

“places himself above the object of his mockery.”¹⁰¹ Rather than take part in the carnivalesque—in recognizing the comicality of even the *idea* of a wholly structured social order of things—the “negative” satirist stands on high, clutching tightly onto *his* monologic notion of what “is” and what “should be,” all the while mocking, ridiculing, and laughing *at* those whom he deems “Other than.”

When reading Revelation for humor, I find myself asking: Is this carnival “all the way down,” as Maier would have it? Or, is this another example of Bakhtinian monologism—an amalgamation of divergent scripts that nevertheless attempts to create a *one-sided* satirical overture? Are the Lamb and Zion self-deprecating as a means by which to highlight writ large the absurdity of “the politics of imperial domination”?¹⁰² Or is this something different—an unintentional swallowing of Rome’s own colonial mores which, inevitably, keeps the powerful, whoever the powerful may be, *on top*?

Let us look at the evidence. Thinking dialogically, we do find examples of self-parody and self-mockery in ancient Jewish and early rabbinic texts. On the latter, Daniel Boyarin has suggested that the Babylonian Talmud actually “comes from the [dialogical] world of Menippean satire, the literary style that *by definition*, combines seemingly contradictory elements.”¹⁰³ On his reading, the Talmud offers textual accents—comical “hiccups” and “moments of grotesque”¹⁰⁴—alongside even the most serious of rabbinic pronouncements. In Baba Metsia, for instance, we find a

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰² Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 197.

¹⁰³ Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 196. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

series of comical interludes pertaining to Jewish sex and the size of the sages' penises. As the rabbis discuss serious matters concerning life and death, the Bavli "retrieves"¹⁰⁵ the honor of a hanged man by announcing his vindication through sexual means:

"Be not troubled; he ... had intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur." In that minute [the mourner] placed his hands on his guts, and said, "Be Joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is this when you are doubtful when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you." (83b)¹⁰⁶

In response to such self-disparaging slips, Holger Zellentin writes that the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds offer glimpses of humor as a means by which to address "the discursive tensions of their times."¹⁰⁷ Not only did the rabbis utilize humor as invective against Christians and other non-rabbinic sectarian movements,¹⁰⁸ but also as a form of purposeful self-criticism and self-reflection.¹⁰⁹ Zellentin explains:

Rabbinic parodies and the rabbinic concerns they negotiate emerge as most poignant if we view the rabbis as capable of simultaneously reflecting on internal and external matters ... Parody helps us better understand the rabbis' critical views of themselves and their opponents and allows us to relate conflicts within rabbinic circles to the rabbis' conflicts with those beyond, and vice versa.¹¹⁰

In a similar vein, Erich Gruen recognizes the use of self-disparaging humor in writings such as the book of Judith and the Testament of Abraham, as the authors of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰⁶ Translation from Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 177.

¹⁰⁷ Holger Michael Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 139 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 4.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Tractate *Berakhot* (55a-57b); Tractate *Shabbat* (116a-b); Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature*, 23.

¹⁰⁹ Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature*, 21.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 236.

each not only lampoon their adversaries but also their protagonists. Whereas Judith dresses in whore's attire (attire that mysteriously came for her own closet) in order to sneak into the Assyrian camp, Abraham is characterized as weak, desperate, and afraid in his schemes to outwit Death. Such self-disparagements, Gruen writes, illustrate the respective communities' sense of peace and self-assurance in the diaspora.¹¹¹ They "above all reveal a self-esteem among diaspora Jews and a sufficiently satisfying life-style that allowed for irony without rancor and burlesque without bitterness."¹¹²

Although I agree that we see elements of self-disparagement in traditional Jewish texts, I am not convinced by Gruen's conclusion. Contemporary humor critics have noted the ways in which self-deprecation in Jewish humor often reflects the Jew's fight for survival. According to Avner Ziv, for instance, "Without doubt, self-disparaging humor is regarded in the United States as the most prominent trait of Jewish humor ..."¹¹³ which can: "1)...[serve] as a means for gaining sympathy and affection; 2)...[foster] Jewish appreciation of one's ability to admit her or his faults; and/or 3)...[serve] as a defense mechanism against anxiety."¹¹⁴ Elliot Oring captures this last point well when he writes:

¹¹¹ Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 181.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 181. See also 170, 180, and 193.

¹¹³ Avner Ziv, "Psycho-Social Aspects of Jewish Humor in Israel and in the Diaspora," in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 63.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* For more theoretical views, see, for example: Davies, "Exploring the Thesis of Self-Disparagement Jewish Sense of Humor" and Paul Lewis, "Three Jews and a Blindfold: The Politics of Gallows Humor," in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1993), 47–57. Mark Bleiwess also outlines an array of influential

When a man passionately proclaims his Jewishness and refuses to accept the inferiority that is deemed his, yet secretly or unconsciously reviles his heritage and is utterly convinced of his inferior status, then that man is in a real sense *meschugge*. Perhaps ambivalence of his situation, if it is not to result in tragedy, can be reflected only in the paradoxical structures of jokes and anecdotes.¹¹⁵

In other words, while Gruen suggests that these examples of self-disparaging humor illustrate their respective communities' sense of peace and self-assurance in the diaspora¹¹⁶—writing, again, that these texts, “above all reveal a self-esteem among diaspora Jews and a sufficiently satisfying life-style that allowed for irony without rancor and burlesque without bitterness”¹¹⁷—I question if their inclusion of self-disparagement might have something more to do with ancient Jewish anxiety in/and around the diaspora. Of course, while I do not want to be anachronistic or retroject a contemporary phenomenon too deep into the past, we do have sufficient evidence to suggest that ancient Jewish self-deprecation in humor *need not necessarily* represent the “satisfying life-style” Gruen so easily suggests.

When considering the possibility of a universal, self-deprecating laughter in Revelation, however, I find myself reminded less of Jewish self-disparagement and again of Cassius Dio. We learn the story behind his hidden laughter in *Roman History*. Here, he writes about a spectacle performance by emperor Commodus, who, in the late second century CE, took the stage of the Colosseum for fourteen days in

theories on self-disparagement in Jewish humor at the beginning of his essay on Self-Deprecation in Woody Allen movies. See Mark E. Bleiweiss, “Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen,” in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Incorporated, 2006), 58–65.

¹¹⁵ Elliott Oring, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity* (Jason Aronson, Incorporated, 2007), 118.

¹¹⁶ See Gruen, *Diaspora*, 181.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

order to enact the roles of gladiator, hunter, and deity. Dio writes that he watched up close as Commodus “killed an ostrich, cut off its head, and came over to where [he was] sitting, holding up the head in his left hand and in his right hand a bloody sword” (Dio 73 (72) .23). As the emperor transitioned from one performance to the next, Dio was expected, like the rest of the crowd, to “ooh” and “aah” at the emperor’s courageous displays of masculinity. Rather than “ooh” and “aah” at the emperor’s accomplishments, however, Dio found himself chomping on laurel leaves so as to muffle his otherwise audible laugh. For while laughing at the emperor’s *victims* might have been appropriate, victimizing *the emperor himself* by laughing at him was certainly not. He writes in full:

[M]any would have been put to death on the spot by the sword for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than distress [at his killings] that took hold of us) if I had not myself taken to some laurel leaves from my garland and chewed on them, and persuaded the others sitting near me to chew on them too—to that, by continually moving our mouths, we might hide the fact that we were laughing.¹¹⁸

The danger of Dio’s laughter relates to what John Moreall calls the negative ethics of humor.¹¹⁹ In addition to creating alternative world orders in which the subjugated can “reign supreme,”¹²⁰ jokes can turn hostile, sometimes to the point of inciting a violent reaction from those on the receiving end. The contemporary French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* is well known for its productions of hostile humor and, in

¹¹⁸ Translated by Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 2–3.

¹¹⁹ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 90–110. Cf., *ibid.*, 111–124.

¹²⁰ Antonis K. Petrides, “Plautus Between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce: Assessments and Reassessments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 428.

2011, the *Charlie Hebdo* offices were firebombed for the publication of an issue in which Muhammad was offered a position as guest editor. The caption on the magazine's front cover read: "100 lashes if you don't die of laughter." The ironical reversal in this case—which illustrates further how the comic need not always correspond with the fun—was that the publishers of the magazine were the ones who actually died.

Hitler, too, was offended by comedic caricatures of him (recall chapter two), and even made it legal to imprison those who mocked him. His "Law against Malicious Attacks on the State and Party and in Defense of Party Uniforms" states: "Whosoever makes hostile incendiary, or belittling public remarks about the leaders of the state or the NSDAP, or its ordinances or measures, of the sort that could undermine the trust of the people in its political leadership, is subject to imprisonment."¹²¹ Humor can hurt—and, in many cases, that is the point. Terms such as "cut," "jab," and "punchline" have not been added to humor's lexicon for nothing.¹²² The cuts of humor can be dangerous—enraging, even—as seen in the response to the *Charlie Hebdo* piece.¹²³ In fact, even if critique of those in power is at

¹²¹ See Rudolph Herzog, *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany*, trans. Jefferson Chase (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 67.

¹²² In 1843, the British periodical *Punch* defined the cartoon by calling it "The Big Cut." The term "punch line" appeared for the first time in this issue, further evoking the violence implied in humor, particularly the cartoon.

¹²³ Tendentious humor is especially dangerous if the power holders are the ones doing the punching. As much as humor can enable the lower stratified to transcend a harmful situation and/or debunk oppressive superiors, humor can also be used the power holders to perpetuate fear, prejudice, and systems of oppression.

play, humor is not always void of a negative ethic. As Italian Situationists used to say, “*Una risata vi seppellira*” (it will be a laugh that buries you).¹²⁴

Getting back to Revelation—and it is high time we did—I raise all of this to ask: If I were to watch the Apocalypse performed, as I imagine it was, and if I were transfixed by Christ’s stern gaze, as he stood before me, would I chuckle aloud when I looked back on *him*? Would I let him hear me laugh as I began to notice his *own* unraveling? The answer, I will say, is a resounding “no.” Even as Christ trotted across the stage, or constructed a Kingdom that looked *just like* the thing he had been trying to abolish, I would not want him to know that *he* had become the source of *my* amusement.

The reason for this is the text itself. Reading with the grain, Revelation embodies an “us versus them” dialectic. Even if we were to recognize Revelation as purposefully self-deprecating at various moments throughout the narrative, its self-disparagements would not be consistent with the text’s larger narrative ethos. As we have seen, Revelation is imbued by a thirst for vengeance. It is “affect intensive,”¹²⁵ exposing local and global adversaries as non-halakhic objects of *hate* and *disgust*. To laugh at the Lamb means to bear the mark of the enemy, and to bear the mark of the enemy means to bear the mark of death. As Moore reminds us, “Mountains of corpses...loom over the landscapes of Revelation as the direct result of actions initiated by God or the Lamb. For all who do not acknowledge their sovereignty, God and the Lamb are monstrous agents of terror, beastly objects of horror.”¹²⁶ In other

¹²⁴ See also Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 11.

¹²⁵ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 164.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

words while carnivalistic parody negates “division into performers and spectators,” Revelation revels in the binary.¹²⁷ While carnival “suspend[s]...hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected to it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people,”¹²⁸ Revelation’s humor works to *create* terror in Christ’s adversaries—to construct a New Kingdom in which even the halakhically pure must bow down in his honor. In sum, while Revelation may take on a carnivalistic inversion of hierarchical scripts, it is not, in my view, carnivalistic “all the way down.” It is “absolutely fundamental to the Apocalypse that the violence through which Jesus is said to conquer evil is the violence done to him.”¹²⁹ Revelation reveals not an “escape from the cross” but rather a “revenge for the cross.”¹³⁰ It reveals not an escape from imperial subjugation, but a “displacement of rage” through which Empire and imperial sympathizers become targets of its “ongoing vilification.”¹³¹ In short, it is a fantasy of revenge, not a fantasy of hierarchical deconstruction. Instead of Rome, it is Zion. Instead of Caesar, it is the Lamb. Revelation is resistance

¹²⁷ Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 122.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹²⁹ David L. Barr, “The Lamb Who Looks Like a Dragon?: Characterizing Jesus in John’s Apocalypse,” in *The Lamb Who Looks Like a Dragon*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 209.

¹³⁰ Aaron Ricker Parks, “The Devil’s Reading: Revenge and Revelation in American Comics,” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010), 17.

¹³¹ See Dereck Daschke, *City of Ruins: Mourning the Destruction of Jerusalem Through Jewish Apocalypse* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 199.

literature, and, “*as* resistance literature, [it inverts] the standards of propriety for its *own ends*.”¹³²

It seems to me, then, that the text embodies not a carnivalistic, universal laughter, but rather a satirist’s *negative* laughter—a laughter designed to *overcome* the enemy. Within the narrative world, the Son of Man seems to become so intent on diminishing his adversaries that he, in a fervent rage to become the manliest of men, sows the seeds of his own undoing. In mocking his enemies via grotesque and violent representations of them, he, as Lamb, puts on his own excessive, imperial gaze (cf. 2:22-24). The masculinity of Christ is thus not only “impugned in [this] process,” as Conway suggests,¹³³ but also lends itself to a familiarly humorous interpretation: The Lamb is grotesque in appearance. The Lamb has no self-control. The Lamb is unaware of his own undoing. While some of us might read with an eye toward carnival—with an interpretation that recognizes the absurdity of it “all the way down” (and, indeed, it is absurd)—such an interpretation escapes the range of authorial intentions we might comfortably attribute to Revelation.

A Hybrid Humor, A Hybrid Text (Or, Fallen, Fallen, is Book of Revelation)

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s notions of colonial mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence can help us make sense of the features of Revelation we have been considering. While mimicry, as noted previously, refers to the colonized’s replication

¹³² Greg Carey, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 178. 169–80. Emphasis mine.

¹³³ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 174.

of imperial mores, ambivalence refers to the affect attached to that replication. The colonizing culture, in other words, can indeed appear alluring to the colonized—worthy of imitation, even—but it can also be viewed as affectively repulsive *at the same time*. Mimicry and ambivalence thus manifest in performances of hybridity; the colonized, in mimicking the colonizer, produces an in-between space that is “almost the same but not quite” or, as Bhabha effectively quips, “*almost the same, but not white.*”¹³⁴

We have been observing this co-existence of ex-centricity and relationality primarily through Revelation’s dialogical use of Jewish and Greco-Roman comic scripts. The Apocalypse, as we have seen, is animated by its Jewishness and its (often unacknowledged) *acquiescence and* (readily apparent) *opposition* to the (Greco)Roman Empire, enlisting (and constructing) comic motifs and genres familiar to *both*. While Revelation uses humor to construct a (postcolonial) anti-imperial ex-centric narrative, it is also always already relational, interacting with a complex web of intertextualities that are both/and. As we saw last chapter, this relationality can work in the favor of the colonized. By retooling Roman notions of humor with a Jewish subscript, Revelation turns Roman humor—the humor typically targeted *at Jews—back at Rome*.

But such catachrestic repurposing also relates to Revelation’s use of violent imagery. Whereas Revelation’s violence against Rome illustrates an anti-Roman agenda, the means by which it destroys and eventually replaces her mimics Roman force and conquest. As we have seen, Revelation utilizes humor to oppose Rome and

¹³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 128. Emphasis in the original.

manufacture a more idealized status quo. Rather than simply laugh at Rome, however, it mocks, tortures, and turns into spectacle those who do not worship Christ or abide by John's strict halakhic worldview. The issue here, then, is not necessarily in the text's implied laughter but rather in its *recreation of imperial conquest* through its violent humor. In mocking Rome via Rome's own grotesque and violent representations of the "Other," Revelation takes on an imperial gaze. It exudes an ambivalent attitude toward Empire—a desire to be like Rome, but with a marginal, Jewish twist. For all intents and purposes, it is Revelation that turns Rome and Roman sympathizers into the laughable Other. It is Revelation that in the end forgets the humanity of laughable Others. And it is Revelation that in the end turns its own readers into Commodus's crowded amphitheater, expecting from them cheers of "ooh" and "aah" as its Lamb enacts the text's fantasy of revenge. Thus in attempting to create a *post-colonial* vision—a vision in which the world pledges allegiance to *its* deity—the Apocalypse, creates an ambivalent colonial one anew.

Conclusion

Living Beyond the (Comic) End

According to a tale in the Talmud, the prophet Elijah said that there will be reward in the next world for those who bring laughter to others in this one [Tannit 22a].

- John Morreall¹

The survivor who [experiences] recovery faces life with few illusions but often with gratitude. Her view of life may be tragic, but for that very reason she has learned to cherish laughter.

- Judith Herman²

I began this project by illustrating that the book of Revelation is best read historically as a Jewish text. Its messianic orientation, together with its focus on halakha, Hebrew scripture, and the Davidic Kingdom, are all indications that Revelation's author and implied audience were Jews, and that the book itself is a Jewish text from beginning to end. I then positioned Revelation within a context of imperial trauma. In recognizing Revelation's claims of suffering, persecution, and powerlessness as claims of a traumatic past/present—as well as identifying its dialogic insertions of prior subjection as postmemory narration—I opened the text to a reading of narrative repair. I suggested that, in addition to making trauma claims, the Apocalypse implements a dialogical use of humor to create a comic counterworld—a world designed to resist imperial trauma, persist in the making of a (particular) Jewish

¹ John Morreall, "Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions," in *Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations*, 1997, <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/humor-in-the-holocaust/>.

² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 213.

cultural self, and offer implied audiences an “optimistic expression of becoming, renewal, and freedom.”³

In recognizing Revelation’s violent, misogynist, and catachretic reimagining, however, I also argued the text enacts its own imperial gaze. In violently satirizing its violent enemies, Revelation mimics Roman mores. Thus despite the Apocalypse’s claims of ex-centricity—its “hold[ing] up for emulation a [Jewish] practice that is at once peripheral and pure”⁴—Revelation’s relations to Empire and imperial power remain deeply ambivalent. In constructing a Lamb/Caesar and Jerusalem/Rome, the text exudes a desire to be like Rome, but with a marginal, Jewish twist. This ironic rhetorical effect extends to Revelation’s use of humor. Implicitly, the text depicts Christ as a newer and better Caesar, but in so doing, the vitriolic humor that it directs against Caesar and the Roman Empire attaches itself to Christ’s and God’s Empire. Revelation, as we have seen, becomes so intent on diminishing Rome—on constructing the “mightiest” and “manliest” Christ in the face of Empire—that it sows the seed of its own undoing. In the end, the Christ/Lamb looks like Caesar. And its New Jerusalem: A new Rome. Together, the Lamb and Zion mirror Revelation’s implied comic butts, and I, like Cassius Dio, find myself reaching back for my *own* laurel leaves—to muffle my *own* laughter that is now directed back at *it*.

While some may suggest, in response to this reading, that Revelation mirrors a failed attempt at communal repair, I conclude otherwise. For if we maintain a hermeneutic of trauma beyond Revelation’s introjection imperial mores—beyond its

³ John Clement Ball, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 120.

⁴ Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 32.

violent satirizing of its violent enemies—we discover that Revelation’s unintentional “undoing” might also be part of its reparative “becoming.” Through its simultaneous claims of communal subjection and fantasies of revenge, the text bears witness to a common posttraumatic signification. Dereck Daschke names this signification the melancholia of ancient Jewish apocalyptic fantasy, which entails

a compulsion to return to the original trauma and repeat the loss over and over again; the misrecognition and censorship of what was actually lost, i.e., a core sense of security in the world and one’s future; a displacement of rage and annihilating fantasies onto...[various] targets and their ongoing vilification; and the reproduction in fantasy of that which was lost in an idealized, impervious form.⁵

Trauma theory reveals that this is a common response to trauma, occurring across a wide range of traumatic signifiers. As Judith Herman writes, annihilating fantasies, or “fantasies of revenge,” constitute a “wish for catharsis” that “arise out of the experience of complete helplessness....The victim imagines that she can get rid of the terror, shame, and pain of the trauma by retaliating against the perpetrator...the traumatized person imagines that [reversing the roles of perpetrator and victim] will bring relief.”⁶ Because of the introjection that often takes place in these fantasies—the “master[ing of] fright and pain by taking on qualities of their abusers”⁷—Herman

⁵ Dereck Daschke, *City of Ruins: Mourning the Destruction of Jerusalem Through Jewish Apocalypse* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 199. Daschke names these targets “innocent and inappropriate” (and therefore “displaced”). While trauma signifiers are in many instances displaced and enacted onto innocent people, they are not enacted onto innocent people in all cases (i.e. when the actual perpetrator is the target).

⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 189.

⁷ Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 112.

names revenge fantasy a “stagnation” in the recovery process.⁸ Rather than creating a narrative that mourns attentively one’s loss and organizes one’s community’s “enduring states of mind,”⁹ revenge fantasy is “often a mirror image of the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed. It often has the same grotesque, frozen, and wordless quality as the traumatic memory itself.”¹⁰ The traumatized creator of the fantasy thus rarely experiences a peaceful integration of self-states, but rather, to quote Herman, “feel like a monster,” disgusted both by the idea of becoming her perpetrator and frustrated at the realizing that “revenge can never change or compensate for the harm that was done.”¹¹

Introjection, however, can also function as an unconscious method of camaraderie formation and, in turn, survival. For not only do revenge fantasies often reverse the power dynamics of the trauma proper—and therefore squander feelings of relief through the mirroring of survivor-as-perpetrator—they also, in doing so, inadvertently leave room for recipients of the fantasy to acknowledge more deeply the survivor’s own suffering. Known as projective identification,¹² “patients can behave

⁸ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 189.

⁹ Kai T. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.

¹⁰ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 189.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² The term “projective identification” and the basic concept behind it (it has since been redefined in various ways by various authors) is credited to Melanie Klein in her 1945 essay, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms.” See Melanie Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,” reprinted in *Projective Identification: The Fate of a Concept*, ed. Elizabeth Spillius and Edna O’Shaughnessy (East Sussex, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 19–46. Here she writes, “Much of the hatred against parts of the self is now directed toward the mother. This leads to a particular form of identification which establishes the prototype of an aggressive object-relation. I suggest for these processes the term “projective identification” (*ibid.*, 27). See also

in ways that get the analyst to feel the feelings that the patient, for one reason or another, cannot contain within himself or cannot express in any other way except by getting the analyst to have the experience too.”¹³ Via projective-introjective identification, recipients of revenge fantasy can actually take on the feelings of the survivor by being put into the position of victim within the survivor’s imaginary. In other words, although revenge fantasy in itself often does not help eliminate traumatic recall for the traumatized,¹⁴ it can still, within certain contexts, enable listeners of the fantasy to understand more affectively the survivor’s own trauma. Revenge fantasy’s unproductivity can thus become in a roundabout way something *productive*, particularly if the survivor shares her fantasy with someone who recognizes the projections as such.

A parallel introjective process is common in colonial contexts of trauma. Not only do colonized subjects learn to see themselves through the colonizer’s gaze, but in doing so, they learn that to be “better than” is to implement a colonizing persona. To use the words of Paulo Freire, the colonized “ideal is to be men; but for them, to

Elizabeth Spillius, “The Emergence of Klein’s Idea of Projective Identification in Her Published and Unpublished Work,” in *Projective Identification: The Fate of a Concept*, ed. Elizabeth Spillius and Edna O’Shaughnessy (East Sussex, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 3–18.

¹³ Elizabeth Spillius, *Journeys in Psychoanalysis: The Selected Works of Elizabeth Spillius* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 34.

¹⁴ Again, revenge fantasies do not eliminate the pain of trauma or traumatic recall. They can even leave the survivor experiencing further psychosomatic disturbances as she can take on the qualities of her abuser within the fantasy proper. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 189.

be a ‘man’ is to be an oppressor. This is their model of humanity.”¹⁵ Or as Frantz

Fanon explains:

The symbols of society...the police force, bugle calls in the barracks, military parades, and the flag flying aloft, serve not only as inhibitors but also stimulants. They do not signify “stay where you are.” But rather “Get ready to do the right thing.”...This impulse to take the colonist’s place maintains a constant muscular tonus.¹⁶

Fanon concludes, however, akin to Herman, that “liberation is only truly realized when the oppressed arrive at an awareness of the psychological domination *that has shaped* their consciousness and relationships with the world around them.”¹⁷ Rather than take on the qualities of their abuser in a fight for liberation, they must learn that that very *impulse* to take to colonist’s place—to mimic the colonizer and create ambivalently hybrid colonial constructs anew—has been shaped *by* the colonist onto the colonized’s consciousness. For Fanon, the colonized must learn to unpack from where their fantasies of revenge originate; only then can the colonial/imperial abuse, and the pain associated with it, be dismantled.

¹⁵ Quoted by Abigail Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Post/Coloniality and Subjectivity, 33, no. 3 (August 2013): 175.

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 16–17. Quoted also by Bhabha, “Foreword,” xxxviii.

¹⁷ Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” 176. To quote Fanon: “Antiracist racism and the determination to defend one’s skin, which is characteristic of the colonized’s response to colonial oppression, clearly represent sufficient reasons to join the struggle... [But] the legitimate desire for revenge alone cannot nurture a war of liberation. These flashes of consciousness which fling the body into a zone of turbulence, which plunge it into a virtually pathological dreamlike state where the sight of the other induces vertigo, where my blood calls for the blood of the other, where my death through mere inertia calls for the death of the other, this passionate outburst in the opening phase, disintegrates if it is left to feed on itself.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 89.

More recent relational applications of trauma theory to therapy indicate that this unpacking takes place through “enactment”—“the unconscious worlds of both patient and therapist create mutually enacted dynamics, which the therapist is responsible to turn into speech and reflection.”¹⁸ Enactments can often appear jarring, and take on a grotesque sensibility. They can take the form of vengeful storytelling through which “the struggle of liberation from the bonds of colonization”¹⁹ is played out, and in which “there is a tendency for the oppressed to become to oppressor.”²⁰ The projective identification that takes place *during* enactments can also appear jarring—such as a therapist’s feelings of fear, disgust, or even victimhood in a survivor’s introjective fantasy of revenge.

Scholars have noted similar feelings of victimhood and disgust when reading Revelation. For Shanell Smith, the Apocalypse “stir[s] up memories of the African American woman’s experience of being repeatedly raped and subjected to other forms of violence under slavery.”²¹ For Hannah Stenström, Revelation’s constructions of gender “hurts—and...participates in [larger] oppressive structures.”²² For Stephen Moore, “[r]eading Revelation is...like looking in the mirror—while

¹⁸ McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis, Second Edition*, 120.

¹⁹ Abigail Ward, “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas,” 175. Here she is in conversation with Paulo Freire.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 178.

²² Hanna Stenström, “‘They Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women...’ Christian Identity According to the Book of Revelation,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 52–53.

having a psychotic episode.”²³ I, too, share a similar reading. When analyzing Revelation’s use of humor in the service of anti-imperial resistance, I notice that its introjections of imperial violence, misogyny, and ἔθνος cleansing in its “writing back” to Empire are reminiscent of the Jewish experience—including my family’s experience—of being tortured, raped, and stripped naked for execution under the Third Reich. In order to overcome these emotive responses, I find myself enjoying Revelation’s own humorous undoing, a mirror of my own defiance—and, perhaps, a mirror of my own introjection.

But maybe that is the point. According to relational psychoanalytic theorists, these responses are not “clinical errors” in enactments but rather “the essence of the material to be analyzed.”²⁴ Again, because “[t]raumatic symptoms have a tendency to *become disconnected from their source* and to take on a life of their own,”²⁵ trauma’s melancholic signifiers can take shape in a variety of forms, *including* fantasy and the enactment of grotesque and disorienting self-states. It is thus the work of the recovery to play them out. In letting them unfold in a safe space—and in then talking about the experiences of the enactment for *both* the creator and the receiver—*further* narrative can take shape.

By situating Revelation’s introjection of imperial mores in its fantasy for revenge alongside relational applications of trauma theory to therapy, we can read Revelation’s introjection of imperial mores as the enactment of its own

²³ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 66.

²⁴ Jody Messler Davies and Mary Gail Frawley, *Treating The Adult Survivor Of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 3.

²⁵ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34. Emphasis mine.

melancholia.²⁶ Reading in this way not only enables us to recognize the text as a work *in process*—in a state of recovery *becoming*—but to also open up a dialogical space between Revelation and its readers. Through the projective-identification that takes place in its introjective fantasy, readers can “co-create an illusory world, where past, present, and future, the real, the fantastically elaborated, and the other wise irreducible, can come alive.”²⁷ By co-creating in the this way, we can recognize that *our* feelings of disgust, *our* memories, postmemories, and introjective responses around misogyny, slavery, mockery, ethnic cleansing etc. are what *give us access to* Revelation’s—more specifically, Revelation’s community of storytellers’—experiences of trauma under their own misogynistic, slave-making, name-calling, and ethnic Othering imperial oppressor(s). According to relational trauma theory, in other words, it is our responses that help bring to life the posttraumatic significations of Revelation’s own textual unconscious and, in turn, help us to see the ways in which its projective-introjective identifications are part of its narrative claiming.

To conclude, let me be clear when I say that my suggestion for recognizing a productive posttraumatic signification in Revelation’s projective-identification and introjective counter narrative is not to say that I align with optimistic and justice-focused readings of the book, such as those mentioned in previous chapters. I am not

²⁶ Suffice it to note that in addition to transpiring in therapy contexts, projective identification can take place between persons involved in other types of close relationships, such as those between spouses, friends, teachers and students, parents and children, and texts and their readers. For more on the close relationship between texts and readers, see, for example, Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

arguing that to find productivity in Revelation's grotesqueries is to liberate the text or to somehow wipe clean its violent rhetoric. Nor do I concur with interpretations of trauma that suggest we should focus on unearthing an overarching "positive" from traumatic pasts. As Abigail Ward explains,

One example of this desire to render traumatic experience as positive may be seen in the number of critics who suggest that there should be some kind of affirmative message that can be taken from the "unspeakable horror" of slavery or, indeed, that a traumatic past might be interpreted into a hopeful fiction text.²⁸

Such interpretations go against my ethics of reading.²⁹ I agree, for instance, with Robert Eaglestone when he writes that "using these terms can, in fact, risk stripping any agency from the survivor, revictimizing the survivor as (only) a traumatized victim."³⁰ To read Revelation's claim of trauma as solely a "hopeful fiction text" risks to "wrongly...resolve, assimilate, or normalize [it]—to make [its] 'troubles...a drop of rain in the sea.'"³¹

What I am suggesting is instead that the often-read-as unethical/unreadable/unassimilable aspects of the text's affect actually give us access to some of Revelation's posttraumatic signification. In the face of trauma, narratives of repair do not form in a vacuum but rather take shape over time. Theories of

²⁸ Abigail Ward, "Understanding Postcolonial Traumas," 179.

²⁹ Maia Kotrosits and Hal Taussig contend similarly. They write that they "feel emphatically that to give meaning to the various and overlapping experiences of pain, loss, and trauma does not need to mean redeeming them to a 'higher purpose.' ... It can also be about creating more detailed and complicated pictures to account for the world's muddle." Kotrosits and Taussig, *Re-Reading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7–8.

³⁰ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

enactment indicate that posttraumatic signifiers are bound to occur in the retellings.³² The work of recovery is thus to *identify* the posttraumatic signifiers so that the retellings can turn into further retellings, and that those retellings can eventually turn into integrative narratives that claim a traumatic past, imagine alternative futures, and erode traumatizing ideologies without introjection or the need for projective identification (and/or other painful symptomologies). In other words, in recognizing our own psycho-affective responses to Revelation—our own volleying with the text—we are able to maintain that its introjections of misogynistic and violent humor perpetuates harmful systems of oppression *while at the same time* unearths more about the text’s own trauma and working toward survival.

Recognizing this, I leave Revelation’s use of violent and misogynistic humor not with apology or resolve, but with understanding. For although I, to John, am like a new Jezebel—a non-halakhic Jew at which to point and laugh—I nevertheless question if, in co-constructing an illusory world (his, an introjection of Empire through humor; mine, a Holocaust postmemory in response), we can at least agree on one thing:

“They tried to kill us, they failed, let’s eat.”³³

Pass the pork? —Kidding!

³² This also mirrors posttraumatic symptomology more generally. Those who suffer from PTSD can be triggered unexpectedly, even in retellings. They can be living in an integrative self-state in one moment and then in the next transition into a dissociative state, consumed by the trauma.

³³ Within some Jewish cultures, this is a standard joke recited in the face of communal trauma memory/postmemory.

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