

## **Sarah Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation: Roasting Rome*.**

**Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.**

*Olivia Stewart Lester, Loyola University Chicago*

Sarah Emanuel offers a new reading of Revelation, drawing on postcolonial theory (including postcolonial trauma theory), humor theory, and literary theory to argue that the book of Revelation utilizes humor as a strategy of Jewish recovery from collective trauma. Emanuel argues that although postcolonial trauma theory renders Revelation's sometimes grotesque humor more intelligible, Revelation should not be read as expressing simple resistance to the dynamics of empire. Rather, Revelation replicates much of the logic of Roman rule, even as it tries to undermine Rome with parody, irony, and other comic elements.

The introduction lays out the major argument of the book and orients the reader to the theoretical bodies of knowledge with which Emanuel will dialogue. The introduction also discusses the genre of the book of Revelation. Emanuel notes that Revelation participates in the genres of apocalypse and prophecy, while also containing features similar to ancient letters and having some relationship to a worship setting. Rather than reducing Revelation to one primary genre, Emanuel explains that she will read the text as a narrative: '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' (7). It is this focus on narrative that enables Emanuel to read Revelation alongside postcolonial trauma theory, arguing for the power of communal storytelling in the aftermath of trauma as a means of recovery.

Chapter one locates Revelation within Judaism and then contends for the relevance of postcolonial theory, trauma theory, and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism for interpreting Revelation. It is the Jewishness of the text that grounds all of Emanuel's readings of Revelation as postcolonial, posttraumatic, and comic. She places John's Jesus-following Jewishness in a larger context of the diversity within ancient Judaism and then turns to Revelation as a postcolonial narrative shaped by trauma. She builds on earlier discussions of apocalyptic literature as responding to feelings of oppression (e.g., Collins 1984), but makes a stronger claim, asserting that Jews suffered trauma as imperial subjects within the Roman empire. Emanuel takes Revelation's '*writing back to* and *bearing witness to* colonial imperialism' (46) as postcolonial (even though the text was written well before the modern colonial period). In an elegant turn, Emanuel employs dialogism and Julia Kristeva's intertextuality to affirm Revelation's meanings as multiple and unfinalizable, but also to locate the text in its ancient multicultural context. Emanuel reads Revelation as engaging in dialogue with both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions, arguing that historical-critical readings are themselves already dialogical, insofar as they attend to these ancient cross-cultural conversations.

Chapter two analyzes the themes of trauma and humor. Emanuel begins with a consideration of trauma in general—its unnarratability and its power to disrupt the mind of the traumatized (with flashbacks, nightmares, etc.)—noting

trauma's impact not only on individuals but on whole cultures or communities. She then examines the usefulness of postcolonial trauma theory for understanding biblical texts that engage with empire, using the insight that colonial subjugation inflicts trauma (e.g., Bubenechik 2013; Gandhi 1998). Emanuel argues that ancient Jews suffered numerous instances of trauma as subjects of the Roman empire and argues that many biblical narratives function as narratives of recovery. In the second half of this chapter, humor takes center stage. Emanuel explains that there is no one dominant theory of humor, and no one model for finding humor in biblical texts. Readers of the Hebrew Bible, however, have frequently found humor in 'texts' incongruities, topsy-turvy character dynamics, and U-shaped plotlines' (75). Emanuel counters the popular notion that humor is light-hearted, painting instead a variegated portrait of humor as a vehicle for relief in the face of trauma. Humor can include violence as well as incongruity. The final section of the chapter analyzes Greco-Roman humor, with its frequent focus on food, character reversals, and nonnormative bodies, including women and disabled persons.

Chapters three, four, and five apply Emanuel's theoretical work to close readings of Revelation. Chapter three focuses on 'Balaam' and 'Jezebel' (Rev 2), interpreting John's local enemies in light of ancient humor. Emanuel first contends that Revelation does not just work to resolve trauma for John as an individual, but also creates a community and works towards its collective recovery. Part of the work of constituting a community is defining its enemies. Interpreting the figure of 'Balaam,' Emanuel traces the contours of humor in the Numbers 22 account on which Revelation draws, noting how the text weaves together irony, animal humor, and reversals. She argues that those comic elements travel with the figure of Balaam into Revelation. 'Jezebel' is a more serious figure. Emanuel does not shy away from Revelation's sexual violence, found among other places in the prediction of punishment for 'Jezebel.' Nevertheless, Emanuel's broadened understanding of humor is capacious enough for the seriousness and violence surrounding 'Jezebel,' and can be seen in the irony attending her portrayal in 1–2 Kings. Emanuel compares the ironic portrayal of Queen Jezebel with the reversal envisioned by the text of Revelation for the rival prophet.

Chapter four engages in close readings of the dragon, the sea beast, the land beast, and the Whore of Babylon, John's imperial enemies. Emanuel considers these figures in light of 'hidden transcripts,' another strategy for resistance and recovery in colonial contexts. She reads the dragon (Rev 12) as bringing together Jewish and Roman traditions to overthrow Roman power, here figured as Apollo. She views the sea beast (Rev 13) as mocking Nero with its imperfect number (666) and its resonances with Roman animal humor. The land beast (Rev 13) is humorous because of its strange physiognomy (read here as effeminate) and because of the absurdity of its followers. The Whore of Babylon receives the most attention in this chapter. Emanuel employs performance criticism to imagine a reading of Rev 17 filled with sarcasm, queer camp, and hyperbole, while also engaging in historical critical comparisons with Roman satires about luxury, gluttony, and lust. Emanuel concludes that the transformations of Roman tropes discussed in this chapter are akin to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'catachresis'—intentional misuse of dominant ideology by a postcolonial subject.

Chapter five reads against the grain of the text, examining the ways that Christ appears as a new Caesar and the New Jerusalem appears as a new Rome. Emanuel compares the hyperbolic violence and reversals instigated by the Lamb in

---

Revelation with other Jewish texts that blend violence and humor in ironic judgment: the account of the judge Ehud killing king Eglon (Judg 3), the plagues and exodus from Egypt (Ex 1–14), and Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace (Dan 3). There is humor to be found in the ironic reversals of Revelation; at the same time, however, the text replicates the violence and domination against which it protests. Progressing through readings of Jesus as Lamb, Son of Man, and Rider on a white horse, Emanuel considers the ways the humor of Revelation turns in on itself. Her readings attend closely to Jesus and gender, noting the texts in which he is hypermasculine and the more perplexing description of Jesus’s breasts (*mastoi*, Rev 1:13), which leads her to a reading of Jesus in drag. While Emanuel suggests ways in which the mocking of imperial figures in Revelation turns back onto Jesus (insofar as he resembles them), she is careful to note that the vantage point of the text itself is not one of playful dialogism or carnival. For Emanuel, Revelation enacts a ‘recreation of imperial conquest through its violent humor’ (200).

The conclusion briefly considers the topics of projective identification and trauma enactment, suggesting that we might compare the violence of Revelation to a revenge fantasy. This does not exonerate Revelation, in Emanuel’s view, from the violence and misogyny pervasive in the book. It does, however, render those features more understandable.

Overall, this book demonstrates a rich engagement with several bodies of theoretical literature. It offers excellent introductory discussions of postcolonial theory, trauma theory, humor theory, and dialogism for readers in biblical studies. Emanuel advances a compelling argument, bringing together elements of parody and irony previously noted in readings of Revelation into an innovative and coherent notion of humor. The questions that remain for this reviewer relate to Emanuel’s focus on narrative in Revelation, at the possible expense of the apocalyptic or prophetic aspects of the text. I wonder how Emanuel’s insights might inform readings that foreground the apocalyptic or revelatory nature of the text. With respect to apocalyptic, if we took a narrative frame as a subfeature of the genre of apocalypse (as defined in Semeia 14, discussed by Emanuel [Collins 1979]), rather than the text’s main focus, I wonder how many of Emanuel’s insights about postcolonial recovery and repair through humor in Revelation would transfer to other apocalyptic texts. Might recovery be a feature of the genre? Regarding prophecy, do we lose an appreciation for the prophetic nature of the text when instances of hyperbole, parody, and irony are located alongside satires as humor? If these features also occur frequently in Jewish prophetic literature, as Emanuel notes, should they be analyzed under the dominant heading of humor, or might humor be a subfeature of prophecy?

None of these questions undermine the brilliance of this book. They speak, rather, to its generative and engaging readings of Revelation. Emanuel’s monograph is well worth the attention of readers of Revelation, as well as anyone interested in postcolonial theory, trauma theory, and humor in biblical studies.

## Reference List

Bubenechik, Milena. 2013. *The Trauma of Colonial Condition: In Nervous Conditions and Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Hamburg: Anchor Academic.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. 1984. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Collins, John, ed. 1979. *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. Semeia 14. Chico: Scholars Press, 1979.

Gandhi, Leela. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)