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978-1-108-49659-9 — Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation
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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 Shershow[1]

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. Throughout the narrative, we learn that God's people are not only tortured, but also "sometimes killed by various agents of Satan."[2] As John himself writes, "I, John, your brother, [share] with you in Jesus the suffering (*thlipsis*) . . . and the patient endurance [of it]" (1:9).

But Revelation is not just about the woes of John and his implied audience. Much of the book outlines in detail the destruction of John's adversaries, including those "various agents of Satan." Whereas Revelation's early 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") – succeeding chapters focus on the destructions of more global 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 the 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.

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[1] Scott Cutler Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst, MA: 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, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

Revelation remains one of the most challenging New Testament writings. Not only are the text's allusions and imaginings cryptic and difficult to comprehend, 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 eighteenth 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 twentieth 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 outlined in detail the ills of this world and how they signify the oncoming battle between God and Satan in the end times. 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."[3] 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, 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 (Babylon forced Israelites into exile in the sixth century BCE and subsequently became associated with evil, hardship, and oppression in later Israelite/Jewish literature), 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" designed to disrupt hegemonic discourses is one to which most scholars subscribe.[4] By characterizing Babylon as immoral and licentious – as "a mother of whores and the earth's abominations" (17:5) – Revelation disrupts normative representations of power to such a degree that the text's opposing forces appear vilified and subverted at numerous moments throughout the narrative.

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

## SUBVERTING THE EMPIRE THROUGH HUMOR

This book explores Revelation's subversions through the lens of the comic. Throughout the chapters to follow, I argue that Revelation is a postcolonial Jewish narrative (of becoming) that uses humor as a mode of opposition and repair in the face of imperial trauma.[5] By putting humor and trauma theories in conversation with the postcolonial and historical theoretical view that Revelation is a counter-imperial text – one that emerges out of and also "writes back" to Roman imperial subjugation[6] – I illustrate that Revelation implements humor as an articulation of its anti-imperial resistance (its ex-centricity, as Homi K. Bhabha would say),[7] 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 cultural self for Revelation, its comedic portrayals of global adversaries work to erode the dominant transcript in which that Jewish cultural self has been deemed "Other than."[8]

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[4] 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" (James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* [New Haven, CT: 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.

[5] I use this qualifier to refer to the notion that narratives contribute to the construction and becoming of selves. 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." For more on this view, see Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[6] As R. S. Sugirtharajah puts it, "[T]he initial and primary tasks of postcolonialism are 'writing back' and 'listening again'" (R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* [Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2011], 25).

In order to demonstrate this, I first establish that Revelation is a Hellenistic, Roman period Jewish text. Whereas in many contemporary contexts Revelation might best be analyzed as Christian in that it informs Christian communal memory and identity – 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." This belief stemmed from Jewish tradition; as scholars are more frequently highlighting, 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. First-century Judaism, as Shaye Cohen explains, was "marked by numerous sects[9] and groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, the Jews of Qumran,[10] Zealots, Sicarii, 'The Fourth Philosophy,' Christ[-followers], Samaritans, Therapeutae, and others."[11] Revelation is positioned within this diverse Jewish matrix. Through its comic subversions, the text not only combats Rome, but also negotiates a particular type of Jewishness within its imaginary. This is not to say, though, 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 argue that Revelation is a Hellenistic Jewish text, written by a Hellenistic sectarian Jew.

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[7] Ex-centricity refers to the decentering of ethnocentric imperialistic discourses. For more on the ex-centricity of postcoloniality, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 6.

[8] 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, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012). See also Chapter 2 of this book.

[9] 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 or to bestow special epithets upon themselves." In other words, he values the original meaning of the Greek *hairesis* and Latin *secta* as a "school of thought." Interestingly, though, when he sees sects combat other groups in the ancient literature (e.g., in 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." While I think it worthwhile to consider other terms to discuss the plurality of ancient Jewishness and center/periphery discussions, this book 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 an acknowledgement of the term's limitations. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 124.

By reading Revelation as a Hellenistic Jewish text, we are better equipped to recognize the ways in which the Apocalypse implements popular aspects of the comic as a survival strategy – as a means by which to undermine Rome and, ultimately, create a "signal of transcendence" for its implied sectarian counterparts.[12] As the subtitle of this book suggests, Revelation "roasts" Rome – both humorously and via imagined incendiary flame (see 17:16; 18:8) – to the extent of creating a new world order in which the implied Jewish Other "reign[s] supreme" over and against the Roman imperial order.[13] 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.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that despite Revelation's ex-centricity, its relations to Empire and imperial power are ambivalent. Revelation, put simply, inevitably swallows imperial court ceremonial only to carry the caloric enterprise on its own hips. To quote 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 Christianized version of the same thing."[14] 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."[15]

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[10] 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).

[11] Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 222.

[12] 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).

[13] 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.

This ironic rhetorical effect extends to Revelation's use of humor. Implicitly, the text depicts Christ as a newer and better Caesar, but in doing so, 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, so too does the Apocalypse seem to simultaneously detest and desire the imperial throne. A major question I attempt to answer in this book, then, is how to deal with this contradiction – how to make sense of Revelation's simultaneous anti-imperial and pro-imperial worldview.

## SETTING THE SCENE

### *What Kind of Story Is This?*

Suffice to say that biblical stories are not independent. They do not generate meaning free of other texts, contexts, or discourses, nor are they void of reader response. In simplest terms: Biblical stories, like all stories, talk to each other. They build off of each other. They respond to one another in both explicit and implicit ways, and they are in continuous dialogue with communities of storytellers – and story listeners – across a multitude of times and spaces.[16]

What, then, of Revelation? With *whom* does it speak? With *what* does it think?

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

[15] Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 14.

[16] See 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), 17–18.

In answering these questions, a common place to begin is the apocalypse genre. Because Revelation introduces itself as an *apocalupsis* – some sort of "unveiling" of that which is hidden – scholars typically associate the book most directly with the genre of apocalypse, even if the first century is too early to construe Revelation's opening words as a formal genre designation. The apocalypse genre, generally speaking, refers to a form of ancient Jewish writing that originated in Judea/Palestine and flourished in the period between 200 BCE and 100 CE. The 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 salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."[17]

But Revelation contains elements of other genres, too. For example, while John refers to his vision as prophecy (1:3),[18] it is also framed by a greeting and conclusion that mirrors those of ancient letters (1:4–6; 22:16–21).[19] 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).[20] 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."[21]

In an effort to avoid this "pinning down," I will be reading the Apocalypse as a narrative text. 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.

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[17] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 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).

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

[19] Ibid., 109–112.

[20] Ibid., 127.

[21] 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.

While Revelation's greeting and conclusion, for instance, mirror what we see in ancient letters, they still operate within a larger narrative 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 time focusing on how "the author took such diverse material and wove it into a [larger] narrative."[22] Or in the words of Mieke Bal, as "a series of . . . events that are caused or experienced by actors,"[23] 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."[24] As with other ancient writings, the Apocalypse offers a dialogical and intertextual apocalyptic experience, which in turn invites the "audience [to] imaginatively share that experience."[25] The text's visions, letters, liturgies, and myths do not take away from its narrative character; they add to its depth.

Although seemingly tangential, the issue of imperial colonization and its relations to narration is of great import. While the field of postcolonial studies often focuses on imperial and colonial discursive realities of the early modern period, particularly in reference to European colonizations, I favor a more expansive approach.[26] I agree, for instance, with postcolonial literary theorist Justin D. Edwards 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 been used as a political and ideological tool to advocate change and liberation."[27] Indeed, as John Clement Ball asserts, 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."[28] In reading Revelation as narrative, this book recognizes it as responding to these challenges and constructing a postcolonial ethos.

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[22] David L. Barr, "Narrative Techniques in the Book of Revelation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: 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*, Danna Nolan Fewell (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27–50.

[23] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine Van Boheemen (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 5.

[24] Barr, "Narrative Techniques in the Book of Revelation," 376.

[25] Ibid., 377.

[26] For more on this and, specifically, my rationale for applying the term "postcolonial" to Revelation, see Chapter 1.

[27] Justin D. Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2. Emphasis added.

### *When and Where Was It Written?*

Reading Revelation as a postcolonial narrative leads to another important starting point for our analysis: 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 any 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?

Although I do not think we can determine the when 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.[29] 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).[30] Revelation was also 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.[31]

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

[29] Nero died on June 9, 68 CE. For more on the Neronian myth, see Chapter 4.

[30] Koester, *Revelation*, 71.

[31] Some scholars question whether John may have written 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).

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While some may contend that this is not enough – that we must position Revelation within a specific *Sitz im Leben* to fully understand the text's constructions of a suffering Jewish community – I arrive at a different conclusion. Based 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 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."[32] 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.[33] This, paired with the fact that Rome's military pervaded the streets of the Roman colonies, including Judea, meant that Jews were never autonomous, but rather a conquered people who, in the words of S. R. F. Price, had to "accept subjection to [Rome]."[34]

Postcolonial trauma theory suggests that this type of deferred subjectivity and imperial subjection is, in and of itself, traumatic. According to Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, theorists and clinicians alike are coming to find that colonial experiences such as "dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide" should be included in our understanding of traumatic experiences,[35] as well as the stressors "produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities."[36] Revelation knows these experiences. Regardless of dating or specific locale, the Apocalypse responds to a backdrop of Empire-wide domination – of Roman

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[32] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 2.

[33] 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). On its relations to Rome, Boyarin 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).

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

[35] Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (Spring 2008): 3.

[36] Ibid.