

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

Empire-critical and postcolonial readings of Revelation are now commonplace, but scholars have not yet put these views into conversation with Jewish trauma and cultural survival strategies. In this book, Sarah Emanuel positions Revelation within its ancient Jewish context. Proposing a new reading of Revelation, she demonstrates how the text's author, a first century CE Jewish Christ-follower, used humor as a means of resisting Roman power. Emanuel uses multiple critical lenses, including humor, trauma, and postcolonial theory, together with historical-critical methods. These approaches enable a deeper understanding of the Jewishness of the early Christ-centered movement, and how Jews in antiquity related to their cultural and religious identity. Emanuel's volume offers new insights and fills a gap in contemporary scholarship on Revelation and biblical scholarship more broadly.

Sarah Emanuel is Faculty Fellow of Biblical Studies at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. She holds a PhD with distinction in Biblical Studies from Drew University's Graduate Division of Religion, with foci in New Testament, ancient Jewish-Christian encounters, and contemporary critical theory. Emanuel is an editor at *Ancient Jew Review*, a forum board member at Feminist Studies in Religion, Inc., a co-creator of the academic podcast "Feminists Talk Religion," and on the steering committee for the Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Emanuel has published articles in *Biblical Interpretation*, *The Bible and Critical Theory*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, and *Studia Patristica*. She is also a recipient of multiple teaching awards, including Colby College's Global Innovation Grant.

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

*Roasting Rome*

SARAH EMANUEL

*Colby College*



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To the women who raised me. And to the man who taught me that  
not every man is a “John.” Justin, this is especially for you.

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*

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## Acknowledgments

This book is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation. The former project – the dissertation – was written during my time in the closet, a place I marked “safe” in response to internalized homophobia and intense childhood trauma. The edited book version – what you are about to read – was put together after stepping through the closet door as a queer woman. My life, though delightful and joyous, has also been filled with such pain and persistence that applying methods of survival to John’s Apocalypse has often felt more like “me-search” than research. But the book is here. It’s finally here. And so am I.

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## A Note on the Cover

The cover art for this book is a commissioned piece by Alain Dimapilis, with whom I worked for several months. The cover’s background is modeled after the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, which was a temple complex dedicated to Aphrodite and the Julio-Claudian emperors. The complex featured roughly 200 reliefs on the north and south sides of a long processional avenue; the reliefs included depictions of Roman emperors, Greek myths, imperial elites, and personified nations living under Roman rule. As non-elite, non-Roman sympathizing frequenters walked through the processional avenue, they became objects of the imperial gaze – the inconsequential bodies of the nations ruled by Rome.

The Sebasteion background highlights the imperial world John of Revelation knew, and also imagines John about to perform a standup set in a space where he is “Other.” While the Roman eyes watch, oppress, and traumatize our implied Jewish humorist, the quintessential comic stool, water bottle (replaced here by a more timely cup), and mic spotlight John’s lampooning – or “roasting” – of Rome in the face of Rome’s own imperial might.

Such artwork, however, also showcases the extent to which John and his Apocalypse take on Romanness. Revelation, as we will see, does not leave the confines of Rome; like the comic setup here, it stays, it lingers, it breathes. Even the cup upon the stool is an imagined enmeshing of a first-century Roman drinking glass and a Jewish Kiddush cup, which demonstrates the Apocalypse’s complex enlisting of Romanness even in its difference and pushback (c.f., Rev. 17:4-6; Rome’s own “cup” of abominations is drunk by/attaches to John’s Apocalypse).

Yes, there are anachronisms. The comic mic, stool, and Kiddush-like cup are out of sync with a first-century *Sitz im Leben*. The tefillin upon the stool is no less anachronistic, as tefillin in the first century likely looked different from what we see here. Still, I chose tefillin as a recognizable (to modern readers) cultural marker of John's Jewishness because (1) I wanted readers to consider visually the Jewishness of John; and (2) John appeals to proper amuletic practices over and against Roman practices (see Rev. 7:3; 9:4; and Chapter 4 of this book).

I remain grateful to Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre for taking me to the ruins of Sebasteion at Aphrodisias as a doctoral student. It was standing with her upon the remains of the processional avenue that I began to imagine with a deeper affect what it might have felt like to be a Jewish "Other" in such a Roman space. I extend further thanks to Alain for helping me bring my imagination to life, and to Cambridge University Press for its support of my not-so-traditional book cover (and book topic).

The purpose of the cover is to invoke imaginatively this book's overarching thesis, and to provide an artistic framework with which to further dialogue. Indeed, at least when it comes to interest in the imaginary, perhaps John of Revelation and I are not so different after all.