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The Comic Truth: Claiming a Jewish Cultural Self through Humor

What prevents one from telling the truth while laughing?

– Horace[1]

Postcolonial trauma theories show 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 that gives voice and value to the subjugated.[2] As Frantz Fanon writes on the making of a Negro [*sic*] 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. Relatedly, I suggest that Revelation attempts to create a Jewish subjectivity in the face of imperial trauma through a dialogical use of humor. The Apocalypse, I contend, narrates a traumatic past/present, consciously or not, in its pursuit of constructing a Jewish cultural "self." This construction, however, does not embody a broad-based "all Jews are welcome" ideology, 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).

Before diving into this work, though, it is important to keep in mind that, just as negotiations of an internal "self" were common for Jews in

[1] Horace wrote this as justification for his way of teaching via satire. See Book 1.1.24–25.

[2] Philip Chia makes the same claim in his reading of Daniel (Chia, "On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1," 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.

the early centuries BCE and CE (recall that Jews in antiquity debated regularly about their God, Temple, and Torah), so too were 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 discontents emerge not only between the colonizer and the colonized, but also, as Musa Dube explains, "between various interest groups of the latter, which try to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized."[4] Revelation 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 articulates an ideology that is thoroughly ex-centric, standing vehemently against a "co-constitution and reciprocal creation of colonizer and colonized."[6]

In this chapter, I will focus on John's letters to the assemblies in Roman Asia and how they work to both claim a Jewish subalternity and build a particular Jewish identity in the face of that Jewish subalternity. First, I will outline the ways in which John claims a traumatic past/present and alludes throughout his views to an implied communal self. Then, I will turn to the ways in which humor infiltrates such claiming. By 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 ultimately argue that Revelation relies on a dialogical use of humor to make its anti-imperial-assimilationist claims. By mocking local adversaries through humor, 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 Revelation chapter 1, John makes a claim of communal trauma. He 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 [*thlipsis*] ... and the patient endurance"

[4] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 127.
[5] Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32. [6] Ibid., 31.

(1:5, 9). By recalling Christ's crucifixion – an agonizing and humiliating death if there ever was one – John not only alludes to Christ's subjection under imperial Rome, but also makes clear that Jesus' followers continue to live in the wake of his death. This is evidenced not only in the allusion to Jesus' 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.[7]

By bridging Christ's past crucifixion and readers' present suffering, Revelation constructs its narrative claim.[8] For implied readers of the Apocalypse, "[l]iving into the present means living into Jesus' death,"[9] and living into Jesus' death means living into affliction. There is hope, however. So long as readers adhere to Revelation's claims and partake together in the suffering of Christ, they will be 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 … eat from the tree of life in God's paradise" (2:6).

In reconfiguring a cultural identity in which its trauma claims are heard, understood, and given value, Revelation imagines an alternative future in which survivors have worth – a worth that takes place primarily in the end times. While implied readers will continue to suffer ("Beware, the devil will throw some of you into prison," 2:10), 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 future[10] – akin to Jesus of Nazareth's – Revelation conceives an alternative. In other words, as the Apocalypse struggles with the fear of continued suffering (the foreshortened future), it also, in doing so, attempts to counter its fears by imagining a future that is otherwise (the counternarrative of repair). More simply, while Revelation is about an impending end, it is also about imagining futures beyond that end for implied readers. Its message of endurance thus serves as a method of survival: "Hold onto our claim," we

[7] Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 19.
[8] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma*, 17.
[9] Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 19.
[10] A common response to trauma, as we have seen. See also *DSM-5*, 272.

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 three stages of recovery: "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community."[11] This takes time, especially when feelings of safety are fleeting.[12] But by establishing some sort of support system and consciously living into the trauma – feeling it, reconstructing it, naming it – survivors and their communities can eventually reclaim their presents and their futures.[13] As explained in Chapter 2, recovery takes place not in the burial of the trauma, but in living into it through narrative. While John of Revelation may not express a *Sitz im Leben* of safety, it is clear he makes the attempt to construct a community of connectivity. His Apocalypse, moreover, calls implied readers to live into their trauma, including the death of their Christ. It calls readers to live into the world it is creating, and in turn, to 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,[14] 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 *martyres*: "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 both shares with John the pain of Jesus' death and continual suffering (1:5, 9) and also recognizes the

[11] See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 3.
[12] This includes feelings of safety within one's body, environment, and community.
[13] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2.
[14] Antipas is the only named martyr in Revelation.

import of a halakhic lifestyle. Interestingly, much of John's construction of a communal self is made by highlighting how *not* to act. According to Samuel Huntington, though, this is not an uncommon method of self-definition. "Peoples and nations," he writes, "are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: 'Who are we?'" We often, he writes further, "know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against."[15] Revelation knows this "self" vs. "other" dialectic. Put simply, 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. Here, 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 doings of the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), Balaam (2:14), or Jezebel (2:20),[16] each of whom advise local Christ-

[15] See Chia, "On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1," 182.

[16] While Jezebel and Balaam are found in a number of canonical and extracanonical sources, the Nicolaitans are unknown outside the book of Revelation. Scholars such as R. H. Charles, Colin J. Hemer, and D. F. Watson claim that the Nicolaitans are associated symbolically with Balaam, based on etymological associations. When broken down, Nikolaus [*nika laon*] means "conquer the people" and Balaam [*bala am*] means "he has consumed the people." 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 scholarly conversation surrounding it, see Marshall, *Parables of War*, 129. See also Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, 263. Others, such as Heikki Räisäanen and David Aune, contend that the Nicolaitans follow an actual person (Nikolaus), making the point that John's use of metaphorical naming elsewhere need not be attributed to all names in all places. See 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.

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 shares 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" (Koester, *Revelation*, 264).

followers to practice idolatry, perform non-halakhic sex acts,[17] and eat foods unclean. Revelation's letters to Pergamum and Thyatira thus outline the grotesque "threat of hybrid"[18] – an internal threat of willful and repulsive assimilation[19] – 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. Their assimilationist views and practices are so vile, in fact, that they become co-constitutionally despised (*miseis*, 2:6). We see John's hatred of them reflected in his punishments. He warns Christ-followers who adhere to the teachings of Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans that they will be tortured unless they repent for their wrongdoings: "Repent," John adjures. "If not, [Christ] will come to you soon and make war against [you] with the sword of [his] mouth" (2:16).

Who, exactly, are these Nicolaitans, Balaams, and Jezebels? This is a difficult question to answer. While scholars have previously understood Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans as constituents of three separate groups, "Jezebel" is now more commonly viewed as a Nicolaitan prophet, and "Balaam" as a parodic element of Nicolaitan practices. Most contemporary scholars of Revelation also 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 was or was not "real," scholarly consensus remains that Balaam and Jezebel are derisive ciphers employed by John to affiliate his adversaries with hated figures of the Hebrew Bible. This symbolism opens the text for a dialogical reading; the Balaam trope and Jezebel prophetess carry with them the remnants of Hebrew Bible characters through their shared network of textuality. In order to explore the dialogical meaning of Revelation 2, we must be willing to move between it and its dialogical subtexts.[20] In what follows, I will move 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,

[17] Unless their sexual immorality is read as a metaphor for idolatry.
[18] Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32.
[19] Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, 132. [20] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 1.

the text's local whore. In each case, I will trace 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 a *Sitz im Leben* of trauma and despair.

BALAAM AND BALAK

In Revelation 2:14, we learn that there are Christ-followers in Pergamum who "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 engage in improper sex acts." Readers familiar with Revelation's textual networks 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 Hebrew Bible (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 relies on this previous narrative to make its claims.

By way of background, Balaam and Balak appear in Numbers 22, a text in which humorous incongruities abound. The story begins with King Balak asking the seer Balaam to force the Israelites to leave his territory. God, however, has plans of his own, and sends an armed angel to stop Balaam from following through on Balak's plans. This is where the story gets interesting. For while the author could, for all intents and purposes, have God annihilate Balaam so as to stop Balak from antagonizing the Israelite people, he instead makes a mockery of him. For example, despite the fact that Balaam is a seer, the author makes clear that Balaam cannot see much of anything. He has no idea that the angel God sent is standing right next to him. Balaam's she-ass, however, can, and in fear of the angel's sword, runs off of the road. Balaam has no idea why his donkey runs off the road, and so assumes in the end that the donkey has lost her mind. This scenario continues multiple times, 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 does not last forever. Eventually, God grants 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 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 you 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)

Obviously, Balaam finds his ass convincing, which is comical in its own right. But what is perhaps most humorous about this conversation is the fact that Balaam is actually correct: He *has* been mocked, just not in the way he thinks. Simply stated, Balaam is parodied not because his donkey keeps halting in the road, but because he is unable to see why his donkey does this. 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."[21]

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 Israelites 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 Shethites, 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). Once again, the great seer is reduced to a blithering idiot. In fact, by the time we read of Balaam's failed attempt to bless the Israelites, we are not surprised by his ineptitude; the characterization of Balaam in the earlier Numbers cycle sets up well this later undertaking, creating in us, too, a greater ability to see than the text's seer. Numbers' use of name-play also comes into focus here. While the name "Balaam" means "he has consumed or abused the people," it is he who has become consumed by his own ineptitude.

This humor, to be sure, is of the cruel variety.[22] It undoes Balaam completely, so much so that he not only loses his credibility, but also is

[21] 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.

[22] See 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

eventually killed for his wrongdoings (see Josh. 13:22). King Balak, too, is a target of such joking, although perhaps in a less painful way. For example, while Balaam does eventually see the angel and decide to bless the Israelites instead of curse them (Num. 23:7–10), Balak, in response to Balaam's newfound Yahwism, falls into a hyperbolic 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). But then Balak, akin to Balaam, learns nothing. Instead, he repeats his itinerary for a second and third time, mirroring the premise of repetition that is so fundamental to comic writing: 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.[23] And while he does not die, he in the end wins nothing and the Israelites prosper once again.[24]

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 Balak, it both invites readers into the realm of the comic and molds its latter-day Balaam and Balak as its dialogic punchlines.[25] 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. As he writes on comic repetition: "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].*"[26] By associating its adversaries with idiots of lore, Revelation makes clear that its own "Balaam" and "Balak" – and their followers – are mechanical "thems" that cannot be "us."

and Yehuda T. Radday, Bible and Literature Series 23 (New York, NY: The Almond Press, 1990), 42.

[23] Ibid., 297. For the classic view of humor in/and the mechanical, see Henri Bergson, *Laughter*.

[24] This is undermined once we learn that Balaam's blessings were unintentional curses. See Numbers 25:1–2.

[25] I borrow this "latter-day" phrasing from Steve Friesen, who uses it humorously with regard to Jezebel in "Sarcasm in Revelation 2–3," 134.

[26] See Bergson, *Laughter*, 30, 33. Emphasis in the original.

JEZEBEL

Why She Is Hated Most

When comparing Jezebel to the Nicolaitans and the Balaam trope, Jezebel is more reviled. She is also given more attention. 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 and to eat foods sacrificed to idols.[27] 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. And I will strike her children with death.[28] 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, this pericope is describing 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."[29] They are linked, in other words, with cultural rules and taboos that regulate and are regulated by the social order of things.[30] 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. In the words of John Marshall, her unclean practices serve as "a divider, a litmus test of the authenticity of Judaism."[31] In the sense that she represents for John another non-halakhic Greco-Roman sympathizer, she is not much different from her 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").[32]

[27] I borrow the use of "whorings," as a parallel translation of "fornication," from John W. Marshall, "Gender and Empire," 17–32.

[28] "Strike with death" – thereby transferring the image of a foreshortened future to his enemy.

[29] 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.

[30] Ibid. [31] Marshall, "Gender and Empire," 25.

[32] See Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 164, 167.

While the practices of Balaam and the Nicolaitans are described as equally intolerable, it is the woman Jezebel whom the text vilifies as 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-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."[33] Those who behave like Jezebel thus "pollute" like Jezebel, and her "pollution [is] intolerable."[34]

To some extent, Revelation's description of Jezebel is cheap rhetoric. In addition to throwing the prophetess on a bed – a veiled act of sexual violence (see below) – John resorts to name-calling.[35] There is tactical reason for this, however – even more, I suggest, than for Revelation's naming of Balaam. For while the latter tends to be read as a trope used to undermine the Nicolaitans as a whole, "Jezebel" is read as a specific person within this group who is associated with a known figure of disgust. To use the words of Melissa Jackson, even those "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].'"[36] The Apocalypse thus abuses the prophetess in code, so as to 1) associate her negatively with dialogical subtext, and in turn 2) strip her of her own autonomy. Akin to the ways in which naming trauma can redirect one's pain toward healing, so too can an externally imposed naming redirect one's freedom toward loss.

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

[33] Ibid., 167. [34] Ibid.

[35] Gilbert Desrosiers agrees. See *An Introduction to Revelation: A Pathway to Interpretation* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Continuum, 2005), 80.

[36] Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 171. Here, she is quoting Phyllis Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers," *JBL* 114 (1995), 3–19 (4).

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."[37] 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. This "further reason," I think, is David. For 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 God."[38] To a large degree, this is the whole point of John's Apocalypse: to bring about the '*olam haba*'. As Collins writes further: "Much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature was inspired by three major crises that befell Jerusalem and its temple."[39] 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 further the list of subtexts to include the divided kingdom perpetuated by Jeroboam in the tenth 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

[37] Desrosiers, *An Introduction to Revelation*, 80.

[38] John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 177.

[39] Ibid., 160.

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]n anointed one 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."[40] In short, David and *Davidness*,[41] 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-identification: "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).[42] Put simply: Jesus as the Davidic messiah will destroy Israel's enemies, so as to establish a new monarchy where the role of the 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 tenth 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 CE 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.

[40] Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 115.
[41] For more on Davidic messianism, see Chapter 5.
[42] 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" (*porneusai*; Rev. 2:20–21). Although many scholars note that Jezebel's sexual pollutions likely function as a metaphor to indicate her positive attitude toward Greco-Roman practices, it still brings her sexed body into the foreground. This is the *woman* Jezebel (*gunaika Iezabel*) and, contra other Nicolaitan prophets, her womanly parts are (seemingly) 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.[43]

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] (*porneusai*; 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."[44] 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 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."[45] Adela Yarbro Collins contends similarly, writing that "John's name-calling has obscured the fact that we have here an important

[43] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 223.
[44] Ibid. [45] Ibid., 222.

indication of the leadership of women in the early church of this region."[46]

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.[47] "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."[48] 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."[49] 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" (Rev. 2:22; emphases mine). Knowing this, the question 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.[50] 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 [she is] doing . . . sees women as marginalized . . . and/or used as sexual objects and abused."[51] The image of Christ, with "eyes like the

[46] Quoted by Desrosiers, *An Introduction to Revelation*, 80.

[47] Thimmes, "'Teaching and Beguiling My Servants,'" 78. [48] Ibid.

[49] Pippin writes this of "all the apocalyptic females" (Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 73).

[50] Thimmes, "'Teaching and Beguiling My Servants,'" 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).

[51] Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 53.

flame of fire" (2:18) thrusting Jezebel on a bed (2:22) certainly raises issues of sexual abuse and sexual humiliation.[52] And, 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 [*porneia*]. At its root, the term indicates the commerce of prostitution .... By accusing Jezebel of [*porneia*], Revelation casts her as a prostitute."[53] To put it otherwise, she is the local whore. The threat of violence against her mirrors the sexual threats she has brought upon Revelation's implied community (again, perhaps representing a Levitical "sexual violation for sexual violation"). Furthermore, 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 line with depicting Jezebel as a sexual object of disgust, Revelation makes a mockery of her. For implied readers in particular – i.e., halakhically oriented Christ-followers familiar with the text's dialogical cues – Revelation's attacks yield a certain sense of wit. We see this already in the name: *Iezabel*. 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 *Iezabel* associates dialogically[54] with Hebrew phrases such as "where is the prince?" (*Izebul*) and "no nobility"

[52] Most interpreters take an apologetic approach to 2:22 by claiming that Jezebel is being thrown onto a "sickbed." The sexual imagery in this verse is metaphorical; Jezebel is being punished with illness, not being sexual abused. The likelihood that Jezebel is being thrown on a sickbed seems very slim to me, given that the immediate context is full of references to fornication and adultery. *Kline* is only "sickbed" when it is situated within a context of sickness. The context of Revelation 2, put simply, is not of illness, but rather of sexual violence. For more on this issue, see Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, 109. It should also not go unnoted 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."

[53] Marshall, "Gender and Empire," 22.

[54] In this case, akin in particular to Bakhtin's *polyglossia*, see Chapter 1, footnote 120.

(*I-zebul*), and an Arabic cognate for "dung" (*Zebel*).[55] Naming the prophetess "Jezebel" thus functions as comedic wordplay that 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: "The 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)."[56] 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 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.

But there is humor in Jezebel's original story, too. According to Melissa Jackson, the inversion of gender roles throughout her 1 and 2 Kings narrative functions in particular as a comedic breakthrough. Jezebel is the "take-charge woman,"[57] she writes, leaving Ahab the fool who always follows his wife's demands.[58] In other words, although Ahab is King, it is really Jezebel who "wears the crown." We see examples of this gender bending throughout 1 Kings. For example, in 1 Kings 21, Ahab sulks at home and is unwilling to eat because Naboth would not give him

[55] See Gale A. Yee, "Jezebel," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3, 848. See also Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 172.
[56] Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 32.
[57] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 172. [58] Ibid.

the vineyard he wanted. Jezebel responds by saying, "Do you not govern Israel?" (1 Kgs 21:7). According to Jackson, Jezebel's tone here "drips with sarcasm."[59] Ahab, though King, failed to rule over a single vineyard (with the offer to pay for it, too!). In actuality, the text implies that he has no idea how to govern, so much so that Jezebel is more likely meaning, "Asherah Almighty! Can you not do *anything*?" Ahab's inability to rule over his surroundings is mirrored in his inability to rule over his own stomach. He cannot feed himself, and must rely on his wife's following command for sustenance: "Get up. Eat. *I* will get the vineyard."

Throughout the 1 and 2 Kings intertext, Jezebel also plays the trickster, a key character trait in both biblical and Greco-Roman humor.[60] Like Ehud in Judges 3 or the clever slave in Plautus' *Pseudolus*, Jezebel drives the plot through deception – that is, by pretending to be someone she is not. This is seen most clearly in her ploy to steal Naboth's vineyard. After Ahab sulks at home unable to eat, Jezebel writes letters to the elders and nobles in Ahab's name: "Proclaim a fast," she writes, "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 deceives the elders and nobles into thinking that 1) she is Ahab; and 2) that Naboth was unfaithful. Her trick also appears to be a success: The men stone Naboth, and Ahab gains the vineyard. Jezebel, it seems, is no bumbling Balaam.

[59] Ibid., 174.

[60] "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 (Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 44, 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.

In line with this, Ahab does, at first blush, appear to be the text's sole comic butt. As Athalya Brenner writes on such humor-based incongruity:

> 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.[61]

For a Jewish first-century reader attuned to humor, however, Jezebel's relationship with Ahab mirrors both the types of topsy-turvy character dynamics mocked by biblical and Greco-Roman humorists *and also* the types of women ancient humorists warned against. Roman satirists, for instance, often constructed themselves textually as the "right kind of male," and in doing so ridiculed anyone who did not comply with their standards, including especially their views toward women.[62] In 1 and 2 Kings, Ahab is akin to the dimwitted "man" of the house, while Jezebel mirrors the unwanted nagging wife (cf. Prov. 21:9, 19; 25:24). Recall that in Satire 6, Juvenal even insists that it is better for men to engage in homoerotic sex than to answer to women like Jezebel: "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 derides, and Ahab mirrors the men Juvenal critiques for being with them.

As the plot moves forward, in fact, readers learn that the joke also inevitably falls on Jezebel. This functions primarily through the themes concerning food and eating.[63] For example, even though Jezebel implores Ahab to eat, both she and Ahab, in the end, are the ones who are consumed.[64] 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, is so disgusted by Jezebel's whorings that he orders her eunuchs to throw her out the window. After they throw her down, the text highlights the way her blood splatters onto the walls and onto the horses that trample her. Jezebel dies and, as Jehu enjoys a feast post-murder, so too do the dogs upon Jezebel's body. Thus, in an ironic

[61] Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism?," 43.
[62] See Amy Richlin, "Invective against Women in Roman Satire," 377.
[63] See Jackson's engagement with Helena Zlotkin in *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 173.
[64] Ibid.

turnabout, the Deuteronomist outwits Jezebel at her own game.[65] The humor here is grotesque, and teeters into the realm of the carnivalesque. For not only does the Deuteronomist decrown the normative ruler(s) – an important aspect of carnivalistic pageantry – but he (they[66]) does so with a view to the grotesqueries of the body.[67] Francisco O. García-Treto says it well when he remarks:

> [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 stratus" 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.[68]

It is important to note that the grotesque does not negate the humor here; rather, it adds to it. In the words of Mel Brooks: "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." The trickeries, ironies, and carnivalistic reversals employed throughout the Jezebel narrative are comical and invite implied readers to laugh not only at the King's and Queen's defilement and demise, but also those associated with them (e.g., Revelation's own false prophetess).

Of course, Revelation's use of physical and sexual humor – in relation to food, no less[69] – is informed by multiple Jewish texts. The book of Esther is perhaps the most commonly cited text with regard to biblical humor, primarily for its use of the comic against Haman. For instance, when comparing the use of humor in Esther and Revelation, we notice that Haman, like Jezebel, is unaware of his own ineptitude. Because of his incompetence, he, like Revelation's Jezebel, finds himself lying prostrate on a piece of furniture. Then, 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. Judges 4 and the book of Judith use a similar type of humor as well. In Judges 4, Sisera finds himself lying impotent on a bed, completely unaware that the

[65] 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.

[66] See footnote 65 of this chapter.

[67] Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "The Fall of the House: A Carnivalesque Reading of 2 Kings 9 and 10," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 46 (February 1, 1990): 58.

[68] Ibid.

[69] See Nicole Wilkinson Duran, *Having Men for Dinner: Biblical Women's Deadly Banquets* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

gender-bending Jael is about to thrust a tent peg down his mouth.[70] Like Haman and Jezebel, in Judith, Holofernes' oblivious, over-sexualized, and gluttonous conduct leads to his own demise. In the end, he is turned into a spectacle and murdered on a bed.

To be sure, intertextuality constructs Revelation's Jezebel as "one of … the most booed antiheroes."[71] By introducing the "so-called prophet" via Deuteronomistic subtext, the Apocalypse makes clear that it is mocking its adversary via wit and wordplay. But in addition to borrowing the Deuteronomist's Evil Queen – as well as remnants of other Hebrew Bible villains, as noted above – Revelation also borrows its use of humor. In John's letters, it is as if Revelation is metaphorically grabbing the congregation microphone for the roast:

> Check. Check. Hey, how are we doin' tonight? I don't know about you, but I just hate it when women go around talking to your kids and your wives and your townsmen, telling them that they know the "deep things of God."[72] For example, take this so-called Prophetess. Please! Take her … away! Like, throw her out a window or something, I mean, oh my YHWH! And, you know, she's getting a pretty good following. [Booing in the background.] I know, I know, I can't believe it either. But what gets me every time I see her nagging, telling people *what to do* and *how to do it* is … hey, doesn't this lady look familiar? Oh, you know who I'm talking about [beat] *ie-zebel*. [Laughing in the background.] Ie-zebel doesn't just mean shit anymore, folks! What's in a name, anyway? Oh, Jezebel … it's like whenever I see her eating in the JCC cafeteria, I can't help but picture piles of shit on her plate. [More laughing.] Hey, come on, now … don't pretend you're all innocent here. I see you in the back, "Mr. Ahab!" I kid, you know I kid! But no, I'm serious. You might be burned alive. Anyway … try the broiled fish, and don't forget to tip your waiter!

Traces of anachronism aside, my point is this: For implied readers – those familiar with the Deuteronomistic transcript – Revelation's name-calling 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, excrement of lore.

[70] *Raqaq* is often translated as "temple," but could also be rendered "mouth" or "parted lips." See Danna Nolan Fewell, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Ann Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 73–83.

[71] Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 173.

[72] 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*, 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).

Making a Mockery of Him

I suggest there is more to Revelation's 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, highlighting John's use of the feminine article and noun in his depiction of her (*tēn gunaika*; Rev. 2:20) – I question if this might be all too easy. I do not know if we can be sure, in other words, whether Jezebel is a woman at all.

Revelation would not be the first biblical text to blur gender lines as a means of attack. Aberrations of gender and sexual mores often work to brand biblical characters – and nations – as "lesser than," including the ostensibly "masculine." The "pornoprophetics"[73] of the Hebrew Bible repeatedly represent (androcentric) Israel as a sexually dissolute female. In Hosea, Israel is described as a cheating wife who has broken her covenant with YHWH. In Ezekiel, Jerusalem is scorned for being a "whore" who "whores with lovers" (Ez. 16:35–37). In Isaiah, Zion is "devastated in war and its 'openings' [i.e., vagina] ... [must] lament" (Is. 3:17).[74]

Scholars have argued that Revelation does much the same thing with 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: "I saw a woman [drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs; 17:6] sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names ... and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the Great, mother of whores and the earth's abominations'" (17:3–5). To use the words of Vander Stichele, the pornoprophetics of Revelation 17 "move" Rome from a virile city to a feminine whore.[75] By decking Rome out as a "Great Whore" and hence a sexual object of disgust, Revelation's John makes a mockery of the Empire, subjects it to vicious humor, having recourse to gendered strategies of lampooning that writers and readers of earlier prophetic texts – as well as writers and consumers of Roman humor – would have found familiar. Rome in Revelation, as we will see more fully in Chapter 4, is not the owner of Others but the one who is

[73] 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.

[74] Ibid., 39.

[75] 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.

owned – the one who is penetrated and degraded as she sits in utter squalor – thus raising the question: 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 the 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 unheroic qualities of women. We see evidence of this through Polemo, a physiognomist from the second century CE, who explains how persons could be associated with a particular sex:

> You obtain physiognomic indications of masculinity and feminist 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.[76]

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, but 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."[77]

[76] 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.

[77] Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, IL, and London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 50.

Because we, ultimately, cannot look up Jezebel's skirt to solve the matter of her anatomical sex – nor should we, if Revelation's violent derisions teach us anything – 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 how most critical scholars imagine her to be – and then transition to reading Jezebel as a man.

Playing with Gender, Playing with Sex

As we have seen, in the Greco-Roman world, women and women's bodies were often mocked simply for the fact that they *were* women and had women's bodies. In the words of Amy Richlin: "Repulsive women populate the pages of satire: why? The poet and audience must take pleasure in examining them and proclaiming their disgust."[78] Even a woman's laugh was mocked regularly as reflecting the "roaring of the animal kingdom,"[79] unlike the more sophisticated laugh that came from men. But sexualized and gender-based humor also often permeated the Greco-Roman world 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). 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."[80] In fact, if

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).

[78] Richlin, "Invective against Women in Roman Satire," 378.

[79] Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 157.

[80] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 172.

we read Jezebel of 1 and 2 Kings as a manly woman, we recognize that she is not the heroic manly woman, but the monstrous one. For instance, unlike many biblical stories of other "comic 'not-hero' protagonists"[81] (e.g., women, differently abled persons, or other marginalized bodies), 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.[82] 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 be thrown back down (and 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 throws her not out the window but onto the bed so as to "give" 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 who thinks she "wears the pants" – virtuously so. According to John, however, she does so monstrously, making her and her followers targets of his vindictive humor. In fact, 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, prior to the bed-scene and 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 the case. As Stephen Moore explains: "Roman masculinity was 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."[83] To maintain "true" masculinity meant to hover, in just the right way, at the top end of the

[81] Ibid., 100.
[82] For more on the productivity of the 'not-hero' in biblical texts, including tricksters, see Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*.
[83] Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 141.

gender gradient. In the words of Maud Gleason: "Manliness was not a birthright."[84] Or as Chris Frilingos puts it: "It was work."[85]

Masculinity was also a goal. L. Stephanie Cobb expounds that "[m]aleness . . . 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."[86] 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 (be thrown down?) toward the lesser-privileged feminine space.

Although there is evidence of women leaders and prophets in Jewish culture,[87] 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 thrown out the window and devoured by dogs.

We certainly see this type of mockery in 1 and 2 Kings. Again, while Jezebel is lampooned for being a monstrous woman, Ahab is satirized for being an effeminate man. But this type of humor also permeated Greco-Roman forms. 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

[84] 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.

[85] Ibid. [86] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 28.

[87] For more on this, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. Brown Judaic Studies 36 (Chico, CA: 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.

"womanly tasks."[88] Lucian even adds to this comic scene by having Omphale beat Hercules as she puts on his clothes and armor.[89] In this comic counterworld, Omphale becomes more manly than a demigod. The joke here, it seems, is primarily on Hercules. The standard hero has become the weak one – "the failed woman," as John Clarke has it[90] – stuck at home spinning the wool:

[Pompeii VIII, 4, 34, tablinum 4, north wall (lost), Hercules spinning wool in Omphale's court[91]]

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

[88] John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 173. [89] Ibid. [90] Ibid., 177.

[91] This image and its description are from Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 178. Hercules is second from 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).

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)

It is important to note that the depiction of men as failed women was most often reserved for those who could not maintain proper masculine virtue. In his Satire 9, for instance, Juvenal writes that a man named Naevolus has become a male prostitute, and that Naevolus despises his client, Virro, for the sexual acts he makes him do. But rather than satirize Naevolus for his prostitution, Juvenal lampoons Virro for forcing Naevolus to both take on the active role in sex with him and impregnate his wife for him. The problem for Juvenal, in other words, is the rich Virro who purchases a masculine facade from the male prostitute. While Virro's 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, he should be exposed as the "woman" he really is.

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 so easily solve the matter of Jezebel's anatomical sex – nor, I must add, is it necessarily our right to do so – what we can gather, at least from John's perspective, is that s/he *thinks* s/he is the hero. [92] 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 s/he 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.

[92] The subheading 'Jezebel's Thinkery' is a play on Aristophones' satiric representation of the Thinkery in *The Clouds*.

Revelation, as we have seen, 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.[93] According to Paul Allen Miller, "[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]:[94] the adulterous man is penetrated like a woman and subjected by his social inferiors."[95] If Revelation's "Jezebel," is indeed an anatomical man, already humiliated through "his" "encase[ment] in female flesh,"[96] "he" would be humiliated all the more through forced penetration by God's servant, Christ. We might even imagine Jezebel cognates coming back into play here. Whenever John says "Jezebel," he is actually making another ironical claim: "*Izebul*, *Izebul*? Where is the prince?"[97] It is as though John, back at the roast microphone, is nodding at the shit-eating tableau and saying, "Where's the prince? I got ya 'prince' right here." Jezebel, in other words, 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

[93] 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.

[94] In Greco-Roman humor, punishment for anatomical women adulterers is rarely mentioned.

[95] Paul Allen Miller, *Latin Verse Satire* (London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 122.

[96] 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" (Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire*, 131).

[97] As noted above, *Izebul* means "Where is the prince?"

actions (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. These letters to the assemblies in Roman Asia work to claim Jewish subalternity through a remembering of Christ's death and a narrativizing of communal *thlipsis*. They also work to construct a Jewish communal 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."[98] Colonized subjects can thus find themselves, in writing back to Empire, "try[ing] to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized."[99] We see this in Revelation. In "building up" to its narrativizing of a halakhically oriented '*olam haba*' (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 then, in turn, define, thicken, and affirm the *correct* culture and colonized self.[100]

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/him (e.g., "Balaam" and "Balak") are not on the same side, so to speak, as the implied author and reader. The humor

[98] Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," 53.
[99] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 127.
[100] See ibid. See also Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," 15.

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-followers *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 Chapter 4, I will explain how this use of humor expands into Revelation's visions of global adversaries as a means to both survive the trauma begun by the colonizer and construct an even deeper divide between the implied "us" and "them."