

**Review of Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*
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Lindsey M. Guy, Drew University

Craig R. Koester's commentary *Revelation* is a recent addition to the Anchor Yale Bible Commentary series, originally published in 2014 to replace Joan Massyngberde Ford's 1975 Anchor Bible commentary on Revelation, and newly out in paperback. As Koester writes that he would like to resist the categorization of his interpretation (xiii), I ask his forgiveness that I should do so anyway. This commentary, at various points, appeals to strategies of historical-critical scholarship, narrative and intertextual criticism, and modern mainline Protestant Christian theology. The structure of the commentary and its scholarly sources likewise triangulate these purposes: following Koester's new translation of Revelation,¹ the 150 page introduction magisterially establishes the history of interpretation, historical context, and literary elements. The commentary that comprises the remaining 700 pages exhaustively draws upon insights from other historical-critical scholars, the work of church fathers, and intertextual tracing of motifs from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, non-canonical Christian sources, and Greco-Roman literature.

For all the breadth that Koester's methodology promises, a narrative emerges lacking in fissures or internal tensions. Koester *trusts* John, maintaining an alliance with his narrative such that his sympathies are John's sympathies, his theology is John's theology, his God is John's God, and the three of them apparently share mutual enemies. What does it mean to read with normative sympathies, to condemn the unsaved world all over again?

The amount of trust that Koester places in John is underscored by the intermingled methodology, as some moments appear to conflate narrative detail with historical context.² Is the proximity to John meant to assert historical

¹ The translation's ethos falls between the NRSV and NIV: the *uion anthropou* of Rev. 1.13 is translated as "someone who looked like a human being" rather than the "Son of Man", while most instances of *doulos*, particularly God's *douloi*, are translated as "servant," "to avoid" as Koester argues, "the impression that they are the mere property of God, the slaveholder. Note that Revelation links the negative connotation of ordinary slave trade to Babylon/Rome (18.13), while using *douloi* as a positive metaphor for God's people" (211).

² For example, under the introduction's heading "Composition of the Community," Koester reiterates Revelation 2 itself to historicize Jezebel and the tensions John purports surround her (88-9). Citations of the gospels are likewise historicized; for example, as a citation of intra-Jewish conflict about Jesus' divinity: "If the congregation at Smyrna held a Christology like that of John—who ascribed traits of deity to Jesus (2.8)—many Jews would have considered this blasphemous (Matt 9.3, 26.65; John 10.33)" (280).

empathy so that readers are thrust into the mind set and sympathies of a first-century author (as relayed by a twenty-first-century commentator)? I am prompted also to an ethical response, asking: is it ethical to historicize the polemics of Revelation? Historicized narratives of, for example, intra-Jewish polemics within the gospels have catalysed horrific anti-Jewish violence.³ Readers of Revelation who might enact John's theology could readily find modern targets in female heads of state (Babylon), sex workers (Babylon again),⁴ female religious leaders (Jezebel), or whomever "fornicators" might be to any particular audience (Rev. 21.8; 22.15).

To demonstrate this precarity, I will focus on Koester's exegesis of the Whore of Babylon as an example of the work done by this commentary. Babylon is indicative of the modern political stakes in reading this ancient political narrative. She has left a complex and volatile body of work in her wake, as anti-racist and anti-colonial feminists struggle with complex sympathies toward her. Koester acknowledges the scholarly question of Babylon's demise as violence against women writ large (693), and offers the parallels of Rome conquering the feminised nations in the reliefs of Aphrodisias (694-5). But this comparison (unintentionally) underscores the fragility of the commentary's defence of God. The reliefs show *aggressors*, Claudius and Nero having conquered the feminised Britannia and Armenia, respectively: imagery of war-as-sex-as-war. The commentary, by contrast, depicts a victim without an aggressor—a victim who has *brought it upon herself*. Mingling the judgments of the Roman empire as a whole, the Empire's wealth, Babylon as the Roman elite, and Babylon as wily whore, Koester asserts that "evil becomes its own undoing" (693). "The brutality that created the empire now becomes the empire's undoing" (694), and similar sentiments echo repeatedly, asserting that whatever befalls Babylon or Rome deserved to happen.

The sense of *justice* invoked by this commentary thus draws heavily on a just world fallacy—that we shall know the "villains" of the narrative by the punishments they receive (that they obviously also deserve). This circular reasoning depends once again on maintaining a particular trust in John's authorial reliability and theology. The commentary's persistent, passionate condemnation of Revelation's antagonists is bewildering. Why spend any amount of time condemning fictional characters, most of all the characters that Revelation was already written to condemn?

As Erin Runions argues in her 2014 monograph *The Babylon Complex*, biblical texts were producing theopolitical power at their conception, *by their*

³ This commentary itself has a problematic relationship to Judaism—beyond the historicized intra-Jewish conflict mentioned above, it also persistently refers to Revelation's original audience as "Christians," without a disclaimer about the dating of the term, or the movement's relationship to Judaism. There are no citations of Daniel Boyarin, Shaye Cohen, Jacob Neusner, or similar scholars who would have assisted in such nuance.

⁴ Avaren Ipsen's 2009 work, *Sex Working and the Bible*, convenes a reading group of activist sex workers. When the group is asked if the story of Babylon legitimates violence against sex workers, one woman answers, "Yes, it does. Just ask Gary Leon Ridgeway [the Green River Killer; most of the forty-eight counts of murder with which he was charged were sex workers]. How did he vindicate himself every day when he went to bed? He read it in the Bible that it was OK to kill some whores" (Ipsen 2009, 181).

conception. Specifically, Babylon “is an image flexible enough to mediate and contain these political tensions” in its/her various creations as tower, empire, head of state, whore, and all the associated ambiguities (Runions 2014, 36). The allure and aversion are, at times, indistinguishable, and its/her liminality seems to be exactly the draw. As Runions writes, “The Whore’s evil resides in difference. Fear *and* desire, hatred *and* attraction toward the Whore pulse through the text. The contradictory sets of affects produce conviction of her evil. The violence toward her is stronger because of censored desire for her” (2014, 235-6).

But Koester’s commentary does not acknowledge Babylon as a head of state; it does not consider that the “kings of the earth” might be her equals, that she might be independently wealthy, or that running the Roman economy is a skilled job. Her allure and power are only treated in terms of condemnation: the commentary characterises Babylon’s “passionate immorality [as] a metaphor for the debased pursuit of luxury, false worship, and brutality” (698). Much is made of the moral failure of her sex work. At four different points Koester suggests that her sumptuous clothing was given to her by lustful johns (671, 673, 682, 707); and, because he does not consider her as independently wealthy (or perhaps she is too impure to be deserving of her wealth), he reads her clothing as deception: “Her attire indicates wealth, yet since the woman is a prostitute, her opulent dress communicates shamelessness” (707).

Thus the collapse of Babylon as *only* grotesque, *only* tawdry, *only* a whore, undoes the arguable intention of Revelation’s community: that the alluring, repellent nature of Babylon negotiated the audience’s own ambivalent proximity to empire. If divestment were so simple, Babylon as a character would have never existed. And as many biblical scholars have argued, even John’s stringent condemnation of Babylon cannot resist making her an alluring spectacle, while dealing in the same violent imperialism that he means to condemn. At some point the commentary’s focused, insistent judgment becomes uncomfortable. Why re-victimise the victim, why re-condemn the condemned?

The commentary offers no modern analogues to the villains/victims of Revelation, but it is compatible with an extant cultural narrative of women who are de/legitimised by sexuality (which may in fact only be femininity under a male gaze)—that is, this rhetoric simultaneously implies that a woman has amassed power by “using” her sexuality, and that her power lacks credibility because of said sexuality. I suggest that this rhetorical Möbius strip is a particular iteration of the paradox of sovereignty, with patriarchy factored in. And recent political cartoons about Hillary Clinton offer some of the most pointed examples of this gendered de/legitimation.

This motif of sexualised female political power in fact bears a strange resemblance to Babylon herself. To date, five artists—Gary McCoy, A.F. Branco, Ben Garrison, Mike Lester, and Sean Delonas⁵—have depicted Hillary Clinton as a

⁵ McCoy, Branco, Delonas, and Lester are all nationally syndicated print artists. Garrison self-publishes online, but he has found significant success as a hero of 4chan, and is arguably one of the most recognizable artist of the alt-right movement. The cartoons are available online on the

stereotypical sex worker. Clinton is posed with cash under “Wall Street” street signs in Garrison’s and Branco’s cartoons; she collects money from her scandals, depicted as anonymous men, in McCoy’s; she smokes in a bright red pantsuit on a street corner while negotiating the price of a “meeting” (scare quotes in the original) with a man in a car marked “Morocco” in Lester’s. Delonas’s, the only post-11/9 example, depicts both Bill and Hillary in a closed storefront marked “Clinton Speeches, Inc,” mourning while dressed only in underwear and feather boas. It should go without saying that all of the artists go out of their way to depict her as unattractive by normative standards, with thick thighs and a protruding stomach. And while it is not located on her forehead, Branco and Garrison do both even give her a tattoo.

These artists’ impulses, upon seeing a woman holding power or wealth, to assume sex is the mechanism by which she earned it, is a misogynistic failure of imagination. It is a useful assumption for them, however, as it simultaneously “justifies” a woman holding power, and discredits the same. I would suggest that their imagery intends to discredit Clinton not only as a politician but also as a woman—that her wealth and power are a failure of femininity, in the same way that they understand promiscuity to be a failure of femininity. To that end, Clinton’s appearance, wealth, and social power all indicate that she’s doing her gender *wrong*.

Victor S. Navasky, former editor of *The Nation*, writes that caricatures carry unique weight and responsibility, as they claim to depict what is “truer than true”: for “what can be more dangerous to one’s sense of self than caricature’s implicit claim that, in the guise of jokey exaggeration, the grotesque distortion in fact reveals the truth about one’s miserable character?” (2013, 46). Caricature and parody—including Revelation itself, as scholars including Koester have noted its parodic elements—assert both truth and power, as the caricaturist has not only the wisdom but also the vantage point to name what their subject “truly” is.

However, Navasky notes, “caricatures by definition deal in distortion ... carrying messages that once launched into the world are uncontrollable, and speak for themselves” (2013, 35-6). And this too is an ethical quandary, that this commentary treats Revelation’s distortions in an overly serious, overly invested manner. It replicates the barbs of John’s parody; but without the particular target of Rome available to absorb the critique, the judgement lands differently, and perhaps unpredictably, upon more precarious targets.

following websites: McCoy (2008), <http://www.bartcop.com/ho-hillary-gary-mccoy.jpg>; Branco (2016), <http://comicallyincorrect.com/2016/02/08/hillary-on-wall-street/>; Garrison (2016), https://grrrgraphics.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/hillary_wall_street_whore_rgb.jpg; Lester’s cartoon, 10/22/16; Lester (2016), http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/properties/lester/art_images/cg580d867d559d1.jpg; Delona (2016), http://media.cagle.com/226/2016/11/16/187670_600.jpg.

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