

BOOK REVIEW

Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). xxiii + 462 pp. Hbk. \$50.00.

Portier-Young sets the tone for her exceptional book on early Jewish resistance literature in the preface, explaining her project's origins as a 2004 dissertation at Duke University, its development with help from senior colleagues there and the manner in which the finished work relates to a similar project, published a year earlier by a more established scholar. As she concedes, 'it would have been disingenuous to insert references...throughout the manuscript' to Richard Horsley's *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), so she offers instead a book review in miniature, setting forth her own thesis in clear but complementary opposition to that of Horsley: where he deconstructs the 'distinctiveness' of apocalyptic genres and worldviews, she believes that the generic characteristics inform the way in which 'the text functions as resistant discourse and how the text presents its program of resistance' (p. xv). She succeeds brilliantly at this, producing a volume that would be ideally suited for intermediate to advanced seminars. While I maintain occasional reservations about the interrelation of narrative and theology that Portier-Young suggests, the seminar setting would encourage critical discussion on this and other issues, forcing professors and students alike to clarify their own views on ancient apocalyptic and imperial matrices.

Portier-Young's first task, 'Theorizing Resistance', provides the title for the first of the book's three units and the solitary chapter therein. This unit/chapter's main concern is with the conceptualization of resistance, as well as that of the *conditions* and *objects* of resistance: not so much empires themselves, but imperial *practices* characterized by hegemony, domination or combinations thereof. The author begins by breaking down Rainer Albertz's category of an 'apocalyptic theology

of resistance' into a plurality of such theologies, overlapping but distinctive in their worldviews and expressions. She acknowledges that her conceptual categories of hegemony and domination are modern ones, borrowing as they do from Antonio Gramsci, Marx, Weber and others. Contesting these practices takes the form of 'effective action', from the rejection or transformation of imperial institutions and strategies, to subversive or revolutionary 'embodied practices' such as fasting, prayer, penitence, fighting and martyrdom (pp. 11, 13; her subsequent review on p. 45 might better have noted that *attempted* actions are not always effective). These practices are supported by critical revalorizations of empire's symbols and inversions of its 'polarities' ('inside/outside, civilized/uncivilized, ordered/violent, moderate/excessive', p. 20). All of the dynamics in question are on display in the sources Portier-Young prioritizes—*1 Enoch* and *Daniel*—as well as in less apocalyptic documents like 1–2 Maccabees. Following a concise review of important studies on resistance to Hellenistic empires, Portier-Young concludes by discussing James C. Scott's work on public and 'hidden' transcripts and its relevance to the apocalyptic authors' decisions about anonymity, pseudonymity and claims to alternative sources of authority.

The second unit, 'Seleucid Domination in Judea', furnishes rich historical context and previews of responses to state-sponsored terror. In the first two of five chapters, Portier-Young profiles Hellenistic rule in Judea, the transition to Seleucid rule, and the fallout from Seleucid capitulation to Rome. Numismatics, alongside documents such as a letter to Ptolemy and a *programma* on temple purity laws (as recorded by Josephus, *Ant.* 12.138–146), help Portier-Young to picture Jewish life under Antiochus III as replete with stressors that presaged the revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes. As she puts it, Antiochus III 'claims that the Jewish ancestral laws and customs derive their ultimate authority not from their god Yhwh, but from the Seleucid empire. According to imperial logic, the only freedoms they possess are granted by the king. Freedom is not an absolute, but conditional' and revocable (p. 62). Rome's defeat of Antiochus (190 BCE) added more layers to Seleucid hegemony, layers Portier-Young explores through sources such as a recently published correspondence between Seleucus IV and Heliodorus. In a Palestinian stele that 'reads like a monumental email forwarded from one recipient to another', the Seleucid dating implies that '[a]ll past, all present, all future unfolds from the empire's

beginning’, a claim that the historical apocalypses countered by asserting God’s sovereignty over time and the ordering of life (p. 81). The stele informs Portier-Young’s view of 2 Maccabees, its composer—whom she calls ‘the epitomator’ (p. 87), an unwieldy epithet that sounds like it belongs in a Schwarzenegger film—and her nuanced proposal on the rebuff of Hellenism as a ‘trope for the structures and symbols of imperial power’ (p. 114), rather than a wholesale rejection of Greek cultural imports.

The unit’s remaining chapters address the Sixth Syrian War, Jason’s revolt and the re-conquest of Jerusalem, ‘Seleucid State Terror’ and the destabilizing persecution that followed the Edict of Antiochus. Throughout, Portier-Young expertly balances classical sources, her selected historical apocalypses and other Jewish literature. She has sound reasons (not fully explained until much later) for only consulting Maccabean and testamentary writings occasionally at this stage: the *Testament of Moses* is a slightly later source and ‘not properly an apocalypse’, and ‘while 1 and 2 Maccabees contain narratives of resistance, they are *not* resistance literature’ (pp. 391, 395, italics unique). The imperial program highlighted here is that of cyclical re-conquest (as symbolic de-creation of Judea and re-creation of the empire) and terrorization in response to, and preceded by, civic unrest. ‘Antiochus IV, Rome, and the Plan of God’, a section comparing evidence from Daniel with Polybius’s account of Antiochus’s withdrawal from Ptolemaic Egypt, is persuasive even without clear links between its subjects. A more detailed description of the conflict between the theologies of Antiochus, Rome and Daniel would have deepened the background for Portier-Young’s later sections on soteriology. Her main concern there is with the horrors perpetrated by Antiochus (e.g. massacre, home invasions, abductions, enslavement, plundering of the temple) and the apocalyptic responses that exposed these truths behind the imperial spectacle, but she misses an opportunity to discuss, even briefly, the ways in which her ‘apocalyptic theologies of resistance’ image God as one who overcomes such horrors, as Marilyn McCord Adams has done for Christian systematic theology in *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

With her third unit, Portier-Young engages directly with the selected apocalyptic theologies that resisted Seleucid hegemony and domination: Daniel and the Enochic Apocalypse of Weeks and Book of Dreams. Her thesis, that the apocalyptic writers (or writing collectives)

‘countered Antiochus’s pretensions to be author and authorizer of world and identity by asserting the authority of revealed knowledge that testified to the creative and provident power of God’ (pp. 221-22), is amply demonstrated in chapters on each work of resistance, as well as in a separate chapter on Enochic authority. She argues convincingly, even on matters where some readers may disagree with her assessment. For example, she sees Ashpenaz, Nebuchadnezzar’s representative in Daniel 1, as a party to the imperial mimicry of God’s provident care for his people, where Wes Howard-Brook avers (in *Come Out, My People!* *God’s Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010], p. 340) that Daniel and the official share a solidarity of the oppressed. Portier-Young’s grasp of analogies between apocalyptic and prophetic texts (Dan. 3.15 and Isa. 36–37, pp. 259-60; other instances can be found on pp. 263-64 and p. 333) is strong, as evinced in an earlier comparison of the Animal Apocalypse’s portrayal of empires’ ‘predatory rule’ to a similar symbol in Jeremiah (p. 170). She is careful not to bring later apocalyptic writings into the conversation, even when such references would have helped to interweave related rhetorical threads: for instance, the allegorical felling of past imperial ‘trees’ in *1 Enoch* 83.4 and Ezekiel 31 develops further in *2 Baruch* 35–40.

Portier-Young caps her superb study with a conclusion and an epilogue. She underscores the necessity of the employment of the terms domination and hegemony: while ‘proper to modern, not ancient, discourse, they nonetheless provide descriptive categories for analyzing the conditions and objects of resistance for the earliest Jewish apocalypses and their audiences’, as well as the forms of resistance advocated and modeled by the apocalyptic authors and their characters (pp. 383, 389). In the epilogue, the author invites readers to join her in taking up the study of questions that branch off of her completed work, including the ‘subversive use of nonnative traditions’, the relation (vis-à-vis resistance) of apocalyptic and testamentary genres, the function of ‘narratives of resistance’ in historiographic literature (noted above with reference to 1–2 Maccabees), methodological contrasts between ancient and modern state terrorism and theological considerations. Here and throughout the volume she models a healthy equilibrium comprised of Jewish and Greco-Roman interests in the ancient world and its texts.

Finally, a word concerning Portier-Young's interrelation of narrative and theology, which detracts little from the book's overall excellence. I wonder if she could have said more about the manner in which the narrational worlds of her selected apocalyptic works might have influenced the theological outlook of their intended audiences. She treats individual pericopes with skill, but the cumulative impact of the full discourses—the 'story worlds', mentioned only rarely, as on p. 268—of Daniel and the Enochic composite (or its components) receive scant attention. I recognize that Portier-Young does not intend her book to focus on hermeneutics, but the original primary and secondary audiences (not to mention postmodern audiences!) can and should be understood as auditors of hegemonic cultural discourses as well as apocalyptic texts. The author's intention of moving 'from theory to story' (p. 45) at the end of her first unit would perhaps have met with even more success had her *theological constructions* shown a more explicit indebtedness to their *narrational origins*. As an example, the biblical-theological roots of Daniel's 'narrative modelling' technique (pp. 235–42) could be more thoroughly revealed. Portier-Young herself rightly insists that boundaries, however porous and mobile, are vital to the formation of meaning and identity. But as these apocalypticists indeed 'countered Antiochus's pretensions to be author and authorizer of world and identity', then at least two questions should be added to her concluding theological considerations: how, and on what basis, did these authors and audiences understand the claim of their God to be the author, authorizer and *centre* of their communal life; and how did they answer his covenant-keeping call, by crossing or even transgressing the boundaries of the captivating story narrated by the empires of their day?

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