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Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and This Is The End

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Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and This Is The End

Abstract

The Book of Revelation is one of the most borrowed-from texts of the New Testament when it comes to popular culture. Although there are dozens of other ancient apocalyptic writings, it is John's apocalyptic visions that directly inform contemporary ideas of apocalypse. The apocalyptic comedy *This Is The End* (Dir. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2013) not only invokes imagery from Revelation but also adapts portions of the text in its portrayal of the end times. However, it also reproduces and expands upon the use of sexual violence as a means of punishment found in Revelation. This paper will examine the mechanisms of sexual violence in Revelation as they are interpreted in *This Is The End*. I will argue that in the same way that Revelation imagines itself as challenging the status quo that is the Roman Empire and yet reinforces violence against women as normative, the rape jokes in *This Is The End* (even ones that purport to invert narratives) prop up a system in which sexual violence is understood as deserved punishment.

Keywords

Rape culture, Revelation, sexual violence, comedy, rape jokes, *This Is The End*

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Author Notes

I am Senior Lecturer in Biblical and Religious Studies and the Director of the Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies. I am a Metis citizen, originally from Canada; I moved to Sheffield in 2015. Currently my research areas include gender; the senses; anti-Semitism; and apocalyptic literature.

Introduction

The Book of Revelation is one of the most borrowed-from texts of the New Testament when it comes to popular culture. Although there are dozens of other ancient apocalyptic writings, it is John's apocalyptic visions that directly inform contemporary ideas of apocalypse.¹ The apocalyptic comedy *This Is the End* (Dir. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2013) not only invokes imagery from Revelation (filtered through two thousand years of culture) but also adapts portions of the text in its portrayal of the end times. However, it also reproduces and expands upon the use of sexualized violence as a means of punishment found in Revelation.² To head off objections that analyzing issues of consent or sexual assault in antiquity is anachronistic, I would propose that the tools for analysis of antiquity, historical-critical or otherwise, are all technically anachronistic;³ and further, that if "consent" as we approach it today does not exist in antiquity, that is in part because of the active silencing of women and enslaved men whose perspectives on their own bodily autonomy (or lack thereof) are not well represented in ancient texts.⁴ As Rhiannon Graybill points out, rape stories in the Bible are part of the "cultural scaffolding" that support a system in which rape and sexualized violence are normalized: "The Bible helps us understand contemporary rape culture; contemporary rape culture helps us read and understand rape in the Bible."⁵ Cinema represents one place where examples of rape culture, and their relationship to the

Bible, can be found. Using methods outlined by other scholars of Bible and film, drawing attention to the film's quotation of the Bible as text and its use for elements of the plot,⁶ this paper will examine the mechanisms of sexualized violence in Revelation as they are interpreted in *This Is the End*. I will argue that in the same way that Revelation imagines itself as challenging the status quo that is the Roman Empire⁷ and yet reinforces violence against women as normative, the rape jokes in *This Is the End* (even ones that purport to invert narratives) prop up a system, commonly called "rape culture,"⁸ in which sexualized violence is understood as deserved punishment.

The premise of the film *This Is the End* is that several celebrities, playing themselves, become trapped together as the apocalypse begins, after attending a party at James Franco's Hollywood mansion. The characters are exaggerated caricatures of the actors or their typical roles, or sometimes inversions of themselves. Jonah Hill plays a "sensitive new-age guy" who is in touch with his emotions, as if his character in *Superbad* has matured a few years; Danny McBride plays a selfish, hyper-masculine "bro" reminiscent of his roles on *Eastbound & Down* and *Vice Principals*; Michael Cera, on the other hand, plays a rage-filled, coked-up asshole who sexually assaults Rhianna at the party and shortly meets his death by falling into the giant crevice that opens up on the front lawn of the mansion. Those who survive the party: James Franco, Jonah Hill, Seth Rogen, Jay

Baruchel, Danny McBride, and Craig Robinson, attempt to survive and to figure out what is going on.

Writers Rogen and Goldberg are Jewish, as are many of the main cast. However, I want to be clear that the sexualized violence in the film is not the result of Jews reading an otherwise benevolent Christian text. The New Testament texts are not benevolent: the New Testament includes many examples of Jesus calling for violence, including but not limited to Revelation.⁹ The film's interpretation of Revelation, instead, emerges from a culture that has been steeped in Christian dominance for generations, and is especially colored, consciously or otherwise, by American Dispensationalist readings of Revelation.¹⁰ This particular cinematic iteration of the intersection of the Bible and rape culture emerges from specifically Christian notions of gender and apocalyptic violence, despite the writers' identity.

The film consciously evokes imagery from Revelation, and the characters at one point quote the biblical text to support their suspicion that they are experiencing the biblical end times. That the text itself is highlighted in the film indicates the special location the Book of Revelation has as a cultural icon of apocalypse, interpreted or imagined by its readers in light of the various cultural readings of the last two millennia. Baruchel gestures with a Bible and proceeds to try to convince his friends that the disasters they are experiencing are located in the Book of Revelation.¹¹ He proceeds to "read" aloud from the Bible in order to prove his point:

Jay Baruchel: I think I know what it is.

Craig Robinson: Let's hear it.

JB: I think it's the Apocalypse.

All: What?

JB: I'm serious, boys. It's all in here, in the Book of Revelations.

James Franco: You took my Bible?

JB: Well, just hear me out, and you tell me that what I'm describing isn't what's going on right now. "And the skies shall open up, and the light of the Lord shall shine down, and those of good heart shall be brought into my kingdom of heaven." That's the Rapture, those are the gigantic beams of blue light. "And there will be a great mountain burning in fire." I mean, the Hollywood Hills are literally engulfed in flames as we sit here right now.

CR: The Hollywood Hills ain't no mountain. It's a hill. Takes about 10 minutes to get across that motherfucker with no traffic. [A discussion about LA traffic ensues, interrupting Baruchel's reading.]

JB: Boys, can I just fucking finish? [...] "And out of the pit rose a great red dragon having seven heads; that old serpent called the devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world, was released onto the earth."

The careful reader may have noticed some creative additions to the text as read by Baruchel, since to establish a biblical precedent for the Rapture, for example, requires some flexibility. Regardless, the film clearly and intentionally locates its apocalyptic mythology in the Book of Revelation. It establishes a direct connection for the viewer between the apocalyptic events on the screen and the Bible, so that viewers assume a continuity between the text and the film.

There are several rape jokes in *This Is The End*. I've counted at least four, but I will focus my analysis on two examples. The film came out in a time when rape had not yet become as widespread a topic within public discussion that it has now become, in particular since the #MeToo movement.¹² However, there were several discussions going on at the time of and just prior to the film's release on the function of rape jokes in society. Notably, in the summer previous to *This Is The End*, comedian Daniel Tosh had been under fire for responding to a woman heckler at a live comedy show by suggesting that it would be funny if that woman were raped by five men right then and there.¹³ This incident brought the issue of rape jokes to the fore; Roxane Gay responded to the Tosh event in an essay for Salon, saying, "Rape humor is not 'just jokes' or 'stand-up.' Humor about sexualized violence suggests permissiveness — not for people who would never commit such acts, but for the people who have whatever weakness that allows them to do terrible things unto others."¹⁴ Scholars of humor have likewise pointed out how jokes function to communicate social and political meaning; Elise Kramer writes, "In order to fully understand the social meaning of rape jokes [...] one must understand the culturally specific ideological framework within which 'types' of jokes are associated with 'types' of people."¹⁵ The implication is twofold: first Gay suggests that social acceptance of rape jokes signals to rapists that their actions are socially accepted as well; second, Kramer observes that negative reactions to rape jokes

emerge from the perception that those who tell rape jokes or find rape jokes funny lack critical understanding of rape culture.¹⁶

Rape's function as a tool of power and control points to the dynamics that make rape jokes potent communicators of social values;¹⁷ such jokes perform tacit reminders to women that they are rapeable. This claim can also be made of Roman antiquity. Sexually aggressive jokes made at the expense of victims were commonplace in ancient Roman society, as I will illustrate briefly below. Amy Richlin has pointed out that such comments are not 'locker-room talk,' ignored by women or addressed only to other elite men; rather, she approaches these texts as having "descriptive validity" that represents a current within a culture that is only sometimes explicitly voiced.¹⁸

Revelation's apocalypse depicts a dualistic battle between God and the forces of evil.¹⁹ Likewise, the characters in *This Is the End* must fight back against material demons as well as their own personal shortcomings in order to survive. As a weapon of power and control, rape in the context of war has a long, sordid, and ongoing history as both reality and as metaphor.²⁰ The Trojan War, after all, centers on the euphemized rape of Helen, and a sizable portion of the Iliad revolves around Achilles pouting because the woman he has captured to rape is going to be raped by someone else.²¹ Greeks and Romans also used the threat of rape as a metaphor for conquest, as in the examples I offer here of a Greek vase and a Roman coin depicting the subjugation of Judea. The so-called Eurymedon Vase (Figure 1), from

around 460 BCE, depicts a nude man in Thracian cape and not much else holding his erect penis while gesturing at another man on the other side of the jug.²²

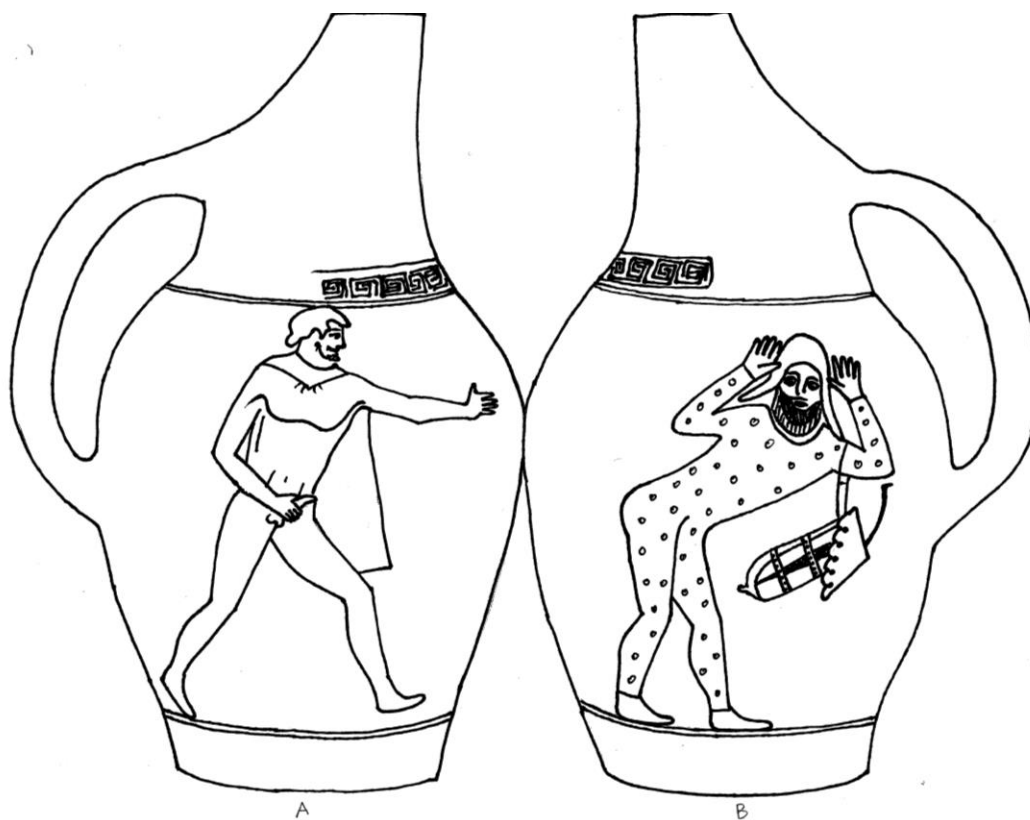


Figure 1: By M Warren after *The Eurymedon Vase* (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg)

The other man, marked as a foreigner by his clothing and his hat, is bent over in surrender. The inscription on the vase reads, “I am Eurymedon / I stand bent forward.” The overall impression is that the conquered is made to submit to the sexual assault of the victor. While initial interpretations of the vase hypothesized that the entire caption was attributed to the clothed man,²³ subsequent readings have challenged that understanding. Rather, as Amy C. Smith has demonstrated, the

position of the text in relation to the figures likely indicates that the first part of the text, “I am Eurymedon,” is spoken by the nude man, while the second portion, “I stand bent forward,” should be attributed to the other figure.²⁴ The meaning of the name Eurymedon has been controversial, with Shauenburg initially assuming that the clothed figure represented the site of the Battle of Eurymedon and that the nude figure represented the army; however, especially in combination with the attribution of the speech, it is additionally unlikely that the clothed figure represents the river after which the battle was named.²⁵ Rather, he likely represents the personification of the battle itself, while the other figure stands in for the conquered locale. Acknowledging the multiple layers of meaning that are possible in artistic representation, including sex, satire, and comedy, Smith observes that the dress of the nude figure marks his identity as a hunter, and that “a hunter is a pursuer, whether in the context of game, sex, or war.”²⁶ Thus, the conquest of the foreign location by the ‘hunter’ is imagined in the context of sexual pursuit. The posture of the clothed man indicates that the vase’s political commentary relies on rape to make its point. While James Davidson suggests that the bent-over position is suggestive of promiscuity, and thus that the bent-over figure is indicating his extreme sexual desire,²⁷ most other scholars disagree with this view. His clothing, marking him as foreign, and his weaponry, indicating that he is an archer who kills from afar rather than up close, already mark him as feminized in the context of the vase. He holds his arms up in alarm, in a posture commonly used to depict women

about to be raped in other artistic representations.²⁸ As Karim Arafat concludes, “I do not find it possible to interpret the vase in any other way than as using rape as a metaphor for victory. As such, it is highly appropriate, since if the pursuit is the battle, the rape is the victory.”²⁹ Rape’s use to represent military conquest has a long lineage,³⁰ then, that extends well beyond Revelation’s era.

The Judea Capta coin (Figure 2) likewise presents a virile conqueror towering over a small, hunched over woman. Davina Lopez points out that the coin uses gendered bodies to illustrate the masculine power of Rome over and against the feminized weakness of Judea, the conquered land.³¹ As Lopez observes, “the

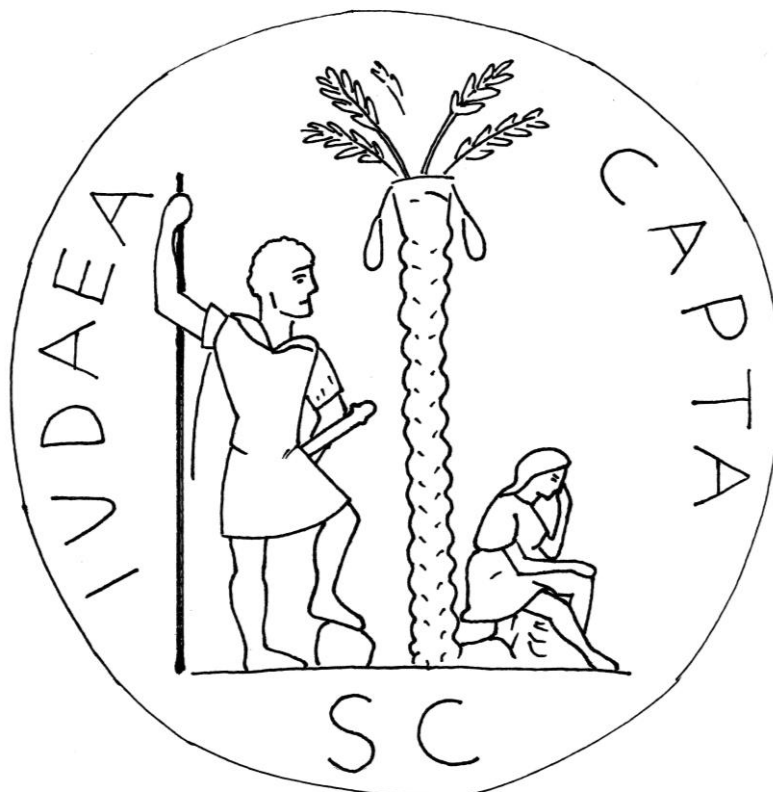


Figure 2: By M Warren after LIMC 'Iudaea' no 14 (+ BMCRE 117)

positioning of his dagger in his groin area appears to be no accident.”³² The sword the soldier carries at his hip suggests both the threat of further violence, including, especially because of its phallic placement, the very real possibility of rape. This tactic is prevalent in Roman discourse and iconography; gendered modes of depicting inferiority were (and continue to be) a mechanism by which elite men prop up or attempt to impose their own claims to authority and power.³³

It is also the case that Revelation uses the threat of sexual violence as a tool against those whom the author views as the enemies of God. Threats of sexualized violence are used against two female characters in Revelation, Jezebel and Babylon, as part of how the Seer imagines God’s war against the evils of the Roman Empire.³⁴ Revelation is a text of resistance against the violence of Rome.³⁵ It attempts to muster rhetorical weapons against that empire as a means of challenging its dominance. It is in this context that we should read the threats of sexualized violence the text contains.

The first example, as several scholars now recognize,³⁶ is in the letter to the assembly at Thyatira, which is dictated to John by Jesus himself. Part of this letter, Rev 2:22–23, condemns a woman called Jezebel for what the text claims is fornication and false prophecy: “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; and I will strike her children dead.” Her fornication, her *porneia*, is unspecified; the Greek covers a range of inappropriate sexual activity, including

but not limited to sex work. In this context, the significance of the threat to throw her on a bed should not be overlooked; while the exact act threatened is glossed over, it makes her lovers very upset. Her children, presumably the (real or metaphorical) products of her *porneia*, Jesus threatens to kill. Whether Jezebel stands in for a faction within John's community which holds different attitudes in its relationship with Rome, or whether she represents a historical leader of such a group, her gender—and thus vulnerability to forcible penetration—is implicated in the threat of punishment. Just as in the example of the *Judea Capta* coin, women's vulnerable bodies are a locus for arguments about colonial power and resistance.³⁷ But likewise, as in the *Eurymedon* vase, the text attempts to make the sexualized violence it describes humorous; Jezebel is the butt of the joke, whose punchline relies on her sexual humiliation as well as other ancient intertexts, as Emanuel points out.³⁸ In threatening sexual assault against Jezebel as a means of upholding John's interpretation of how best to resist Rome, the text mimics imperial modes of expressing power, including by using humor.

The Seer's violent response to Jezebel in chapter 2 is magnified later in the vision when he turns his attention to Babylon. These two female enemies of God are connected in how they are described: as sexually immoral, as connected with inappropriate food, and as encouragers of behavior that John despises.³⁹ Direct sexualized violence takes place in Revelation 17:16–17, where the angel explains to John that “they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and

burn her up with fire.” Make no mistake: stripping someone naked is a sexualized punishment.⁴⁰ Here, the “A City is a Woman” metaphor is employed, using Babylon, a city historically the enemy of Jerusalem, to conceptually map the characteristics of Babylon onto the city/woman in the text, but also the negative associations attached to sex work in antiquity.⁴¹ In refiguring the conquering Rome as a conquered and humiliated woman instead of the virile soldier of official coinage, John explicitly inverts political imagery used by the Empire in his critique,⁴² but in doing so replicates the threats of sexual assault used by Rome in establishing and maintaining its imperial power. Again, Babylon, as a sexualized Rome, is the object of ridicule as well as sexualized violence.⁴³ Importantly, the casual reader is implicated in this violence, and in the text’s sexualized derision of her, since its portrayal as the downfall of the enemy, Rome, makes it tempting to join in with Revelation in celebrating Babylon’s ruin at the hands of the powerful God.⁴⁴

To sum up what I have established so far, Revelation as apocalyptic text uses women and sexualized violence in similar ways to the Empire it seeks to resist. As Lynn Huber suggests, the boundaries between human women and metaphorical women in antiquity isn’t always easy to discern,⁴⁵ making this imagery all the more volatile in the biblical context, as well as in its afterlives. Sarah Emanuel’s work points out the role that humor plays in the sexualized derision of both Jezebel and Babylon in their respective sexual assaults. The 2013 comedy film *This Is The End*

invokes Revelation as the blueprint for its apocalyptic landscape. The next section of this paper will discuss the ways in which Revelation's sexualized violence is replicated for comedic effect in *This Is The End*, and how its rape jokes function, like the threats in Revelation, to reinforce rather than critique rape culture. I will look at two representative scenes from the film in order to showcase how the film uses rape jokes.

Example 1: Women Exaggerate and Blame Good Guys

In the first scene I will examine, Emma Watson has just broken into the house to find the protagonists alive and more or less well. She needs food and water, which the men have, and her appearance suggests that she has been on the run for a while, trying to find safety. She is relieved when they offer her a place to stay. When she is in her bedroom with the door closed, the men have a conversation about how they should not rape her, which Watson overhears, or mishears.

Jay Baruchel: Guys, listen, listen. I think we need to address the elephant in the room.

Seth Rogen: Whoa. Jay, don't talk about Craig like that. That's fucked up.

Craig Robinson: I'm right here, man.

SR: Yeah.

JB: I'm not calling Craig an elephant.

James Franco: Wow, that's fucking weird. What does that even mean?

JB: Yeah, no.

JF: That's racist.

JB: I wasn't referring to him. I was referring to the issue that's on all of our minds.

JF: What?

JB: This is one girl in a house with six males.

JF: Yeah. Really safe.

SR: Ideal scenario.

CR: She's like a little sister.

JB: I think that she needs... It's important that she feels safe.

JF: Yeah.

JB: And comfortable. And we should be mindful.

CR: Who's making her not feel safe?

JB: Well, I'm just saying, we should... We don't want to give off a bad vibe.

SR: Vibe?

JF: Vibes? I ain't giving no vibes.

SR: Yeah, wait, what kind of vibes are you talking about, man?

Danny McBride: He's talking about us giving off a rapey vibe.⁴⁶

Everyone: Hey! Shh! Whoa! What? Jesus.

JF: Jay, what the fuck, man?

SR: Chill out, dude.

JF: Why you putting that shit in the mix? Yeah.

JB: He fucking said it.

DM: You're the one saying it. No one here is thinking about raping anyone.

JB: Shh!

JF [waving a gun]: Well, you talking about vibes is the only thing that's rapey going on right now.

SR: Dude, nothing was rapey till you brought up the rapey vibes.

JF: Fucking one who smelt it dealt it, dawg.

SR: True that, dude.

JF: One who denies it supplies it.

JB: I know, it's farts, I get it.

Jonah Hill: Guys, guys, guys. Jay's not rapey. Jay couldn't rape a fly. He probably could.

CR: Maybe we should just stop this entire conversation right now.

JF: If anyone's gonna rape anyone here, it's probably gonna be Danny.

DM: What the fuck, Franco?

JF: What?

DM: Why do you think I'm gonna rape somebody?

JF: I'm just trying to lay it out there.

DM: I'm not gonna rape anyone, all right? If anyone's gonna rape somebody, it's Jay.

[Cut to Emma Watson, overhearing]

[Off-screen:

JB: What?

DM: He came up with the rape idea.] [return screen to men in hallway]

And his face looks like the police sketch of a fucking rapist.

JF: True.

JB: What the fuck does that mean?

DM: If anybody's raping Emma Watson, it's fucking Sir Rapes-a-Lot over here.

JB: Chill out!

[Emma Watson kicks open the door to confront them]

EW: Hey!

Men: Whoa!

JF: Easy. Easy.

EW: Back the fuck up!

JF: Emma. What's wrong?

SR: Wait, what's wrong?

EW: What's wrong? I just heard you guys talking about which one of you is gonna get to rape me.

Men: No, no, no, no!

SR: Guys, I got it. I got it. No. It's funny. It's funny. We were specifically talking about not raping you.

[EW hits SR in the nose with the butt of her axe.]

Men: Jesus! Holy shit!

EW: Back up!

JH: It's me, Jonah! It's me, Jonah Hill. America's sweetheart. J-bug, J-bone. Your friend. I would never hurt you.

EW: Get back!

As the audience, we are party to both the “true” conversation that the men have, and the “false” conversation that Watson thinks she hears. As the audience, we are supposed to empathize with the men and laugh at the misunderstanding. Really, it was Jay Baruchel’s concern about a woman’s safety that is at fault for the whole misunderstanding; Baruchel’s attempt to encourage his fellow men to be ‘mindful’ about how Watson might perceive her safety is what creates the problem. Seth Rogan even explains the “joke” to Watson, telling her that it actually is funny if only she would try to understand. But the punch-line—that women misunderstand men’s intentions and overreact to the imagined threat of rape—is at Watson’s expense. It is a punch-line that makes use of anti-feminist narratives about women not being funny,⁴⁷ or not being able to take a joke, exaggerating about sexual harassment, and lying about sexual assault. In an interview, the directors discuss their decision to include this scene, and their decision to “embrace that

rapiness.”⁴⁸ The conversation comes about as the result of the interviewer querying why they chose not to include any women in the core cast. For Rogan and Goldberg, the answer is simple: including women changes the tone of the film from neutral to sexual. In other words, in their view, the very presence of a woman automatically sexualizes a scene and brings the possibility of rape to the fore: “We kept saying like, ‘If we have a girl, it will start to feel rape-y.’”⁴⁹ The directors’ justification for the scene provides important additional context: the film’s engagement with rape culture emerges from the widespread view that women are inherently sexual and inherently rapeable.

Example 2: Men’s Rape is Funny

The next example is the depiction of the rape of Jonah Hill by a demon. In this example, the wording is less important than the cinematography, and so I will forgo the transcription in favor of spending some time describing the way the scene was shot. The assault opens with a camera shot from the point of view of the demon, so that we, the audience, experience the demon’s approach to Hill first hand. We can hear the demon’s growl as it/we loom over the bed. The camera then shifts and we see the silhouette of a human-shaped demon with an erect penis, before the point of view collapses demon and viewer once more. It is a scene that consciously evokes a similar scene of demonic rape from Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*

in its lighting, camera position, and direction. Even if the scene is a conscious allusion to Polanski's infamous scene and not something created *ex nihilo* by the writers, Rogen and Goldberg made a decision not only to include a scene of rape as a comedic moment, but also, in some sense, to pay homage to a film directed by Polanski, a notorious rapist.⁵⁰ As in *Rosemary's Baby*, the viewer experiences the assault in part from the point of view of the demonic being. Hill is sleeping in his bed when the assault occurs, and at first, like Rosemary, he is unsure if what is happening is a dream or real. The audience, as in the scene with Watson, are in the know; we understand that the rape is real. This knowledge is supposed to make the scene humorous as we watch Hill's unconscious reactions to the demon's touches. Hill, still asleep, thinks that the person touching him and scratching him is his friend Craig Robinson, the film's only Black leading actor.⁵¹ The punch-line for this rape joke resides in the idea that men's rape is somehow funny, and likewise plays on Hill's character's effeminate behaviors before and after the rape: he is affectionate, peace-making, negotiating tensions among the group using words, and in his post-assault "confession" to the video-camera, talks about his experience as if he is discussing it with a therapist.⁵² Hill's rape also directly echoes Revelation's use of sexualized violence as end-time punishment. Demonic divine beings are precisely those beings who, in the biblical text, mete out the punishment for Babylon in Rev 17:16–17:

And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled.

Whereas in Revelation 2, the rape threat is uttered by Christ himself, in this excerpt God uses the Beast to punish Babylon. Especially in the context of a film whose resolution occurs when the main characters attempt genuine remorse for past bad actions and, when successful, are taken up in beams of light, the use of rape by demons presents a world in which wrong-doers are punished with sexual assault at the will of God.

Conclusion

Not all rape jokes are created equal. There is debate among feminists about the difference between a rape joke that makes rapists the butt of the joke and a rape joke that makes rape victims the butt of the joke. The question is whether the joke reinforces rape culture and victim blaming or whether it makes wry observations in a critical way about a culture that seems not to care about how prevalent sexual harassment and violence is.⁵³ In the examples that I have covered here from *This Is The End*, there is no critique of the existing rape myths; instead, Hill's rape and Watson's reaction to the threat of rape both make the victims the object of the humor. The audience, who view Hill's rape through the eyes of the demon, are

made complicit in his assault, similar to how readers of Revelation 17 might become caught up in the sexual assault of Babylon. In the case of Watson, because viewers are party to the whole conversation, we are intended to empathize with the men in the scene, who are ‘falsely’ accused of plotting Watson’s assault. This is also the case for the other rape jokes in the film, although there is insufficient space to cover them all here: in one scene, James Franco admitting to having sex with Lindsay Lohan when she was so intoxicated that she thought he was someone else,⁵⁴ and another where Channing Tatum is shown naked and bound in chains, as the sex slave of Danny McBride. As such, the film’s punch lines reinforce rape culture rather than critique it.

Writing about rape jokes in an entirely different context—Ancient Rome—Richlin writes, “Cultures where rape is a joke are cultures that foster rape. We need to know our history and our present.”⁵⁵ She points out how punitive rape, such as that encountered by Jonah Hill or by the Whore, is a common threat in joking representations of sexualized violence.⁵⁶ Like the Eurymedon vase,⁵⁷ the jokes in *This Is The End* are at the expense of the victim; we as viewers are invited to join in making fun of the victims and to identify with the attacker or potential attackers. Likewise, Revelation invites us as readers or hearers of its depictions of sexualized violence to ally ourselves with the attackers, who are either divine or are agents of God. The mockery of the victim emerges from the ironic inversion of circumstances experienced by Jezebel and by the Whore;⁵⁸ where once they are described as

figures whose adultery was intentional, the Seer imagines the removal of their agency in acts of sexualized violence.

The film's use of rape in this particular way is similar to how sexualized violence is used in the biblical text from which it explicitly draws its vision of the end times. Comparing these two texts helps to clarify the significance of the sexualized violence in the biblical text. Revelation is certainly an anti-empire text, but it uses the same modes of enforcing power that Rome does.⁵⁹ Just as the imperial coin commemorating the subjugation of Judea uses the threat of the phallus as a symbol of Roman might, Revelation likewise envisions its enemies as the victims of sexual assault. Like the dominated "outsider" community around the text of Revelation, the actors James Franco, Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill, and the other stars of the film are known for their style of "outsider comedy," sometimes called "comedy of the bullied,"⁶⁰ that resists mainstream humor. The actors and their directors have made an industry portraying "hapless losers as heroes."⁶¹ Their oeuvre presents itself as rejecting mainstream modes of joke-making which are often at the expense of "losers," and the actors emerged in their earliest projects as underdogs; *Freaks and Geeks*, *Superbad*, *Knocked Up*, and other films and television shows which starred Franco, Rogen, Hill, and the rest of the *This Is The End* cast focused on uplifting the nerds and outcasts. But the film's purported challenge to the status quo is limited, if it is present at all; the system of social power that makes these actors and their characters feel like bullied underdogs is not

broken down but simply inverted.⁶² The film employs those hierarchical structures in order to construct its humor; the rape jokes are part of how that humor and its social capital function. Revelation likewise uses sexual assault to bring down a status quo, only to imagine its author and his allies as the new violent power in control. As Sarah Emanuel writes, “As God and Christ become the new overlords of the New Jerusalem, we are haunted by images of the Roman past. Just as Rome was secured via war, rape, and conquest, so too is Christ’s New Kingdom.”⁶³ In challenging the Roman Empire, the text reinforces violence against women as normative, just as the rape jokes in *This Is the End* prop up a system wherein sexual assault is punishment. In both cases, biblical and cinematic, the apocalyptic imagination tolerates and emboldens those who purport to be underdogs to empower themselves through the use of sexualized violence.

Notes

¹ While the original meaning of the Greek term *apocalypsis* means the revealing of something, the prevalence in ancient apocalyptic literature, developed especially in Christian apocalypses, is that what is revealed is God’s coming judgement of the world. In popular culture, the word apocalypse has come to refer to the end of the world rather than something revealed per se, but such popular apocalypses do in the end reveal much about our own society and its social ills.

² Sexualized violence is an umbrella term which includes sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment, including both physical and emotional violence.

³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Introduction,” in idem., *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 1–29).

⁴ For a discussion of issues with consent as a concept, see Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts After Terror: Rape Sexual Violence and the Hebrew Bible* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁵ Graybill, *Texts After Terror*, 12, 20.

⁶ See Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), and earlier, Adele Reinhartz, "Scripture on the Silver Screen," *Journal of Religion & Film* 3:1 (1999), Article 3.

⁷ On this, see Anatheia Portier-Young, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature as Resistance Literature," *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (ed. J. J. Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 145–162.

⁸ Rhiannon Graybill gives the following definition: "'Rape culture' is a term drawn from feminist scholarship and activism around sexual violence. It describes the social, cultural, and ideological structures that sustain and nourish sexual violence. The concept of 'rape culture' insists that rape is not an act of incomprehensible violence that suddenly ruptures the social fabric, but rather an extreme expression of what is culturally acceptable, salient, even ordinary: It stands on a continuum with other acts of 'everyday rape culture'" (Graybill, *Texts After Terror*, 28).

⁹ Eva Mroczek, "Mean, Angry Old Testament God vs. Nice, Loving New Testament God?" Class handout. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BG5PvCO5pTTATcgBF-Da5j9p0myFgg9wj1ECkrRhFbI>

¹⁰ In particular, Dispensationalist interpretations of Revelation, as popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, loom large in American culture and its cinema. See, for example, Ian Boxall, "Reception History and the Interpretation of Revelation," in Craig R. Koester (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 376–393 and Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder Colo: Westview Press, 2004).

¹¹ Baruchel says Revelations with an 's', a common misspelling which coincidentally also occurs in Dispensationalist theologian John Nelson Darby's *Notes on the Book of Revelations: To Assist Inquirers in Searching into that Book* (London: Central Tract Depot, 1839).

¹² #MeToo was coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, and came into widespread use in 2017 when it began trending on social media. The 2017 use of the hashtag was in response to the allegations about Harvey Weinstein, notably used by actress Alyssa Milano. As a movement, #MeToo raises awareness about experiences of sexual abuse and harassment and was a way to empower survivors of sexual violence to share their stories; in doing so, the movement demonstrates the prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment in society. Several scholars, many of whom are cited in this article, had already published on sexual violence in the Bible (Johanna Stiebert, Renita Weems, and Phyllis Tribble for example) and in Revelation specifically (Tina Pippin, Lynn R. Huber, and John Marshall for example) prior to the #MeToo movement, and The Shiloh Project, a research theme dedicated to exposing the relationship between rape culture and the Bible, housed within the Sheffield Centre for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies, was founded in 2016.

¹³ The woman shouted, "Rape jokes are never funny!" Tosh responded: "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by, like five guys right now?" As reported in Jason Zinoman, "Toe-to-Toe at the Edge of the Comedy Club Stage," *New York Times* 17 July 2012. Accessed 10 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/18/arts/television/when-the-comic-and-the-heckler-both-take-offense.html>

¹⁴ Roxane Gay, “Daniel Tosh and Rape Jokes: Still Not Funny,” *Salon* 12 July 2012. https://www.salon.com/2012/07/12/daniel_tosh_and_rape_jokes_still_not_funny/

¹⁵ Elise Kramer, “The Playful is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments,” *Language in Society* 40.2 (2011): 137–68, here 163.

¹⁶ The fact that James Franco, one of the film’s main stars, has been accused of sexual exploitation or inappropriate sexual behavior by five women suggests that he lacks critical understanding of rape culture (Daniel Miller and Amy Kaufman, “Five Women Accuse Actor James Franco of Inappropriate or Sexually Exploitative Behavior,” *LA Times* 11 January 2018. www.latimes.com/business/entertainment/la-fi-ct-james-franco-allegations-20180111-htmlstory.html&usg=AOvVaw0Fs31dhrHrvH94lfuAIZ3V). Franco was also under fire in 2014 for asking a woman whom he knew to be underage for her hotel’s address.

¹⁷ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Bantam 1975).

¹⁸ Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (repr. 1987)), xxv.

¹⁹ For an overview of apocalyptic dualism, see Jorg Frey, “Apocalyptic Dualism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (ed. J. J. Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271–294.

²⁰ See Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 31–113 and Kathy L. Gaca, “Telling the Girls from the Boys and Children: Interpreting Παῖδες in the Sexual Violence of Populace-Ravaging Ancient Warfare,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 35–36 (2011), 85–109.

²¹ When Agamemnon demands Briseis, she is already in Achilles’s tent, suggesting that Achilles has already raped her (*Iliad* 1.311); Agamemnon denies raping Briseis in 19.163, 239–240; Achilles is explicitly depicted as sleeping in the same bed with Briseis in 24.660.

²² The fact that this vase exists as a rape joke/threat is separate from the issue of penetrator/penetrated in ancient Greek and Roman sexuality. See Maia Kotrosits, “Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27.3 (2018), 343–366; Mark Masterson, “Studies of Ancient Masculinity,” *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (Thomas K. Hubbard, ed.; London: Blackwell, 2014), 17–30; James Davidson, “Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality: Penetration and the Truth of Sex,” *Past & Present* 170 (2001), 3–51.

²³ K. Schauenburg, “εὐρυμέδον εἰμί,” *AthMitt* 90 (1975): 97–121.

²⁴ Amy C. Smith, “Eurymedon and the Evolution of Political Personifications in the Early Classical Period,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 119 (1999), 128–141, here 135.

²⁵ Smith, “Eurymedon,” 135.

²⁶ Smith, “Eurymedon,” 136.

²⁷ James Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* (London: HarperCollins, 1998) 180–181.

²⁸ Froma Zeitlin, “Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth,” in *Rape* (Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter; Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 122–51, here 128; Smith, “Eurymedon,” 138.

²⁹ Karim W. Arafat, “State of the Art — Art of the State,” in S. Deacy and K.F. Pierce (eds.), *Rape in Antiquity* (London: Duckworth 2002; repr. 1997) 180–223, here 190.

³⁰ Including, of course, Livy’s invocation of the Rape of the Sabine women to establish the city of Rome; here the mass rape is a means of conquering the indigenous population while at the same time colonizing the land with new offspring (James A. Arieti, “Rape and Livy’s View of Roman History,” *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* [Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce, eds.; Classical Press of Wales, 2002], 374–407 here 379).

³¹ For discussion of the metaphor “A City is a Woman” in antiquity, and in particular in Revelation, see Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John’s Apocalypse* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2007), 89–112.

³² Davina C Lopez, “Before Your Very Eyes: Roman Imperial Ideology, Gender Constructs, and Paul’s Inter-Nationalism,” *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds.; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 115–162, here 121–123. See also Rene Rodgers, “Female Representation in Roman Art: Feminizing the Provincial Other,” in *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art* (Sarah Scott and Jane Webster, eds.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 69–93.

³³ Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28, 42.

³⁴ See John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John* (Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, eds.; London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 17–32.

³⁵ See discussion in Stephen Young, “Revelation Naturalizes Sexual Violence,” 244–245.

³⁶ Sarah Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation: Roasting Rome*, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 110; Tina Pippin, “‘And I Will Strike Her Children Dead’: Death and the Deconstruction of Social Location.” *Reading From This Place. Volume I: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Fortress Press, 1995), 191–198 esp 195; Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 43; Stephen Young, “Revelation Naturalizes Sexual Violence and Readers Erase It: Unveiling the Son of God’s Rape of Jezebel,” in Christy Cobb and Eric Vanden Eykel eds, *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* (London: Lexington, 2022). 241–246.

³⁷ Marshall, “Gender and Empire,” 22–25.

³⁸ Emanuel, *Humor*, 115

³⁹ Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, xiii; 189; 89–92; Marshall, “Gender and Empire,” 27.

⁴⁰ David Tombs, “Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,” *Union Seminary Quarterly*

Review 53 (1999), 89–109, especially 100–105. See also Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, 64 on the metaphor “Shame is Nakedness.”

⁴¹ Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, 62. Huber observes that the conceptual mapping “Babylon is Rome” also allows this metaphor to be extended to other cities, such as Washington DC.

⁴² Marshall, “Gender and Empire,” 27–28.

⁴³ Emanuel, *Humor*, 149–163.

⁴⁴ Tina Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 60 (1992): 67–82 here 75.

⁴⁵ Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, 59.

⁴⁶ The word “rapey” reached its second-highest search ranking on Google in June 2013, corresponding with the film’s release (<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=rapey&hl=en-GB>). Only three months earlier, Robin Thicke’s song ‘Blurred Lines’ was released, leading to widespread discussion about what seemed to many as its casual support for rape culture. Elly Brinkley, “Is Robin Thicke’s ‘Blurred Lines’ a ‘rapey’ song?” *Wall Street Journal* 8 August 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-76254>

⁴⁷ Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair* January 2007. Online. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701>

⁴⁸ Meadhbh McGrath, “Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Craig Robinson Discuss ‘This is the End,’” *Daily Californian*, 13 June 2013. <https://www.dailycal.org/2013/06/13/seth-rogen-evan-goldberg-and-craig-robinson-discuss-this-is-the-end>

⁴⁹ McGrath, “Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Craig Robinson Discuss ‘This is the End.’”

⁵⁰ For other filmic references, see Ben Sherlock, “10 Best Movie References in *This Is The End*,” *Screen Rant*, 7 November 2021. <https://screenrant.com/this-is-end-seth-rogen-movie-references/>

⁵¹ The darkness of the demon’s form, both in shadow and in complexion, combined with enduring racist stereotypes about Black men as rapists of White victims adds to the already problematic scene. See Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly, “Any Four Black Men Will Do: Rape, Race, and the Ultimate Scapegoat,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37.6 (2007): 859–95.

⁵² After Hill’s rape, he becomes possessed by the demon and threatens to rape Seth Rogen.

⁵³ An example of a rape joke that critiques rape culture is Wanda Sykes’ “detachable pussy” joke: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv5pjSRSLGQ&has_verified=1

⁵⁴ This is sexual assault! It is particularly heinous coming from the character of James Franco since, as I mentioned in footnote 7 above, actor James Franco has been accused by at least five women of sexually-exploitative behavior. See further <http://fortune.com/2018/01/11/james-franco-golden-globes-accusations/> and <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/james-franco->

golden-globes-2018-sexual-harassment-times-up-the-disaster-artist-a8149191.html and more recently <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/feb/21/james-franco-sexual-misconduct-lawsuit-deal>

⁵⁵ Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, xxviii.

⁵⁶ Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, passim.

⁵⁷ Arafat, “State of the Art,” 189.

⁵⁸ See Adela Yarbro Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-Song or Dirge?” in *L’ Apocalypse Johannique et l’apocalyptique Dans Le Nouveau Testament* (Gembloux, Belgium: Louvain: Éditions J Duculot Univ Press, 1980), 185–204; David L. Barr, “John’s Ironic Empire,” *Interpretation* 63.1 (2009): 20–30.

⁵⁹ See Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), esp. the chapter on Revelation.

⁶⁰ *Vulture*, “Mike White Calls Out Judd Apatow,” 7 May 2007. Accessed 8 May 2019. https://www.vulture.com/2007/05/mike_white_calls_out_judd_apat.html

⁶¹ Sharon Waxman, “Giving the Last Laugh to Losers,” *New York Times*, 6 May 2007. Accessed 8 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/movies/moviesspecial/06waxm.html>

⁶² On Revelation and its reception in American popular culture as a “revenge fantasy” of underdogs merely reversing existing modes of violent oppression against the oppressor, see Aaron Ricker, “The Devil’s Reading: Revenge and Revelation in American Comics,” *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer; New York: Continuum, 2010), 15–23.

⁶³ Sarah Emanuel, *Humor*, 51.

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