
A major revision of her 2004 dissertation, Anathea Portier-Young’s *Apocalypse Against Empire* significantly advances our understanding of the apocalyptic genre’s relationship to historical events and the specific ways in which apocalyptic literature can function as a literature of resistance. Portier-Young reads the book of Daniel and two Enochic texts—the Apocalypse of Weeks and the Book of Dreams—as resistance literature, arguing that they speak directly to the historical situation of the Jewish people in the second century BCE under Seleucid rule. The book’s greatest contribution is the way in which it brings apocalyptic literature into conversation with theoretical studies of domination and resistance, making for an exceptionally well-grounded argument. While the main approach is historical critical, the bibliographic net is cast wide enough to encompass literature in the fields of sociology, political science, and literary theory. Portier-Young’s work is a well-grounded, thorough exploration of the Seleucid period and of Jewish apocalyptic literature as a call to faithfulness amidst an oppressive culture.

The book is divided into three parts. Chapter 1, coextensive with Part One, theorizes resistance, hegemony, and domination through its engagement with political theorists, Marxist scholars, and continental philosophers. Oft-cited scholars of apocalyptic literature, such as John Collins and Paul Hanson, are mentioned briefly, but Portier-Young is more concerned with establishing a theoretical framework independent of biblical scholarship. She begins with the functional definition that “resistance limits power” (6), and goes on to argue that the creation of a “resistant discourse” (44) is as important a form of limiting power as are more overt acts of resistance. Portier-Young also brings in a discussion of non-violent means of hegemonic control, aptly noting that “in examining resistance to Antiochus’s persecution and to the Hellenistic empires more generally, we need to look at responses not only to the violent forms of physical coercion … but also responses to more subtle forms of control conveyed through cultural institutions … and the structured practices of everyday life” (11-12).

In Part Two of the book (Chs. 2-6), Portier-Young puts her theoretical groundwork to use as she details the specific ways in which the Seleucid empire practiced hegemony and domination. Chapter 2 sets the stage by detailing the transition from Hellenistic rule to Seleucid rule. In Chapter 3, Portier-Young discusses the ways in which Jewish identity was threatened by Seleucid rule, including, for example, the Seleucid attempt to (1) erase the Jewish reckoning of time and replace it with the Seleucid dating system, and (2) establish the gymnasium as a forum to mark the Jewish body as other. This heavily footnoted chapter is a wealth of research material and will prove extremely useful for anyone studying this period.

Chapter 4 focuses directly on the Seleucid-Ptolemaic war of 170-168 BCE, the Maccabean revolt, and the subsequent ramifications for Jerusalem. Chapter 5, which relies on 1 and 2 Maccabees as historical documents, details how the Seleucid empire moved from hegemonic domination to the use of “state terror” (140, 174), the purpose of which was not only to punish, but also to “shatter the illusion of Judean autonomia,
rob the populace of its will to resist, and create a lasting atmosphere of deep insecurity” (142). Chapter 6 documents Antiochus’s edict of 167 BCE, which outlawed the practice of Judaism and instituted a period of severe religious persecution. This edict “aimed at more than subjugation. The edict launched a program of domination over Judean bodies, minds, souls, and wills” (215). It was an attempt to eradicate the identity of the Jewish people and replace it with an identity of empire. It is during this program of state terror that the book of Daniel, the Apocalypse of Weeks, and the Book of Dreams were written.

In Chapter 7, which begins the third part of the book, Portier-Young turns to a reading of these apocalyptic texts, starting with the book of Daniel. Her main thesis is that Daniel is a book of non-violent resistance, urging the Jewish people to remain steadfast in the face of persecution through the example of Daniel and the promise of a future restoration. Among her interesting conclusions, Portier-Young argues that the book as preserved in the MT is the original composition, intentionally using both Hebrew and Aramaic to help the audience “move from a posture of partial accommodation and collaboration to one of total rejection of Seleucid hegemony and domination” (227). Portier-Young views Daniel 7 as the “decisive shift,” which uses “a language of empire to refute its claims and announces its ends” (228). Then, with Daniel 8, the writers return to Hebrew to describe the overthrow of empire and the restoration of the covenant between Israel and Yhwh.

Chapter 8 is an excursus on Enochic authority, while Chapter 9 presents a discussion of The Apocalypse of Weeks (1 En. 93:1-10; 91:11-17) as resistance literature. Portier-Young follows John Collins in viewing this text as perhaps the earliest extant historical apocalypse, and she dates it to the late third or early second centuries BCE, “or the period leading up to and including Seleucid rule in Judea” (315). In contrast to the non-violent resistance promoted in the book of Daniel, the language of the Apocalypse of Weeks, suggests Portier-Young, urges readers toward more active resistance. Thus, the reference to the sword that will be given to the righteous (91:12) is a call for “armed resistance to the measures of Antiochus in the immediate future” (319). Portier-Young identifies the book’s audience as the “righteous” (93:2), called to “root out structures of violence and deceit, domination and hegemony, in order to establish an alternative, just order” (319-20). This “rooting out” is envisioned in the seventh week of the apocalypse’s ten weeks, which the book identifies as the present. This means that during the violent revolution which will take place in the eighth week “perpetrators may yet have an opportunity for repentance and reconciliation before they are finally called to account for their deeds” (335).

In Chapter 10, Portier-Young hears a similar call to violent revolution being made in the sight and vision motifs of the Book of Dreams, which she dates to 165-160 BCE and accepts as a literary unity (347-48). The call to violent revolution is signified by the lambs growing horns (90:8-9), including the great horn sprouted by one sheep identified by Portier-Young as Judas Maccabeus (373). After the rams have grown horns, God’s intervention “turns the tide of the battle in favor of the Judeans” (377).