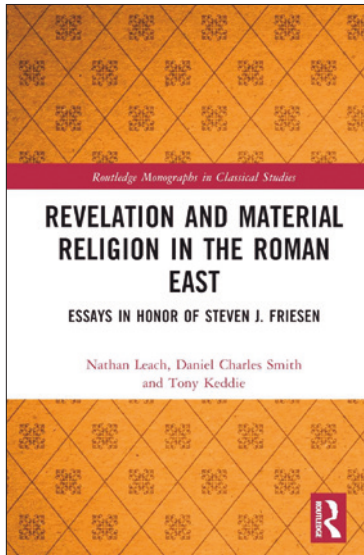


## Revelation and Material Religion in the Roman East




---

LEACH, NATHAN, SMITH, DANIEL CHARLES & KEDDIE, TONY (EDS. 2023). *Revelation and Material Religion in the Roman East. Essays in Honor of Steven J. Friesen*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge. 344 pp., 104.00 £ [ISBN 978-1-03-238267-8]

---

ALEKSANDRA KUBIAK-SCHNEIDER

University of Wrocław

okubiak@gmail.com – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3273-2447>

The collected set of essays in the volume *Revelation and Material Religion in the Roman East. Essays in Honor of Steven J. Friesen* celebrate the outstanding scholarship of Steven J. Friesen, an expert in the early Christianity with a particular attentiveness to the *Apocalypse of John* and also in the material religion in Roman Western Asia Minor. 17 researchers from all over the world contributed with their papers grouped in three parts: “Materializing Revelation” (Part I), “Spatializing Religion and Power” (Part II) and “Politicizing Memory” (Part III). The colleagues of the honorand, his

former students, who are the authors of this book, present in the introduction the rich curriculum of Steven J. Friesen and an excerpt from his impressive bibliographical record (pp. 1-4). The papers relate to the previous works of the honorand, but in the same time they surpass the area of his research, bringing new discussion and views.

The first part (“Materializing Revelation”), with seven chapters, concentrates on book of *Revelation* of the *New Testament* and its contextualization either textual (Paulo Nogueira, pp. 17-31 and Nathan Leach, pp. 75-91), social (Lynn R. Huber, pp. 32-51), cultural (Tony Keddie, pp. 92-108) or material (Dominika Kurek-Chomycz, pp. 108-125). Keddie looks at the blood sacrifices through the Greco-Roman traditions known to John of Patmos (p. 94). He proposes that the author of the *Apocalypse* encoded skillfully the experiences of the people and himself of a traditional temple sacrifice into a new narrative of Lamb and his followers as real sacrificial victims. It is awkward however that Keddie does not mention anything about the organization of the temple life in the Roman Near East, *e.g.* in the Levantine coast (Roman provinces Judea-Palaestina and Coele-Syria), despite he rightly states the Jewish origins of John. The religious and cultural situation in the place of origins of John had for sure an impact on the content of the *Apocalypse*, what is unnoticed by the author of this chapter. Keddie opposes the modern interpretations of blood in *Revelation* with the sensory experience of the people of the Roman province Asia. He goes further to alert the scholars and readers to be careful on neoliberal point of view on the slaughter and animal blood. He makes a point writing: “We do not know what the slaying of a lamb looks, smells, and sounds like, and we do not associate it with social experience of sharing a meal with gods” (p. 105). It is a remark worth recalling, especially in the researching the ancient rituals.

Another sensory aspect of the visions in the *Apocalypse of John* are noted by Kurek-Chomycz (pp. 109-125). Through the mean of incense and the utensils used for incense, she examines sensory experiences overlooked in the scholar exegesis of this book of the *New Testament*. Kurek-Chomycz provides the passages where John refers to the use of incense and related tools. She discusses the vocabulary used in the *Revelation* such as *phiale*, *libanotos*, *thymiamata* together with the epigraphic evidence from the cities mentioned in the *Apocalypse*. But what is different from the paper of Keddie, she goes deeper in the (Hebrew) Biblical tradition and to the *Dead Sea Scrolls* to understand the use of this kind of offering to the God and its longevity in the religious performances known to Jews.

The part two (“Spatializing Religion and Power”) contains five chapters related to different approaches to space. As the authors of the book point out, the concept

of space is a crucial element in the studies of Friesen. The chapters deal with public space as agora (Alex Hon Ho Ip, pp. 128-143), place of games – arena (Jin Young Kim, pp. 144-164), domestic area and religions (Christine Thomas), religious space of sanctuaries (Daniel Schowalter) and beyond them (Adeline Harrington). The paper by Schowalter (pp. 177-203) is the only one concerning East beyond Greece and Asia Minor. It concerns the religious deposit of bones and artifacts from the northern Israel site Omrit, where was located a sanctuary with three phases of development (from the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE). Schowalter presents an archaeological overview of the cult site debating over a construction history. It is an interesting remark that the sanctuary was planned at first stage as a temple-tomb for a member of elite, but excavations did not reveal any human remains. Instead, they discovered a sacrificial deposit containing burnt bones from minimum 42 sheep/goat. Such a material data gives a glimpse into the ritual performance in the Roman Levant. The artifacts buried with the faunal remains were glass vessels, pottery remains and a lamp. The deposit might have been connected to the restorations of the temple. Schowalter at pp. 198-199 in eight points provides an explanation what could have happened in the past. He tries, convincingly in my opinion, to reconstruct the ritual gesture and actions of the officials and workers to ensure that they did not violate the sacral character of the place. After this chapter we pass to the contribution on the “untempled” altars (pp. 204-221). Harrington’s case study of the altars in Priene draws attention to the modern, scholar, perception of “sacred space”, what, according to her, is “modern theoretical construct that did not serve as a legitimate spatial organization in antiquity” (p. 207). I cannot disagree with her in that matter, taking into consideration Palmyrene evidence of three monumental altars dedicated by the Palmyrene *polis* to the “He whose name is blessed forever” which were found outside of any built structure, in the middle of a field, located in some distance from the ancient route.<sup>1</sup> Already the presence of an object such as altar brings a notion of sacrality without building a temple. It permits to perform rituals in the theater, *bouleuterion* and agora, but also in other places: on the street, at home, etc. It is an interesting remark by Harrington that the ancient Greek cities were considered as *temenoi* (p. 216). It is a tempting concept, especially that this idea was also known to the people of ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Kubiak-Schneider, 2021, pp. 93-97, no. 8 in the catalogue (= *PAT* 0340 A-C).

2. Laneri, 2024.

The part three (“Politicizing Memory”) comprises five chapters focused on the perception and memory of cities and regions. It begins with the essay on Hera in Peloponnese through the work of Pausanias and cultural memory scope (Jorunn Økland, pp. 225-240). Økland emphasizes the aspect of memory at Pausanias who juxtaposes the Greek religious practices in the cult of Hera with the changing political situation and Roman imperial dynamism within the sphere of cults. In the end of her chapter, she relates the work of Pausanias collecting the stories and Greek names to the actual events like the war in Ukraine and the work of the volunteers to not forget Ukrainian cultural heritage. Økland makes it well explained that the material culture is an anchor point for the people – no matter if in antiquity or in present times.

Next chapters refer to the cities and places in the Asia Minor: Laodicea on the Lycus (Alan H. Cadwallader, pp. 241-257), Side (Jaimie Gunderson, pp. 258-278) and Pepouza and Tymion (Caroline Crews, pp. 279-300). In the paper by Cadwallader, an unexperienced reader has no explicit explanation to which Laodicea the author refers. The city name *Laodikeia* is not without ambiguity, being attested as the toponym in nowadays Syria, Greece and Iraq. A more precise information in the brackets, concerning the localization of the city, would have brought a clearness in that matter.

The last chapter of the book by Ma. Marilou S. Ibita (pp. 301-313) on the question of food insecurity and post-traumatic issues within the problems raised by Paul in his *Letter to Corinthians* (1 *Cor* 11: 17-34). It is the “contemporization” of the writing of Paul, adapting it to the problems of present times and an attempt to find explanations and solutions to the food crisis in the times of Paul and nowadays.

The book consists of many elements and aspects, bringing to the thought the entire scholarship of Steven J. Friesen. However, the title of the volume pointing to the Roman East is, in my opinion, misleading. There is no justification for this anywhere in the volume. A potential reader who will grasp this position would expect essays on Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia, sometimes Egypt, but only one paper in the volume refers to the Near East (by D. Schowalter) and the rest concerns the cities or locations either in Greece or in Asia Minor. Speaking about Roman East, one has a much broader connotations than the authors of the volume offer.<sup>3</sup> The book is rather addressed to the specialists than to the people outside of academia, because of characteristics of the papers. They are very specific and nuances understandable only by trained audience, in fact typical for this sort

---

3. See, e.g., Alston & Lieu, 2007.

of publications as the honorific books are. Nevertheless, Nathan Leach, Daniel Charles Smith and Tony Keddie achieved with a big success to pay homage to their mentor and colleague by gathering excellent quality of papers.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Alston, Richard & Lieu, Samuel N.C. (eds.) (2007). *Aspects of the Roman East. Volume I: Papers in Honour of Professor Fergus Millar FBA*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Kubiak-Schneider, Aleksandra (2021). *Dédicaces sans théonyme de Palmyre. Béni (soit) son nom pour l'éternité*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Laneri, Nicola (2024). *From Ritual to God in the Ancient Near East. Tracing Origins of Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.