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Jana Riess: Revelation's revelations, or why Elmo bears the mark of the beast

A writer who is completing a self-assigned task of writing the Twible -- a cheeky summary of the Bible in daily tweets -- ponders what she's learned.

by [Jana Riess](#)



Flickr / Wilton Taylor

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On May 21 I'll finish the Twible. I started this project on a lark in late 2009, when my erstwhile mission to finally make it all the way through studying the Bible merged with my relatively new desire to do something more entertaining on Twitter than simply tweet what I had for breakfast. (It was Cheerios; thank you for asking.)

So for the last three and a half years I've been tweeting a chapter of the Bible each day, a bit of plot summary blended with a dollop of sarcasm, all in 140 characters or less. I wrote about this venture in [an earlier issue of Faith & Leadership](#), and I've learned a lot since then. I can't believe I'm in the homestretch, having made it all the way to Revelation without (a) losing steam or (b) being struck by lightning for blasphemy.

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Jana Riess set out a year ago to tweet the Bible, reading the Good Book and summarizing it in 140-character-long humorous commentaries. The project has proved to be fun, racy, messy -- and has connected her with a far-flung community.

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God, it seems, has a sense of humor.

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One of the most significant challenges of the [Twible](#) project, right up there with finding the fun in the book of Lamentations, has been tweeting Revelation. (Please note that the book is called Revelation, singular, and not Revelations, plural, which may sound serenely postmodern but which takes up one more character on Twitter. Every character counts, you know.)

The fact that some of us can't get the name of the book right is the least of our problems. We can't agree on anything at all about Revelation. A few still insist that the John who wrote it was the same fellow who penned the Fourth Gospel and the lovey-dovey letters of 1, 2 and 3 John, while most other scholars look at the language, wartime context and subject matter of Revelation and attribute it to John of Patmos, another writer entirely. Who may or may not have been on drugs.

Beyond the controversies about authorship are the absolutely trippy things the book *says*. In John's vision, killer beasts have eyes all over their bodies (4:8), like über-angry potatoes. Angels, far from the Della Reese/Precious Moments angelic stereotype, revel in attacking humankind and wiping us right off the face of the planet (chapters 8-11). And in the New Testament's coolest-ever nativity scene, a sparkly woman gives birth to Jesus with a killer dragon acting as midwife (12:1-6). I have enjoyed many pleasant moments imagining just how that particular narrative could spice up children's Christmas pageants across the nation.

Because the book's content is highly symbolic and opaque, every generation has delighted in coming up with its own cast of characters to fill in the many blanks that the Revelator put in to keep us guessing. When I was in high school, the antichrist du jour was Mikhail Gorbachev, the head of the Communist Party in what was then the Soviet Union. People claimed that the noticeable birthmark on Gorbachev's head was the telltale "mark of the beast," and they performed impressive feats of hermeneutical gymnastics to associate the Soviet leader with the beastly number 666.

But they were merely playing their part in a long line of antichrist guessers. Martin Luther, for example, famously despised the book of Revelation and wanted it out of the canon ... until he began to perceive that the whore of Babylon was actually the Catholic Church and that the disputed book could be interpreted as proving his point. Suddenly, Luther was Revelation's biggest fan. (Not to be outdone, Catholic artists depicted Luther as the seven-headed monster of the Apocalypse. Two can play that game.)

New Testament scholar Elaine Pagels has noted that the identity of these characters from Revelation -- the whore of Babylon, the antichrist, the dragon, the woman clothed with the sun -- are perennially adaptable.

Which brings me back to the Twible and my own candidate for apocalyptic evil: Elmo. He's a beast. He's fiery red. He's ubiquitous. Some of his best friends are monsters. He speaks in falsetto, so he's clearly hiding his true identity. And he refers to himself in the third person, which is a known tell for villains through the ages.

Ridiculous? Of course. But ridiculous and *fun*. Ridiculous and *harmless*, unlike the dangerously politicized finger-pointing that has characterized centuries of Christian hatred.

In the end, the best that any [satirical project like the Twible](#) can hope to accomplish is precisely this: to use humor to help us examine our assumptions, which are so often faulty, culturally conditioned and flat-out wrong.

A Muppet antichrist makes just about as much sense as anything else human beings have come up with in 2,000 years of interpreting the Bible's most controversial book. And Elmo is way cuter than Gorbachev.

