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# Divine Injustice: Violence and Violation as Prophetic Image of God

WILLIAM C. WOODY, SJ

*Boston College School of Theology and Ministry*

*E-mail: wwoody@jesuits.org*

## Abstract

While the Judeo-Christian religious tradition promotes an image of God characterized by mercy and compassion, one cannot deny the startling images in scripture of a wrathful God who seemingly condones sexual violence and rape as divinely-sanctioned punishments. This article reviews existing interpretive strategies designed to salvage the image of a merciful and compassionate deity despite depictions of a violent and sexually-violating God in the scriptural texts. These attempts at interpretation, however, are not without their limitations and problems. After surveying and critiquing attempts at interpreting images of divine wrath, this article seeks to reinterpret the texts as a divinely-inspired and implicit critique of the religious tradition itself – one which has enabled and even promoted sexual subjugation, violence, and trauma in the name of God.

**Keywords:** Divine vengeance, sexual violence, trauma, prophetic tradition, scriptural interpretation

**I**MAGES OF GOD HOLD POWERFUL sway over one's faith, framing the tenor of relationship with the divine. An individual's prayer life, a community's understanding and relation to the divine, and especially one's outlook on punishment and redemption hinge upon such images and conceptions of God. While the Judeo-Christian religious tradition espouses a tradition teeming with images of God's compassion and merciful love, it is also replete with contrasting depictions of divine wrath, vengeance, and violence. One troubling trope in particular recurs throughout the prophetic tradition – that of sexual shaming, violence, and even rape as a form of justified or deserved punishment.

Divine decrees of sexual violence provide chilling examples of how the prophetic tradition gives expression to YHWH's wrath. Such images should arrest and disgust any reader, and they prove even more difficult in our contemporary context following revelations of sexual abuse in the Church and society's wider reckoning with sexual predation endemic in a number of institutions. How can one worship a God who not only condones, but seemingly decrees and even participates in rape as a fitting punishment for infidelity? How ought we to grapple with challenging biblical texts in which YHWH appears to advocate sexual violence as an appropriate and deserved punishment?

This article examines possible interpretive strategies to wrestle with the concept of a violent, vengeful God in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, specifically as manifested in the prophetic tradition. Faced with texts that promote rape as a form of divine justice, I examine both the successes and shortcomings of a number of approaches to these texts. Renouncing or silencing troubling passages, reducing their function to mere metaphor or figurative use, contextualizing the works within a specific historical moment of a community in crisis, or identifying the limitations of the human agent (the prophet) have all proven effective ways of preserving the image of a compassionate and merciful God despite the brutal violence depicted in these passages. Yet each of these approaches fails in certain respects.

Perhaps another method of interpreting instances of sexual violence at the hands of God would prove beneficial. Without denying either the genuine human or divine authorship of the biblical texts, I wager that the answer lies in separating the literal sense of the human author's words from the divinely-designed end of the inspired text. Ultimately, I propose that we can read in these passages a divinely-inspired critique of the religious tradition — instances in which God reveals the limitations of even those acting in his service and offers an implicit critique of certain elements within the tradition itself.

## **Sexual Shaming and Rape as Prophetic Motif**

Before reviewing existing interpretive strategies that wrestle with troubling images of God, it is first necessary to consider the use of sexual violence as a motif within the prophetic tradition. The fiery invective of the prophets promises divine judgment in the form of cataclysmic disaster. Amongst other means of depicting such catastrophe, the texts frequently employ images of sexual shaming and violation as a paradigm for divine punishment. This prophetic trope recurs across a number of texts, not as some mere idiosyncratic quirk of rhetorical style unique to one author. Major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all make extensive

sexual violence as a manifestation of divine judgment, and minor prophets such as Nahum similarly draw from this alarming yet effective imagery. Consider YHWH's depiction and explanation, through the voice of Jeremiah, of the impending siege and invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army:

And if you say in your heart, "Why have these things come upon me?" it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you are violated... This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, says the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies. I will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your shameless prostitutions on the hills of the countryside. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! (Jer. 13:22-27)<sup>1</sup>

God seemingly endorses the stripping and public shaming of an adulterous woman as an appropriate punishment for infidelity. Amy Kalmanofsky notes that the language employed here in describing the "skirts" and one's "shame" being seen publicly "can be understood in these passages as euphemisms for female genitals and suggest that Zion, the personified city of Jerusalem, is stripped and then sexually violated."<sup>2</sup> The "sexually suggestive and violent imagery" describes the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians — God's own instrument of chastisement — as the enemy "undresses and invades Judah."<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah continues with frequent recourse to such depictions of violation and shaming to express judgment and punishment, using similar motifs in his Oracles Against the Nations concerning Edom and Babylon (Jer. 49-51). Indeed, YHWH does not reserve this punishment exclusively to the unfaithful Israel.

While Jeremiah makes frequent and unrelenting use of such violent depictions, they are not a unique characteristic of his own prophetic style. Similar language appears in oracles of judgment against Nineveh and the Assyrians in the prophet Nahum 3:4-6, and much longer, graphic accounts against Israel and Judah in Ezekiel 16 and 23. In each instance, the punishment of shaming and violation is justified by noting the promiscuity, infidelity, and "whoring" of the one deserving punishment:

Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute... I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations come from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Kalmanofsky, "As She Did, Do to Her!" Jeremiah's OAN as Revenge Fantasies," in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles Against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*, ed. Else K. Holt, Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

and kingdoms on your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle. (Nah. 3:4-6)

The agency of YHWH in these texts is clearly emphasized as the perpetrator of the violation and shaming. The (male) deity exacts the punishment of rape and shaming against (largely female) victims. Yet it is important to note that prophetic imagery of sexual violence is not exclusively depicted as a male aggressor against a female victim. While the majority of these instances invoke rape as the appropriate punishment against a female subject for “infidelity,” “whoring,” or “lusting after” others (notably Ezek. 16, 23; Jer. 13:22-27), the prophetic tradition also includes graphic instances of sexual violence perpetrated against male subjects (Jer. 49:8-10). In his oracle against Edom, Jeremiah depicts vengeance in the form of sexual violence against a male victim (personified as Esau), with the voice of God raging, “I will bring the calamity of Esau upon him, the time when I punish him...as for me, I have stripped Esau bare, I have uncovered his hiding places, and he is not able to conceal himself. His offspring are destroyed [ravaged]<sup>4</sup>, his kinsfolk and his neighbors” (Jer. 49:8-10). The wrath of God extends not only to the violation of the male Esau, but also of “his kinsfolk and his neighbors” in a retributive punishment whose scope seemingly knows no limits.

Finally, while many of these texts provide for sexual punishments for what are metaphorically depicted as sexual sins — “lusting after” others, or “infidelity” through idolatry and foreign alliances — the punishment can also fit the crime in instances of revenge. Against Babylon, Jeremiah’s YHWH decrees, “take vengeance on her, do to her as she has done!” (Jer. 50:15), and Isaiah describes divine vengeance in uncovering the “nakedness” of Babylon so that “your shame shall be seen” as a consequence of Babylon being too harsh and merciless despite being the very instrument of divine chastisement against Judah (Isa. 47:1-6). Throughout these texts, divine justice appears as a capricious and vindictive endeavor to shame, humiliate, and violate both Israel and her enemies.

## Attempts at Salvaging the Image of God

Faced with graphic depictions of sexual violence at the hands of YHWH, many readers find these texts repugnant and incompatible with their understanding of God. How ought communities of faith to understand

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Allen translates “destroyed” as “ravaged,” continuing more directly in the trope of sexual violence. Allen observes that the emphatic proclamation by God that “I will bring calamity” assures that behind the invaders “would stand the person of Yahweh, who was to give them access to property and human life.” See Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 488-497.

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texts in which God seemingly endorses, justifies, and even perpetrates sexual violence? Can we maintain or salvage the image of a compassionate and merciful God?

A number of interpretive strategies have been adopted in grappling with these images, each with its own benefits and limitations. Let us consider several of these approaches: (1) a repudiation or silencing of the text itself; (2) understanding these images as merely a metaphor for war and invasion; (3) situating the composition and reception of the texts within their particular historical context, namely a community in crisis; and (4) highlighting the limitations or misunderstandings of the prophetic agent himself.

### *Silence & Renunciation*

The easiest and most evident way to deal with challenging passages is simply to ignore them, to renounce them as misrepresentations of God or as offensive texts that are incompatible with the community's prior concept of the divine. The individual or the community can simply excise these difficult passages from the canon or discount them as a corrupting influence. This is, in effect, how many religious traditions have addressed these very images of divinely-sanctioned sexual violence. Susanne Scholz notes that, during Talmudic times, the rabbis "understood the grave theological challenges of these passages" and "prohibited the liturgical reading of a text such as Ezekiel 16...they ordered the biblical poetics of rape to remain unread in public settings."<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church adopts a similar approach and omits most images of sexual violence from liturgical reading and the lectionary, and rarely (if ever) do these passages appear as meditations for retreats or spiritual reading.

Such an approach, however, is not without major problems. From a methodological standpoint it establishes a questionable and dangerous precedent, especially if we consider these texts as the genuinely inspired word of God. As *Dei Verbum* establishes, "since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings...therefore, all Scripture is divinely inspired...."<sup>6</sup> The task of the interpreter is not to discount select passages of Scripture that might prove challenging, but to discover what is "that truth which God

<sup>5</sup> Scholz goes on to note that "despite the various efforts to keep these texts out of sight from 'ordinary readers,' they have always been part of the biblical canon." See Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 205-6.

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), §11.

wanted put into sacred writings.”<sup>7</sup> Excising or denying difficult passages is an abdication of that responsibility. Furthermore, if we take “the content and unity of the whole of Scripture” as an interpretive principle, a tattered and redacted text will severely diminish the ability to interpret authentically.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does this approach do violence to the integrity of the scriptural text as it has been received by the community, it also opens the doors to cherry-picking any passages we may find palatable while avoiding anything that challenges us throughout the entirety of Scripture. Glossing over or silencing these passages may be a well-intentioned endeavor to preserve the image of a merciful God, but we cannot deny that such imagery exists (and pervades) the Scriptural text and the religious tradition itself.

### *Mere Metaphor*

A more subtle way of discounting these passages — one which preserves their position within the text yet which neutralizes their offensive literal meaning — is to reduce them merely to figurative language. Rape and sexual violation serve as effective metaphors for military incursion and conquest, and they provide unmistakable images for the audience of the prophetic words to grasp.

Kathleen M. O’Connor describes rape imagery as “apt language for invasion” to capture the experience of “violence, intrusive and painful physical penetration, traumatic powerlessness and shameful humiliation of women, husbands, brothers, and sons.”<sup>9</sup> The hyperbolic use of rape to convey the sense of futility and trauma experienced by a conquered people certainly provides an attention-grabbing means of conveying one’s message.

Most commentators seem content to treat these passages as a flourish of rhetorical style and a metaphorical means of conveying the experience of warfare. While plausible as an interpretive strategy, it is insufficient. For although the passages can function in a metaphorical, figurative way, they do not do so exclusively. Rape and sexual trauma were — and indeed still are — the literal and brutal reality of warfare. To reduce these passages to a simple metaphor flattens the truly startling nature of the text, and seeks to avoid its challenging and provocative nature.

To remind readers of this point, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite reads these passages alongside experiences of rape victims and trauma in armed conflict — not simply in the ancient world, but also in more recent military campaigns. She examines harrowing accounts of sexual violence in Vietnam, Kuwait, Nanking, and the Bosnian conflicts during the 20th century, rec-

<sup>7</sup> Idem.

<sup>8</sup> *Dei Verbum*, §12.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 54-55. As quoted in Kalmanofsky, “‘As She Did, Do to Her!’ Jeremiah’s OAN as Revenge Fantasies,” 117.