

# 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

use of 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

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<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

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<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.

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

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<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.

ognizing that “rape” does not function simply as figurative language for invasion during warfare. “At some point the term metaphor loses its meaning when it is a literal description of what is taking place,” she observes, recalling the very real, brutal nature of warfare that can be lost when we metaphorize the language of sexual trauma.<sup>10</sup> The prophetic accounts call to mind not only the reality of impending military invasion and conquest, but also the fact that any number of people will suffer horrific atrocities as a result — especially those most vulnerable. The visceral repugnancy of the passages nonetheless gives some voice and recognition to the horrors that the most vulnerable suffered, oftentimes horrors that have been glossed over or silenced without further acknowledgment.

Thus, while we cannot endorse a literal reading of the text that promotes an image of “God as rapist” or that sexual trauma is a divinely-decreed punishment, discounting the passages through silence or neutralizing the text through metaphor pose significant interpretive problems. Beyond the mere problems of interpretation, I would also suggest that such an approach is a grave injustice to the victims who actually did endure the brutal reality of these events. Voice is seldom given to the experience of the victims and the conquered in warfare, let alone preserved for the religious imagination of future generations.<sup>11</sup> To silence or to ignore that lived reality is, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur warns, effectively to “kill the victims twice.”<sup>12</sup>

### *A Community in Crisis: Meaning Making and Clinging to God*

Another means of wrestling with these difficult texts is to understand them in the light of the context in which they were composed, received, and preserved. Perhaps these texts that depict divine vengeance are not an experience of divine vengeance in the moment, but a subsequent projection or interpretation by a community in crisis. As an attempt to make sense of traumatic events and to preserve meaning amidst chaos and collapse, the community imputes the agency of punishment to God as a means of upholding divine control over their destiny and an affirmation that, ultimately, God’s governance and order still stand.

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “‘You May Enjoy the Spoil of Your Enemies’: Rape as a Biblical Metaphor for War,” *Semeia* 61 (1993), 71.

<sup>11</sup> “Rarely do we find such an artifact preserved for posterity. Even more rarely does the literary tradition of the defeated come to play a pivotal role in subsequent cultural history.” See Louis Stulman, “Art and Atrocity, and the Book of Jeremiah,” in *Jeremiah Invented: Constructions and Deconstructions of Jeremiah*, ed. Else K. Holt and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 99.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Memory of Suffering,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 290.

For a community facing imminent invasion and collapse, ascribing agency to YHWH rather than to mere chance or to the power of foreign gods provides a last-resort source of comfort and assurance:

That God's rape is a "text of terror" is central to its purpose and to its capacity to defend God. For Judean victims, defeat by Babylon means that Judah lost the war to superior deities, to Marduk and his pantheon. It means that Judah's God is ineffectual, effete, and has "been disappeared." But if God is the author of Zion's rape, God is not disappeared, not a defeated lesser being, not diminished, but powerful.<sup>13</sup>

For the victims, the punishment is neither chaotic nor unmerited. By ascribing agency to God and seeing the calamity as divinely-sanctioned (and justifiably merited) punishment, the community is able to preserve some semblance of trust in divine governance, power, and order in an otherwise chaotic and calamitous time. YHWH remains in control as the social and political order crumbles. By ascribing these events to the will of God as deserved punishment for infidelity, a coherent framework of meaning emerges that remains stable amidst the larger experience of chaos. Stulman contends that the inclination "to hold this 'tiny country' responsible for virtually all its troubles, to explain its political misfortunes by way of moral causality, is a rigorous attempt to create symbolic coherence in times of social convulsion."<sup>14</sup> Such an attempt is necessary for the preservation and survival of the community:

For the sake of community survival, the text places war, military occupation, exile, and captivity — traumatic events in ancient as well as modern times — within a framework of meaning. More directly, this literature asserts that the nation's concentration of pain is not beyond the scope of God's concern or governance, nor is it the result of capricious geopolitical or mythic forces.<sup>15</sup>

To that end, the narrative of human sinfulness eliciting divine punishment provides a clear-cut (albeit superficial) explanation for what in reality was a far more complex array of contributing factors to the events that unfolded in the fall of Judah. O'Connor reads in these texts of terror

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence," in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets*, ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O'Brien (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Stulman, "The Prose Sermons in the Book of Jeremiah: Duhm's and Mowinckel's Contributions to Contemporary Trauma Readings," in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 135.

<sup>15</sup> Idem.

an attempt at clinging to God and preserving meaning as God's Chosen People:

...What I see in this shocking violent imagery is a provisional effort to make sense of the disaster, to hold onto God, to cling mightily to the Creator in the midst of destruction all around. I see engagement in life-giving, world-altering interpretation. I see in God's violence a potent stammering toward meaning... of making sense of the senseless.<sup>16</sup>

This attempt at making meaning and a coherent narrative through theological interpretation can also provide a therapeutic means of expressing the community's history, offer a cathartic outlet for healing and release, or function as a theological reflection for self-understanding. As trauma literature and a meditation on war itself, the words of the prophets can "show the people the reality of their suffering, as if in a mirror. To see and to name this reality as what they have suffered is the first step toward healing."<sup>17</sup> In short, it is for the good of the community, the preservation of their worldview, and the prospect of recovery that God be identified as the agent of disaster.

Importantly, the use of rape imagery and revenge fantasies against Judah's own enemies serve to bolster this framework of meaning that upholds divine governance and order. When the prophet Nahum rails against the Assyrians and Nineveh, or Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesy divine retribution against the Babylonians, their oracles fit into a theological understanding that God employs agents of divine chastisement, yet if they overreach or go too far, God's justice demands retribution for their transgression. Such an understanding also serves to highlight how God's own (human) instruments can exceed the scope of their mission (a point to which we shall return momentarily when discussing the role of the prophet himself).

With respect to Assyria and Babylon, both are depicted as the rods of divine punishment, the means by which YHWH exercises judgment on the unfaithful Israel and Judah. Yet within this framework of meaning, divine retribution is visited upon both empires for their own excesses and merciless behavior. Richard Clifford traces this to the "Isaian two-stage view" of history, noting that for the prophet Nahum, "in stage 1, Assyria is an instrument of the Lord's chastisement of Israel; in stage 2,

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence," 47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. O'Connor elaborates that, "Trauma and disaster studies suggest a different way to understand. The fact that rape is appalling and unbearable, unspeakable and unacceptable is surely the point! To be victims of invasion *is* appalling, unbearable, unspeakable, and unacceptable, a ripping apart, an intimate destruction of life. This poem of God's violent rape of Zion gives the people back their story and brings to speech the profound terror and harm of Babylonian assaults" (46).

Assyria will undergo punishment for grossly exceeding the divine mandate. Upholding the righteous and chastising the wicked are two sides of the one coin of justice."<sup>18</sup> Christopher Frechette interprets Isaiah's invective against Babylon in a similar manner, where God condemns Babylon for showing no mercy, and "even on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy" (Isa. 47:6). He contends that, "while not disagreeing with traditions that YHWH intended the destruction of Jerusalem in order to punish Israel, Isa. 47 nevertheless condemns the human agents, symbolized by Daughter Babylon, for the manner in which they enacted that destruction...."<sup>19</sup> Congruent with the larger framework of divine governance and order, the vengeance justly exacted upon Babylon will be carried out by YHWH himself, "the acknowledged arbiter of justice and meaning...the violence is imagined not as blind rage but in conjunction with the new interpretation that the violations experienced by the Judeans at the hands of the Babylonians were wrong."<sup>20</sup> For the community that has experienced a collapse of social and political order, trust in a cosmic order and in the ultimate justice of YHWH provides a stable source of meaning, security, and trust.

Attention to the historical context surrounding the original composition, reception, and preservation of these texts is the exegetically responsible and necessary approach to interpretation. Yet again, it is insufficient and has its limitations. Such a move requires that we bracket the divine authorship of the text, however, and view the narrative either as a projection by the people undergoing the cataclysmic events, or a subsequent theological interpretation of historical occurrences. To equate the text with the community's theological reflections on historical events or as a projection onto God places too much emphasis on the historical or psychological aspects of the human author/community. While this approach is useful to understand the historical context of the prophecy and its importance to the community which underwent these events, it fails to address the continued and living value of the text. What does the inspired text have to offer to faith communities today, and how do we make sense of images of divine violence when read in our present context?

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<sup>18</sup> Richard J. Clifford, "Nahum," in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, eds. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu, Richard J. Clifford, S.J., Carol J. Dempsey, O.P., Eileen M. Schuller, O.S.U., Thomas D. Stegman, S.J., and Ronald D. Witherup, P.S.S. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2018), 853.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher G. Frechette, "Daughter Babylon Raped and Bereaved (Isaiah 47): Symbolic Violence and Meaning-Making in Recovery from Trauma," in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*

***Blame the Messenger:  
The Limitations of the Prophet***

One final means of interpreting passages of sexual violence at the hands of God is to construe such passages as a misunderstanding on the part of the prophet himself, a result of the prophet's very human (and very real) limitations. According to this approach, God's message became "lost in translation" and the text reflects more the designs of the prophet than of God.

As noted above with respect to Babylon and Assyria, the human instruments by which YHWH actualizes his plans in history can exceed the scope of their mission — something that the prophetic tradition itself explicitly recognizes (Isa. 47:3-6; Nah. 3; Jer. 50-51).<sup>21</sup> It is not inconceivable then — perhaps even likely — that the prophetic office can also transgress "too far" and outstrip the message of God.

One must keep in mind the limitations of the human agents employed by God, even if the prophet may be called and inspired. Abraham Heschel construes the prophetic office as being more than a mere messenger. Rather, he sees in the prophetic office a share in the feeling of the divine pathos. He notes, "the task of the prophet is to convey the word of God. Yet the word is aglow with the pathos. One cannot understand the word without sensing the pathos...the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a *sympathy with the divine pathos*...."<sup>22</sup> To have a share in the divine pathos and to communicate it is no small feat, one which calls into question the ability of the human mind to conceive of and subsequently to communicate the mind of God.

The prophetic tradition includes its own self-critique on this front, with God declaring through the prophet Isaiah that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Even if the divine pathos were to become effable to the human mind (which is far from guaranteed), its reception by a limited mind and the prophet's later communication of that message in human language opens two stages of potential corruption or misconstruing. Further, if the prophet is purportedly "sensing" or "feeling" the divine pathos, how ought one to discern and to separate the frustrations and feelings of the prophet himself from those of God?

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<sup>21</sup> The wider gamut of salvation history also shows how, with the sole exception of the Blessed Mother, the human agents employed by God are all fallible and sinful individuals who fail in certain respects. The stories of Judah, Moses, Saul and David, Peter and Paul all attest to the limitations and shortcomings of agents who are nonetheless inspired, chosen, and used by God for divine purposes.

<sup>22</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, "What Manner of Man is the Prophet?" in *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 26.

This line of reasoning could provide a means to discount more difficult passages as a misunderstanding or corrupting human influence on the divine words — or, perhaps more charitably, the need for the prophet to use hyperbole and extreme language to convey some sense of that which is ultimately unsayable/incommunicable in human terms. If that is the case, we can thus understand the use of rape imagery and sexual violence as a device of the prophet that gestures toward, but does not fully capture, the sense that God intended. Yet just as with the metaphorical readings or the approach of simply discounting difficult passages, such an approach poses major problems to the integrity of the Scriptural text as the inspired word of God. Furthermore, questioning the ability of the prophet to communicate the divine message undermines not only difficult passages, but the entire prophetic tradition (if not the very notion of revelation itself). While the genuinely human author undoubtedly carries his own personal views, feelings, and limitations, we cannot use them as a means simply to discount aspects of the text as it has been produced and received.

## **Another Solution? A Perennial Challenge to the Religious Tradition**

Despite the problems and pitfalls with the previous methods of interpretation, drawing a distinction between the human agent and God's intent provides an insightful starting point for a different approach. As noted at the outset, while I deny neither the genuine human nor 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. Images and understandings of divine violence and rape are certainly the work of a human author — this is without question, as we have received a written text in history through human hands. Yet they are also the result of genuine divine authorship and inspiration. It is this second pole of the equation that provokes our problem, and the question remains, "to what end?" What purpose or what truth does God intend to communicate in "inspiring" such passages, if not the *prima facie*, literal meaning of the text?<sup>23</sup>

By inspiring texts that communicate such repugnant and alarming images of God, I believe that God imbues within the prophetic tradition itself an implicit, divinely-inspired critique of the religious tradition, especially in its espousal of patriarchal structures and attitudes that promote sexual subjugation and enable sexual violence. In order to clarify and to separate the spiritual sense of the Scripture and its divinely-inspired end

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<sup>23</sup> *Dei Verbum*, §12.

from the literal meaning of the words, let us consider some principles from the tradition of Catholic biblical interpretation.

Pope Benedict XVI makes an important differentiation between the “literal” and “spiritual” sense of Scripture, and the need to transcend the strict “letter” of the text as if it were simply an historical artifact. Rather, he argues for a rediscovery of “the interplay between the *different senses of scripture*,” and how “transcending the literal sense [makes] the letter itself credible.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps more than any other point in Scripture, biblical rape texts and images of divine sexual violence necessitate such a transcendence of the literal sense to make “the letter itself credible.”

Admitting genuine human authorship (including human influence, limitations, potential for mistake or error, or a “blurring of the lines” between God and God’s agent) does not deny the divine inspiration and authorship of the texts. Rather, it forces the biblical reader to reconsider (1) the role of the genuine human authors of the texts, and (2) how one understands the “truth” of Scripture as divinely-inspired.

It is a mistake to believe that “affirming the Sacred Scriptures to be the inspired word of God entails denying that they are also genuinely human word.”<sup>25</sup> The Catholic understanding of the scriptures maintains that the texts “have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself,” yet that “in composing the sacred books, God chose human beings and, while employed by Him, they made use of their powers and abilities... as true authors.”<sup>26</sup> This interpretive approach neither denies the genuine divine authorship of the Scriptures nor does it ignore the human context and influences on their composition. Consequently, since “God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words....”<sup>27</sup> Thus a level of interpretation and discernment is necessary to unpack the true meaning of the text — divinely inspired as it may be, a product that is both truly authored by God and truly authored through human beings.

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), §38. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 226.

<sup>26</sup> *Dei Verbum*, §11: “Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles...holds that the books of both the Old and the New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose human beings and while employed by Him, they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.”

<sup>27</sup> *Dei Verbum*, §12.

Ascribing the literal words primarily to the human prophet (and existing tropes and motifs that the prophets inherit from their own tradition) rather than to YHWH helps to contextualize the otherwise shocking language of sexual shaming and violence at the hands of God. This perspective will also prevent us from subscribing to an image of a wrathful God who endorses and promotes sexual violence. Nonetheless, such an attribution of the words to the human author rather than to YHWH need not deny the inspired nature of the text. Yet we must examine what God intended to “manifest by means of their words,” not necessarily dictate verbatim for transcription.

What God makes manifest by means of these words is the reaction of disgust. It is here, in disgust, that I suggest a true sharing in the divine *pathos* occurs. These texts give us pause, they trouble us, they challenge us. The very fact that these passages arrest us and elicit disgust shows that they cannot simply be ignored or glossed over — and perhaps this is the point! To silence or to metaphorize them runs away from the challenge and denies that they have something very real and pressing to communicate today. Without endorsing the literal meaning of the words, the divine author grabs our attention and forces us to recognize something of significance in these texts, to be unsettled by such passages and to wrestle with them.

One possibility is that God is using the prophetic tradition and its tropes of sexual violence to force us to confront violent aspects within our own religious tradition. Indeed, on a human level and in the world of the text, these passages demonstrate how concepts and ideas of God can be (and have been) used to justify experiences of violence, war, subjugation, and rape. Attempts at “culturally inscribing” God into the “poetics of rape” should shock and appall the reader, and such a reaction may well be the truth God wishes to make manifest through the text.<sup>28</sup>

In recognizing and resisting misappropriations of God for violent and oppressive ends, we are nonetheless also confronted with the tragic reality that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition contains and has promoted such violence. It has been used to justify and to perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and institutions that promote (or at the very least enable) sexual subjugation, violence, and trauma. Through these texts, God and the prophets place that

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<sup>28</sup> Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 183. “What is needed in reading such rape rhetoric is a ‘voice of advocacy’ that names the violence, holds the perpetrators accountable, and questions the divinely sanctioned abuse of power. Such an interpretation also emphasizes that ‘this misogynist text really says nothing about YHWH’ because in this poem androcentric culture and history have ‘culturally inscribed’ God in the poetics of rape.” See also Johnny Miles, “Re-reading the Power of Satire: Isaiah’s ‘Daughters of Zion,’ Pope’s ‘Belinda,’ and the Rhetoric of Rape,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 2 (2006): 215. As quoted in Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 183.

historical heritage front and center to each generation anew — an unsettling yet necessary recognition that challenges us continually in a perennial critique of the tradition itself.

As a written text received and passed down through tradition, the inspired prophetic words continue to function as a challenge to each subsequent generation. Walter Brueggemann describes the power and function of a written prophetic utterance quite aptly, noting:

Written utterance has a kind of freedom from context that spoken utterance does not. And this written utterance explodes always again in odd, energetic, and transformative ways. Such texted reality is a great and relentless enemy of silence. The community of this text has learned, many times over, that enforced silence kills (see Psalm 39:1-3)...the text authorizes the mute to speak, and to know what to say, in the face of life-cancelling power.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the inspired word of God, “living and effective” (Heb. 4:12) shall not return empty but “shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the things for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). These words of God continue to challenge us – to wrest us from complacency, to think critically about our own religious tradition, and to strive ever more toward justice and the building of the Kingdom. Seen in this light, the prophetic tradition’s unsettling images of a violent and violating God does not promote rape as an instrument of divine justice — rather it reveals its absurdity and perversion. Far from promoting or endorsing sexual shaming as divinely-decreed punishment, God uses these texts to challenge and to critique a tradition that enables and has promoted sexual subjugation and violence throughout its very history. In this way, God’s truth manifests itself through the otherwise disturbing and difficult passages that pervade the prophetic tradition.

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Texts that Linger, Words that Explode,” *Theology Today* 54, no. 2 (1997), 189.

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