

Jeremy Schulz

Revealing Revelation

Smith

Reclaiming What Was Taken: Women's Survival of Rape in the Book of Revelation

Rape culture is, and has been, alive and thriving. The victimization of people who have been raped is constantly perpetuated by those in power, whether it be through media, political voice, or sacred scripture. In the following I will argue that the Book of Revelation was written with disregard to the suffering of victims of rape, and propagates the notion that sexual violence is a means to an end. I argue that this sacred text continues to objectify individuals who have been traumatized by rape, and I will suggest that the 'survivor' outlook be utilized to not only diminish the regularity of sexual violence, but to also help survivors of such violation to reclaim their inherent self-value.

Reading the final book in the canon that makes up the Christian Bible can have a rather traumatizing effect upon anyone who can say they've lived a generally healthy and uneventful life; now compound the reading with one or more truly tragic experiences and you've got a book that, if written today, might have a trigger warning placed neatly on the cover. If we consider this as having an eschatological message, the inevitable end of times becomes a frightening experience, yet what is even more terrifying than the impending doom is the blatant and common images of sexual violence that permeate this text, and the idea that violating someone sexually is an appropriate method of punishment for certain transgressions.

The first instance of sexual violence that we come across in Revelation occurs with the condemnation of the church in Thyatira in regard to Jezebel, 2:20-22 "But I have this against

you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings.”

Thankfully, there is not a shortage of scholarly ink devoted to deconstructing the message that John presents us with. In her essay, Pamela Thimmes presents a concise breakdown of this particular letter, looking at the community of Thyatira, the issues concerning Jezebel, and the coinciding punishments.¹ When taken at face value, the accusations made of Jezebel have the potential to pose a serious problem to the community which is actively struggling to maintain some sort of cultural identity that is separate from Rome, while also hoping to bodily survive in a world that is dominated by Imperial cult; however as scholars, we should not be quick to take such accusations as inherent truths without considering the multifaceted arena that is politics.

When considering Jezebel, it is important to remember her name, or the name that John prescribes to her in his letters. The name Jezebel is a title, one that David Barr believes is meant to bring to mind the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, in a veiled attempt to diminish a potential rival.² Barr makes an excellent point that regardless of any moral implications of her actions, Jezebel made quite the name for herself even when looked at through an anachronistic lens, but that making of a name is even more significant due to the time and place she resided in. Other than his attempt to compare a political opponent to an infamous woman of myth in hopes of discrediting her, Barr presents us with an interesting idea which he credits to Paul Duff: Jezebel was too powerful for John to engage directly. Barr writes “Those who followed her were

¹ Thimmes, *“Teaching and Beguiling My Servants”* A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, p. 74.

² Barr, *“Women in Myth and History: Deconstructing John’s Characterizations”* A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, p. 60

probably the wealthiest and most influential members of the assemblies. John needed to move cautiously or risk alienating important people...His attack on his powerful rival must be indirect; he must present the image of the opponent in such a way that the reader condemns it.”³

Thimmes continues to delve deeper into the sociopolitical repercussions that arise when “the insider is a woman, and the outsider is a man.” Her argument here is that John, feeling as though his authority is being challenged, engages in a campaign of mudslinging and threats of violence which Thimmes refers to as a *rhetoric of conflict*, or the language one uses when engaging in a strategy meant to undermine opponents and influence the outcome of a situation.⁴ This is a strategy that is commonly utilized in times of political transformation and change in leadership, but in particular we see this being instrumented in times of war; one party uses hate speech and propaganda as a means of demonizing the adversary and attempting to win the hearts and minds of the people.

This is not the first time we see this strategy in Revelation, as we can see in 2:12-15 with the third letter to the church in Pergamum, “there are some who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication.”, again here the opponent to John’s power is vilified. What is different in the case of Jezebel is that she is not attacked as a male or genderless opponent as is the case in Pergamum, instead the accusations thrust upon her are of sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols with an explicit note that she is a woman; John turns the two ‘womanly’ realms of the ancient world against the opposition. Thimmes quotes Cheryl Glenn saying, “For the past twenty-five hundred years in Western culture, the ideal woman has

³ Barr, “*Women in Myth and History: Deconstructing John’s Characterizations*” A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, p. 61

⁴ Thimmes, “*Teaching and Beguiling My Servants*” A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, p. 77

been disciplined by cultural codes that require a closed mouth (silence), a closed body (chastity), and an enclosed life (domestic confinement).”⁵

Once we’ve identified Jezebel, and the threat she poses, we come to her punishment. It is important to compare her judgement to that of the opponent in Pergamum, who is allowed to blend in with the masses and take a generalized wrath. Jezebel is being “thrown on a bed”, and while some may argue that translation would refer to a ‘sick bed’, the obvious targeting of her as a woman seems clear that her specific punishment is rape. To some extent we can do a comparison to the Whore of Babylon and be grateful that Jezebel’s suffering is not graphically depicted, yet it may be even more terrible knowing that, according to John, Jesus is the one who is throwing her on the bed. Not only do we have the idea of sexual violence firmly planted in our minds, but now we’re supposed to disregard the more kind imagery of Jesus of the Gospels, and imagine him as a violent divine being that uses rape as a punishment.

It is in the throwing on the bed that we get to a very specific way in which Revelation victimizes sexual assault survivors. Rape is awful, and there is no healthy way that one can ever forget such a horrendous violation; however, in cases where the individual does not have their life taken, survivors get off the bed. They are, hopefully, able to find help, make a report, and begin a lifelong process of healing and working to move forward. Jezebel does not get to make that choice, instead she is thrown on the bed and is never given the chance to stand up; in a twisted perversion of an already deplorable act, Jezebel is seemingly sentenced to an eternity of endless rape. We can make this argument as John clearly states in Rev 2:23 “and I will strike her children dead.” If John has to note when people will die and such a detail is missing from Jezebel’s fate, we can assume that there is no end to her torment.

⁵ Thimmes, *“Teaching and Beguiling My Servants”* A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, p. 78

In modern times there is a victimization associated with people who have been raped. Not only have these individuals been subjected to a heinous and traumatic physical experience, but they are then all too often placed in the 'victim' category just as Jezebel is. In previously working as an advocate at the Rape Crisis Center of Central New Mexico, I engaged people of completely diverse walks of life who had been the targets of rape and sexual violence, with a majority of these attacks having taken place within the same day. From the moment we met, there was some force that sought to victimize them; whether it be law enforcement officers, medical examiners, attorneys, even family members, it seemed that society had to create a victim identity in order to engage with the individual. What needs to change, other than the terrible act of rape itself, is the idea that someone who has gone through this kind of ordeal is then marked as a victim; instead we need to embrace the notion that while this unacceptable violation occurred, the individual survived and they will continue to survive. We do not say that people are victims of cancer; we say they survived it, so why should a person be forced to carry around this metaphorical red 'V' and never have their abilities and efforts of survival be placed at the forefront?

In Revelation, the woman Jezebel is read as a villain who must be victimized for her actions; however, I think we need to revolutionize this story. Jezebel is an agent in a time when women held little to no agency, and regardless of what she has or has not done, there is absolutely no acceptable reason that she should be turned into a victim. Mary Ann Beavis perhaps says it best in her article. "Much to John's disgust, the early Christian woman he so detested probably continued her ministry of teaching and preaching in Thyatira while he

remained imprisoned on Patmos.”⁶ With the thoughts of Barr and Beavis in mind, I believe there is a way for Revelation to allow survivors of sexual assault to reclaim their value and their scripture by seeing that Jezebel was powerful enough to warrant a disguised assault on her character, and that if we grant her the agency she so rightly deserves, we can see a powerful survivor of sexual assault who gets up off the bed, reports the rape to the appropriate authorities, and lives a life without fear, domination, or degradation.

⁶ Beavis, *“Jezebel Speaks: Naming the Goddesses in the Book of Revelation”* A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John p. 143

Bibliography

Coogan, Michael D, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins. The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version : with the Apocrypha : an Ecumenical Study Bible. Oxford [England: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Levine, Amy-Jill. A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John. London: T & T Clark, 2009. Feminist companion to the New Testament and early Christian writings, 13; Feminist companion to the New Testament and early Christian writings, 13.

Pippin, Tina. Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

Pippin, Tina. The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John, Semeia 60. 1992.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. The Book of Revelation--Justice and Judgment. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.