

**Biblical Authority and Difficult Texts:**  
Deconstruction, Reconstruction, Decision

by

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Prophets: A Survey  
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“One of the primary tasks of practical reasoning is learning how to view things in the right way. Once one does this, then one can draw the appropriate analogies and act in the appropriate ways.”<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, we will precede our study of Biblical authority in light of problematic prophetic texts<sup>2</sup> by first considering [John 6:53-69](#), wherein Jesus uses the metaphor of human cannibalism to convey spiritual truth. This highly offensive language caused some of Jesus’ own followers to abandon him, yet despite the revolting nature of this imagery, and despite the varying reactions to it,<sup>3</sup> followers of Jesus through the centuries have managed to deal with Jesus’ language *without thereby accepting, condoning, or practicing cannibalism*.

If we can tolerate this cannibalism metaphor, and even derive valuable spiritual insight from it,<sup>4</sup> then surely our modern-day allergic reaction to the rape/violence metaphors<sup>5</sup> of the prophets requires explanation. That we currently decry the metaphor of cannibalism less loudly than we condemn the imagery of rape and violence likely stems from the reality that our society, while having no significant subculture of cannibalism,<sup>6</sup> does have a long

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<sup>1</sup> Fowl, Stephen E.; *Engaging Scripture*; Blackwell, 1998; p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically [Hosea 2](#); [Jeremiah 3:1-5](#), [13:20-27](#); and most especially [Ezekiel 16](#) and [23](#), texts that [Weems](#) correctly describes as “two of the most violent chapters in the whole of the Hebrew Bible” (Weems, Renita J.; *Battered Love*; Fortress, 1995; p. 96).

<sup>3</sup> One of the main functions of scripture is to elicit a response from us; we must all “choose us this day whom we will serve.” As Augustine says, some biblical passages were “spoken with a useful and healthful obscurity for the purpose of exercising and sharpening...the minds of the readers and of destroying fastidiousness and stimulating the desire to learn, concealing their intention in such a way that the minds of the impious are *either converted to piety or excluded from the mysteries of faith*” (*On Christian Doctrine*; translated by D.W. Robertson, Jr; Prentice-Hall, 1997 [originally published 1958]; p. 132; emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> “The more things seem to be obscured by figurative words, the sweeter they become when they are explained” (*ibid*, pp. 128-129).

<sup>5</sup> “Metaphors originate in social contexts and reinforce social contexts...Audiences accept, reject, esteem, and forget metaphors in proportion to the metaphors’ ability or inability to square with a web of emotional, social, political, historical, institutional data” ([Weems](#), p. 34).

<sup>6</sup> [Jeffrey Dahmer](#) and [Hannibal Lecter](#) notwithstanding. Also, some primitive tribes believe that eating the remains of their deceased loved ones is more respectful and dignified than allowing their corpses to rot underground and be eaten by worms. As Augustine says, “...men of good hope may profitably see both that the customs which they disdain may have a good use and that the customs which they themselves embrace may be damnable...*let them not measure others by themselves*” (*ibid*, p. 95-96, emphasis added).

cultural habit and history of violence against women.<sup>7</sup> *It is the festering wound of our own cultural situation that exacerbates our sensitivities to the crude sexual imagery in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.*<sup>8</sup> Any reasonable reading of Scripture, using clear passages to help interpret more difficult ones,<sup>9</sup> reveals that God no more desires violence against women<sup>10</sup> than he condones cannibalism.

In a broader sense, though, we may wonder why God would not have been as repulsed *then* as we are *today* with this sort of language. The status of women in ancient cultures was hardly preferable to that of our modern, civilized societies;<sup>11</sup> indeed, if the status of women during the prophetic era was even *close* to being as bad as it is today, then we wonder how God could be careless (negligent?) enough to employ any sort of language that might be interpreted to fuel the flames of women's misery down through the centuries. Moreover, why should God use *any* unpleasant language,<sup>12</sup> *whatever* the reason? Wouldn't

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<sup>7</sup> This history of violence against women is not an aberration linked solely to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather something which sadly can be observed in virtually every known society and religion, past or present.

<sup>8</sup> Our society, *if it did not inveterately practice and/or ignore the violence committed against women*, would likely manage the prophets' violent sexual metaphors as well as we take in stride Jesus' appalling cannibalism imagery.

<sup>9</sup> "...the first rule of this undertaking and labor is...to know these books even if they are not understood... memorize them...those things which are put openly in them...are to be studied more diligently and more intelligently, for the more one learns about these things the more capable of understanding he becomes... Then, having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may *take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure*" (Augustine, p. 42, emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> We must attend closely to what the prophets *do not* say. As Weems herself admits, "The prophet carefully avoids any suggestion that the husband rapes the wife. That is because *God, though gendered in the Bible as male, is absolutely never represented as acting sexually*" (Weems, p. 145, emphasis added; contrast this with p. 16, where she makes the blasphemous and contradictory assertion that "...God, like human beings...is jealous and commits rape").

<sup>11</sup> Probably only a select few women today enjoy appreciably greater status than was the common experience of most women during all previous eras. Future historians, looking back, may well read the lyrics of our hip-hop music (or the rantings of Don Imus) and judge our era one of the most misogynistic of all time—and of course, pervasive social evils such as pornography, abortion, out-of-wedlock births, promiscuity, divorce, idolization of unattainable standards of physical beauty and unending youthfulness, anorexia, and bulimia will surely not lessen their judgment in this regard.

<sup>12</sup> "Descriptions of the Lord's anger, sorrow, and compassion will swirl around the downward spiral of Israel's growing unfaithfulness like eddies in a wildly turbulent river. The river will have its moments of calm, but they will soon give way again to increasingly rocky rapids, heading inexorably toward the final

we prefer a God who offers nothing but positive imagery and loving words? Any attempt to begin answering such questions requires an analogy.<sup>13</sup>

Suppose there is an upright and decent man, lovingly devoted to his wife, his daughter, and his mother. His mother taught him to respect and cherish women, and he had always exceeded his mother's expectations. Now suppose also that this man happened to be a drill sergeant in the U.S. Army at the time of the Vietnam War. His duties were to prepare lazy, doped-up, undisciplined young hippies for combat.<sup>14</sup> He is given only three weeks to prepare each new batch of recruits. If they failed to learn proper discipline, duty, and combat skill during this time, they will likely be quickly killed or maimed in battle, right along with all the fellow soldiers in their unit, and right along with all the helpless and innocent villagers they are sent to protect.<sup>15</sup>

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waterfall that will dash Israel into a splintered social and religious heap" (Olson, Dennis T.; *The New Interpreter's Bible*; Abingdon, 1995-2002; Volume II, p. 750).

<sup>13</sup> No single analogy will suffice; an active imagination is needed. The analogy of the drill sergeant presented here works best if the prophet is addressing the people *prior* to judgment—*before* it is too late for them to escape the impending disaster. If one is dealing with texts that address the people *after* they have already gone through the hell of judgment, then other analogies will work better. A comparison to "post-traumatic stress disorder" may resonate to some extent in our post-modern context, though the extent to which 20<sup>th</sup>-century psychological concepts will match the lived experience of an entire nation of ancient people is far from clear (and given the general notion of Biblical inspiration, just exactly who is suffering from this disorder? The prophets? The nation of Israel? God? All of the above?). Perhaps the analogy of a sporting coach recounting to his team exactly why their season ended in disaster—and precisely what must be done to avoid a repeat performance going forward—has broader and more direct application in our sports-minded society. Also, for me, a fascinating episode from the original Star Trek may be relevant. Captain Kirk encounters a planet whose various competing "leaders" resemble 1930's-era gangsters trapped in a vicious cycle of mutual deceit and "whacking" (assassinations). Kirk's patient attempts to reason with them accomplish nothing; sincere and civilized discourse simply does not compute, for in their minds they can only assume that Kirk is "trying to pull a fast one on them." Only after Kirk adopts their mobster mannerisms and language are they able to give him a real hearing. Kirk then convinces them that he is the biggest, baddest, gangster this side of the galaxy; he gets them to stop killing each other by assigning each of them a rank within the pecking order of his "new and improved" mobster enterprise; he orders them to clean up their act and to begin working together in harmony so as to increase their overall profits—which, he assures them, he will return to collect every year...*or else!*

<sup>14</sup> "...some things are taught for everyone in general; others are *directed toward particular classes of people*, in order that the medicine of instruction may be applicable not only to the general state of health but also *to the special infirmities of each member*" (Augustine, p. 94, cf. p. 109, emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> This is not a precise historical account of the Vietnam War, but rather a loosely idealized interpretation.

Painful experience has taught this drill sergeant that the best and only way to achieve the necessary results is to begin by deconstructively assaulting each new batch of recruits with language which they must deem utterly abusive, shameful, and demeaning.<sup>16</sup> Obviously this would not be the sort of language his mother taught him, and no doubt she would be shocked and dismayed to hear it coming from her son's mouth. Nevertheless, as long as he is on duty, the drill sergeant has a vital job to do, and if he fails to do it right—however personally unpleasant it may seem to him—innocent people will die.<sup>17</sup>

There is no point blaming the drill sergeant for starting the war; there is no point blaming him for the inexplicable political policies floating overhead; there is no point blaming him for the dismal character and condition of his recruits. For the sake of our story, these are all “givens,”<sup>18</sup> and the only thing the drill sergeant can do is take the recruits as they are and train them as best he can in the limited time available. Moreover, you can't blame the drill sergeant if his successfully trained soldiers survive the war and return to civilian society, only to have difficulty abandoning the abusive and sexist attitudes that were drilled into their heads during boot camp.<sup>19</sup>

So what can we say about the authority of the Bible, given the instances of unpleasant, offensive, crude language we at times perceive in it? First of all, the Bible possesses an *objective* authority because it alone—out of all the so-called “sacred scriptures” of all

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<sup>16</sup> Insert here whatever terms you wish: “pussies,” “wimps,” “ladies,” “fairies,” “cock-suckers,” and so on.

<sup>17</sup> “The prophets were not trying to use rational, logical, coherent, reasonable, detached arguments... They spoke with all the passion, hyperbole, and drama characteristic of speakers who doubt whether they will be given another chance to speak” (Weems, p. 66).

<sup>18</sup> In similar fashion, God has chosen to relate to humans in a “given” way that allows us to experience real consequences of our choices and actions. God does not always protect us from ourselves, at least not in the short term.

<sup>19</sup> These foul and feckless recruits will of course have already adopted violent and sexist language and attitudes toward others long before their boot camp experience. Had they not had the tables turned on them, had they not themselves become the *target* of such deconstructing language, they would have been unable to acquire the reconstructive qualities and knowledge that would ultimately help them (and the people they serve) to survive the horrors of war. **Weaning them away from any resulting residue of offensive, abusive language must remain an important task for a future day.**

the religions in the world—is *God’s* word, a revelation to us from the very Creator and Sustainer of the universe. We have no better word to give or receive. If scripture at any point offends, then we like Peter can only say, “Lord, to whom will we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the Bible confronts us and asks us to make a decision. If we decide to trust God’s words, then the Bible becomes *subjectively* authoritative for us through the indwelling of God’s Spirit, and through our communal efforts<sup>21</sup> to interpret and apply the words we have received, so that we may act out God’s intentions for our lives with a spirit of love, humility, and forgiveness. And maybe, just maybe, if the Bible truly is authoritative for us, we will go out and do whatever we can to heal the festering wounds that continue to afflict our society.

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<sup>20</sup> This need not prevent us from prayerfully sparring with God (see Abraham’s example in [Genesis 18:16-33](#)).

<sup>21</sup> “Great authors need great readers” ([Weems](#), p. 103).