

5 Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence, and Judeophobia in Text and Church¹

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Introduction

The 1980s saw the emergence of a powerful set of scholarly works on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible. Renita Weems, Mieke Bal, and Cheryl Exum were among early feminists to explore sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault. While some scholars focused on such issues in (then) contemporary church settings, biblical scholars continued for some time to focus largely on the Hebrew Bible.

Scholars arrived at the study of sexual violence in the Greek Bible and associated early Christian literature in the early 2000s; that field is still emerging. Masculinity studies and Queer studies have enriched the field. An interesting development in recent years has been the scholarly recognition of the intersections of sexual violence in early Christian literature and Judeophobia.

Miryam Clough, herself a survivor of clerical abuse, has focused her efforts on exploring abuse within the church and the ways in which such abuse has powerfully affected women's vocation. The academic work of David Tombs, like that of Clough, incorporates training and workshops that help church communities address sexual harm in their midst. Tombs has pioneered work on the scenes of Jesus' sexual abuse in the Gospels, applying modern understanding of the powerful intersections between torture and sexual abuse.

Meredith Warren, too, has long focused her attention on sexual abuse and sexual violence in Christian texts and is one of the scholars to note the connections between oppression of women in biblical literature and the demonizing of Jews. Eric Vanden Eykel also explores sexual assault in early Christian literature; he joins Warren in pointing out the intersectionality of Judeophobia and sexual violence in the Greek Bible and associated texts.

For centuries, theologians and scholars alike have privileged the Greek Bible and associated texts, neglecting the wealth of violent depictions they include. Supersessionist claims, moreover, that assert that the Hebrew Bible's

violence is succeeded by the Greek Bible's emphasis on love and peace have prevented biblical scholars from frank assessments of the abuse and violence in Christian literature. Both Warren and Vanden Eykel have led efforts to recognize the effects of supersessionism; the intersection of sexual abuse and Judeophobia is a topic nowadays because of their work.

Miryam Clough is Research Fellow at the College of St. John the Evangelist in Auckland, New Zealand. She is a contributor to the Routledge focus series to which this volume belongs. Her volume is entitled *Vocation and Violence: The Church and #MeToo* (2022). It explores the impact of clergy sexual misconduct on women's vocational aspirations and career choices in the church. Clough's book includes data from interviews with both survivors and church leaders, as well as accounts of her own experiences and sets out how misogyny and toxic masculinity justify purity culture, complementarianism, and clericalism. These, she argues, help cultivate the conditions for rape culture to flourish.

Clough has also contributed to *Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm: A Toolkit for Churches*, edited by Emily Colgan and Caroline Blyth. This toolkit was developed as a practical resource for church leaders to reflect on ways that churches can become spaces where sexual harm survivors feel safe and supported.

Barbara Thiede: I'm going to say how grateful we are for your time, Miryam. Can you start by telling us what drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the first place?

Miryam Clough: When I was an undergraduate, sexual violence wasn't widely discussed. To read about a rape case in the newspaper or see a dramatized rape on TV was quite shocking. As a young theology student studying the Hebrew Bible and translating Hosea, I found that I was unable to work with those [texts of] sexual violence in class, and my lecturer agreed that I could hand in written translations instead. There wasn't much literature around at the time that critiqued the sexual violence in that text, and I found it quite hard to deal with. So, I would have said this is a topic I've shied away from until recently. And yet when I think about it, my first theology dissertation—I was writing in the late 1980s—was concerned with sexual violence.

I'd become aware of what we called "sexist language" in those days—language that privileges the masculine and is still quite common in churches now. It was actually a male friend who'd said, "Don't you realize this language is disadvantaging women?" So, part of that dissertation, which was on the Psalms, was around language, but I was also advocating for the Psalms as a pastoral and liturgical

resource for women who'd experienced sexual violence, because they cover the whole gamut of human emotion. New Zealand's Anglican Prayer Book² was just being finalized at the time, and the Prayer Book Commission had decided to omit many of the violent passages from the Psalms. I was saying, these psalms are potentially really useful for women who've been abused, because they allow us to express all those difficult emotions in a safe way. I was advocating for retaining those verses. So that was, I guess, the first step.

When I started my PhD, it was partly around processing my own experience in the church, particularly at that time around a relationship that I was in with an Anglican priest. It was a very emotionally abusive relationship, and at times he was physically violent. It had become public to some extent, but he'd moved to another diocese, so there were no consequences for him in terms of his position in the church. I was pondering the structural stuff that was going on there—I felt that I was being called to account but he, as a priest, wasn't—when I saw Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), and I made the connection that I was experiencing a lot of shame, and shame seemed to be really dominant in the situation of women in Magdalene laundries. I wanted to know, where was their agency in that situation and how did the church retain *any* credibility, given its appalling treatment of these women, many of whom had been abused? I was also curious about the different ways shame was manifesting in the relationship I was in and about the way responsibility and blame were being allocated by others. So, I decided to do a PhD on shame and sexuality, focusing on the Magdalene laundries.

Researching shame took me into the area of violence. Authors like Thomas Scheff, Allan Schore, and James Gilligan were all linking shame to violence. Gilligan, for instance, says that underneath every act of violence there's an individual trying to regain their self-esteem, and Schore looks at the neurobiological link between shame and rage. I looked at the way shame is weaponized against women who have been abused and against women who don't conform to the church's standards of purity. As well as the physical constraints of incarceration, women in Magdalene laundries were subjected to repeated shaming. It effectively paralyzed them.

If you'd said to me a few years ago that my PhD had been on sexual violence, I probably wouldn't have recognized it as such, explicitly, although there are lots of examples of rape culture and sexual violence in it. I now see that kind of "architecture of containment," as James Smith describes the Magdalene laundries and those associated institutions that locked up women and children around matters of sexuality, as, itself, a form of sexualized violence.

Barbara Thiede: Even the initial steps that you describe that have to do with misogynistic language or toxic language: these are already a starting point around sexualized violence. I mean, that's a part of what undergirds rape culture. Even if you didn't see it that way, it still seems like you were already addressing issues of sexualized violence really from the get-go.

Miryam Clough: Yes, that's right. Eventually, I began engaging with it more consciously. I published *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, which was the monograph based on my PhD, in 2017. Not long after that, I was reflecting on the factors that led to my not getting ordained in the 1980s, talking to a male friend I'd trained with. His path was very much just straight into ministry. What were the differences in our situations? That led me to study the experiences of women in the Anglican Church in New Zealand. I wanted to understand more about the context of my own experiences in the church. Again, it still didn't occur to me at that point that I would be studying sexual violence—even though it was part of my own story.

Someone suggested that I read Louise Deans' 2001 book, *Whistleblower: Abuse of Power in the Church: A New Zealand Story*, which was about her [own] and other women's experience of reporting being abused in the 1980s by Rob McCullough, who was a senior priest in the Anglican Church. Eventually around thirty-five women disclosed being abused by him. So, from there, the literature trail I was following was taking me again to the issue of abuse, and I wrote *Vocation and Violence: The Church and #MeToo* (2022), which was about clergy misconduct and its effects on women with vocations to ministry.

Barbara Thiede: It's hard to tell the story on multiple levels. It's hard to tell the story on a personal level. It's hard to tell the story because nobody gives you room or space to tell the story. And then there's actual pushback against

telling the story. I'm just thinking about the question of the effects of the suppression of sexual violence in Christian contexts and how this facilitates and even undergirds rape culture. Can you speak to that?

Miryam Clough: Yes, many people have suffered terrible pushback. Louise Deans documents this in her book, but she persisted and 30 years after she first disclosed the abuse, she gave evidence at the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care. The stories don't go away just because they've been shut down. The church is realizing this now, I think.

With the situation I mentioned, when that relationship became public and someone went to the bishop, the bishop said, "There can't be a scandal. You can't talk about this." It was never identified as abuse; it was treated as an affair. None of the power dynamics were discussed. It was only when I started reading the literature on clergy abuse that I started to understand those power dynamics and the lack of meaningful consent within any pastor-congregant relationship.

One consequence of the suppression of any abuse in the church is that the abuse of power is not exposed or critiqued. Instead, victims are shamed. It has to be kept a secret. Rape myths come into play, and women are blamed for men's poor behavior. Women—and others—who do speak out are shut down by church leaders and lawyers in really horrible, damaging ways. And because it's not talked about, it keeps happening. Several of the women I interviewed for *Vocation and Violence* commented that they appreciated being able to tell their stories, because, in many respects, they had not felt heard—or they had been actively shut down in the past. Hearing the stories is also helpful for other survivors. That was a big thing for me: to realize I wasn't alone and that there was a context that supported sexual violence.

A big part of that context for me was the use of New Testament texts to serve that misogynist agenda—that whole culture of "women shouldn't be ordained, women should be silent, Jesus only chose male disciples"—it was very prevalent when I was an ordinand in the 1980s. Every day was a battle in that respect. The attempts to silence women in that way or to make life difficult for women or to deny their vocations—which is a form of violence in itself. That contributes to a context where more egregious acts of sexual violence can happen under the radar.

And then there's the use of biblical texts to actually justify male violence. The Anglican Church in Australia commissioned a study in 2021 that found equivalent and higher rates of intimate partner violence in Anglican communities than in the general population, and that violence was justified by patriarchal interpretations of New Testament texts around male headship and female submission.³

Barbara Thiede: Where do we stand with the work that's been done on sexual violence in Christian settings?

Miryam Clough: I think there's some exciting work being done, but there's still a long way to go, and I'm not sure how many people in the church really engage with this work. Jenny Richards, in Australia, has done some really interesting doctoral research on developing faith-law approaches to domestic violence based around the theology of T.F. and J.B. Torrance. She highlights that women are still often encouraged by pastors to forgive their partners and remain in abusive relationships.⁴

Barbara Thiede: Why is it that we keep having to say the same things over and over again? We're saying the same things we were saying decades ago. Clearly there has been some work done on sexual violence in Christianity. Are we seeing any real impact of that work?

Miryam Clough: The reception to my material around sexual violence has been positive, but you know, conferences are attracting the people who are already interested, often attracting survivors—people who “get it” because they've been there. Out in the congregations generally, there's not a lot of engagement. I think often it's down to the people who are leading those communities whether it's discussed or not. Some people feel a responsibility to have these conversations, but there's still a lack of understanding, even among the leadership. The Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia released a statement after the Royal Commission's final report came out in 2024, and at the end of the statement, there was an invitation to anyone who'd experienced abuse in the Anglican Church to come forward. There was an email address you could write to, but no information about who would receive or respond to the email or what would happen next. Reading it, I thought, there's no way I would feel safe as a survivor to respond to that. They don't really get it, even at a pastoral level.

I would say, working in the Māori Anglican Church, where more people have experienced abuse of various

kinds (statistically, Māori are disproportionately affected by sexual violence), there's more of an openness to discussing sexual violence. I remember a student giving a homily during a ministry training weekend and talking quite openly about her childhood memories of her father regularly beating up her mother. I was quite shocked at her unfiltered telling of the story, but people responded really positively. It resonated with them. I've found there's more of a willingness in that context to acknowledge sexual violence, but it can also be challenging to try and critique rape-supporting biblical texts. People get really offended because you're criticizing the Bible—or you're seen as having a go at men.

There's also a concern in the church with sexual morality, with purity, with no sex outside marriage, and with restricting ministry opportunities for people in committed same-sex partnerships—with policing sexuality. Policing sexuality is part of rape culture as well, and I see that kind of moral policing still happening at the expense of understanding sexual violence—just like it did in the twentieth century with the Magdalene laundries. We'd rather tell people in loving, consenting, respectful relationships that they can't have sex than make the changes needed to prevent sexual violence in our churches. I attended a hearing where a female priest was harangued in a really intrusive way about her personal life by the male lawyer representing the church. The women who were there supporting her were in tears. I was sitting there thinking, "this is medieval." She hadn't breached a fiduciary boundary. She hadn't abused anyone. I can't imagine that many male clergy have been spoken to in the way that she was, even when they've *committed* abuse.

It shocked me to come back into the church after nearly twenty years away—I came back in 2019 expecting things to be different. Expecting women to be really established as leaders in the church. But it's just not like that. Women aren't flourishing. The language is often male-centric. There's little awareness that language produces culture and that, even more broadly, women are being written out of it.

Barbara Thiede: Looking back, would you do anything differently?

Miryam Clough: With the knowledge I now have, I think I would have more confidence to challenge things. I've certainly broadened my understanding of what sexual violence is and of

how power can be exploited by clergy. I wouldn't refer now to a relationship between a priest and a parishioner as a consensual affair, for instance.

Johanna Stiebert: I'd love to have male ordinands read your book, actually. It would be really great if they could get insight into what the world looks like.

Miryam Clough: I'd be surprised if very many are interested.

Barbara Thiede: That should not be up to them.

It makes me grateful for everyone like you who is trying to open the door that keeps getting shut by institutions. We keep forcing it open and we turn around and it's shut again, and we feel like we have to start all over again with just turning the knob.

I want to thank you so very much for spending the time on thinking about these things with us.

Miryam Clough: Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this—it's a really exciting project.

David Tombs is Howard Paterson Chair Professor of Theology and Public Issues and Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He is also an Anglican lay theologian.

Tombs specializes in contextual approaches to public theology, including liberation theologies and theologies of reconciliation. Together with Jayme Reaves, Tombs co-edited the courageous collection of essays *When Did We See You Naked?: Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse* (2021).

Tombs authored *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and the Scandal of the Cross* (2022), a monograph in the Routledge focus series *Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible*, where he integrates modern accounts of torture into reading the depictions of crucifixion in the Passion narratives and other Greek and Roman sources. He attends closely to the sexual violence gospel accounts describe.

Tombs regularly engages in community outreach, both writing and consulting with churches who hope to improve their response to sexual and spiritual abuse.

Barbara Thiede: David, it is an honor to have you here. We are grateful for the courage and the bravery of your work and the persistence with which you quietly and kindly keep doing it. What brought you to this topic of sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

David Tombs: In 1997, I was in the University of London library reading an account of a graphically misogynistic, sexualized execution of a health worker in El Salvador in the early

1980s. At that time, there were very high levels of political violence and counterinsurgency in Central America, struggles over democracy and military regimes. Reading that story took me into learning about torture as an instrument of state terror in Latin American regimes. Two things came out of that.

Firstly, how much we need to understand torture as a form of state terror that's directed against a much wider audience than the immediate victim who experiences torture. Secondly, how shockingly prevalent sexualized violence and violations are in torture practices. It's almost universal but it may not be obvious on first reading. As soon as you start digging into torture practices, you discover you're engaging and learning about sexual violence.

My work at the time was in theology, in Christology. I was looking at two Salvadoran theologians or, actually, two Basque theologians working in El Salvador, Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. They were working on the crucified Christ as understood through the crucified experiences of the Salvadoran people—metaphorically, they called the crucified people “the preeminent reality” in Central America in their day. They asked: how are we to understand the crucified people?

I was thinking about the execution of the health worker. Here was a really graphic example of El Salvadoran crucifixion which they might have used to address sexual violence, but which they left on an abstract level. They would have seen her death as an important part of the experience of the crucified people, but they would not have spoken of the sexual violence involved in her death. It's not that they were, I suspect, unaware of the frequency of sexual violence, but they didn't wish to focus in detail on the particulars of this woman's death. I wanted to understand *why* was the health worker executed in that way and why was the sexual violence not featured in the work of such insightful theologians like Ellacuría and Sobrino?

For all their brilliant work, Ellacuría and Sobrino hadn't really identified the sexualized element of political violence in their understanding of the crucified people, and they hadn't used that experience for their thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus.

I thought, “I'll try to bring this health worker's experience into that conversation on crucifixion.” The state

terror aspects of crucifixion were fairly straightforward and obvious and not completely original.

But thinking about crucifixion in terms of sexual violence was completely new at least in terms of the language used. The stripping and naked exposure of Jesus was something which was reasonably widely known, but it wasn't seen as sexual violence or abuse in any way. Naming the stripping and nakedness as intentional and a form of sexual humiliation, and therefore a form of sexual abuse, was a new way of thinking about the text.

I wanted to investigate the gospel texts that directly disclose that aspect of Jesus' experience and then ask, "might the stripping have then led to other forms of sexual violence which are not immediately disclosed?"

But you don't quite know who your audience will be, and it's always varied. I'm surprised by the public criticism that speaking of Jesus' experience trivializes sexual violence against women. I think it comes from people thinking that forced stripping is "not that bad" and their belief that women particularly have experienced much worse sexual violence than stripping. Acknowledging the stripping of Jesus as sexual, and a possible step to other sexual violence, should not be seen as trivializing anyone else's experience of sexual violence.

Johanna Stiebert: What led you to seeing what is so rarely seen—sexual violence against a man?

David Tombs: I was reading the Latin American torture reports. There were, of course, plenty of stories of torture and sexual violence against women. It was almost universal in one form or another. But there were also plenty of stories where men were stripped and kept naked, where there was genital beating, where there were different forms of sexual violence. I noticed that there was at least as much silence—perhaps even more silence—about the sexual violence against men, as there was against women. There weren't many directly attested accounts of, for example, rape of male victims, but there were sometimes references to the possibility that other men might have been subjected to sexual violence.

The issue of male-against-male sexual violence in detention and torture wasn't always foregrounded. You had to notice it. For example, accounts of torture by electrical shocks would usually mention shocks to the genitals, but this would not be labeled as sexual violence. Likewise,

genital beating would be described but not recorded as sexual violence. Often sexual violence is just subsumed as torture.

The reticence and reluctance to use the language of sexual violence for torture practices that involve sexual violence seemed really important for thinking of Jesus' experience. If we're willing to use the language of sexual violence, it becomes obvious there's something hidden in plain sight.

Barbara Thiede: Why is it so difficult for readers to see what's before their eyes, what's hidden in plain sight when it comes to the sexual assault that Jesus endures in these texts? Why is it so important that they do?

David Tombs: There's a really interesting combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity that is at play here. In many ways Jesus' crucifixion is very familiar to people. It's a story that is very well known—or people think it's very well known. But describing the mistreatment to Jesus as a form of sexual violence or sexual violation, sexualized violence, or sexual abuse: that's very *unfamiliar*. You've got this tension between what's familiar and what's unfamiliar. If you were starting with a torture victim that nobody knew anything about, people might be much more ready to believe that if they were stripped and exposed naked, this constitutes sexual violence. However, because the stories of stripping and the crucifixion are so well known, I think people feel confident that they can dismiss this suggestion that sexual abuse is at work.

There are a number of factors that feed into this and complicate it. There's a strong suspicion of academic work, a suspicion that academics are trying to promote themselves, jumping on a "MeToo bandwagon." Others are cautious about thinking about things in new ways. Some have argued that it's making crucifixion about sexual abuse, which is [neither] necessary [nor] appropriate. And sometimes, or very often, no specific reason is given; it's just dismissed as absurd or offensive without needing to give a specific reason.

For some people, there's a very narrow understanding of sexual abuse. Some only see it as relevant to children. Or it only qualifies as sexual abuse if Jesus is raped.

Johanna Stiebert: There doesn't seem to be much of a problem to acknowledge that Jesus was tortured and suffered terribly... think of the Mel Gibson film, for example. This seems

the *one type of torture* that cannot be named. Why do you think that is?

David Tombs: I think religious purity values and purity culture have an influence. For some people it's that they just don't know how to respond to a male figure, to a sacred figure, to a figure who is seen as pure but who has been subjected to sexual violence.

I've tried to change the way I've presented the work since 1999. In 1999, I referred to the stripping and the nudity as a form of sexual humiliation, which is a form of sexual abuse. I drew a distinction between sexual humiliation and the further possibility of sexual assault. But actually, drawing the distinction in this way can encourage people not to take the stripping and nudity seriously. The stripping and the nudity *are themselves* a form of sexual assault. Students are sometimes anxious and tentative at this suggestion that there's evidence that Jesus was subjected to sexual abuse. But when they make the connection that the evidence of the stripping and nudity is very clear and the stripping and the nudity should be named as a form of sexual abuse, things fall into place.

Barbara Thiede: Would students presented with Mary stripped of her clothing in front of 500 Roman men understand that as sexual assault, as sexual abuse?

David Tombs: I suspect they would. I think most people are not aware that "a whole cohort"—about 500 soldiers—were involved. One aspect of thinking of Mary in that way is her strong association with purity. Jesus' experience is potentially a helpful way of examining the problematic aspects around purity. When Jesus is named as a victim of sexual violence, churches can't take the default response of blaming and rejecting the victim of sexual violence. The issue of sexual violence has to be addressed at a deeper level and not as easy victim-blaming.

When you can actually have a conversation with people, they come to see what's being said as absolutely right and often are amazed that they didn't see it before.

I now put a bit more emphasis on the crucifixion experience of forced nudity. We have much more compelling evidence that on the cross, Jesus was fully naked. However, there aren't many works where this evidence gets drawn together in a helpful way. I wrote a piece for *The Conversation* that gathered the different types of evidence together.⁵

Barbara Thiede: You've opened a door, but what is it that scholars need in order to walk through it?

David Tombs: I suspect the biggest thing would be a clearer sense of how both male and female political prisoners in the world today are often subjected to sexual violence. That would really help. I'm doing more work to explore how sexual violence of political prisoners is reported in contemporary accounts. It is legitimate and appropriate to use these contemporary accounts to ask about Jesus' experience, because Jesus was a political prisoner.

Turning to the Roman world, there has been a lot done in Classics by scholars offering insights into attitudes, into conquest and violence and the role of penetration and hierarchy in sexual acts. This helps move [us] away from a really unfortunate assumption that sexual abuse is only about sexual gratification and driven by erotic desire. Sexual violence during torture is much more about power, control, and humiliation.

There may also be a guild issue. I don't claim to be a biblical scholar. It's not how I came into this. And I suspect that whether you are seen as a biblical scholar or not makes a difference to some biblical scholars. Because I'm fairly explicit that I'm coming to this as a contextual theologian, and from a liberation theology perspective, there are assumptions that liberation theology projects its own interpretations *into* the text rather than draws the historical reading *out of* the text. Drawing on contemporary torture reports can be seen as a subjective activist eisegesis rather than respectable scholarly exegesis.⁶ I think that's wrong.

My research would probably have had more impact in biblical studies if it had been in a biblical studies journal. I'm really pleased I did what I did and published in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, which was known for its support for liberationist perspectives, but it probably reinforced some of the reservations some scholars might have about historical anachronism. I didn't expect to keep working on it, but things just kept coming up. The Abu Ghraib scandal coincided with [the Mel Gibson film] *The Passion of the Christ*. But everyone was talking about *The Passion of the Christ* and yet couldn't put together the mistreatment of naked prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the mistreatment of the naked Jesus ... it took me back into it. The death of Muammar Gaddafi did the same in 2011, as

did #MeToo in 2017 and, more recently, the Abuse in Care Inquiry in New Zealand (2018–2024).

Coming here to New Zealand, I've been working with a Peruvian colleague, Rocío Figueroa, and it's taken us into the issue of the abuse of religious women, consecrated women or nuns, and how this experience of Jesus might be a helpful resource for nuns who have been subjected to sexual abuse.

Johanna Stiebert: You work on Jesus as the victim of sexual abuse. How did you feel about Stephen Young's chapter [in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts*], the one which suggests that Jesus is a rapist in the Revelation text?

David Tombs: *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts*, edited by Christy Cobb and Eric Vanden Eykel, is a fabulous book, and Stephen Young's chapter raises really challenging issues. Young picks up a very different perspective from the one that I address in my work. The Christ figure in Revelation is not the earthly Jesus, but Christ as triumphant heavenly Lord. It's confronting but understandable that Jesus as a triumphant Christ figure should be represented in terms of toxic masculinity, in terms of using sexual violence in punitive ways, in terms of all the things which would have been common in that culture and remain common in ours.

Barbara Thiede: In your work, you describe the sexual assault on Jesus. Young describes Jesus as a rapist.

Johanna Stiebert: As a liberation theologian how do you deal with that?

David Tombs: I would be concerned at any faith community that in any way said that because this is how Christ is represented in Revelation, or God in Hosea, that that justifies and makes somehow righteous violent masculinity and punitive sexual violence. That seems to me completely wrong.

The truth is liberating. Whatever the truth is, [don't] be afraid of it. If the heavenly Christ is represented as sexually violent in Revelation, nothing is served by denying it or pretending otherwise. It needs to be faced up to. It needs to be confronted. The harmful assumptions behind seeing the Son of God in this way need to be identified and clearly understood and rejected. One way to do this is to note that this representation of the heavenly Christ is diametrically opposed to the experiences of the earthly Jesus.

Young's point that the sexual violence of Christ against Jezebel is normalized and erased by readers is well put. It is likely to be a painful truth for the church, but it offers the church an opportunity for liberation from a destructive

and distorted Christology. At the same time, a similar argument can be made for how readers normalize and erase the sexual violence against the earthly Jesus. Acknowledging this normalization and erasure of Jesus' own experience is a painful truth that can offer liberation.

Barbara Thiede: Can you assess the way that suppression or erasure around sexual violence has facilitated or affected rape culture in institutional contexts and religious institutions?

David Tombs: One of the other texts I work on is 2 Samuel 20:3, which is a terrible demonstration of the stigma that victims of sexual violence [endure]. Ten women, David's secondary wives, are raped by Absalom and then shut away by David. Everyone can see that the rape by Absalom is wrong and horrific and terrible. However, people often have trouble seeing that what David does is deeply harmful. David's actions reinforce the message that those who have been subjected to sexual violence are irretrievably damaged and should be rejected from respectable society. Jesus' experience of sexual abuse has huge potential within churches to surface and challenge this sort of stigma.

The Church of England is going through an absolute crisis around sexual abuse issues and how they failed to respond. I would like my work to be shared by those engaged in safeguarding in the Church of England. This work on Jesus is highly relevant to safeguarding work precisely *because* it points to dismissal and minimization. When churches refuse to acknowledge Jesus' experience for what it is, they deprive themselves of a really important resource for challenging stigma.

Johanna Stiebert: David, thank you so much. I think it's so important that you say all this in the way that you do. You do it with great sensitivity, without hiding anything.

Barbara Thiede: I want to express my gratitude, too.

David Tombs: It's been great to talk to you both.

Meredith J. C. Warren is Senior Lecturer in biblical and religious studies at the University of Sheffield and Director of the Sheffield Centre for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies. She describes herself as a feminist from childhood.

Warren's scholarship centers her feminism and spans a wide range of topics in early Christianity and its intersections with Judaism. She is the co-author of *Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Parks et al. 2022); with Shayna Sheinfeld and Sara Parks) and the author of numerous articles on gender, sexual violence, and the Bible, notably "Five Husbands: Slut Shaming the Samaritan Woman" (2022a), "Mary Magdalene and the

Dangers of White Feminism” (2022b), and “Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and This Is the End” (2023).

Warren pays tribute to decades of scholarship on sexual violence, rape culture, and Judeophobia. Still, today’s researchers must continue to raise concerns, she argues, to dispel harmful stereotypes about the nature of Jewish and Christian literature.

Barbara Thiede: First, we want to say how honored we are to have you here. We want to jump in by asking: when you look at the terms *rape* and *rape culture*, what do these terms actually mean for you?

Meredith Warren: For me, rape culture is the way that society is so not bothered about sexual violence or gender violence and is very permissive about the kinds of behaviors that prop up a system that is quite happy with having any number of its members abused or sexually abused.

Barbara Thiede: Is it possible for you to pinpoint what drew you to think about sexual violence in biblical literature?

Meredith Warren: I’d always been a feminist, even when I was a child. And then, early in my career, I came across this article by John Marshall on Revelation and the rape threats uttered to Jezebel by Jesus (Marshall 2010). It was the first time that I had noticed or been called to notice that verse. I was flabbergasted that all these commentaries on Revelation, all this mainstream scholarship, were totally oblivious. Now I know that it’s not obliviousness. It’s not ignorance. It’s bending over backwards to get rid of a problem that exists in a text.

Stumbling across that article really opened my eyes and made me hungry for more of that kind of approach to the New Testament. I was raised in an Anglican church. I went to youth group; I was confirmed. I always was uncomfortable with the underlying misogyny of what I was experiencing.

Mike Pope wrote an article in 2018, “Gabriel’s Entrance and Biblical Violence in Luke’s Annunciation Narrative” (Pope 2018). It’s about the lack of consent that Mary has when God is suddenly, “by the way, you’re going to have a baby...” For me, that was one of these light bulb moments. This is the thing that I knew was creepy. And finally, someone has put footnotes on that.

The work of other scholars that I was reading at the time, like Adele Reinhartz and Tina Pippin, and the women that I went to and did my PhD with, Sara Parks

and Shayna Sheinfeld, and then coming to Sheffield and working with Katie Edwards and meeting Johanna [Stiebert]—all of those things kind of galvanized me. This isn't just something that you keep for your group chat. This isn't something that just gets brought out when you're at the pub with your mates. This is something you can write and publish on.

When I did my PhD, the university and the department that I was in was quite old-school. You did traditional biblical studies, historical-critical method. So, the idea that you could do feminist biblical scholarship and be taken seriously... obviously, I knew that because I was reading all of these scholars. But the idea that *I* could do that came to light, is what I'm trying to say.

I was always drawn to these texts where there's so much going on with gender, but I came so late to the idea that I could actually comment on what those texts were doing.

Barbara Thiede: You are describing a personal awareness that can be confirmed by academics who are articulating what you are feeling, rather than erasing what you were sensing.

Meredith, generally, when people think of sexual violence, we tend to find that they automatically gravitate towards the Hebrew Bible. The topic [of sexual violence] regarding *Christian* biblical literature has remained fairly invisible until pretty recently. What do you think that scholars needed in order to be able to acknowledge, understand, and start investigating sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

Meredith Warren: I'm not really sure what people needed. I know that there's a pervasive idea that there's *no possible way* that Jesus could be mean or violent. Every year when I get a fresh crop of students, one of the first things that I know I have to do is [look with them] at a list of verses. Some are from the Hebrew Bible and some are from the New Testament. There's a nice variety of a loving God in both and a pretty angry God in both (Mroczek 2021). I'm trying to break down that idea that there's like a clear division between a mean Old Testament god and a nice New Testament god. There needs to be that recognition that texts about love occur in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and that Jesus has a temper, and he acts on that temper all the time.

Trying to acknowledge or resist Jesus' PR team—that would be what people would need.

Barbara Thiede: Would you say that erasure has had a particular effect on rape culture in our own time?

Meredith Warren: I've written on a film, "This Is the End," and its use of rape culture, and Revelation fits really well with what the New Testament is doing with rape culture and sexual violence. The use of rape jokes in that film [is] a way of asserting control by a group of actors who are considered sort of underdogs in the comedy industry but are reinforcing very mainstream misogyny in how they're engaging with each other and with the few female characters in the film. This goes hand-in-hand with what Revelation is doing. On paper, it looks like it's resisting empire. But when you look right down at it, it wants to *replace* the empire with its own *divine* empire that the author is going to control. He really hates women, to be honest with you.

There's [also] the 2018 film on Mary Magdalene, a film that is ostensibly about a woman and this relationship that she has with Jesus. But it plays on this sort of long-standing practice that comes up again and again in Christian feminism: Jesus is great and you can tell that Jesus is great because look how good he is compared to the Jews, who are horrible. There's this idea that Judaism is bad for women and Jesus came in and saved women. There's antisemitism in the film (Warren 2022b).

This happens all the time. The gospels use "Jews" as sort of a negative prop against which Jesus can be measured. The film also amplifies this. However, we're reading the New Testament; however, we're reading this text, that is how it plays out in culture.

But there are implications for people who are churchgoers, right? This is creating an environment where you can't really complain about misogyny or sexual violence or sexual abuse in the church. You must know that Jesus was a feminist and therefore the church is good for women. They all work together in a really pernicious way, I guess.

Johanna Stiebert: Is Jesus regarded as a feminist because so much of that Christian literature is, by contrast, so overtly anti-feminist?

Meredith Warren: In conservative Christian circles, certainly, Jesus is not a feminist, and he upholds "traditional" gender roles. But among Christian feminists and especially [in] Christian feminist scholarship, you do get this idea that Jesus paved the way for women.

It's much like early feminist literature tried with such devotion to find those strong female leaders in the Hebrew

Bible who demonstrate that it isn't as bad as we always thought it was.

Barbara Thiede: It seems to be yet another way of undergirding a supersessionist argument, really.

Meredith Warren: Absolutely. We have evidence that Mary Magdalene must have been [most] probably independently wealthy (e.g., Luke 8:1–3). We have archaeological finds like Babatha's archives where she owns land and is able to hire legal representation and act on her own behalf in the courts (Parks, Sheinfeld, and Warren 2023, 145–47). We know [about] women patrons in antiquity and that in later antiquity they bankrolled church fathers (e.g., Matthews 2001; Chin and Schroeder 2017).

But a lot of Christian feminism can't possibly imagine that anything good that they like about Jesus could possibly have originated outside of Jesus' own brain. The idea of giving credit for the things that they like to Judaism is somehow too difficult to acknowledge.

Barbara Thiede: You've already begun to address the way Christian scripture has been used in the service of antisemitism. You clearly feel there's a lot of work to be done on this topic.

Meredith Warren: There has been quite a lot of work done on combating Christian feminist supersessionism and antisemitism, but it tends not to get, like, picked up or read very often. Judith Plaskow has been working on this since the 70s.⁷ She's got some fabulous articles about this and laments in at least one of them that it continues to be necessary to critique this ongoing trend in feminist scholarship (Plaskow 1993, 117). My friend Sara Parks has written on this [issue], and she's also got a chapter on feminist New Testament scholarship and Judeophobia in the book that I co-edited with Sarah Rollens and Eric Vanden Eykel: *Judeophobia and the New Testament: Texts and Contexts* (Parks 2025). Those are going to be really great resources, especially for teaching, as well. The problem is: why does it seem like every generation has to do this all over again?

It goes back to the false idea that feminist scholarship isn't real scholarship, it's not serious. Sara Parks (2019) has written on what she termed the Brooten phenomenon, named after Bernadette Brooten, who uncovered the Junia mistranslation in the 1970s (Brooten 1977). And yet, go and look into who's written on the mistranslation: it's a bunch of men who hardly cite her. They get all the credit while the person who actually wrote the pioneering article

on this topic is ignored. This happens again and again with critiques of supersessionism and antisemitism and feminist scholarship as well. So, the work has to be done again every single time.

Barbara Thiede: Why does the guild seem to be incapable of valorizing this work so that it *doesn't* have to be redone?

Meredith Warren: I have been going to the SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] conference for a number of years. And it seems like every couple of years we have a debate about who are we inviting to be part of this organization and whose money is here.

Why are these book publishers that have anti-trans stuff and supersessionist stuff as part of their publication offerings next to our books about liberation and feminist scholarship? Why does this keep happening, and why does no one seem to care about it?

But to a certain extent, there's a financial implication. And, especially in the States, the places that still offer biblical studies as a degree are Christian colleges. And in the UK, a lot of the departments are still theology departments where what is taught is *Christian* theology, but it's called "theology." You might have a Jewish Studies program somewhere, but it might not even *be* in the theology program. It might be somewhere else, in History. And related to that: if [organizations] are worried about keeping [their] Christian evangelical base, then the Christian evangelical base is invested in supersessionism. If you're going to try and root out supersessionism from the guild, there's a risk that you're going to piss off a whole bunch of your base. You also have to keep Christian Zionism alive.

Barbara Thiede: Is there a relationship between Judeophobia and antisemitism and sexual violence in Christian texts? Do these things connect?

Meredith Warren: There definitely is. Both link back to this idea of Christian hegemony and Christian supremacy, because both antisemitism and misogyny are tools of oppression, propping up this hegemonic order where Christianity is normative and powerful. You have to stay with Christianity because "look at what it used to be like in the Hebrew Bible—it could be like that, right?"

My colleague at Sheffield, Valerie Hobbs, has written about abuse in Christian contexts, about rape culture and sermons on divorce (Hobbs 2019). [She shows] how the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees on divorce is one

that gets misread so frequently in Christian contexts. It doesn't fit with this idea of Jesus as more liberal towards women. The Pharisees [present] the rules for divorce, and Jesus is the one saying, "absolutely not, *no* divorce." This makes it difficult to talk about Jesus the feminist, or Jesus is good for women.⁸ Jesus is actually *more conservative* than your supposed Pharisees.

Barbara Thiede: If you were assessing where are we as a whole on sexual violence, on rape, on rape culture in these texts, where are we? What's really getting into the classroom? What's infusing our seminars, our education, our SBL sessions? What's the state of the field and to what extent does anybody notice?

Meredith Warren: We've done a lot of like chipping away of things, and we've created a big enough hole that now we can see how bad things are. Before it looked like, okay, if we just write, like, a couple of articles and this book, we will have done it. Now we can see exactly how big this excavation project is. Things are so much better than when I was a grad student. There is so much more out there now. I'm really excited because I get emails from people who want to do PhDs on this stuff.

Barbara Thiede: Is there anything you would do differently, would say differently?

Meredith Warren: I wish I had been more explicit in my earlier work about how my approach to certain texts, or my choice of certain texts, has implications for the wider world.

Barbara Thiede: Is there a question we should have asked that we didn't?

Meredith Warren: I don't know if this is a question, but I feel there isn't as much conversation as I would like there to be among New Testament *and* Hebrew Bible scholars about this material. There's still sort of a weird great divide going on.

Barbara Thiede: Meredith, it seems that the very need for that kind of conversation, collaboration, and communication would do a lot to deal with the rewriting problem that you described earlier. If we talk to each other more, would we have the need to keep rewriting and re-investigating?

Meredith Warren: My guess is maybe not. We could also talk about material outside of the canon. We need to, like, break out of our canonical silos.

Barbara Thiede: This was delightful. Hearing your perspective on so many aspects of what's happening regarding sexual violence, rape, rape culture, antisemitism, and Judeophobia has been so informative. Thank you for giving us your time.

We so appreciate that you are willing to participate in this project.

Meredith Warren: Absolutely.

Eric Vanden Eykel is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Ferrum College, where he teaches courses on early Christian literature and the cultural afterlives of biblical texts. His research explores the interpretive dynamics of minor and marginalized figures in early Christian literature, with particular attention to how gender, power, and violence are constructed and contested in the textual tradition.

Vanden Eykel is the co-editor of *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* (Cobb and Vanden Eykel 2022), a volume that brings together interdisciplinary approaches to the intersections of bodily harm, sexualized violence, and sacred scripture in antiquity. His scholarship examines how early Christian texts reflect and participate in rape culture—through silences, euphemisms, narrative gaps, and theological justifications. His current work explores how narratives of suffering in both canonical and apocryphal texts are shaped by gendered assumptions and how these stories have been appropriated, reimagined, or challenged across the centuries.

Through both his writing and teaching, Vanden Eykel advocates for ethically responsible interpretation that takes seriously the historical embeddedness of ancient texts and the ongoing consequences of their use in contemporary religious and political discourse.

Barbara Thiede: Eric, thank you so much for being here. Can you explain what drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

Eric Vanden Eykel: My big “aha” moment was when I was working on the Salome episode in the Proto-Gospel of James. [Here] Mary gives birth in a cave. She’s all by herself. The midwife and Joseph are outside the cave. There’s this flash of light. The light recedes and then the midwife looks in and Jesus is nursing. She goes to Salome and says, “a virgin has given birth, and her body shows no signs of it.” Salome rushes into the cave and says, “I’m not going to believe it unless I put my fingers in.” And she does. Her hand catches on fire; it’s a very dramatic scene where she’s screaming about her hand withering. An angel comes and says, “pick up Jesus and you’ll be healed.”

I’d presented on it a couple of times. My focus had always been on the literary echoes between this story and Doubting Thomas, [who says] “I won’t believe he’s risen from the dead unless I put in my fingers.” It’s identical.

I was teaching this story in my class on early Christian literature. A student approached me after class, a female student. She was extremely upset. She said, “You know, you need to put a trigger warning, a content warning, on this story before you discuss it in class, because this is a story of sexual assault.” I looked at her and I said, “You’re right.”

It was an extremely emotional moment for both of us. I had betrayed my students in that moment—or maybe my positionality had betrayed them, I’m not sure. My student had seen something that I was unable to see, because I had never been in a situation like that where somebody was investigating me without my permission. I apologized to her and went back and reread [my work]. I’m looking at this stuff thinking, “I totally missed the point, *totally* missed the point.”

That was my entryway. Once you see it, you can’t really unsee it. I talked with Christy Cobb, and she and I then co-edited [and published] *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* (2022).

Barbara Thiede: What is it that scholars have needed in order to acknowledge, understand, and address the sexual violence in these texts?

Eric Vanden Eykel: Pessimistically, I would say, many scholars still don’t have what they need to start thinking about this because of supersessionism. I once heard a pastor say from the pulpit something along the lines of, “if you have a question of why we needed a savior, just look at the Old Testament.” That’s a really, really weird claim.

I think what I needed, and what I think what others have needed as well, was to broaden the understanding of what we’re talking about when we’re talking about sexual violence. I pivot back to Rhiannon Graybill’s phenomenal work, *Texts After Terror* (2021). What scholars of the Greek Bible have needed to see is that it’s not the case that you have to have a “traditional” rape story in order for there to be sexualized violence. These dynamics, this rhetoric, takes a lot of different forms and sometimes it’s subtle. [Take] the case of a story like Salome, where this is so obvious to so many women, but it wasn’t obvious to me.

Scholars have needed to listen to other voices. There are some things we can’t see because of our

positionality. There are also some things we can't see because we aren't looking for them.

Our field of early Christian and ancient Jewish literature is so Christian-dominated. Scholars of the Greek Bible needed to realize that their own part of the canon is doing that same sort of work.

Barbara Thiede: How would you assess the state of scholarship on sexual violence in Christian literature?

Eric Vanden Eykel: I think that the conversation isn't loud enough yet, but I think that we are moving in the right direction. There are more and more people who are starting to see the more subtle examples, the ones that you don't really quite notice until they're pointed out to you.

We're clearly thinking more about positionality. More broadly, that conversation is becoming more acceptable at all levels of the guild. People are starting to listen a little bit more and to be more aware of and think critically and creatively about power dynamics.

To throw Rhiannon Graybill's work in there again, I think we've also really started to move away from this idea that sexual violence is black and white. You've got her terminology that sex is not a traffic light and neither is rape. I think she's spot on there.

My colleague Stephen Young, for example, has a chapter in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* about Revelation (Young 2022). [Commentaries] say it's a sickbed. No, it's not. [Jesus] is talking about killing her children [who] are the product of her adultery. She's not sick. She's being assaulted! And who's the one doing the assaulting? It's Jesus. It's been explained away so that we can't see it, but I think that we're starting to get more and more people who are digging into this and saying, "let's look at this again with fresh eyes—away from what all of these other people, either theologians or scholars, or whatever, have told us what this text is about. Let's go ahead and interrogate those positions and ask, what is this text really about?" That's good movement in the right direction.

Barbara Thiede: The kinds of things you have described have operated for so long—denial or erasure of the sexual violence that inhabits Christian texts: what's the effect of that in the real world?

Eric Vanden Eykel: Normalizing, right? That story of the Annunciation is a great place to start. If I look up, I've got two paintings

on my office wall of the Annunciation, and they're beautiful, right? Everyone's comfortable and Mary's all dressed up and everything's exciting. It's a new baby...

But I've heard this story used for victims of sexual assault who have become pregnant. [That victim] is told, "you know, Mary was also an underage woman, or a girl, and she, too, was given this burden to bear. And she accepted it, right?" This serves to erase the horrible thing that's happened to her. To take an instance like this and to theologize it and to say, "you can be just like Mary here and you can also carry your child..." The sentiments behind that may be pastoral, but they're also tapping into the kind of ickiness of the Lukan Annunciation story, pulling back the curtain to almost tacitly acknowledge that the Annunciation story is a story of a forced and not otherwise wanted pregnancy. This is a conversation that is happening daily with victims of assault that is directly related to how we have understood the story and how we have refused to see what this story really is about. We normalize sexual assault as something that "just happens" sometimes.

This is a story where Gabriel says [everything] in future tense. "*This* will happen. *This* will happen. *This* will happen. And you're going to do this and this and this and *this*." It's not until after he already says all the stuff that's going to happen that Mary says, "may it be to me as you've said."

You can already see this in the Proto-Gospel. Very importantly, no blood and no pain. [The author] sanitizes it by saying, "well, this wasn't a pregnancy like any other." This baby just appeared. Mary's body was unaffected by it. There are other examples too, one of them being the Immaculate Conception—this whole idea that Mary is prepared from the moment that she's conceived, that her whole nature is transformed by grace. The whole point of this, theologically, is so that she can't say no to Gabriel.

None of the theologians who are talking about this are subtle about any of it. They're all saying [that] the grace that God gives her at the moment of her conception enables her to say yes. That sounds a lot like a date rape drug.

By the time we get to today, it's just a beautiful painting where everyone's happy, everyone's comfortable. It's all good.

Johanna Stiebert: Just out of interest, off topic, but is there anything about Mary menstruating?

Eric Vanden Eykel: I'm going to give you a speculative answer first. If this occurs in the tradition, it's probably something that's going to pop up in the medieval period when people are starting to toy with the notion of Mary as the co-redeemer. I could imagine a scenario where somebody draws some comparison between the blood of menstruation and the blood of the cross or something like that. That's a wild guess. But now I'm also going to spend the weekend looking for it. So, thank you.

In the Proto-Gospel [of James], Mary grows up from the age of three to twelve in the temple—and in the Holy of Holies, no less. The thing that gets her expelled from the temple is [that] the priests say Mary is about to defile the temple of the Lord. The subtext there is that she's about to start her period.

The way that I read that is that this is the author being antisemitic. Mary is utterly pure in this text. There is nothing impure about her at all. Jewish leaders are caricatured in this text; they don't know what's right in front of them. They can't see it and they don't understand. I think it's Judeophobic. I don't think that that author imagines Mary as ever having menstruated because I think that that author considers that to be a consequence of impurity.

Barbara Thiede: What needs to be done in biblical scholarship around the intersection between Christian writings and antisemitism?

Erik Vanden Eykel: The subject matter is brutal and, yes, there's still plenty of work to be done. Many of the texts of the Greek Bible are supersessionist in nature, flat-out Judeophobic. And in some cases, Jews are never mentioned. Philemon never mentions Jews. That is also a form of Judeophobia, right? Erasure.

There's been some good work on highlighting those dynamics in these texts. Why is John referring to "the Jews" as a bad group when *everyone* in the story is Jewish? [There's work on] helping theologians with pulpit usage, [like the] common usage of the term "Pharisee," for example. More people are saying, "hey, you shouldn't be using this term as an insult, because that's anti-Jewish." At least in some circles that has helped us to make some progress.

The major work that needs to be done is scholars becoming more aware of the types of tropes that they are reproducing in their own work.

Barbara Thiede: Are Judeophobia and sexual violence connected in Christian texts?

Eric Vanden Eykel: They both rely on the same sorts of rhetorical and theological strategies to make the arguments that they're making. Sexual violence and Judeophobia are built within frameworks of domination and control, othering, the sense that this person is not a human with dignity, but something else entirely, [it's] dehumanizing. You can look at depictions of Jews in art as these kinds of monstrous others, right? Jews are othered by a lot of early Christian literature. They're blamed for Jesus' death. They're blamed for all sorts of things all the way through the medieval period, right? It's like, "hey, oh, there's an outbreak of plague... whose fault is it?" And when we talk about sexual violence and victim-blaming and these sorts of things, [we hear], "men are easily tempted and it's not their fault." Both of these things employ violence as a theological metaphor.

Stephen [Young]'s chapter on the Jezebel? Her consequence is martial rape. Punishment involves violence. That's not necessarily an early Christian innovation either. Read Ezekiel, Hosea. This rhetoric doesn't just come from nowhere. I think they're both peddling in the same type of rhetorical strategies.

I don't think you can really emphasize these things enough.

Barbara Thiede: I first encountered your work through a piece that you had written about abuse in the academy. Is there a link between abuse in the academy and rape culture in the academy?

Eric Vanden Eykel: They're absolutely related. At the very least, they're related because of the attitudes that fuel both of them. Sexual violence is fueled by the idea that this other person exists for my purposes.

The main point of that piece is whether we can still cite perpetrators of sexualized violence and whether we *should* still cite them. It's the question that agitates the heck out of me because you don't have to cite *anyone* you don't want to cite.

The other side of that coin are the random emails from people who say, "why didn't you cite me in this

work?” That sense of entitlement to a presence in a person’s work is very much fueled by that same kind of dynamic of a person who believes that they are entitled to whatever bodies they encounter. It’s the same attitude that goes into both.

In some cases, with well-known abusers in our field, tenure is used as a smokescreen to say, “Well, this person has tenure, so what can you do?” That’s not actually the case. “What can you do? Well, we’ve removed them from teaching, and they now live somewhere else, but they’re still on our payroll.”

That sort of harboring is what’s fueling this, right? People can get away with this stuff, and the institutions that they work for are going to try to sweep it under the rug as much as possible, not necessarily to defend them but to defend the institution. Institutions don’t care about us. They care about themselves.

Barbara Thiede: Is there anything when you look back, Eric, that you would have done or written differently?

Erik Vanden Eykel: Everything, I think. I was trained to see scholarly interpretation of texts, translation, those sorts of things as kind of exercises in objectivity. Obviously, I’m well versed enough in postmodernism to know that we all are participants in the creation of meaning. I wrote at length about this in my book on the Proto-Gospel of James... in the methodological chapter on matching together the author’s intended meaning and what the readers have heard. Meaning happens with those things together. But I only knew that intellectually.

What I would do differently is to realize that that’s not just an intellectual exercise. Interpretations have real consequences. That student’s conversation with me was part of that awakening in me to say, “you know, *no*, this is *not* just an article or a chapter or a lecture.” Acknowledging the real consequences of how these texts have been interpreted is something I can’t unsee now, [so] I’m making sure that I’m listening to people outside of my own positionality. Not diversifying your bibliography to meet a quota of scholars, but to say, “I have *chosen* these as conversation partners because they can see things that I’m not able to.” And to allow that to change my lens as well.

Barbara Thiede:

Thank you. That brings us to the most important question, maybe... Is there a question that we *should* have asked.

Erik Vanden Eykel: People are reading these texts that we're talking about as sacred texts. I don't have any faith commitments, but it is a question for millions and millions of people, right? What does that mean for my faith or my tradition—should we just throw these things out? Should we all be agnostics, or whatever?

I think that that's an important question for us to wrestle with.

Barbara Thiede: What do you say to those many students and those many individuals?

Erik Vanden Eykel: Religions are artifacts of lived human experience. Lived human experience is messy. We learn from the past and we use what we learned from the past to make our presence and our futures better. If being part of a religious tradition is an important part of your identity, then you have to see your religious tradition as one that has been shaped and formed and built by lived human experience. These texts are still problematic. It doesn't mean that we have to keep perpetuating them. We can learn from them, and we can use that knowledge to say, "this is harmful rhetoric and now we're going to do better."

One of my major goals in class is to get them to see *all* texts are the products of human creativity. So, humans are putting in all of their messiness. Does Luke know that he's telling a rape story? No. He probably thinks that he's telling a beautiful story, but his presuppositions about the nature of this particular body [Mary] and how it's related to what God wants from it are different from how we should be thinking about this stuff today. So, I tell people, "no, you don't have to [throw out the text], unless your religion simply *is* this text. The texts are a big part of it, but they're bigger than just the text." Then people can sort of start to see that life is messy. So is religion.

Barbara Thiede: Indeed. Thank you, Eric, we are so grateful you could be here to speak with us. We deeply appreciate your time.

Eric Vanden Eykel: I enjoyed it! Thank you both.

Notes

1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.

2 Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia (1989).

3 NCLS Research (2021).

4 Jenny Richards (2025).

5 See David Tombs (2024).

6 *Eisegesis* refers to “personal” interpretation of a text, which may involve reading “into” a text, as opposed to *exegesis*, which presumably rests on “objective” explanation or analysis that is generated “out” of the text.

7 Plaskow (1978, 1980); see also Heschel (1990).

8 See also Hicks-Keeton (2023).

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