

On Trusting Compassion

A Musing by Marti Steussy

Job to his friends: Listen now to my arguments;
Hear out my accusations.
Will you lie to vindicate God?
Will you perjure yourselves for him?
Will you blindly stand on his side,
pleading his case alone?

God to Eliphaz: My anger blazes against you and your two friends!
You have not spoken rightly concerning me, as my servant Job has.¹

Yes, the Bible has troubling texts.² How can God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, even if later rescinding the command (Gen 22), much less authorize the deaths of Job's livestock, servants, and children just to see if it will shake Job's virtue (Job 1-2)? In the New Testament, is it God who causes Ananias and Sapphira to drop dead (Acts 5)? What does it mean for Jesus to tell "the Jews who believed in him" that they cannot accept his word because they are not God's children but the devil's (John 8)? Even Christians who expect comfort and reassurance from the Bible often feel gut uneasiness with these stories. That uneasiness is important.

Three basic strategies surface for dealing (or not) with troubling stories. The first is to ignore them, pretend they aren't there. Understandably, 2 Kgs 2:23-25 (in which Elisha curses some "small boys" in LORD's name, after which she-bears maul forty-two of the boys) appears in neither the Revised Common Lectionary nor most study curricula. Such neglect supports a positive image of the Bible and avoids (initially) unsettling people whose lives already have enough problems. But what happens when people do stumble across these stories? And doesn't ignoring them make a lie of our claim to take "all scripture" as "inspired...and useful" (2 Tim 3:16)?

¹ Job 13:7-8, trans. Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 34; Job 42:7, NAB.

² "Text" here in the large sense of "something constructed to convey meaning," not in the narrow sense of printed or written as over against spoken!

The second strategy is to try to explain away the problems.³ For instance, people have told me that when the little boys call Elisha a “baldy,” they are making fun of his prophetic vocation. However, I am not aware of any evidence that shaving the head signified prophetic vocation (if anything, head-shaving appears to be forbidden for persons undertaking sacred obligations), nor that teasing a prophet was considered equivalent to blasphemy. The great merit of this strategy is that it pushes us to read the stories charitably, to discover what people might have found helpful in them.⁴ But inventing “ancient customs” just to ease our discomfort strikes me as historically dishonest—an act of bad faith toward ancient brothers and sisters. It can also worsen rather than solve the theological issues. Is the tearing-apart of small boys by wild animals really more acceptable if the boys have taunted a religious figure rather than an ordinary stranger? What does that say about God?⁵

The third strategy is to entertain the possibility that the stories’ purposes and values do not line up with our own assumptions. We tend to assume that a prophet must be godly and morally virtuous, but could the she-bears story be meant to impress us with Elisha’s power rather than his virtue? Might he even be violating the commandment against wrongful use of LORD’s name (Ex 20:7)? He would not be the first or last religious leader to abuse power!⁶ But to interpret the story

³ The “explaining away” approach is used by Jews as well as Christians. Christians often assume that rabbinic comments are based on direct knowledge of ancient customs, and this may even be true in some cases, but in others the rabbis seem to be scrambling as we do to neutralize an offensive implication.

⁴ I do believe that no story will survive if there is not *something* helpful for *someone* in it, some appeal for the audience, even if the story also has a manipulative component that merits challenge.

⁵ These problems are often dealt with by contrasting a supposed OT “God of wrath” with an alleged NT “God of love,” but at least in the Elisha case, the children are not sent to a “Gehenna of fire” or “outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth”—the concept of eternal punishment is, outside of Dan 12:2 and Isa 66:24, not found in the Hebrew Bible.

⁶ So why didn’t God intervene? I think the story assumes (as do some other stories in the Old Testament and from neighboring cultures) that knowing a god’s name gives one a sort of power-of-attorney for the god, so that blessings and curses issued by a prophet or priest—or perhaps anyone—in LORD’s name go into action without further divine review—that’s *why* there is a commandment about not misusing the Name. Invoking that assumption helps us understand the story, but whether we agree with the assumption is, IMO, a separate question.

this way requires first that we question our own assumptions about what the Bible is up to, and then, if what we find differs from our beliefs, decide whether to adjust our own theologies or to admit disagreement with the text.

The question of how to deal with difficult stories interests most biblical storytellers. Because they get excited about exploring the Bible, storytellers tend to discover the less-known stories. And because tellers linger in the exact words, they are likely to notice problems that casual readers and even preachers may skim past.⁷ Additionally, storytellers soon learn that “nice” stories told in a preachy style easily put people to sleep, while unexpected and startling material tends to hold audience (and teller) interest! Yet if we have cut our storytelling teeth on parables and gospel healing stories (as is commonly the case), we may be unprepared to deal with stories that do not communicate obvious beneficial lessons.

Historically and literarily trained scholars, on the other hand, tend to be more comfortable challenging Bible stories. Study of ancient cultures makes it easier for us to spot assumptions that differ from our own. And because we’ve had to study all the contents of the Bible—not just the popular parts—we’re not only aware of the problem stories, but of factual and theological discrepancies between different parts of the Bible. This makes disagreement seem less scary, since disagreeing with one part of the Bible generally arises from agreement with some other part! Finally, the academy (in my experience) values questioning and evaluation of evidence more than submission to authority or choosing the most convenient/comforting options. While I don’t believe that pure

⁷ They may also discover that some common explaining-away tactics (such as the idea that Jesus’ cry, “Why have you forsaken me?” in Mt 27:46/Mk 15:34, quoting Ps 22:1, alludes to the deliverance proclaimed in Ps 22:22-31 rather than expressing despair) don’t actually work in telling.

“objectivity” is possible, to the best of my ability I will “tell it like it is” rather as I or someone else thinks it should be.

Scholars do, however, use all three strategies, and there is tension even within the NBS Seminar between those who’d rather set problematic material aside, those who seek ameliorating interpretations, and those who are very willing to challenge. My personal impression is that Hebrew Bible scholars and women are more inclined to challenge than are male New Testament scholars, although there are exceptions in both directions. Women may be more willing to challenge because the Bible has so often been used to justify abuse of women, and Hebrew Bible scholars because a greater proportion of our material was not originally intended as religious instruction, and therefore yields odd and sometimes harmful results when people try to squeeze “lessons” from it. Furthermore, challenging God appears as a legitimate expression of faithfulness in several of the Hebrew Bible’s own stories.⁸

I favor honesty about both what is in the stories and how we feel about them. Descriptive honesty is important to me as a matter of keeping faith with and listening carefully to ancient witnesses, rather than making them projection screens for my own beliefs. It is also important to me, as I mentioned earlier, because I think that glossing over problems leads to real trouble in people’s perceptions of God. I *wish* that Nathan’s confrontation with David in 2 Sam 12 was about God’s opposition to murder and the “taking” of women, but actually the speech speaks of God helping David defeat Saul, giving Saul’s women to David, taking David’s women and giving them to somebody else, putting a sword over David’s own house, and causing Bathsheba’s baby to die.⁹ Is it

⁸ Although challenging the value system of a biblical story should not necessarily be equated with challenging God!

⁹ This does NOT mean that I think God approves of taking women or is in the business of doing so. It does mean, per the note above, that I think there can be a gap between how a biblical storyteller—or a character in the teller’s story—describes God, and who God actually is.

really a good idea to tell people that this is what divine love and justice look like? Might it not be better to admit that the chapter operates on the metaphor of LORD as a powerful patron, who feels dissed because David has taken without first asking?

Even more important to me than descriptive honesty, however, is honesty about our reactions to stories, because it is there that I think the Spirit is often at work. Sometimes, happily, an honest reaction may do better than strained efforts at pious interpretation in helping us understand what scriptural storytellers wanted to say. This would be the case with many of the stories in Judges, where I think Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Jdg 11) and the rape, intertribal warfare, and kidnappings of Jdg 19-21 are presented as evidence of a serious downhill slide rather than as stories of religious heroes—before that, these may even have been told as “horror stories,” ones that fascinated people simply because they were so appalling. The storytellers never imagined, I think, that we would be so stupid as to need to be told that these are highly problematic situations! Similarly, I think we misread the story of Amnon raping his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam 13) if we suppose that this was “business as usual,” much less conform it to the assumption that David models kingly and personal virtue. But whether or not the storytellers would have expected us to demur, I think that failing to honor our misgivings about such stories does moral harm to us.

This summer I taught an intensive seminary-level course in biblical storytelling. I encouraged students to choose stories they had issues with, and most followed that advice: Jephthah's story (Jdg 11), the tale of the Levite and his concubine (Jdg 19), and the rape of Tamar were among the stories chosen. On the front end, fascinatingly, students had great difficulty with their verbatim tellings. This was partly because they didn't yet have an idea what a good verbatim telling could look like, but it was largely, as later reports made clear, *because they thought they were*

supposed to approve of what happened in the stories. A traumatized army veteran struggled with the sea closing over Pharaoh's soldiers. He clearly expected us to berate him for his empathy with the Egyptians! A woman student froze repeatedly as she attempted to tell the story of Abraham's haggling with God in Genesis 18. She was pinned between her shock that Abraham would question God, her horror that God's plan appeared to merit questioning, and terror that she even had these questions about the story.

Although I encouraged them to be open with their questions as they prepared the verbatim tellings, it was not until we got into the clearly imaginative space of creative presentations that students felt safe articulating their moral and theological misgivings about the stories.¹⁰ The woman who had tried to tell Genesis 18 sat down facing an empty chair and asked, "How could you do that to me? Are you just toying with me? I thought you were a God of life? I don't mean to be disrespectful, really I don't, I want to love and admire you, so why is it me that has to ask the question of justice toward Sodom?" She had been paralyzed by the story of Abraham asking those questions in Genesis, but when she got outside the Bible, pretending to be Abraham and addressing an empty chair, she raised the questions fluently and with deep passion. Even more strikingly, when she retold the Gen 18 story on the final day of class, she made eye contact, told the story with confidence and good expression, and even prompted some laughter with her characterizations of God and Abraham probing each other's limits. Her comment in her post-paper was, "When I chose Genesis 18:16-33, I thought I knew what this passage was saying... I discovered that my embedded

¹⁰ My instruction on the creative presentations was, "Open up the questions. Don't try to give the answers. Trust your audience to decide which questions are most important for them and how they will answer." I tried to encourage the same in the verbatim tellings, but it obviously ran counter to deeply embedded expectations about how you are "supposed" to tell a biblical story.

theology was getting in the way of discernment of the scripture... This project opened a completely new world of possibilities for me.”¹¹

Student after student mentioned such discovery. One, who managed a top-notch telling of Luke 8:41-48 (the healing of the hemorrhagic woman) on the first try, wrote this about her preparation: “I subconsciously was producing a lesson. The more that I tried to create a lesson, the more frustrated I became. My attempt...was suffocating the story. Once I gave myself permission to change my mind about the original direction, I could trust the questions.” Yet another, who told the story of God’s message to Eli in 1 Sam 3, wrote: “As I began to let this passage live in me I grew more and more empathetic to Eli. I did not want to gloss over the messiness and sadness that I experienced in this story. I hope that this communicates that God cares for all: the young and the elderly and everyone in between. Also, if we are able to gloss over the sadness of characters in this story that we deem to be sacred, then my guess is that we are unwilling to be empathetic to other people suffering around us.”¹² Allow me to underscore the theological side of his reflection: the student noticed that a teller’s willingness to empathize with the characters suggests that God also might care about them, and that the audience in turn need not suppress their own caring.

So, when students approached difficult stories the way they thought they “should,” they tried to shut down their empathy for the Egyptians, Eli, even Jephthah’s daughter and Tamar, and in the process experienced paralysis and a sense that their faith was threatened. Once they accepted permission to express their empathy and their questions—even questions about God’s reported involvement with events—they (perhaps paradoxically, perhaps not) felt more care for the characters,

¹¹ Karen Clifton, “Theological Reflection Paper,” 6/20/2017, used with permission.

¹² Sheila Spencer, “Theological Reflection,” 6/20/2017; Preston Becker, “Theological Reflection Paper,” 6/20/17; both used with permission.

a greater sense of freedom, and less need to control their audiences, whom they invited into the same process of questioning and compassion. Ironically, they also experienced renewed interest in the Bible, an eagerness to find out more about what is in it and the different ways it can be understood.

What deeply disquiets me about these reactions (which I have been watching in my classes for nearly three decades now) is what they reveal about what many Christians really believe. I have heard many sermons, and many testimonials from students, praising Jesus' compassion for people that would allegedly have been religious outcasts (this was, in fact, the approach that the woman working on Luke 8 originally planned). Bracketing, for the moment, the question of whether common stereotypes about Judaism in Jesus' time are correct, I note that in their approach to the problematic stories, the students felt obliged to suppress the very compassion for which they praise Jesus, and which they typically uphold as a central tenet of Christianity. They assumed that in a biblical story, unrescued sufferers must be enemies of God, and so felt *guilty* about any stirrings of empathy for such characters! It was only when we moved the conversation into spaces outside their usual framework of piety (e.g. talking to an empty chair) that students opened themselves to ordinary human sympathy. What a stunning (and appalling) commentary on the mindset that our models of scripture nurture!

I think people need to know that scripture has problematic stories, and they need permission to respond honestly to those stories. While I do hold that stories deserve a hermeneutic of generosity as well as a hermeneutic of suspicion, I also oppose too-strenuous efforts at "saving" them, because such efforts reinforce notions that those who fare badly in scripture must somehow deserve it, and that in the end a pious person would never disagree with the values or beliefs of biblical writers. I firmly believe that "inspiration" can happen in the reception (and challenging) of stories, not just in

their production or encoded content. Stories have their own ethical dynamic of human sympathy, and when our code for biblical interpretation demands suspension of that sympathy, we need to ask some hard questions about that code as well as the Bible to which we apply it.