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CCJR #4: Rape Culture is Real

There is no denying that America has a problem with believing and honoring survivors of sexual assault and rape. Despite the popularity of twitter hashtags #YesAllWomen and #MeToo, rape culture has not lost any footing, as evidenced by the confirmation of supreme court justice Brett Kavanaugh, despite the accusations made by Christine Blasey Ford. Though not a Christian nation, America is subject to a great deal of Christian influence. The violence inherent in rape culture may not be entirely rooted in Christianity, but there is plenty of out-of-contextual-textual evidence in the Christian Scriptures to support a culture that vilifies women who speak up about sexual misconduct. This places a responsibility on Christian leaders to address rape culture when they witness it and to correct misinterpretations derived from Christian documents.

One such text that normalizes sexual violence can be found in The Revelation of John, Chapters 17 and 18. In these chapters “Babylon the great, mother of whores” is introduced. Babylon is a city and a woman all at once. She is extravagant, she is sexually immoral, she is drunk. She is stripped naked, ravaged, and burned. She also an allegory for Rome at a time when speaking against Rome would be subject to censure. She is not a real woman and never was intended to be interpreted as such, but God’s prescription for her has real consequences that we can clearly see playing out in a 21st century context. Consider the following:

Tweets with hashtag #RapeCultureIsWhen¹	New Revised Standard Version²
“Rape culture is when women who come forward are questioned about what they were wearing.”	“The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls.” (Rev. 17:4a).
“Rape Culture is when survivors who come forward are asked, ‘Were you drinking’”	“And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.” (Rev. 17:6).
“Rape Culture is when people say, ‘she was asking for it.’”	“...holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication.” (Rev. 17:4b).

The result of the whore’s drunken revelry at the expense of the bloodied saints and witnesses is that God has “put it into their hearts” (Rev 17:17) to end her life violently and sexually. “...they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.” (Rev. 17:16). She is not merely killed. She is not merely burned. She is stripped down. She is consumed. It is an act ordained by God as God seeks to dispense judgment. It is important to remind ourselves that she is not a woman, but instead she represents Rome. That said, “Sexualized violence against women is one of John’s primary modes of depicting God’s Judgment.”³ We cannot get so caught up in shouting about the intended metaphor that we forget the real consequences of such sexual violence in a religious text.

Monica Carson is determined to show that the context of Revelation is more important than the consequences, however, her critique of the whore sounds eerily like the hashtags in the above table, saying that the whore bears much of the responsibility for the way she is dealt with.

¹ Zerlina Maxwell, “Rape Culture Is Real,” *Time*, March 27, 2014, <http://time.com/40110/rape-culture-is-real/>.

² Coogan, Michael D. et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Fourth Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ John W. Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

“The whore may be a victim of the beast, but she is by no means innocent,”⁴ sounds a lot like the victim blaming that takes place in 21st century America.

The shocking similarities in narratives is a reminder of the important task of undoing the damage done by Revelation. Progressive Christians avoid the text because it is so violent, but if we are to take on the task of pushing against rape culture, we have to be well acquainted with it enough to know how to respond when it crops up in popular culture, and how to address attitudes of victim blaming in our congregations. Sermons should not be avoided on the tough topics, but should include enough contextual evidence to show the allegory of the role of the whore and expose where they have been appropriated into rape culture, condemning the harmful effects while leaving the impression that John is writing an anti-imperialist text, not an anti-woman one.

⁴ Monica Carson, “The Harlot, the Beast and the Sex Trafficker: Reflections on Some Recent Feminist Interpretations of Revelation 17-18,” *The Expository Times* 122, no. 5 (2011): 218–227.

Bibliography

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