

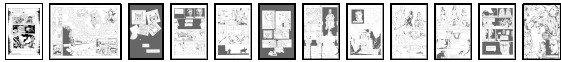
Graphic Images of YHWH: Exploring and Exploding the Bounds of Sexual Objectification in Ezekiel 16

B.J. Parker <b_j_parker_at_baylor_dot_edu>, Baylor University

Abstract

For nearly its entire textual life Ezekiel 16 has barely survived. Early Jewish communities were wary of including it in their canon of sacred texts because of the chapter's explicit and disturbing imagery. Christian communities have likewise wrestled with the text by essentially barring it from communal worship (the text does not appear in any lectionary) as well as nearly bracketing it in scholarship (most, if not all, scholars see the text as a violent and gross misrepresentation of gender roles as well as one of the most exacerbating cases of divine violence. Kathryn Phisterer Darr's work stands out as one of the few that allows the tension of the text to stand.). Despite all of these objections, however, the text remains in the canon. In this one chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, one finds themes of hope, love, despair, suffering, betrayal, grace, and abandonment — all foundational to the human experience. In addition to a colorful theological tapestry, one also finds a definitively historical text that is troubling to most contemporary readers. Theology, history, and contemporary reader combine to make the text and its message shocking at best and inaccessible at worst; this project proposes a solution by way of sequential art. Because the theological message of Ezekiel 16 is both wrapped up in the larger narrativ context and presents itself through forceful and explicit imagery, exegeting the text via sequential art offers the reader a new medium for understanding the text. I propose a retelling of the story found in Ezekiel 16 that consciously creates space for the theological themes, historical realities, and contemporary cultural concerns all to be heard and to stand in tension with one another. Along with a sequential retelling of the story of Israel and YHWH, I will also annotate my work to provide historical, artistic and scholarly perspectives for the reader. I will first create the comic by traditional pencil and ink and then scan the images. The images can then appear in any form needed.





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Creator's Statement

Ezekiel 16 shocks, frightens and disturbs most readers. In the chapter, the prophet Ezekiel metaphorically recounts the tragic story of Israel. Beginning with Israel's founding, and then moving through periods of social and economic development, Ezekiel eventually describes the events that led to the Assyrian and Babylonian assaults on Israel that ended in the death of millions and the exile of most of those left in Israel. Faced with such a traumatic history, Ezekiel finds an explanation for suffering in retributive justice, or suffering caused by one's own choices. In the metaphor, Ezekiel images Israel as a beloved wife who forsakes her husband for others and murders their children. This metaphor parallels the account in 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles of Israel's worship of other gods (including child sacrifice) as well as political alliances with surrounding nations. The sexual and violent imagery Ezekiel uses delivers a disquieting answer to the question of why the people of Israel experienced the tragedy of exile.

For nearly its entire textual life, Ezekiel 16 has barely survived. The early Jewish communities were wary of including it in their canon of sacred texts because of the chapter's explicit imagery. Christian communities have likewise wrestled with the text by essentially barring it from communal worship; this is evident in the text's absence from all lectionaries. Biblical scholarship has also nearly excised the chapter. Scholars such as Mary Shields [Shields 1998] and Renita J. Weems [Weems 1995] have called for the near deletion of the text from the Christian canon. Others, such as Margaret O'Dell [O'Dell 2005] and Kathryn Pfisterer Darr [Darr 2002], [Darr 1992] have encouraged faith communities to contend with the text as Jacob does with "angel" at the Jabbok.

Within the scholarly discussion, regardless of what one wishes to do with the text, one of the most common arguments leveled against Ezekiel 16 is the sexual objectification of the text's female figure. One of the most glaring problems in this line of argumentation, however, is the lack of a definition of what sexual objectification *actually is*. To further complicate matters, most feminist critics outside the niche of biblical studies have varying explanations of what constitutes sexual objectification. Cynthia Eller [Eller 2000] and Melody Davis [Davis 1991] see objectification as related to a person's body being valued only for its usefulness. Amanda Zimmerman [Zimmerman 2008] and Maya Gordon [Gordon 2008], on the other hand, define sexual objectification simply as making one into a sex object. In contrast to these, a more robust definition of sexual objectification might connect objectification to the stripping of the complexities inherent in an individual. If one views Ezekiel 16 through the lens of either of the first two definitions, one can easily make a case for sexual objectification within the text and thus be on firm ground for eliminating the text from one's "canon within the canon," if not the entire bible. The third option, though, seems to point to both new and old means of exploration that promise to be fruitful.

The context of a person or character becomes essential with a nuanced view that sees sexual objectification as "the thinking of, viewing, talking to or about and/or treating an individual in a way that depersonalizes him or her and understands her or his only function to be one of sexuality thus reducing complexities to sexual potential." A narrative context allows for characters to retain their personal complexities in spite of potential depersonalizing events. The fact that the text of Ezekiel 16 was originally conveyed in the form of narrative makes room for the possibility of character complexities and so moves away from objectification. If the text allows complexities to remain, which I argue it does, Ezekiel 16 stands as a text full of incredible theological, historical, and cultural tensions that require careful and close exegetical attention — all of which narrative and more specifically, visual narrative, have the potential to develop.

In this project I attempt to engage the tensions within the text of Ezekiel 16 by way of sequential art. Because the theological message of Ezekiel 16 is both wrapped up in a larger narrational context and presents itself through forceful and explicit imagery, exegeting the text via sequential art offers the reader a new medium for understanding the text. By retelling the story found in Ezekiel 16 through sequential art, I consciously create space for the theological themes, historical realities, and contemporary cultural concerns all to be heard and to stand in tension with one another.

As one progresses through the biblical chapter of Ezekiel 16 there are times when the prophet's metaphor seems to break down. This is especially true when he references the development of Israel's monarchy and its alliances with foreign nations. I have purposefully inserted images portraying these events into the sequential art to both provide rationale in the drama as well as to preserve the somewhat disjointed feel of the text.

Having spent much time with both the sequential art format and the theologically problematic text of Ezekiel 16, I am convinced more than ever that the comic form holds much potential for scholarly exploration. The process of synthesizing traditional biblical scholarship, the contours of the text, and the fundamentals of comics that Scott McCloud [McCloud 1993] has drawn requires the scholar/artist to engage in fascinating and novel means of reflection. As one progresses through the creation process one must make decisions that not only engage with previous scholarly voices, but also those from the world of comics. I have, for instance, drawn on Liam Sharp's work in *Testament* [Sharp, 2006], Tomás Giorello's *King Conan* [Giorello 2011], and Diógenes Nieves' *Demon Knights* [Nieves 2011]. These artists' work fall on the realistic side of McCloud's spectrum of Realistic-Ironic [McCloud 1993]. By doing so, I have added visual and thematic texture to the project as well as engaged and appropriated these artists' form of mythmaking. This small artistic choice merely hints at the untapped potential for new ways of thinking about traditional problems.

For those familiar with the text of Ezekiel 16, it is my hope that this visual retelling will not dismiss the important criticism of Shields and Weems, but allow a new perspective on the theological problems and possibilities within the text. For those unfamiliar with the text, I hope to offer a guide that both orients the reader to the text's complexities and compels the reader to consider the function and limitations of scripture.

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