

TRANSFORMING GOD-LANGUAGE:

THE METAPHOR OF GOD AS ABUSIVE SPOUSE (EZEKIEL 16) IN CONVERSATION WITH THE PORTRAYAL OF GOD IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

In probably one of the most disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible, God is imaged in Ezekiel 16 (and 23) in terms of the metaphor of an Abusive Spouse (cf. also Hosea 1-2 and Jeremiah 2-3). In view of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' concern regarding the impact of violent (sacred) texts in a context of violence against women and children, I propose that Ezekiel 16 in all of its shock value offers a powerful teaching opportunity to raise awareness regarding a number of important issues such as the nature of God-language, the reality of sexual violence, and the impact of gender and race when it comes to interpreting the biblical witness. From experience, though, this text is not the easiest to teach. When teaching on difficult topics such as exemplified by this text from Ezekiel, I have found that it helps students to enter the topic by means of a creative interjection coming from the world of popular culture. This essay will bring into conversation the God-language in Ezekiel 16 with the portrayal of God in Alice Walker's novel 'The Color Purple' (1982), which tells, in the form of letters to God, the story of a young African-American woman, Celie, who is the victim of rape by her abusive, domineering father. A creative engagement between Ezekiel 16 and 'The Color Purple' that asks critical questions about the nature of God-language and how it relates to a situation of physical and sexual abuse may offer some intriguing possibilities for teaching on this difficult topic – in particular raising awareness about the multi-faceted phenomenon of violence against women.

Key Words

God-language; *The Color Purple*; Feminist Theology; Ezekiel 16

Violent Texts, Violated Bodies

In probably one of the most disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible, God is imaged in Ezekiel 16 (and 23) in terms of the metaphor of an Abusive Spouse (cf. also Hosea 1-2 and Jeremiah 2-3). In this violent text, God is portrayed as Jerusalem's husband who took her in when she was just an abandoned infant. However, after outlining God's gracious care for Israel, God accuses his wife of having sexual relations with other nations (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon), which causes God to respond in a jealous rage. In vv 39-41, God punishes his wife for her lewd behaviour, commanding the woman's lovers to break down her platforms and high places and to destroy her property – imagery that has been taken to denote rape (Exum 1995:254-255). The woman is stripped naked, stoned and dismembered – the graphic imagery of a violated body serving the purpose of satisfying God's fury upon her (v42) (Day 2000:205,212).

There are several troubling features associated with this text. Probably most problematic is the violent actions that are ascribed to God. Linda Day demonstrates compellingly how Ezekiel 16 reflects power dynamics that are quite similar to that of the battered woman syndrome including the building tension and acute violent phase followed by acts of kindness and remorse on the part of the batterer (Day 2000:213-215). What's more, Ezekiel 16 justifies the husband's rage and his violent actions by blaming the woman. As Cheryl Exum writes: "It is the woman's fault that she is sexually abused because she asked for it by deliberately flaunting her husband's will (control) and thereby antagonizing him. Sexual sin is punished sexually in the most degrading way" (Exum 1995:256).

It is indeed a question what to do with this troubling text.¹ Whenever I introduce Ezekiel 16 in class at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, where I have been teaching since June 2010, students would be either appalled by the graphic portrayal of divine violence or they would say that they had no idea that this text was part of the canon. Regardless of their response, I am all too aware that quite a few of the white, coloured and black students who sit before me in class have already been exposed to the reality of gender-based violence that crosses racial and socio-economic lines in South Africa, or will soon, as they enter into ministry.²

Moreover, even though students are shocked by the extreme punishment this woman receives, the fact that the main character in this disturbing text is God makes it difficult for them to question the actions of the male perpetrator(s).³ Mary Shields warns though that it is dangerous "to let the male figure off the hook here, even if that figure is God" (Shields 1998, 14, 17). The reason for this is that the sexualized violence in the text does not stay between the pages of this ancient book. As Shields points out, because the woman's punishment takes place "in the sight of many women" (v41), her raped and mutilated body becomes an object lesson for others of her gender" (Shields 1998, 12. Cf. also Exum 1995:254-255).⁴

¹ Feminist interpreters have proposed various ways in which to deal with this text that forms part of the Jewish and Christian canon and that continues to have an impact on the lives of women and men till this day. Exum demonstrates the variety of feminist responses at work in the respective contributions to the *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), in which feminist authors such as Susan Ackermann (Isaiah), Gale Yee (Hosea), Kathleen O'Connor (Jeremiah), Kathryn Pfisterer Darr (Ezekiel) and Judith Sanderson (Nahum) all "wrestle with the implications of biblical violence against women and struggle to find ways of dealing with it (Exum, 1995:263).

² Beyond the shocking statistics reported by Crime Statistics for South Africa that paint a bleak picture regarding the gravity of the violence and sexual assault against men, women and children (http://www.rape.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=875), I have had at least two students who have come to my office sharing their personal stories of being violated.

³ Linda Day points out how (male) biblical interpreters have a difficult time critiquing God. Investigating some of the most influential commentaries on this text, she shows how these commentators (Clements, Block, Hals, Brownlee and Blenkinsopp) side with God, focusing on his amazing love for the woman, and arguing that the woman somehow deserved the punishment she received (Day 2000:225-226). Day argues that quite often scholars seeking to make sense of this text inadvertently participate in the battered women syndrome reflected in this text. She says the following: "The words and concerns of these scholars unexpectedly echo in certain ways the characteristics of battered women before they choose to leave their relationships. Much like battered women do not admit to a problem of abuse in their relationships, these commentators do not find YHWH's abusive actions in this text to be problematic.... They buy into either religion's or society's prescribed traditional roles for women ..." (Day 2000:227). Even Renita Weems who was one of the first scholars to confront the problematic nature of God's character in her book *Battered Love* attempts to save the marriage metaphor when she privileges God in the end, arguing that "the marriage metaphor permits us to believe in the most unbelievable of all possible responses to our woundedness, namely grace" (Weems 1995:114).

⁴ Even more explicitly in Ezek 23:48, the gendered violence experienced by the metaphorical woman in Ezekiel 16 serves as a warning for women both ancient and modern (Yee 2003:126).

In view of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' concern⁵ regarding the impact of violent (sacred) texts in a context of violence against women and children, I propose that Ezekiel 16 in all of its shock value offers a powerful teaching opportunity to raise awareness regarding a number of important issues such as the nature of God-language, the reality of sexual violence, and the impact of gender and race when it comes to interpreting the biblical witness. But from experience, this text is not the easiest to teach. When teaching on difficult topics such as exemplified by this text from Ezekiel, I have found that it helps students to enter the topic by means of a creative interjection coming from the world of popular culture.⁶ As part of a larger project that brings together representations of gender-based violence in popular culture with biblical representations outlining violence against women, this essay will bring into conversation the God-language in Ezekiel 16 with the portrayal of God in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which tells, in the form of letters to God, the story of a young African-American woman, Celie, who is the victim of rape by her abusive, domineering father. A creative engagement between Ezekiel 16 and *The Color Purple* that asks critical questions about the nature of God-language and how it relates to a situation of physical and sexual abuse may offer some intriguing possibilities for teaching on this difficult topic – in particular raising awareness about the multi-faceted phenomenon of violence against women.⁷

In Conversation with *The Color Purple*

In a classroom setting, *The Color Purple* may provide a helpful hermeneutical framework for a discussion on gender-based violence and God-language in the biblical traditions by focusing on the following aspects:

▪ *Understanding God-Language*

The Color Purple offers a good opportunity to teach the situatedness of God-language, i.e. how God-language is shaped by the cultural and social context from which it develops. In a compelling conversation between the two African American women, Shug Avery asks Celie how her God looks. She answers: "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (176). As the conversation continues, Celie admits that her God has bluish-gray eyes with white lashes which leads Shug to conclude that Celie's picture of God is the God of the "white folks' white bible" (177).

Celie's understanding of God is shaped by the racial and sexual oppression that permeates her world. By means of her interaction with Shug, Celie comes to understand that she conceives of God in the same terms as the racist, sexist white mayor or even worse, her

⁵ The Circle of Concerned African Woman Theologians is defined as follow by Isabel Phiri (2008:67): "The Circle is a community of African women theologians who come together to reflect on what it means to them to be women of faith within their experiences of religion, culture, politics and social-economic structures in Africa." Citing the Circle's 2007 draft constitution, she continues: "The Circle seeks to build the capacity of African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge using a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture. It empowers African women to actively work for social justice in their communities and reflect on their actions in their publications."

⁶ Cf. also the intriguing article by Erin Runions, "Why Girls Cry: Gender Melancholia and Sexual Violence in Ezekiel 16 and *Boys Don't Cry*," (2002).

⁷ Seeing that both Ezekiel 16 as well as *The Color Purple* deal specifically with violence against women, this essay will focus its attention on this theme. This is not to deny the fact men as well as children are also prone to sexualized violence.

abusive, domineering father. As Shug tells her: “You mad because he [God] does not listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say? (177).”

It is further evident that Celie associates God with the abusive behaviour she experienced from her father because of Celie’s answer to her mother regarding who the father of her child is: “I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (12). Not understanding the link between the rape by her father and her ensuing pregnancy, Celie is unable to distinguish between her father’s actions and those of God (Thyreen 1999:53).

And when her mother wants to know what had happened to the baby, Celie also holds God responsible, even though it was her father who took the baby away without her knowing it. She says: “I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can (12).” Thyreen points out that even though the baby is not killed, Celie considers its disappearance in violent terms: as a murder; with God as the perpetrator (Thyreen 1999:53)⁸

The result of Celie’s conflation between God and the abusive power figures in Celie’s life is that Celie internalizes the violent language associated with the divine. This is evident from her advice to her stepson Harpo when he complains to her that his wife Sofia is not respecting his authority, that he should beat her (43). When her conscience bothers her, she confesses to Sofia and says the following: “I’m so shame of myself I say, and the Lord he done whip me little bit too” (46). Celie takes over the vocabulary and ideology of her male abusers, even contemplating that God is “whipping” her. This expression of violence that is reminiscent of Celie being whipped by her father and continues to be whipped by her husband serves as a good example of how divine imagery impacts upon a person’s thoughts and actions. Jeannine Thyreen says it well: “As Celie had no choice but to be obedient to Pa, she now has no choice but to obey her husband; this is the same type of relationship she associates with God, one in which she must endure the hardships that the patriarch imposes upon her.” (Thyreen 1999:52,54). Indeed Celie’s image of God as a domineering, abusive (male) presence relates very much to the life she has to live.

In Ezekiel 16, we also see how the image of a male, abusive God grew out of a context marred by terrifying violence and abuse. Employing postcolonial criticism, Gale Yee convincingly shows how the pornographic representation of gender violence in this text emerges out of the prophet Ezekiel’s attempt to make sense of the personal and collective trauma caused by the colonization, conquest, and exile of Israel at the hand of the Babylonian invaders in the early sixth century. Ezekiel’s portrayal of Israel as an adulterous wife whose sexual exploits are followed by violent actions on the part of the male deity-husband and scorned lovers is thus to be understood in terms of the group of disgraced priestly elite males working through the trauma they had experienced (Yee 2003:112-115).

There is a number of reasons why this trauma therapy of sorts occurs in gendered terms and particularly with reference to gender violence. One could say that the violent acts of the enemy forces invading the land and destroying the property and the people in it are couched in terms of sexualized violence and rape that is reminiscent of the real acts of violence that accompany war.⁹ But Israel is also portrayed in gendered terms to reflect the humiliation as

⁸ Thyreen says it as follows: “Celie’s spiritual, physical, and emotional captivity causes a distorted conceptualization of who ‘God’ is and how ‘He’ acts in her life” (Thyreen 1999:52).

⁹ Cf. the essay by Brad E Kelle, “Wartime Rhetoric: Prophetic Metaphorization of Cities as Female,” (2008:95-112). Kelle argues that, “Certainly the violation of women as a metaphor fits the destruction of capital cities, for the stripping, penetration, exposure and humiliation of the women are analogous to siege warfare, with its breaching of the wall, entrance through the gate, and so forth” (Kelle, 2008:104).

well as the metaphorical and perhaps even literal emasculation/castration of the priestly class by the victorious colonizer (Yee 2003:118). The prophet portrays Israel as a female because after the humiliating attacks by the Babylonian invaders they feel quite similar to a violated woman. Moreover, the prophet's act of scapegoating that places blame metaphorically speaking on the bodies of women also explains the use of gender violence to narrate the nation's trauma. Yee argues that in order to explain the humiliation of his people, Ezekiel transposes "the political dealings of the Judean male elite with foreign nations onto the fractured, beaten, and sexually ravaged body of a woman," thus explaining the trauma of the Babylonian invasion in terms of the punishment an adulterous woman would have received (Yee 2003:132-134).¹⁰

As in the case of *The Color Purple*, it is vital for students to understand how the God-language in Ezekiel 16 and 23 is intrinsically related to the socio-historical context in which it finds its origin.¹¹ With this explanation of the tragic events, the prophet views God as the scorned husband who is justified in punishing his wayward wife. The violent actions of the nations are transposed onto God much as Celie in *The Color Purple* conflates her male abusers' abusive actions with the role of God in her life.

Understanding the mechanics of God-language is but a first step in dealing with this troubling text. As Yee points out, in Ezekiel 16 and 23 "women become the literal and metaphorical sites where male controversies and struggles are played out, in which they have little voice or representation" (Yee 2003:119). This tragic reality leads us to consider a second point in which a critical engagement with *The Color Purple* may be helpful.

▪ *The Voice of the Victim*

The Color Purple is a valuable conversation partner when it comes to teaching on Ezekiel 16 as it supplies the missing voice of the victim. Ezekiel 16 constitutes, in essence, a monologue by God who speaks in the first person throughout the entire chapter. In this regard, Mary Shields notes that "the reader never sees the woman's viewpoint: the narrator continues the I-you language so that the reader views the woman's actions through Yahweh's eyes" (Shields 1998:5).¹² The woman, who emerges in this text as the victim of sexualized violence, constitutes not a subject whose voice we hear, but an object acted upon by God, as well as a series of male lovers that represent the nations' violent actions toward Israel.

In contrast, in *The Color Purple* we are privileged to hear the thoughts and feelings of a victim of incest, rape and domestic violence when much of the novel is structured as letters to God. Celie starts this letter-writing because she is ordered by her abusing, rapist father not to tell anyone: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy (11)." In this regard, the act of writing letters constitutes a recurring act of breaking the silence surrounding abuse and hence a form of resistance. In these letters to God, we see evidence of Celie working through her trauma, moving toward a new understanding of herself, as well as her relationship with God.

¹⁰ One could say that Ezekiel is "Hiding Behind the Naked Woman," as Deryn Guest argues compellingly in an essay with the same name with regard to comparable texts from the book of Lamentations (Guest 1999:413-448).

¹¹ As Yee contends with regard to the troubling portrayal of God in Ezekiel 23: "This is not to condone or excuse the prophet's pornographic symbolization of the nation, but rather to contextualize it" (Yee 2003:134).

¹² Shields argues as follows: "The entire chapter is a series of exposures – views of one observer, the narrator Yahweh. We see only what the narrator allows us to see, and what is hidden is as important to the passage as what is revealed (Shields 1998:5. cf. also Day 2000:206).

This creative interaction between two disparate texts may help students understand the importance of shifting one's focus away from what the privileged narrator wishes us to see in Ezekiel 16. This is not something that comes naturally. As noted before, the fact that God is portrayed in first person terms makes it difficult for readers "to step far enough away from the story to question God" (Shields 1998:14).

This act of resistance also does not come naturally for Celie. Celie finds it difficult to show anger at her abusive and domineering father and husband for the reason that the Bible taught her so. As Celie says it: 'Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what (47)' (Thyreen 1999:54).

However, towards the end of the novel, we see evidence of Celie gaining the confidence to challenge God. When she finds out from her sister Nettie that Pa is not her birth father but her stepfather, and that her real father was killed by white people; his successful store taken away, she angrily writes to God that "You must be sleep (163)." This accusation echoes the assertion in Ps 44:23-24: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" With these words of resistance, Celie, like the Psalmist before her, says that these things would not have happened to her if God had been awake and paying attention.

This act of resistance is, according to David Blumenthal, author of the seminal book, *Facing the Abusing God*, an important step on the road toward healing (Blumenthal 1998:51). In this regard, *The Color Purple* adds a significant dimension to contemplating the missing voice in Ezekiel 16 when we see evidence in the final part of the book of a victim facing her abusers, resisting the dehumanization that has befallen her. This resistance is essential for the beginning of a new chapter. In *The Color Purple*, it is significant that Celie's resistance is followed with a depiction of Celie starting a new life that is characterized by, as Preston McKeever-Floyd calls it, "the integrity of her authentic self." She decides to leave Mr and in Memphis she takes up sewing and becomes a successful seamstress. McKeever-Floyd writes that "sewing – the stitching together of disparate parts into an aesthetically pleasing whole – is an appropriate metaphor for the final stage of her transformation. Celie has faced her demons – self-loathing, lack of self definition – and despite the odds has created a new life tapestry" (McKeever-Floyd 2007:431).

With regards to Ezekiel 16, may it be possible to conceive of a life after the carnage of the exile where the young woman Israel is able to pick up the pieces of her life and make a new life? Does this new life require leaving God? David Blumenthal admits that the metaphor of God as abuser that draws on associations of human abuse may imply for some that we "should separate ourselves firmly from God as we do from human abusers" (Blumenthal 1998:50).¹³ It is thus a question whether Israel, when facing her abuser, will not just walk away. Kathleen O'Connor formulates this dilemma in terms of what the exiles experienced after the trauma of the Babylonian invasion: "They may survive as a people, but only if God survives the nation's destruction" (O'Connor 2008:209). It is interesting that in *The Color Purple*, when Celie finds her voice, she stops writing to God and begins to write to Nettie instead (175).

However, David Blumenthal argues that the act of facing the abusing God for him constituted an act of healing, a step toward recovery. For him, protest theology is coupled with finding a new means of engagement with the divine. Employing an image from the

¹³ Blumenthal maintains that "the nature of covenant allows us to continue facing God, but only in protest that alternates with acceptance" (Blumenthal 1998:50).

world of sailing, Blumenthal proposes that a relationship with God can be likened to the image of tacking (the technique of repeatedly sailing at an angle of 45° into the wind, so slowly making progress). He says: "One rages and protests vigorously and honestly. Then one tacks to a liturgy of joy and blessing. One turns yet again to a theology of courageous challenge. Then one tacks again to a theology of belonging and empowerment" (Blumenthal 1998:49).¹⁴

The Color Purple demonstrates well that what is essential for a continuing relationship with God is that the victim finds new language to speak about God – new language that complies with the "theology of belonging and empowerment" that Blumenthal suggests. In this regard, an engagement with *The Color Purple* may be most helpful.

■ *New Language for God*

The Color Purple offers a great example of finding new language for God that transforms the abusive, distant, and violent divine imagery into an understanding of God that offers healing and comfort to victims of sexual violence. It is in letters to her sister Nettie, as well as her conversations with Shug, that Celie comes to some other insights regarding God. From Nettie, who serves as a missionary in Africa, Celie learns that there were black people in the Bible and that it is a misconception to think of God and Christ in white terms. As Thyreen formulates Nettie's emerging insight:

Nettie is confronted with an awareness that these African people have their own 'God'. This awareness causes her to re-examine her own notions of God... As Nettie slowly redefines God, moving from a deductive toward an inductive understanding, her perspective on religious pictures, icons and relics changes (Thyreen 1999:59).¹⁵

Also Shug Avery implores Celie that she should not think of God as a white male (as she says "You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (179). Shug says: "God ain't a he or a she, but a It... [It] [d]on't look like nothing... It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything... Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it" (177-178). For Shug, the color purple, from which the title of the book derives, is evidence that God loves us and wishes to please us. She says: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (178).¹⁶

Shug relays to Celie how this transformation occurred for her: "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all" (178).¹⁷ Shug further tells Celie that "Whenever you trying

¹⁴ One should note that this strategy of course does not necessarily resolve the issues involved with the act of recovering from abuse or facing one's abuser, but for believers who want to maintain a relationship with God, this strategy offers the means for developing an honest relationship with God that refuses to accept the violence.

¹⁵ Thyreen points out that although it is helpful to correct the inaccurate depiction of God and Jesus as white, "the novel as a whole reveals that it is problematic merely to replace a 'white' determinism with a 'black' determinism" (Thyreen 1999:58).

¹⁶ Thyreen notes that "the color purple symbolizes royalty and passion." As part of her transformation, Celie makes her room purple indicating how the color purple reflects "her new life which includes an intimate connection with God" (Thyreen 1999:65).

¹⁷ It is a revelation for Celie to discover that God is also to be associated with sexuality and sensuality (Thyreen 1999:64). Margaret Kamitsuka notes that African American readings of *The Color Purple* have been blind to the

to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to get list... Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (179).

This new understanding for God does not come easily for Celie who for so long has thought of God in terms of violence and dominance. She says: "He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it" (179). And yet, this conversation with Shug allows Celie to end her letter with a religious expression "AMEN" for the first time (Thyreen 1999:62-63).

It is moreover significant that Celie's last letter is once again addressed to God when she says: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God (p249)." Thyreen points out that "the novel thus abandons a fixed, patriarchal notion of God for one that is more free, recognizing the Divine in all of creation and claiming the Spirit within the individual" (Thyreen 1999:65). This new understanding of God has a transformative effect on Celie's life. Thyreen says it well:

Celie's ensuing actions reveal that her understanding of God has undergone a significant transformation. She has come to see God on a personal level, beyond gender, and realizes the strength within herself to find value as a woman, no longer to be treated as a mule or prostitute. She discovers her own God, not one forced on her by whites or one she associates with her oppression as a woman; it is rather a God that is 'in everything' that allows her to enjoy and appreciate life (Thyreen 1999:63).

This religious transformation endows Celie with the strength to face Mr for the first time. She says: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (187). Thyreen points out that their relationship is transformed so much so that she calls him by his first name Albert: their relationship no longer centering around "the roles of victim, victimizer but those of equal human beings." She says: "Celie will not allow herself to be victimized by Albert, to be dehumanized by anyone, because she now respects herself" (Thyreen 1999:63).

It is interesting that when Nancy Bowen contemplates the question asked in the beginning of this essay, i.e., what to do with the text of terror that constitutes Ezekiel 16, she proposes that for those interpreters who choose not to reject the Bible outright, one may consider "enlarging the understanding of canon to include non-biblical texts that inspire and authorize women and men in their struggle against violence and oppression." She actually mentions the writings of Alice Walker as one such text that may be garnered to "disavow violence, delineate non-sexist and non-patriarchal traditions, and contradict the male-dominant/female subordinate gender paradigm at the root of much violence."¹⁸

themes of lesbianism and bisexuality that permeates the novel (Kamitsuka 2003:60). In contrast, Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* pays attention to not only "color in *The Color Purple* (e.g. racist exploitation of black women's bodies, the fragility of the black family, black women's moral agency, and Celie's rejection of a white God)" but also to "diversity in the sexual identities of African American women. It is a rich and complex identity-politics reading and one that could be used to combat racism and heterosexism in the church" (Williams 1995:53-54).

¹⁸ Nancy Bowen suggests e.g. writings of Amy Tan, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, music of the African American vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock might well serve as some contemporary 'canonical' texts" (Bowen 2006:195). Cf. though the warning posed by Kamitsuka that white feminists have often overlooked the racial component of *The Color Purple* and in particular the uniquely African-American spirituality reflected e.g. in the reference "feeling like a motherless child" that is a reference to the African American spiritual that says "God is a mother to the motherless and a father to the fatherless" (Kamitsuka 2003:52-53).

Seeing that my own position regarding the canon would be that the canon as we have it, even though flawed and limited in places, is sufficient; my own work has been dedicated to finding new ways of speaking about God within the confines of the canon itself. For instance, in my book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* (2012), I seek to develop alternative ways of speaking of God's delivering presence in terms of the non-traditional female metaphors of God as Divine Midwife (Psalm 22:71), God as Mother (Isaiah 42,45,49,66) and God as Wailing Woman (Jeremiah 8-9) that stand over against the violent portrayal of the more common Liberator-Warrior metaphor that has traditionally been used for God.

These divine metaphors that – like Ezekiel 16 – grew out of Israel's experience of trauma during the Babylonian exile, employ acts of tears and lament in the instance of the wailing women, the acts of giving birth and nurturing new life closely associated with mothers, and acts of wisdom, skill and healing performed by professional midwives to talk about God's liberative action. However, instead of violence and abuse that surrounded the divine portrayal of God in Ezekiel 16, the metaphors of God as Wailing Woman, Mother and Midwife that view God's deliverance in terms of God's liberating presence, offer language to us to speak about a God who is on the side of life and who is present in the midst of pain.

However, it remains a question whether one can transform the God-language in Ezekiel 16 that was the focus of this essay. I tend to agree with Kathryn Pfisterer Darr that difficult texts such as Ezekiel 16 should be kept in the canon in order to conscientise students about the persisting reality of gender-based violence in the biblical traditions, as well as in our respective communities today (Darr 1998:199. cf. also Exum 1995:264).¹⁹ The violent metaphor of God as an Abusive Spouse has to be deconstructed so that it may no longer be used to justify the violence and abuse toward any group in society. As shown above, using a popular novel such as *The Color Purple* may facilitate this process. However, when it comes to developing alternative ways of speaking of God, it may be that one has to look to other images for the divine that are also used elsewhere in the biblical tradition that may assist readers today to resist the violation of men, women and children.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to create a conversation between two disparate texts that deal with the common theme of the literary presentation of gender-based violence. It may be the case that not many students have read either Ezekiel 16 or *The Color Purple*. Yet I have found that introducing students to *The Color Purple* as I have done in this essay works well to help them understand the issues involved in understanding a difficult text such as Ezekiel 16 and hence raising awareness regarding gender-based violence. What has been evident from this creative engagement between a biblical text as well as a text coming from popular culture is how this dialogue opens up discussion, in the end adding meaningful perspectives on both texts involved. Such continuing conversations are what is necessary to change a culture in which it is acceptable to rape or abuse men, women and children.

¹⁹ Cf. also Runions who argues that this type of rereading constitutes the only option for dealing with this text, i.e., putting forth a reading that offers a different kind of cultural influence (Runions 2002:191).

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