

Illustrating Sacred Stories: *An Argument for Artistic Interpretation* | BY MINDY BIELAS



"Boxed In: The Woman from Timnah." 20" x 20"; 2013.

It was my first Old Testament class, of my first semester at a new graduate school. The energetic blond woman who was my professor talked us through the syllabus, emphasizing creativity and textual accuracy when it came to our class presentations. We were studying the women in the Book of Judges, such as Deborah and Delilah. I was equal parts excited and terrified. Fast-forward to the week of my presentation. I had shown my paintings to only my roommates, but my professor, Dr. Tammi J. Schneider, encouraged me to apply my creative outlet to class.¹ The academic sources for my assigned

woman, Samson's first wife from Judges 14 and 15, were scarce and biased toward Samson, but I had studied the text and painted during every free moment. Students and teacher returned from our mid-class break and, as butterflies swarmed my stomach, I revealed my painting. We started the conversation with initial reactions, which quickly lead to academic insights and pertinent personal experiences. I was amazed by how one piece of art could shed so much light on both the text discussed, and on the people discussing it.

Sacred stories are powerful, and we can harness and use that power when we better understand these stories and our relationships to them. In the following pages I will first explain how sacred stories inform us, then look at how art can affect the way we understand our sacred stories, show how art is a distinctly unique interpretive tool and, finally,

suggest that we take a new, artistic look at our sacred stories in order to become a more relevant and socially engaged community.

Informative Sacred Stories

Not all stories are told through the same medium. We have traditional books; but then there are also comic books, movies, TV shows, audio books, theater, stories orally handed down through generations, and many more. Stories are everywhere, and each of us has a special relationship with one story or another. Even if a story is

not shared for the purpose of promoting a particular moral, every story communicates an ideology. It is in the reading, viewing, or hearing of a story that the story becomes informative. It is when the story is told that the value system is communicated which influences the subjects in many ways: (1) supporting or deconstructing theories and ideas, (2) questioning or reinforcing preconceived prejudices or biases, (3) affecting our emotional response to a particular issue or phenomenon, and (4) overall, influencing our understandings of ourselves,



"Boxed In: The Levite's Pileges" 24" X 20"; 2014

our relationships, and the world around us. How much more so then would sacred stories—heard and read on a regular basis—inform us?²

There is, however, one complicating factor: we read and understand stories differently. Because each of us has experienced life unique to our social locations—that is our gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, age, and so much more—we interpret stories differently. For example, the majority of the articles written about Samson and his first wife were written by men and influenced by an interpretive history of Samson as hero. One example is, Victor H. Matthews' "Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis," who argues that Samson was seduced by his first wife, away from God's will.³ However, as a woman, I was interested in reading the story from the perspective of his wife. Many of the article's arguments followed Matthews'. I, on the other hand, argued that the woman was trying to survive a life or death dilemma and that Samson was straying from God's will before his first

marriage. A more detailed description of my interpretation can be found on the blog, *Feminism and Religion*.⁴

The differing interpretations have distinctly different implications. For example, the first, more traditional interpretation, suggests that the moral of the story is to stay away from anything that may distract you from God's will. This is an acceptable moral; but the implication is that beautiful things, especially if they are in the form of a female person, are dangerous. This implication is unhelpful because it prepares the Church to demonize women, especially women who happen to be "beautiful."⁵ On the other hand, the moral of the second—that is, my interpretation, focusing on the perspective of Samson's first wife—is that unequal power relationships breed destruction, especially for those with less power in said relationships. Once again, this moral is acceptable, but the implications must be assessed in order to decide if it is one we wish to promote. The implications of this interpretation is that those with power, especially those with a privileged social location, should have their power checked in order to prevent negative consequences, which predominately affect those less privileged. After both have been analyzed, it is clear that the traditional interpretation is less helpful for a community working towards equality.

In order to see how these stories inform and influence us, we must take into consideration new and different interpretations, while also being conscious of the implications of our favored interpretation. With this understanding comes the power to change our interpretations for the benefit of our Church community and our relationships with others.

Art and Sacred Stories

Art is a valuable tool when assessing how sacred stories influence our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us in several ways. In the first place, art makes apparent the subjectivity involved in textual interpretation. No matter the artistic medium being used, the artist must decide how she or he will present the content of the text in question. The parts that seem most important to the artist, the textual aspects that will become the focus of the artistic piece, are decided for personal reasons. The artist's social locations and related experiences will not only influence her interpretation of the text, but will shine through in the artistic expression of the interpretation. This subjectivity is then represented in

the final artistic project. Acknowledging the subjectivity of every interpretation, whether it is expressed artistically or not, is necessary to accepting that there is more than one possible moral in every sacred story.

On the other side of the coin, the sharing of this artistic interpretation, and any resulting conversation, will not only continue to shed light on the artist's unique perspective and interpretation, but also bring attention to the subjectivity of the viewer. Because the viewer of the art piece can perceive the subjective nature of the artist's interpretation, this will do two things.

First, the viewer will feel free to acknowledge the subjective nature of her or his own interpretations. This is significant, especially in fundamentalist communities where the "right" interpretation often trumps any other perspective. If the viewer has been holding onto a traditional interpretation—or another interpretation which is not her own—for the sake of having the "right" interpretation, viewing the art piece may free her to understand the story in a way that better fits her social locations. Alternatively, if the viewer has been promoting her personal interpretation and attempting to prove it is the only right interpretation, the viewer will potentially feel free to acknowledge the subjective nature of her own textual work and the validity of others' work.

Second, the use of art for interpretation opens the conversation to important questions of implications. If conversation partners do not need to defend the correctness of their interpretation, they can instead discuss the implications of different interpretations. However, there is a potential caveat. The aforementioned conversation of implications can only occur if the community has created a space where each voice is equally valued. If the community recognizes one or several persons as more authoritative than the rest, and this authority structure is practiced by said community, then there will continue to be some interpretations promoted as more correct, and the conversation concerning implications will be hindered.

I do not mean to suggest that there cannot be



a leader within a conversation. Instead, the leader or facilitator of a conversation should be someone who is comfortable with giving ideas and concepts, inconsistent with their own, equal weight throughout the conversation. During the presentation of my painting of Samson's first wife in Dr. Schneider's class, I was the expert of the painting and Dr. Schneider was the expert of the text. However, neither of us allowed these positions of authority to hinder the conversation. One student pointed out that the painted woman's arm was twisted in an uncomfortable position, metaphorically associating the visual with the socio-political position of the woman in the text. Another person pointed out that the painted woman could be moving forward or backwards, associating this perceived movement with the struggles of abused women today who wrestle with the "choice" to stay or leave.⁶ Had Dr. Schneider or I pushed our perspective onto our peers as the more correct view, we would have missed out on their insights.⁷

Artistic Influences

One might suggest that such conversations can be had without the use of art. However, I argue that art is a distinctly unique interpretive tool for church communities because it can be holistic, communal, and inclusive, in addition to providing new perspectives important to the continued relevance of the Church as a whole.

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First, artistic expression and its appreciation are holistic in that they incorporate many ways of knowing. Within church communities, many different types of people interact, each prioritizing a particular way of knowing. Those who have been highly educated may expect for there to be logic and facts behind arguments, while many more are sensitive to a more personal knowing, prioritizing feelings when a discussion is at hand. Much of society values intellectual ways of knowing; dismissing emotions, gut feelings, intuition, and experiences. Yet, if the Church is going to be holistic, it needs to create a space where many ways of knowing are valued and accepted. By incorporating other non-traditional ways of understanding, such as through artistic expression, interpretive work will better reflect our persons, experiences, and our communities.

Second, after art is created, it is viewed by a wider community in shared spaces, and it is in the communal response of interpreting and reflecting on art that it can be used as a vital interpretive tool for church communities. According to Roland Barthes's literary theory, "Death of the Author," the author, or in this case the artist, has no more authority in interpretation than others.⁸ Similarly, hierarchies based on educational privi-

lege, in which the clergy or leader has more authority than the laity and followers, can be abandoned for more equal conversations.

Interpretations and reflections are then a communal experience, each person relying on others for insight, sharing the power that comes with interpretive understanding.

Third, because art is holistic and communal, art is also an inclusive interpretive tool for church communities. Anyone can participate because participants do not need to articulate their views in traditionally academic ways, nor do they need specialist insight into the artist's background in order to interpret and reflect on the theology and social theory portrayed. Thus, art can transcend many forms of privilege, especially educational privilege, and include many voices.

These three characteristics—holistic, communal, and inclusive—make art a unique interpretive tool, promoting both a new artistic look at sacred stories, and also the environment necessary for a conversation about the implications of such sacred stories.⁹

The Relevant Church

I have shown how different interpretations of the same sacred story can have radically different implications for the communities who value them. I have also argued that art is a helpful interpretive tool for communities who wish to discuss alternative interpretations and the resulting implications. What I have yet to suggest is that an open conversation about the morals of our sacred stories can have significant impact on the Church's relevance.

There are two aspects to this statement. The first is an open conversation; by this I mean, a conversation where every voice is included. The inclusion of every voice will ensure that the needs of all involved are known and addressable. For example, an over-worked single mother of five may find a particular sacred story is especially important to her social location. Yet, if she never has the chance to contribute to the conversation about this sacred story, then this story may never be shared for the purpose of encouraging other people in similar situations. Additionally, the conversation, initially about the sacred story, would never develop into a conversation about the needs of such a person if her contribution were silenced.

The second aspect of my argument is a conversation about morals or value systems. I have made it clear that every sacred story has many possible implications, some

"Boxed In: Jephthah's Daughter." 22" X 24"; 2014



of which are more detrimental to portions of the community. If conversations about the implications of our sacred stories continue to be hindered by tradition concepts, like “only one correct interpretation,” then we may never know how the stories we share many times over, starting with the youngest of our congregants, are negatively affecting their perspectives of themselves, their relationships with others, and their wider community.

It is in the inclusion of non-traditional perspectives in a conversation of implications that we can assess which interpretations are least detrimental to our community, and therefore making the Church more relevant and socially engaged. Important to note, is that this is a process, one without an end. When the Church stops growing and developing, it will start to die and decay.

One last example of how art can continue to provide helpful and unique perspectives of the sacred stories that inform biblically focused communities, like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, took place last year at a women’s Bible study group. I brought my three-part set of my women of the Book of Judges paintings. Each painting is of a woman, whether Jephthah’s daughter, Samson’s first wife, or the Levite’s concubine, interacting with a multicolored frame. On a previous day we had talked about the women depicted, focusing on the biblical account and purposefully holding off on drawing any morals or applications from the text. But on this day, we focused on the artwork. Each woman took turns explaining what she saw in the paintings, bringing to the conversation her own understanding of the text. Before long, the conversation turned to real life experiences. The artwork had helped build a bridge between the text and the application of the text. What was so important to me was that these women had no problem making these connections between the text and their lives for themselves, working together, and valuing their own perspectives as equal to my more academically informed perspective. Their inter-

pretive process was holistic, communal, and inclusive, providing new perspectives that made their weekly Bible study relevant to their understandings of themselves, their relationships, and the world in which they live. ■

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References

1. To learn more about Dr. Schneider’s textually focused interpretation of the Book of Judges, refer to Tammi J Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville, 2000).
2. Informed by Bruce C. Birch, “The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching,” in *Arts, Theology, and the Church: New Intersections*, eds. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Cleveland, 2005), 105–124.
3. Victor H. Matthews, “Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis,” *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 16, No. 3: 245–257.
4. Melinda Bielas, “Painting Women from Judges – Part 2: The Woman from Timnah Reframed,” *Feminism and Religion* (March 17, 2015). <http://feminismandreligion.com/2015/03/17/painting-women-from-judges-part-2-the-woman-from-timnah-reframed-by-melinda-bielas/>
5. “Beautiful” is put in quotes here to bring attention to the fact that beauty is a socially constructed concept.
6. I put “choice” in quotes to bring attention to the fact that many women in abusive situations have very few options, many of which seem less desirable than leaving the abusive party because of lack of resources, the additional emotional and psychosocial abuse, or both.
7. The concepts of this section have been informed by personal experiences of showing my artistic interpretations in spaces ranging from conservative Sabbath School groups to more liberal academic classrooms.
8. Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977).

Note: This section was originally a section of presentations at both Adventist Society of Religious Studies and American Academy of Religion, 2014.

**Even if
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of promoting
a particular
moral,
every story
communicates
an ideology.**

Since we
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we embrace
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and acknowledge
our claims to
know as repre-
senting work in
progress.

Certainty and Heresy → continued from page 48...

edge” claims. We do this in science all the time. We would all be dead by now if medical knowledge, and with it the practice of good medicine, were to wait until the truth condition were assuredly, i.e. incorrigibly, met.

Some crucial implications seem clear. In the absence of George-like confirmation of our knowledge claims, we must learn to express our knowledge claims in the modest terms of levels of confidence. At times humility requires that we say in all truthfulness, we simply do not now know. And in all such circumstances, the door should be genuinely open for open, serious, and charitable conversation. The truth condition, much to the dismay of some, cannot in the real world be met without qualification. That’s the way things are and will be for a long time! Certainty with qualification is an instructive and humbling result. In this regard, no one can with any credibility claim any sort of privileged immunity. We are all in the quest to know with essentially the same epistemic handicaps.

Germane to the project identified in the opening paragraphs of this piece, we are now in a position to recall and confront the following two observations. First, certainty of the logical kind discussed above is not attainable in open systems. In all open systems our claims can be rationally doubted—not so with a closed system such as logic or pure mathematics. Certainty of this kind is unassailable. Second, *all* other candidates for certainty are open in principle to rational doubt. So, without loss of integrity, we can acknowledge the inevitable and adjust the discourse from talk of certainty to talk of degrees of confidence.

With that said, we encounter an extremely serious problem. The notion of certainty is so appealing, so beguiling, so reassuring, that it becomes the ground for many a deadly social conflict. The notion must be retained, unattenuated, at all costs. The result is certainties in conflict and with that state of affairs, attendant violence. Heretics become identified.

Certainty, like truth, is *prima facie* a commend-

ing term. It takes very little reflection to see that that is so. A peculiar feature of commending terms is that they can be abused to do the work that only carefully developed arguments should do. Call an opinion a finding and all is more or less well; call it a guess and a lot of trouble can ensue. A lot of argument space is taken over by conveniently employing commending terms designed to elicit concurring and favorable responses and, *a fortiori*, by crafting terms of disapproval for whatever is in conflict with a given certainty. No painstaking or rigorous justification is invoked. Anyone can wield a club; it takes skill to build strong bench. We are all familiar with this, I think.

Unfortunately, the discreditors I made reference to in my opening paragraph, treat their brand of ideological certainty—akin to logical certainty discussed above—with militant self-assuredness. The Triumvirate of Tape, Talk, and Text, armed with axioms, postulates, and question-begging rules of correspondence or coherence, take over with virtual epistemic certainty. (Begging the question is the logical fallacy committed when one uses as a premise, precisely what is to be established as a conclusion to one’s argument.) QEDs sprout up, it seems, everywhere. Every question gets a definitive answer. Textual cherry-picking guarantees an inerrant ideological hermeneutic. One unsustainable result is a destructive, because divisive, intolerance.

For the good of the faith we all cherish, and our unyielding commitment to *the only sure and certain Word*, who called and dined with sinners, that sorry state of affairs must go. In the serious business of “getting it doctrinally right,” studied charitable caution is essential. Now, we are destined to know in part. Let’s give more than lip service to this truth. ■

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