

Your Warriors Will Become Women: The Feminization of Exiles, Captives, and Survivors in Ancient Jehud

Ron Clark
 Kairos Church Planting Support/George Fox University
 Portland, OR
reclark@georgefox.edu

Ancient texts use feminine language toward those individuals subject to violence in military, sexual assault, and forced migration. Valiant men are described as weak, afraid, confused, prostituted, or rape victims when defeated by a more powerful nation or god. The Hebrew Scriptures also use this type of description to indicate the defeat of Yahweh's foes whether in the community of Israel or outside its borders. This gendered violence language can be ruthless, cruel, and also misogynistic. Biblical texts, however, use similar language toward Yahweh in order to nurture and protect the victim of violence so that shalom will exist.

Evidence from the Ancient World

Ancient kings enjoyed expressing their exploits in battles and conquests throughout the ancient world to create fear in other cultures or suggest that their armies were invincible. The histories not only boast of these victories but seem to explore in great detail the methods of punishment, humiliation, and shaming of their victims. Whether the conquered people became captives or colonized, the texts and reliefs reveal the methods of humiliation used by armies to subjugate and enslave their victims.

The creation text, *Enuma Elish*, is one which describes Marduk's conquest of Tiamat in graphic detail. Marduk tramples his grandmother's body, split's her like a shellfish, and uses her blood and defeated body to create the human race.¹ The graphic battle scene also involves Ea's initiating the bloody war by chaining/fettering the other gods, putting a nose ring and rope in a victim's nose, and finally killing the captives.² Tiamat, likewise, was described in a frenzy

¹James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd Ed. (Hereafter written as ANET), "The Creation Epic," Tablet IV, lines 88-140, (Princeton: Princeton, 1969), 67.

²ANET, 61-67.

through shaking legs, fear, trembling, wailing, and huddled while caught in a net.³ Various images are used to illuminate the story as Marduk defeated and humiliated his enemies. The creation of humans follows this ancient “slasher movie” with a calling that humans were to serve the gods to make their lives easier.

The people he brought forth, endowed with life, the service of the gods he imposed that these may have ease. Creation, destruction, deliverance, grace—shall be by his command. They shall look up to him.⁴

This yoke, imposed on the humans, was redemption for the yoke placed upon the gods by Ea and Tiamat, their divine parents. This was also psychological terrorism. As the gods were enslaved, so were the victims of their war creating humans who were byproducts of that violent battle.

Other mythological texts include gods such as Baal defeating his enemies by bending or breaking them, and using them as a footstool. Quaking, trembling, collapsing, and being humiliated were clearly expressed in these texts.⁵ When the gods defeated their enemies, they were shamed and oppressed in order to prevent rebellion from mortals. The defeat rarely involved struggle—the gods completely dominated their victims and further traumatized or humiliated them through acts or threats of violence.

Similar language was used in epic war stories or histories in Egypt, Assyria, Sumer, Babylon, and other cultures. The Assyrians seemed to be the most graphic in their displays of power and oppression over other nations.

The Assyrians publicized their atrocities in reports and illustrations for propaganda purposes. In the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, official inscriptions told of cruelty to those captured. Most were killed or blinded; others were impaled on stakes around city

³Ibid., 67.

⁴Ibid., 131.

⁵IIIAB B-A, ANET, 131.

walls as a warning. The bodies were mutilated; heads, hands, and even lower lips were cut off so that counting the dead would be easier. These horrifying illustrations, texts, and reliefs were designed as a warning to frighten the population into submission. Assyrian strategy for conquering foreign territories included siege warfare, pitched battles, and psychological warfare.⁶

As Nemet-Najat suggested, to save time, the Assyrians preferred psychological warfare as a means to gain control over a city without expending energy through physical sieges.

When surrounding the capital city and shouting to the people inside failed, the Assyrians' next tactic was to select one or more small cities to attack, usually ones that could be easily conquered. Then the Assyrians committed extreme acts of cruelty to show how the entire region would be treated if the inhabitants refused to surrender peacefully. Houses were looted and burned to the ground, and the people were murdered, raped, mutilated, or enslaved—acts all vividly portrayed in the Assyrian stone reliefs and royal inscriptions in the palaces. The Assyrian troops regarded looting and rape of a conquered city as partial compensation.⁷

The portrayal of the deportation of the civilian population from a conquered city—the transportation of the captives overland and by boat, the numbering of the captives and the careful recording of captured goods by scribes, and the binding of captives who were men of rank and status—is an outstanding theme of the Assyrian reliefs.⁸

While Assyria seemed to be the most graphic in its description of the oppression of conquered cities, the Egyptians and Babylonians similarly glorified their conquests.⁹ The kings executed those who presented a threat to their army and then chained/fettered, placed in cages, beat, tortured, impaled on poles, flayed, and raped those who were their victims.¹⁰ Displaying the ruler

⁶Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 228-29.

⁷*Ibid.*, 229.

⁸Jan Christian Gertz, "Military Threat and the Concept of Exile in the Book of Amos," *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and its Historical Contexts* (hereafter cited as *The Concept of Exile*), ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, (New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 16.

⁹"The Taking of Joppa," ANET, 22-23; "The Asiatic Campaigns Under Pepi I," ANET 228; and "The Asiatic Campaign of Thut-mose III," ANET 234. "The War Against the Peoples of the Sea," ANET, 262; List of Date Formulae of the Reign of Hammurabi," ANET, 270; "The Siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib," ANET 287.

¹⁰Stuart Al Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 29, 37, 44-45, 57. See also ANET VAB C 4. See also Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998): 17, 19; "The War Against the Peoples of the Sea—Ramses III," ANET, 262; Shalmaneser III— "The Fight Against the Aramean Coalition," A (1-20), ANET, 276.

of the defeated city kissing or bowing at the feet of the king was also common practice in humiliating the fallen warriors.¹¹ Shaving the beard (the sign of military power and masculinity) was also a common practice of a king designed to feminize the enemy.¹²

The Assyrians commonly practiced mass deportation of conquered cities not only to support their need for a larger army, to control a vast empire, but also as a way to depopulate the colonies.¹³ Victims were many times marched on long journeys naked, in stocks, and eventually became sick and exhausted.¹⁴ Sometimes Assyrian overlords blinded the captives so that they could not flee, since chains were somewhat expensive.¹⁵ While the Babylonians found deportations to be valuable to funding their empire, they were not as brutal as the Assyrians before them.¹⁶

The Assyrians destroyed their captors' gods and their temples who were not part of their pantheon, the land, and mocked their belief system. This was expressed as a curse from the gods upon the land.¹⁷ Those who suffered at the hands of their captors were either deported to another city or remained in their city to carve out a meager existence.¹⁸

All of the Israelite deportations were very thorough and severe. The Assyrians connected the consequences of conquest in a proportional way to the degree of resistance of the conquered nation.¹⁹

¹¹Irvine, 57; ANET 131; "Sennacherib," ANET 287; "Adad-Nirari III: Expedition to Palestine," ANET 281.

¹²Aster, 102-4.

¹³Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 49-50; Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 6.

¹⁴Nemet-Nejat, 237.

¹⁵Blindness and deafness were also viewed as punishments for breaking a covenant and a curse from the gods. "The Soldiers' Oath," ANET 353.

¹⁶Smith-Christopher, 48-49.

¹⁷Jeremy D. Smoak, "Building Houses and Planting Vineyards: The Early Inner-Biblical Discourse on an Ancient Israelite Wartime Curse," *JBL* 127, no. 1 (2008): 19-35.

¹⁸K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Deportations of the Israelites," *JBL* 117/2 (1998): 214.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 227.

While ancient cultures used this language concerning captives the Hebrew Scriptures expressed this language as well (Is 3:1-7, 12; 10:18-19; 13:7-8; 14:10-11; 15:2-3, 7-8; 16:2; 19:14-16; 21:3; 23:15-16; 28:7-8; 26:16-17; 33:7; 37:26-27; 42:14; 47:2-3; 59:10; Jer 13:21-22, 25-27; 14:9; 30:15).

She is pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, and every face grows pale. Nah 2:10

This is what Yahweh declares: “Dead bodies will lie like dung on the open field, like cut grain behind the reaper, with no one to gather them.” Jer 9:22

This is what Yahweh says: “Do not deceive yourselves, thinking, ‘The Babylonians will surely leave us.’ They will not! Even if you were to defeat the entire Babylonian army that is attacking you and only wounded men were left in their tents, they would come out and burn this city down.” Jer 37:9

Was your prostitution not enough?... In all your detestable practices and your prostitution, you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood. Ezek 16: 20-22

This is what Sovereign Yahweh says: “Bring a mob against them and give them over to terror and plunder. The mob will stone them and cut them down with their swords; they will kill their sons and daughters and burn down their houses. I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not imitate you. You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am Sovereign Yahweh.” Ezek 23:46-49

When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Josh 2:11

The Hebrew bible used similar language to suggest that the enemy (including God’s people) would be humiliated by Yahweh, who may have used another army to fulfill this task. The prophets of Yahweh suggested that the humiliation, violation, and captivity of both Israel and

Judah were the will of their God, whom they had rejected and abused (Jer 44:2,12; Exek 16:20-22).²⁰

A Day in the Life of the Captives

“Feminization”

My definition of feminization is important as we move forward. In this paper I refer to the “feminization” of others by a dominant culture, or one that views itself more dominant. This feminization involves the use of feminine language, force, physical oppression, or cultural images to humiliate another person or object by considering them “non-masculine” or “abnormal” by the dominant masculine culture. This masculine culture tends to distinguish between masculine and feminine terms such as strength vs weakness, power vs submission, courage vs fear, order vs chaos, etc.²¹ Male or female captives would have been “feminized,” by the colonizer to humiliate, oppress, and psychologically victimize another culture/nation. This included warriors who were defeated, captured, and/or whose dead bodies were desecrated.²² The enslaved survivors would have typically been females, children, slaves, and the elderly.²³ The nations that were captured, exiled, and/or deported were placed under tremendous stress, shame, and humiliation. The colonizing nation not only physically oppressed the captives, but they also enacted a system which continued to dehumanize them—even after the captor

²⁰T.M. Lemos, “The Emasculation of Exile: Hypermasculinity and Feminization in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (Hereafter referred to as *Exile...*), edited by Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritche Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 378.

²¹Ron Clark, *Am I Sleeping With the Enemy? Males and Females in the Image of God* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 49-52.

²²ANET 277-78; 263; 270; 276.

²³Ancient war texts suggest defeat by the scattering of soldiers upon the shore, ocean, or land. The texts give little indication that there were soldiers taken captive. ANET, 263.

departed.²⁴ Those who were captured during war suffered long term physical, emotional, and psychological duress in the following ways.²⁵

1. Death or the experience of death among the community
2. Famine and epidemics
3. Executions at the hands of the captors
4. Long range factors such as chronic illness, and psychological duress
5. The deportation of the elite left an economic stress on those taken captive

Those who were transported to their new home also faced continued traumatic events such as:²⁶

1. Landlessness
2. Joblessness
3. Homelessness
4. Marginalization
5. Food insecurity
6. Increase morbidity and mortality
7. Limited access to property
8. Community or social disarticulation

Those captured and deported suffered deep psychological wounds and physical maladies.

Trauma and war survivors often suffer from post-traumatic stress and experience traumatic bonding toward their captors. To be a captured male was not only a sign of humiliation and suffering, but it was also a sign that your superior had proven to be “more of a man” than you were.²⁷

²⁴Note: this was expressed by the Assyrians use of psychological terror to control current and future cultures from rebelling. Nemet-Najat, 229.

²⁵Avraham Faust, “Deportation and Demography in Sixth-Century B.C.E. Judah,” *Exile...*, 96-97.

²⁶Aaron A. Burke, “An Anthropological Model for the Investigation of the Archaeology of Refugees in Iron Age Judah and Its Environs,” *Exile...*, 44-45.

²⁷“Masculinity is not a given. It must be shaped and cultivated, created and re-created by cultural discourses, inscribed and reinscribed by social hierarchies and social actions. It experiences triumphs, it endures crises—and none of these pinnacles is greater, it seems, than that experienced when a man or a group of men conquers another, subjecting the vanquished to physical violence and public humiliation, strengthening their claims to masculine honor while at the same time depriving the conquered of their own masculine status. In the ancient Near East, the victorious proclaimed their glories upon stelae and portrayed them upon reliefs, boasting of their strength and prowess, of the favor their gods had bestowed upon them. But how did the vanquished express the despoliation of their manhood, the shame of status newly fallen, the agony of stripes, both emotional and physical, newly struck and so slow in healing?” Lemos, 377.

In addition to this, captives were continually mocked and further marginalized by their oppressors. Psalm 137 illustrates this as well.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

Gazing/looking, the evil eye, taunts, and insults from outsiders were also terms used, by victims, to suggest that they felt stalked and oppressed while suffering emotional trauma and fear as outcasts.²⁸

Yahweh the God of the Captives

The Israelite people fell captive to the Assyrian, Egyptian, and Babylonian armies throughout history. As was customary, the nations of Judah and Israel would have been marginalized and oppressed by their captors. While Yahweh claimed to be the author of their predicament, Babylon was blamed as the ones to administer the punishment.

With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him. (Jer 27:5-7)

In the ancient world this was common, and deity typically judged their worshippers who were disobedient.²⁹ Yahweh took responsibility for the exile because Judah had become stiff necked and rebellious. After their exile Yahweh again claimed to be the one to lead them home. While

²⁸Smith-Christopher, "Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts," *Exile...*, 260-61; also Nissinen, "The Exiled Gods of Babylon in Neo-Assyrian Prophecy," *The Concept of Exile*, 38. Gazing/looking could also represent the ancient "evil eye" curse found in many ancient texts and magic spells. [Evil Eye Resources](#).

²⁹Peter R Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (Philadelphia: Westminster John/Knox, 1968), 43.

the nation could return home from Babylonian captivity, they suffered the scars as exiles and refugees. First, *losing the tabernacle traumatized the nation since the building had occupied holy space in their community and identity.*³⁰ Second, *the literature of exile and post-exile indicates that captivity was a traumatic event experienced by the entire nation.*³¹

The nation was affected by diminished resources and security, an increase of morbidity and mortality, traumatic stress, and the trauma of transportation to another country and culture.³² The prophetic literature suggests that the nation saw itself in prison, suffering, by the use of *chll* (pierced, slain, defiled).³³ Smith-Christopher also wrote that the texts represented a belief that the exilic nation was in prison and experienced deep wounds as illustrated by the words used in the Hebrew texts.³⁴

- *Moser* מוסר = tie, imprison Nah. 1:13, Ps. 107:14
- *Ziqqim* זק'ם = fetter, Nah. 3:10, Is 45:14, Ps. 149, Jer 40:1
- *Nehushtim* נהשתים = Bronze fetter, Jer 39:7, 2 Chron. 36:6, Lam. 3:7
- *Keli* כלא' = imprison, 1 Sam. 25:33, Is 43:6
- *Bor en mayim* ביר א'ן מ'ם = pit without water Gen 37:24, Jer. 38:6, Zech 9:11
- *Bet abdim* בת עבד'ם = house of slavery Exod 13:3,14, 20:2; Deut 5:6, 6:12, 7:8, Jer. 34:13, Mic. 6:4

³⁰Mark K. George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 45.

³¹“Exile has cascading effects. Forced relocation diminishes access to resources, which decreases the security of individuals and families and increases the incidence of disease and death...The deprivations of exile include change of location and loss of property, security, and people. These deprivations have an impact on the identity and ideologies of exiles and exilic communities, which experience and increase in extended families and inclusive marriages and the embrace of supporting ideologies. Ideology yields to the pragmatics of survival. The cascading effects of exile that begin with diminished resources lead to new identities.” Frank Ritchel Ames, “The Cascading Effects of Exile: From Diminished Resources to New Identity,” *Exile...*, 185.

³²*Ibid.*, 175.

³³David G. Garber Jr., “A Vocabulary of Trauma in the Exilic Writings,” *Exile...*, 312-18; Samuel E. Balentine, “The Prose and Poetry of Exile,” *Exile...*, 348-50; and Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 32.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 71-72.

Carr wrote that the lack of direct discourse concerning the suffering during the exile indicates the traumatic affects that captivity had upon the Israelites.³⁵

Finally, *Neusner suggests that the creation of the exilic literature and reediting of the Torah suggests that the nation found this time of suffering as a creative moment in history.*³⁶ While Neusner believed that this was a natural response of a community Middlemas and Friedman indicate that this was also a key event in shaping the future Jewish nation.³⁷ The nation, while in Babylonian captivity and while remnant in the land, developed a complex faith, community, and literature that identified the people of God on a journey to healing.

The rupture of trauma is a narrative (as opposed to nervous) breakdown, rupturing the self in the form of the loss of one's organizing principles and the rupturing of one's relationships with others... This shattering is immobilizing, leaving survivors without a story that enables them to move into their worlds by making sense of the world, their place [in] it, and their relationships with others. But the construction of new narratives holds out the promise of repair.³⁸

The captives were oppressed, humiliated, and "feminized" by both their God and other nations. Yet they found a way, as do most colonized nations, to survive and thrive both as a community and in their literature. However, their God, Yahweh, continued to dwell among them. While they were humiliated and oppressed, Yahweh suffered with them.

³⁵"I suggest that precisely this absence of explicit attribution of prophecy to the heart of the period of exile is itself one of the impacts of exile on the prophetic Gattung: the displacement of authorship of prophetic texts to the preexilic periods and the lack of explicit discussion of the exile except in highly symbolic and ambiguous forms..." David M. Carr, "Reading into the Gap: Refractions of Trauma in Israelite Prophecy," *Exile...*, 297.

³⁶"Religion responds to historical crisis because it forms a critical component in the shaping of the public order of society and culture. Forming and re-forming, a religious community embodies what people do together to solve problems, and thus the political decision of the group flow from their religion." Jacob Neusner. *Transformations in Ancient Judaism: Textual Evidence for Creative Responses to Crisis* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 1.

³⁷Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the "Exile,"* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1; and Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works* (Chico: Scholars, 1981), 6-7.

³⁸Janet L. Rumfelt, "Reversing Fortune: War, Psychic Trauma, and the Promise of Narrative Repair," *Exile...*, 335.

This is evident through the emotional upheaval of the prophets as they confronted the nation of Judah. First, *Yahweh was traumatized through the sin and rejection of the nation*.³⁹

The character of God in the book of Jeremiah is multiple and unstable. Images and metaphors about the deity tumble over and contradict each other in a poetics of divine proliferation and profusion. This multiplicity appears to undermine any consistent characterization or portrayal of the divine and creates by linguistic abundance a language of a God who is multiple and multifaceted.⁴⁰

The nation had turned against Yahweh through violence, unfaithfulness, and oppressing the poor in their community. Yahweh felt the pain of rejection not only from the people, but from other nations. As Mandolfo wrote, Yahweh's emotional response expresses the pain of rejection.

“Thus for, YHWH's tirades seem more the consequence of hurt than anger. He has been passed over for “lovers” that appear to the woman, at least, to be better providers.”⁴¹ O'Conner also suggested that this pain came from the prophet as well as his God.

In YHWH's opening expressive burst of pain, first-person verbs spiral downward in the direction of despair. His cheerfulness disappears, grief descends upon him, sickness invades the heart of God... Using language reminiscent of clinical depression, YHWH trades his anger for sinking despair in the poem's second statement of grief: ‘For the crushing of the daughter of my people, I am crushed, I grow leaden in spirit, horror has seized me’...⁴²

Second, *Yahweh suffered with the captives*. While the nation of Israel was rejected, their God also suffered humiliation. Meier indicates that the earlier prophets were in the presence of Yahweh and the divine council but as the Jews were exiled the prophets left the council and

³⁹“The prophet suspects that the very notion that the husband is willing to take his wife back, to reclaim her after she has become defiled by other men, that he is willing to start anew, and that he will trust her unconditionally again is unimaginable to his male Hebrew audience. Indeed, never could his audience imagine that a husband might take his adulterous wife back so lovingly, so gently, with such trust.” Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995), 50.

⁴⁰Kathleen M. O'Connor, “The Tears of God and Divine Character in Jeremiah 2-9,” *Troubling Jeremiah*, JSOTS 260, edited by A.R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M O'Connor, and Louis Stulman (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 387.

⁴¹Carleen R. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 35.

⁴²O'Connor, 398.

became exiled along with their community.⁴³ Yahweh, however, continued to speak to the exiles through the prophets and sought to reestablish relationship with the nation. Yahweh would have been viewed as weaker than Marduk of Babylon, as well as the Assyrian and Egyptian divine councils. The return of Yahweh's honor, however, seemed to be manifested through the return of the captives (Is 66:19-24; Jer 16:14; Ezek 11:17-18), restoration of a relationship with Judah (Jer 31-34), knowing Yahweh (Jer 24:7; Ezek 12:20; 14:11), the rebuilding of the temple and city of Jerusalem (Ezek 40-48; Hag 1-2; Zech 1-3; 14:20), and the worship of Yahweh by foreign nations (Is 19:18-25; 60:3; Zech 14:16). "Why are you like a man taken by surprise, a warrior powerless to save us? You are among us, Yahweh, and we carry your name; do not forsake us!" (Jer 14:9). The driving force in Yahweh's vision for the people is hope, love, and mercy.

Yahweh also communicated a presence among the people. While Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, and 2 Chronicles were part of the Hagiographa, Yahweh's presence was still among the captives through their heroes and faithful leaders. During these texts and feminization of the Jewish captives Yahweh spoke of hope and freedom, a deep need for those in captivity.⁴⁴

Such linkage of themes of judgment and hope are not brand new. Yet trauma studies offer insight into the dynamics that would have produced such a focus on the exile on the selection, preservation, and reshaping of prophetic literature both to process experiences of survivor guilt and failed enactment and to attempt—building on the authority of pre-exilic prophecy—to rebuild bonds of trust and hope that were severely wounded by the experience of destruction and especially exile.⁴⁵

However, Yahweh not only claimed to have handed them over to punishment, this God pursued them to reestablish a relationship. Yahweh offered hope and mercy as an opportunity to motivate

⁴³Samuel A. Meier. *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 22-42.

⁴⁴M. Jan Holton, "Imagining Hope and Redemption: A Salvation Narrative Among the Displaced in Sudan," *Exiles*, 231.

⁴⁵Carr, 302.

the nation to repentance. “The ability to imagine a future is a lifeline for a refugee...Imagination is a requirement for hope. If we cannot imagine a future that opens to possibility, we fall into despair and hopelessness.”⁴⁶ While the other nations offered fear, oppression, and domination, Yahweh provided hope.

In Babylonian cultures those nations who turned against their gods were oppressed by them. This was common in the ancient world.⁴⁷ Reconciliation occurred when the nation returned and validated the god whom they had hurt. In Assyria, Esharhadon’s act of repentance, for his father Sennacherib’s destruction of Babylon and kidnapping the idols, brought blessings and reconciliation to Assyria when he returned the gods to Babylon.⁴⁸ The absence of the gods brought a curse on the land, as well as the neighboring country that acted disrespectfully. However, Yahweh was one who pursued the rebellious nation promising to lead them home to safety. Throughout the prophets Yahweh promised and sought to reestablish covenant with the people, even though they had violated their relationship with their God (Jer 32:38-39; Ezek 16:60-63; Hos 2:14-23; Zech 13:9). The prophets not only painted a vision of hope for the nation, but also offered hope of a return to relationship and forgiveness. Yahweh’s willingness to reconcile was risky.⁴⁹

Even more the warning in Deuteronomy suggests that the land would be defiled if the victim remarried an unfaithful spouse.

⁴⁶Holton, 231.

⁴⁷Martti Nissinen, “The Exiled Gods of Babylon in Neo-Assyrian Prophecy,” *The Concept of Exile*, 34-35.

⁴⁸Ibid., 31.

⁴⁹“Obviously, in each instance God’s forgiveness would prove to be as shocking to the prophets’ audiences as Israel’s depravity was sure to have been.”

“The prophet suspects that the very notion that the husband is willing to take his wife back, to reclaim her after she has become defiled by other men, that he is willing to start anew, and that he will trust her unconditionally again is unimaginable to his male Hebrew audience. Indeed, never could his audience imagine that a husband might take his adulterous wife back so lovingly, so gently, with such trust.” Weems, 50.

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. Deut 24:1-4

This text illustrates the depth of love and mercy shown by Yahweh who became vulnerable enough to reconcile and reestablish covenant with the offender. In order for this to happen Yahweh created a new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17-25) as a method to replace the nation and restore relationship.⁵⁰ While the Biblical flood in Genesis 6 suggested that God destroyed the earth due to sin, here Yahweh symbolically, claimed that while Israel's sin destroyed the earth they could be reunited to their Lord.

While there is great discussion concerning the "occupation of the desolate land of Judah," during exile, the elite as well as those remaining, Jerusalem and some of the surrounding areas were not unoccupied. The editors used this empty land metaphor to suggest that the land lay fallow in a Sabbath rest while God accompanied the captives, exiles, and squatters in their day to day existence. There were those exiled to Babylon, those who remained in the land, and those who fled to other countries. While God had not abandoned the city of Jerusalem, the promise of hope lay in the gathering and returning to the land of Judah to become God's people once again.

Jeremiah 3:8 suggested that Yahweh had divorced the nation. As a divorced "wife" the nation chased after other lovers, who in turn rejected and abused her. After this Yahweh offered the divorced wife hope by pursuing a relationship and marriage covenant (Jer 31-34). According to Deut. 24:1-4, to accept a twice divorced/rejected wife defiled the land and brought shame on the

⁵⁰Notice Jeremiah 4:23, "I looked at the earth and it was תוהו ובהו, and at the heavens and their light was gone..."

man. Yet Yahweh was willing to create a new heavens and new earth (Is. 65:17-25); new land (Ezek. 37); and take back the one who brought shame on the Holy One of Israel.

This begs the question, “What did it mean to be the God of the captives” or “Is the God of the feminized/marginalized a powerful God?” When a God pursues those who bring shame, is this a cultural display of courage or shame/weakness?⁵¹ The God of the captives, while possibly viewed as weak by the dominant culture, is the God who called humans to a new life. As the prophet Joel cried out, “Everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved...” (Joel 2:32). Thus, the Torah is proclaimed from the margins because Yahweh dwells there.

Yahweh identified with the captives and claimed to be manifested by these qualities, ones used over ten times in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 34:6; Ps 51:3; 86:15; 103:8; Jon 4:2).

Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)

But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. (Ps 86:15)

Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. (Ps 103:8)

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. (Jonah 4:2)

Yahweh, Jesus, and the Early Christian Community

Yahweh is also manifested in this manner through the ministry and compassion of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. Jesus came to Palestine to become the friend of sinners, free the captives, and provide hope for the poor and marginalized (Matt 11:1-6; Luke 7:18-23). The nation of

⁵¹The god ‘El was known as the compassionate god in the ancient world (CTA 4.3.31). Walter A. Maier, III. *‘AS”u”ERAH: Extrabiblical Evidence* (Atlanta: Scholar’s, 1986); 11.

Judah believed that they were again in exile.⁵² Yet this Savior came to call people on the margins out of darkness (Luke 4:16-19). Like Yahweh he became the God of the exiles and captives or, as his enemies put it, “the friend of sinners and tax collectors” (Luke 5:30; 7:34). In the classic question asked by John the Baptist’s disciples (Matt 11 and Luke 7) as to whether Jesus were the Messiah he answered in the affirmative through his works.

At that very time Jesus healed many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. He replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind see, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who is not offended by me.” Luke 7:21-23

Luke’s addition of “at that very time Jesus healed...” indicated that John’s disciples witnessed Jesus’ work among the marginalized yet still questioned his ministry.⁵³ Jesus ending statement “blessed is the one who does not take offense at me” also suggests that this ministry among the sick, sinners, and tax collectors would have presented problems to the early Christian community. This community was being challenged to not only perform ministry among the exiles/marginalized, but to imitate Jesus who claimed to be like Yahweh, the God of the captives. As Paul wrote, Jesus did not consider himself “equal” with Yahweh, but willingly became humiliated (ταπεινος) by becoming human and suffering crucifixion (Phil. 2:5-11) earning him the “NAME above all names.” This humiliation, or “shame of the cross” provided a connection with marginalized populations at Corinth, Rome, and the community addressed by the author of Hebrews (Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor 1:26-28; Heb. 12:1-4). This marginalized Savior brought hope rather than condemnation, even if it meant becoming weak in the eyes of the reader or

⁵²N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), xvii-xviii. Craig A. Evans, “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 77-100, also supports Wright’s views.

⁵³Clark, *Jesus Unleashed: Luke’s Gospel for Emerging Christians*. Eugene: Cascade, 2013); 84-85.

community. Likewise, the Gospel must continue to be proclaimed from the margins because God dwells there and offers hope to those who understand this shame, humiliation, and pain.

As a minister who has worked with victims of Intimate Partner Violence, sex trafficking, and other abuse I find that the connection between a God or Savior who has been “humiliated” creates a strong bond between victims/survivors and the faith community. I also find that the victim of “unjust suffering” also finds hope with Jesus’ who may have willingly laid down his life yet suffered “humiliation” while enduring the shame of humanity to reach people. This also offers a challenge to those using privilege, position, and power to oppress other or advance their “faith community” without recognizing that they serve a God who defends and associates with the weak.

Even in sin, the people of Israel found connection with their God whose relationship carried them through captivity, while calling their leaders to accountability. This God continues to “defend” the humiliated by sharing in their suffering and offering hope of transformation. In our United States’ culture where Jesus and God are viewed as mighty and powerful models of hypermasculinity, the God of the Captives reminds us that divine power is relational, especially in its connection to the humiliated and oppressed who need hope and compassion.