

THE FORSAKEN ONE:

THE TRAFFICKED WOMAN AS A TEMPLATE FOR THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY AND MISSION

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Introduction

After beginning my involvement in anti-trafficking street work in 2004, I came face to face with the worst expressions of an unjust society. I watched before my very eyes the increasing enslavement and exploitation of the alien, the widow and the orphan (categories which usually sum up the profile of the trafficked woman¹) in the streets and in the brothels of central Athens, Greece. I observed the commercialization of the individual and the stripping away of human dignity in its most brutal forms.

Recently, photographs of a dozen prostitutes were published on the Greek police website (www.hellenicpolice.gr), most of them non-Greeks. These women had HIV and were accused of intentionally spreading the disease to unsuspecting citizens. The discussions around this event were heated. Some condemned the public humiliation of these women by the authorities, stigmatizing them and violating their medical confidentiality while letting the clients off the hook. It was the clients who had demanded unprotected sex with the girls and, consequently, put their own families in danger. Others congratulated the authorities for the measures they had

¹ Although there are various forms of human trafficking and the victims vary in age and gender, my references are primarily focused in trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. For the different forms of trafficking see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Human Trafficking", n.p. [cited on 8 August 2012]. Online: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>.

taken to protect the health of the customers and their families from these prostitutes who mercilessly spread the virus.² Even among Christians opinions were divided, something which brought to light that there are various ways of perceiving the prostitute.

While we could point to numerous things that are wrong with the way prostitution is handled in Greece and elsewhere, I would like to focus more on the way we as Christians perceive the prostitute.

The most common way is to see the prostitute as totally *other*, something unrelated to ourselves, which we must either condemn or show charity to. I would like to argue that the Bible encourages an *identification* of God's people with the prostitute as a prerequisite for a just missiological approach towards these women and human trafficking in general. Numerous times, the Scriptures take a category which is perceived as foreign or much "below" the reader and paints him or her with the same colors in an attempt to encourage identification. Its purpose is to eliminate the "otherness." One example of this literary technique is found in the book of Hosea and its identification of Israel with the category of the prostitute. Other categories are the "alien" and the "slave," with which the Israelites are exhorted to identify in order to deal with them justly (e.g. Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; 15:13-15; 16:11-12; 23:7). It appears that justice towards another as *other* is inadequate. Treating another one fairly presupposes some sort of elimination of *otherness*, with the grandest example being that of the incarnation. Christ's becoming fully human earns Him the role of the righteous judge (John 5:22).

Before examining a particular text from the book of Isaiah, we must listen to the woman called "the prostitute." One must empty the term "prostitute" of the stereotypical content it

² See the report by Derek Gatopoulos, "Greece Prostitutes Arrested, 17 HIV-positive Women in Brothels," n.p. [cited on 18 June 2012]. Online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/03/greece-prostitutes-hiv-arrests_n_1473864.html.

usually carries and take a look at the actual person, her dreams and desires. Jenny, a woman I saw for the first time in a basement brothel, sent me the following letter which is indeed a window into her soul:

I lost my father when I was really young. He was my great love. Then I had a failed marriage. I was 14 years old. I stayed with him for a year but he would beat me continually. Fortunately, we did not have a child together so I left him and I had to survive on my own with no help from anyone. I was looking for love so I got into another relationship. I gave all of myself into that relationship, for many many years, but they never wanted me, his family. So they finally threw me out. Now I found my true love. A man who cares about me and loves me. He promised me I won't have to do this job forever, just until I repay all his debts, then he'll marry me. He doesn't take all the money I earn from me. He lets me have some. My dream is to be married and have a house. I want a house to take care of and I love flowers. I want the house to be full of flowers and gardens.

What we see in Jenny's story is the loss of the father's love very early in her life and then the pursuit of finding that lost love in cheap imitations, which were unable to fill the gap of the original loss. The vision of true covenantal love remains unquenched in her, regardless of the multiple disappointments and distortions of authentic care she has experienced. This is the prostitute, the forsaken woman. There are more painful stories and there are less painful ones, but overall, Jenny's narrative represents the journey of numerous girls we meet on the streets of Athens every week.

The Metaphor of the Forsaken Woman.

In Isaiah 62 the author speaks of the story of a tormented city, Zion, or God's elect people, and he presents their story as that of a woman with a restless and painful history:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more

be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa 62:1-5 ESV)

Metaphors make a point about what they are describing rather than about their origin. The purpose of the phrase “the Lord is my shepherd” is to make a point about the Lord, not shepherds. However, the use of the word “shepherd” presupposes a very good understanding of what a shepherd is and does.³ Similarly, in Isaiah 62:1-5, Zion is described as a forsaken woman, and that presupposes the knowledge of what a forsaken woman really is. Isaiah must have encountered in his lifetime such an individual or must have had some idea of the destitute state she would have been in. He would have seen at least one point in her experience to which he was able to relate in order for him to turn her story into the template through which he would interpret the narrative and identity of the people of God (himself included). Through his description of Zion we can discern how he conceives the forsaken woman.

The woman he describes did not have a bright and glorious appearance for the onlooker, as Isaiah desired for her, or an honorable position in society, but the prophet looks beyond appearances. Since he expects that she will one day again be the object of delight and be married, we can presume that this woman was rejected by her husband or lover who no longer found any pleasure in her. The word used for “pleasure, delight” in v. 4 (*hps*) is commonly used in the context of marriage or to characterize someone’s desire for marriage (e.g. Gen. 34:19). Lack of

³ This falls in the realm of “conceptual metaphor.” A conceptual metaphor consists of two domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. For example, we can think of life in terms of journeys. This means that “we have coherently organized knowledge about journeys that we rely on in understanding life The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the target domain.” Life, for example, would be a target domain while journeys are source domains, Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

“delight” in someone is used to describe lack of interest in marrying a particular person (e.g. Deut. 25:7-8; Ruth 3:13) and can be a reason for divorce or separation (e.g. Deut. 21:14). In other words, Isaiah’s metaphor is derived from a woman who has lost her man’s affections (*hps*) and been abandoned (*’zb*) by him.

Divorce was common in the ancient Near East and the reasons often centered on problems associated with infertility or illness.⁴ R.N. Whybray understands that these are the conditions behind the names in our passage: “Forsaken (‘*’zûbāh*) means ‘abandoned (by your husband)’ as in 60:15 and in 54:6, from which the metaphor was taken. Desolate (read *šōmēmāh* for *šēāmāh*) is to be understood as meaning ‘barren’, as in 54:1.”⁵ However, in the ancient world the husband would not normally need “any more justification to divorce a wife than that he chose to do so for his own private purposes or possibly economic gain.”⁶

Just like marriage would have been formalized by the husband’s declaration “you are my wife” in her presence, the divorce was effected by pronouncing the opposite: “you are not my wife.”⁷ Although Deuteronomy 24:1-4 seeks to regulate divorces by demanding a written form of divorce so that a woman could remarry without being accused of adultery, women may have often found themselves in unfortunate situations such as that of Hagar when she was sent away with a child “wandering in the desert” (Gen. 21:8-14).⁸ It is also likely that a man would have gained economic profit out of selling a woman he no longer delighted in (hence the law in Deut. 21:14). The sense that God’s ideal is not found in divorce but in the union established in

⁴ Victor H. Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East”, in Ken M. Campbell (ed.), *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 15.

⁵ R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (The New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 248.

⁶ Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East”, 25.

⁷ Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East”, 25. Also, Daniel I. Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel”, in Ken M. Campbell (ed.) *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 49.

⁸ Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel”, 50.

creation, as claimed by Jesus (Matt. 19:8), seems to be already expressed in the book of Malachi. Daniel Block recognizes Malachi 2:16 (“I hate divorce”) as the basic biblical stance towards this issue, and in answering why divorce was so objectionable, he notes:

Practically, in the ancient context, unless a woman was taken in by her father or her brothers, divorce put her in an extremely vulnerable economic position. Like the widow or the orphan, she would be without male provision and protection, and in many instances would turn to prostitution simply to earn a living.⁹

This resonates with Jenny’s experience: loss of familial protection, rejection by in-laws, abandonment and exploitation by men—circumstances far removed from what a woman would desire for her future. Thus, the success of the metaphor used in Isaiah 62:1-5 begins with the attention the prophet pays to the phenomenon of the forsaken woman and his accurate reflection on her conditions. It is his ability to observe and recognize her suffering, her deprivations, and her longings that teaches him about himself and his people. The prophet’s precise observation of her fallen humanity and his identification with her leads him to compassion and to the realization of the abnormality of the state she is in. It awakens his desire to see her condition reversed. Forsakenness could not be the ideal or permanent state of a woman. She is made to be received back and be the object of delight. The forsaken woman thus becomes the parable of Israel, a mirror for seeing the *self*.

Similarly, in today’s global streets and brothels, if you are willing to look closely, you can meet living parables of yourself, of the church, and of humanity in general. In the face of the trafficked woman you can see the protagonist of salvation history and the life pattern on which the greatest narrative is built: the forsaken one to whom restoration is coming.

⁹ Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel”, 51.

Zion, the Forsaken Woman

For the prophet, the life of the forsaken woman becomes the metaphor of the life of God's people, Zion. Zion has a long and painful history that makes one wonder: why did God abandon her like this? Instead of being the jewel for all the nations to marvel, she has become the disgrace of the nations, violated and brutally ravaged. Isaiah sees Jerusalem abandoned, not glorious. At times she is described like Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:9-10). She opened up her most precious treasures, showed the holiest vessels of her temple to foreign kings (Isa. 39) and sold herself for some false security and hope. Not only foreign armies, but even her own people continually defiled her (Isa. 1:21-23). She was abandoned by all, including her God who seemed to have turned his face away from her. Westermann says that "[t]he land's lying waste indicated that God had forsaken it."¹⁰

Of course God cannot be equated to a human husband or be faulted for the condition of the woman Zion (see Isa. 50:1). Whether it was through her own errors or due to the aggression of others, Zion's transgressions are *not* counted against her. The focus is on the devastation she has endured and its coming reversal. Only compassion, *not* blame, is appropriate at the sight of a destitute people and this is also obvious in the immediate context of our passage, verse 8: "The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: 'I will not give your grain to be food for your enemies anymore, and foreigners shall not drink your wine for which you have labored'." God takes the role of her defender, *not* her accuser. He vindicates¹¹ her and restores her to the position of His wife.

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Old Testament Library; trans. David M. G. Stalker; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 376.

¹¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp notes that "[t]he passage from the ethical to the eschatological connotation of *sedeq* (here translated 'vindication') and its variant *šēdāqā* corresponds to the passage from the forensic sense of vindication of innocence in a court of law to an ultimate vindication." *Isaiah 56-66* (AB 19B; New York: Doubleday, 2003), 235.

The renaming (62:2-4) echoes the marriage ceremony¹² where the man's proclamation "you are my wife" would have changed the status of a woman. Paul Hanson says that, "Third Isaiah follows Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in utilizing the marriage metaphor to express the new name, that is, the new status of the people in relation to God."¹³ For women in prostitution, the name is particularly significant. They almost never give their real name to their clients. This serves as a defense mechanism where other personas are assumed to experience the suffering and the humiliation in an attempt to preserve the "purity" of their true selves. The name of their childhood should not be found on the lips of strangers. This is how intimately linked their name is to their identity. Isaiah gives full authority to God as the one to determine the true identity of the woman Zion, the One to spell out her name. As with Naomi, an experience that overthrows one's whole life calls for a new name. For her it was Mara (Ruth 1:20). God's new name blots out the old experience and it marks a radical transformation in Zion's identity. It signifies a change that will be "incisive, discontinuous with the oppressive structures of the past."¹⁴

Christ's Identification with the Forsaken as His Mission

Not only was the forsaken woman the template through which Isaiah told Zion's story, but, in some sense, she became the parable of the Son of God in His earthly life. The Messiah's mission involved His full identification with the forsaken; it was her story that He chose to "enact." Such was the identification of God's son with the forsaken woman, with Zion, that He came to live and experience her pain and eventually attain to her much desired end, thus bringing that end to the realm of historical possibility for her. He lived a tormented life, rejected by his people,

¹² Also Brevard S. Childs following Anderson's argument that the imagery is derived from the context of a wedding linked to the renaming ceremony. *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 512.

¹³ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 229.

¹⁴ Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 226.

betrayed by his closest ones but worst of all, abandoned by the Father. On the cross he became the “Desolate”, the “Forsaken” (Matt. 27:46). The “estranged” son was restored to life again and his broken body was remade into a glorious one. His ridiculed title written on the cross “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38) was indeed a royal status that was not apparent to the bystanders. It was a promise from His Father who had a throne waiting for Him together with a new name, above every other name, that was waiting to be pronounced to Him (Phil. 2:9). The Messiah took up the forsaken woman’s suffering story and turned it into a monument that testifies to His work. Now His body, the Church, may look abandoned and forsaken but they are nothing more than heirs to the same story, Zion’s story, indeed Jenny’s story.¹⁵ Luther says the following of the Church:

Note, however, that according to substance and appearance the church is a harlot, illegitimate and forsaken. But in the Word the church is seen as a bride, Hephzibah, and beloved son. In faith the heart must be convinced that it is Christ’s Beulah, Hephzibah, and bride, and in the midst of tribulations such a person rejoices and is glad. For he knows that Christ’s righteousness is his own. This produces cheerful hearts and consciences and good theologians, who are then in the best position to teach and console others.¹⁶

The Prophetic Vision and Action

Our window to this perspective is the prophet. Prophecy has to do with having a fully formed picture of reality, from beginning to end, in order to be able to offer an interpretation of isolated moments in that history whose end and purpose do not seem apparent. Only in the light of the entire synchronic prophetic narrative is Isaiah in a position to find meaning in the momentary suffering of the broken community and to understand Zion’s role in this narrative. It is the

¹⁵ Zion in Isaiah 62:1-5 is identified with the Church by various church fathers such as Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome and Clement of Alexandria. See Robert Louis Wilken (ed), *Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (The Church’s Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 484-487.

¹⁶ Hilton C. Oswald (ed), *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (Volume 17; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 346-347.

glorious vision of a coming restoration, a final reversal of the present state that injects him with the strength for survival so that he in turn can inspire his community with hope through his message.

Our prophet cannot “keep silent.” He seems to have assumed the role of Zion’s defender until the day of her restoration. Westermann says that the prophet “was aware that he had been sent to counter God’s silence and restraining of himself of which the state of things gave evidence.”¹⁷ The prophet embodies the words of God in a context where God appears silent and distant. The persistent presence of the prophet as a preacher and an intercessor functions as a living sign of the presence of God among the suffering people and breaks the apparent divine absence and silence. The prophet is animated by his vision of the royally married woman, and only through this glorious vision is he able to infuse hope into the ugly reality before his eyes. Indeed, he beholds the forsaken woman through an already-and-not-yet lens. The present image has already begun its transformation. It is not a mere fantasy in his mind. The prophetic word has regenerative qualities. It was his words that sustained the community which preserved these words and passed them on. Light did appear when he spoke into the chaos.

Conclusion

The prophets of today, God’s Church, adopt this same vision, looking at the present reality as it should be or will be, not as it has come to be. Christians today have already seen the first fruits of the Abandoned One restored in the resurrection of Jesus. They have a precedent in which to ground their vision. In the light of the cross and resurrection, they refuse to accept that God’s

¹⁷ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 374. John Oswald thinks this is God speaking: “Thus God is depicted as responding to the charges that he has been silent to the pleas of his people (cf. 42:14; 45:15-19; 57:11; 64:12; 65:6)”. *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 578.

brides are forsaken. Human trafficking projects a very ugly reality for women. They are abandoned, commodified and expendable. Indeed, after visiting brothel after brothel in Athens, I see that there is nothing in the external appearance of a person or in their inner strength that promises a state different than the one they are already in. In the majority of cases, they lose hope in expecting any other future and their willpower is crushed, so even if they did believe in it, they would not have the strength to pursue it. It is here that the presence of the prophets is of utmost importance. They are the ones who will have to persist “for Zion’s sake.” The forsaken must be invited, many times over, to join the vision which the prophet both conveys and embodies. Until the forsaken begins to read herself in the prophet’s narrative, the prophet must not keep silent. I believe that social action without the Christian theological background is inadequate. Charity from a privileged position is also inadequate and in danger of preserving inequality. Only the once forsaken *owes* charity to the forsaken. Full identification accepts nothing less than everyone having equal access to the gift of restoration.

From my experience, I find that it is not enough to free trafficked women from their bondage. Girls can be easily deceived back into slavery or find themselves, out of economic necessity, in the same or similar position. Many of them, after having worked in prostitution for too long, whether they have been forced into it or not, have a deep sense of guilt and shame thinking they are not worth anything better than this lifestyle. They can be like birds in a cage which refuse to fly away even if you leave the door open. Social action has to go deeper than opening the door, relocating and reintegrating these women to normal life and society. Freedom is secured only in the redefinition of the *self*. Only in the adoption of a new narrative for their lives that reconstructs their humanity into the royal image they were meant to be, the divine image and likeness, can they begin to truly seek a renewed life. This is the freedom which

normally precedes physical liberation: only once a woman discovers that her name is not “Forsaken” but “God’s Delight” is she then able to shake off her fetters.

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