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Should We Escape Divine Judgement?

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Calli Micale's critical question of *Wondrously Wounded* very helpfully foregrounds a theme that will remain important in several of my replies to other respondents. She also helpfully describes the hermeneutic substrate of my theological approach, which may be unfamiliar to some, setting the stage for a rich interplay of further engagements in responses to come.

Influenced by early modern and Reformation theologies of the word (Dickson 1995; Luther 1968, 32) my theological work critically engages contemporary theology and church practice by exploring contours of biblical language and imagery that have become dead in the academic semantic universe that Micale and I inhabit. My aim is to challenge the hold of different biblical images and stories that stabilize widely held yet problematic understandings of disabled people among Christians. There can be no predicting beforehand which metaphorical constellations will be most illuminating in our time and place, which biblical symbols and images, when reanimated in our time by way of spiritual discernment, will reveal what God is doing and saying among us. As I will discuss in my response to Sarah Barton, such a procedure is not properly called a method, as, at root, it is a work of spiritual discernment.

Micale is in general supportive of my use of alternative metaphorical constructions in pursuit of ethical criticism. She takes issue, however, with my use of martial imagery and language. Drawing on the work of queer and black Pentecostal theologians, Micale suggests that it would have been better if I had used the language of excess and abundance to describe how people with disabilities destabilize a morally problematic status quo by bursting common categories of perception in order to catalyze a redemptive remaking of denuding social-symbolic systems.

I take this criticism to be one that is widely shared in contemporary theology and has been echoed by other reviewers of *Wondrously Wounded* (Kahm 2020). Martial images “import logics of imperial conquest (often figured through injured and violated women's bodies) [and] images of

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wounding, in particular, preserve and reincorporate the logics of penetrative domination.” In taking up this imagery I neutralize or undermine my stated interest in calling Christians to seek the decentralized and nonhierarchical circulation of the Spirit’s gifts in the church. Acknowledging that I have introduced this language to “repurpose images of violence and assault,” Micale might be making one of two claims here. A stronger claim would be that no repurposing of this language is possible. It is intrinsically linked to a violence categorially opposed to the Christian gospel. It seems more likely that she is making a weaker claim, that it is unwise to attempt to repurpose militant imagery, given the longstanding and problematic embedding of this imagery in colonial, patriarchal, racist and what she labels heterosexist practices in the western cultural space.

Since I did intentionally deploy martial imagery in *Wondrously Wounded*, is clear that I reject the stronger claim that it is impossible to repurpose the language. I tacitly admit the force of the weaker claim in so gingerly and for a precise purpose introducing martial language in the final chapter of the book. On the page near the end of *Wondrously Wounded* that Micale finds most problematic, I prominently quote Isaiah 65. Verse two reads, “I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.” Jesus was crucified because the divine excess that has been held out to humanity throughout the duration of the created world was nevertheless rejected in the most violent way by “a rebellious people.” I then suggest that the New Testament writers considered the world still challenged and confronted by this same God, who “chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Sinners cannot of their own volition consent to abandon their sin. To affirm that the condition of sin troubles a straightforward claim that we consent to our redemption is by no means to downplay the regularity with which God’s overflowing gifts to creatures are deployed as a hortatory device in many places in scripture. The Psalms brim with enjoinders to the people of God to imitate the superabundant praise of the rest of creation, a trope which Jesus himself takes up in his teachings that his followers should be like the lilies and the sparrows. The power and claim of God’s abundant, excessive grace is a central biblical theme that my emphasis throughout the book on wonder attempted to channel.

Also: are all images of wounding intrinsically vitiated by logics of penetrative domination? There are undoubtedly theological deployments of the language of wounding that are susceptible to this critique, most notably, that of Jean Vanier.

What seems clear in the story of the Church as inherited from Israel is that the passage out of rebellion into God's peace often comes by way of a painful confrontation. My own usage is intentionally linked to the story of Jacob's wrestling with God at the river Jabbok told in Genesis 32, which is the origin of the name "Israel". This story is hermeneutically central in framing my approach to disability. Jacob does not become Israel out of his own desire to be sanctified. He is resisted—which feels violent and threatening to his identity and even existence—by a God who loves him. The wounding that is my focus in *Wondrously Wounded* is therefore specifically that wounding of human beings as they struggle to consent to their being drawn by a superior force out of their sinful idolization of the normal and being-able-to-do.

God's assault is presented as focused on two, and only two penetrative acts: the entry into a resistant "sinful age" that is the incarnation and the penetration of a heart hardened against God by the loving touch of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Both are rightly called a penetration in the sense of being an entry to which sinners cannot independently consent—but one that renews and not exploits. I find Micalé's emphasis on "surface level touch" very helpful here in exegetically elaborating why Christians should seek to embody a gentle touch that is intimate but not invading. Had I more explicitly emphasized that redemptive overcoming of human self-absorption by God redeems by building up the believer, I would have made it more obvious why it is a good thing when God circumvents the self-protective defenses that keep sinners closed on themselves. This would have made it more obvious why God's approach to resistant humans is different in kind from the penetrative human domination that always denudes. All that said, God's gracious non-penetrative touch of the flesh can and does wound, as the lifelong limp of Jacob displays and Israel celebrates at every Passover (Genesis 32:25–33).

I am unpersuaded that a society that is just toward disabled people will flow naturally out of the logics of enlightened progress and capitalist acquisition. I went to some lengths in parts II and III of *Wondrously Wounded* to indicate how predictably liberal politics and economically rationalized medicine let down and even seek to eliminate people with intellectual disabilities. It is precisely because I think these logics are so strong in our time, and so deeply implicated in the normate gaze, that I do not think that they can be queered enough to escape direct confrontation and the wounding that comes as sinners fight to hold onto their sin in the face of divine judgment.

I propose that Christians should not abandon the counter-imagery of a militant redeemer if they wish to emphasize how deeply sinful understandings of disability are entrenched in the modern western imaginary

(Burdette 2020). Theologies of transformation which seek to describe the process of human redemption solely by appeal to divine excess and abundance tend to underplay the scope and depth of human rebellion. Trinitarian theologies of perichoretic excess like Linn Tonstad's mesh smoothly with the hopes inculcated in modern consumers to enter the blessedness of accrued wealth without political conflict: "we can have Christ's body for our own, and all its benefits, at the same time" (Tonstad 2016, 241). The closer we attend to the concrete contexts in which injustice occurs, the easier it is to see how the justice hoped for in the biblical traditions is so sweeping its arrival is bound to produce conflict—and that more predictably than the mere challenging of conceptual binaries that can so easily substitute for and even mask the concrete doing of justice (Brock 2022).

In scripture as well as the main streams of the Christian tradition the direct confrontation of sinners which underlies canonical use of militant imagery is called judgment (Zeigler 2018). The biblical traditions expect that justice must first be established within the inner lives of concrete human beings, a process of being totally turned around that is likely to be at least uncomfortable and possibly frightening and yet is hopeful, because through it the individual is being liberated from sin and being established in freedom and peace (Hebrews 12:11). Those Christians who jettison all canonical militant and judgment imagery lose not only language of moral transformation through discipline but must also excise passages from the Old Testament that the writers of the New Testament read as directly prefiguring Christ (Psalm 18:37-50) including some that Jesus applied to himself (cf. Psalm 22:1, 28-31).

What seems ultimately at issue between Micale and me is whether Christians should hope to gently grow out of our unjust rejection of the least among us, or whether the idolization of aptitude and its constantly proliferating tendrils is the sort of deep-seated sin and pride from which we need to be delivered by the One who is willing to go as far as blocking our plans out of love for those we will hurt. Golden calves offer a fun party, but one that needs to stop and the idol crushed to dust (Exodus 32:20). The question here is how each of us imagines the idol of able-bodied, neurotypical, white men who hold the reigns of political power and live in middle-class nuclear families being desacralized. The psalmists regularly suggest that it might collapse under the weight of its own depraved machinations (cf. Psalm 7:14-16; 9:15). But dare we assert that this temple will not need to be actively cleansed as Jesus cleansed the desecration of Jerusalem's temple? The question is what Christians today are to hope for, and more importantly, whose agency they should hope in. I hope only that Christians would join orthodox Jews who pray this prayer weekly:

Arise, O Lord, in your anger;
rise up against the rage of my enemies.

Awake, my God; decree justice.

Let the assembled peoples
gather round you.

Rule over them from on high;
let the Lord judge the peoples.

Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness,
according to my integrity, O Most High.

O righteous God,
who searches minds and hearts,

bring to an end the violence of the wicked
and make the righteous secure. (Ps. 7:6-9, NIV; cf. Ps. 10)

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