



BOOK REVIEW

Tombs, David. *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and Scandal of the Cross*. London: Routledge, 2023; viii + 94.

In his thought-provoking work, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and Scandal of the Cross*, David Tombs asserts that the unspeakable horror and shame associated with the crucifixion need acknowledgment but should not constitute the final narrative (78). Tombs offers a unique re-reading of the crucifixion, approaching it from the perspective of both historical and contemporary torture practices. This book is presented with the hope that by understanding the crucifixion differently, readers may gain new insights into the Christian understanding of resurrection—not just as a physical event but as the restoration of dignity, God’s embodied response to crucifixion, and all it entails (6). Perhaps only a few scholars demonstrate the courage to explicitly designate Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse in their published works, such as Elaine A. Heath in her 2011 book, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Brazos Press), Wil Gafney in her 2013 *Huffington Post* blog article, “Crucifixion and Sexual Violence” (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crucifixion-and-sexual-violence_b_2965369), and Michael Trainor in his 2013 book chapter, “Sexual Abuse and Luke’s Story of Jesus,” in *Child Sexual Abuse, Society and the Future of the Church* (Adelaide ATF Theology, edited by Hilary D. Regan). However, Tombs was the first to mention it in his 1999 essay in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, titled “Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,” and the demonstrable consistency of his work is worthy of admiration.

In the introduction, Tombs covers significant ground, sharing his eye-opening personal experiences in El Salvador. These experiences with poverty, inequity, and violence, coupled with engagement with Latin American liberation theology—especially Jon Sobrino’s works—prompted a deep exploration of the crucifixion of Jesus in dialogue with the oppressed and crucified. To comprehend this “unspeakable violence,” which

became the primary focus of his Ph.D. study, Tombs delved into reading torture reports and truth commission publications documenting a wide range of prisoner abuses during military dictatorships and repressive regimes in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s (4).

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, “The Strippings,” provides an overview of stripping and enforced nudity used to humiliate prisoners. It examines practices of antiquity that compel stripping in the *praetorium* (the governor’s palace), then transitions to the stripping on the cross, discussing why the stripping of Jesus should be termed sexual abuse. The second part, “The Mocking,” explores whether Jesus was subjected to further sexual assault in the *praetorium* as part of the mocking he experienced. Although this scene is often treated as infantile horseplay in commentaries, Tombs invites readers to acknowledge the possibility of unrecorded violence in the Gospel narratives.

“Crucifixion,” the third part, investigates how the event might be viewed in relation to impalement, asking whether crucifixion could have included penetrative, sexualized violence (6). Since it is intended not only to punish and degrade Jesus but also to terrify onlookers, his crucifixion presents a climax of a different sort for the Christian faith than any so-called happy ending. The final part, “Resurrection,” offers new insights into Jesus’ resurrection based on preceding themes (*viz.* stripping, mocking, and crucifixion). Tombs asserts that “a key challenge to the Christian faith is to acknowledge the cross and speak of salvation *despite* the cross” (7, italics original). Over the centuries, the emphasis on salvation *through* the cross has prevailed, yet Tombs urges Christians not to glorify or romanticize the suffering of the cross but to find ways to bring “down from the cross” those who, like Christ, are *victims of sexual abuse or violence*. Such a perspective reveals a resurrection that occurs in the shadow of the cross, illustrating how human dignity is restored despite the horror of the crucifixion.

As interdisciplinary studies including those intersecting theology and trauma studies or biblical and psychology research have gained popularity in recent years, Tombs’ exploration of crucifixion through the lens of sexual abuse adds a fascinating and fresh perspective. In several places, his book examines historical artifacts, such as early church documents along with the cultural implications of nudity within Roman and Greek contexts, to elucidate contemporary notions of torture and prisoner abuse—as evinced by torture reports and truth commission publications from El Salvador or photos from Abu Ghraib. This interdisciplinary approach enhances an

understanding of Jesus' crucifixion in antiquity. Despite the horror depicted, these historical texts contribute to a sense of hope when juxtaposed with the subsequent event in the gospels—*resurrection*.

Tombs believes that what is recorded in these biblical texts matters, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and responding to sexual abuse. Consequently, we see his willingness to relate historical research to biblical and theological meaning making in ways that bear pastoral implications amidst such horrific themes. Rather than fomenting fear, Tombs thus expresses hope that these texts of horror can bring healing, restoration, and hope to those who suffer from sexual violence or abuse, in particular. To perceive the cross for what it truly is requires a commitment to a difficult profundity that Tombs believes can help churches be truer to their identity as the body of Christ. We see his interpretation of the crucifixion is clearly influenced by liberationist biblical hermeneutics, informed by a direct contextual awareness of state terror and torture practices in Latin America. His analysis of Jesus being stripped, mocked, and eventually crucified opens up the possibility of sexual abuse.

Given the disturbing and challenging nature of his work, Tombs' interpretation may not be accepted by all readers. The question arises as to whether the interpretation he offers properly aligns with the authorial intentions of the biblical Evangelists. On the other hand, there are also readers who take the Passion as narrativel legend and who consider the crucifixion as having only etiological value. In opposition to such views that regard the Passion narratives as merely providing a sacral warrant for instructing communal practices, Tombs suggests viewing Jesus through the lens of sexual abuse victimhood to discredit such a flat, etiological sense of the crucifixion as a legendary narrative. That said, just as Tombs states that his argument merely suggests an interpretive possibility that does not explicitly appear in the text, we need to consider the whole of his argument carefully.

While the specifics of state terror and torture in the Latin American experiences that influence his interpretation differ from the context of Indonesia, aspects of Tombs' arguments are nevertheless compelling. His broader themes of suffering and humiliation, in tandem with potential misinterpretation of sacred narratives, are particularly resonant, given the considerable increase in sexual abuse reports in recent years (e.g., KOMNAS Perempuan, <https://en.komnasperempuan.go.id/read-news-komnas-perempuans-submission-to-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-violence-against-women-calling-for-submission-on-covid-19-and-the-increase-of-domestic-violence-against-women-december-2020>). It is also important to note that such violence

is not limited to female victims. Therefore, we must recognize that a re-reading of Christ's crucifixion through the lens of sexual abuse holds direct value for victims of any gender. Such a perspective might offer a first step in the healing process, providing victims a means to confront and name their harrowing memories. As such, Tombs' work aims to bring about significant changes in how the contemporary church understands and treats survivors of sexual abuse.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book for church leaders, seminary lecturers, theology students, and congregants under care. Tombs' re-reading offers profound hope, namely, that *crucifixion* and all that it entails must not—indeed, cannot—be separated from *resurrection*. Holding to such a perspective not only emphasizes the transformative aspect of the crucifixion but also offers a pathway towards healing and restoration for victims of sexual violence. As the Gospel of John alludes to the liberating potential of *truth* (“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” John 8:32), Tombs argues that the central task of the church is to seek and speak the truth (79). This book exemplifies the manner by which such truth—however uncomfortable—may become a true gift to be embraced.

Fang Fang Chandra

Vancouver School of Theology