
Hands of Doom: The Apocalyptic Imagination of Black Sabbath. Jack Holloway. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2022. Pp. 133.
Reviewed by Daniel Fishley, *McGill University.*

Jack Holloway's *Hands of Doom: The Apocalyptic Imagination of Black Sabbath (HoD)* argues that a host of theological themes and issues marshal the musical output of the influential American rock group Black Sabbath (BS). Holloway, more specifically, interpretes their lyrics via a fundamentally prophetic hermeneutic: their music is a call for justice and social transformation. A central thesis of *HoD* is that BS's music gestures towards what Holloway calls a "negative hope" (8). Here, BS is understood as advancing a "critical idealism, which points to the brokenness of the status quo, and beyond to the heights of justice and love" (8). To that end, Holloway's text aims at unpacking both the theological suppositions of BS's work, as well as the "social, political, and philosophical issues that" heavy metal culture in general raises. In short, *HoD* is a retrospective analysis that looks back at BS and the themes and issues that motivated their music, in order to gain a better understanding of how to move forward theologically, socially, and ethically. Seeing his analysis as largely exploratory in focus, Holloway's principal objective, then, is to "mine Sabbath's music, lyrics, and context and present it as a theological vision in its own right" (10).

HoD is divided into eight short chapters. In the first chapter, Holloway explores the political and social context that helped give shape to BS's rise. Seeing their music as standing against the pollyannish "flower power" songs of the 1960s, BS forged its own sound in the hope of making obvious the horrors of the real world. Sabbath's music then, Holloway notes, "does not provide escape from a woeful world, but rather takes us deeper into the reality

of evil” (4). This historical context is then contrasted with active tensions in contemporary society. Holloway discusses the influences of the Black Lives Matter protests, what he sees as the sloganeering of the Obama presidency, and the “wild regression” of the Trump presidency (5). What unifies the period that gave rise to BS and today’s world, for Holloway, is the sense of desperation concerning the political order’s inability to solve the pressing issues of the day. He thus finds in BS’s music a distilled frustration of the larger problems which he argues haunt modernity: racism, inequality, unchecked capitalism, and environmental destruction. Finally, and following the work of thinkers like Abraham Joshua Heschel, James Cone, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Holloway believes that we must plumb the depths of social life to make obvious those experiences of inequality which are encoded in popular culture and thus “hear the real-life stories they have to share, pay attention to the pain they experience, and listen for the voice of God” (15). It is in this spirit that Holloway listens “for God in Black Sabbath” (15).

Chapter two begins with an account of the band’s first major song, *Black Sabbath*. Holloway discusses how the song’s form and content convey themes of utter “loss and hopelessness” (17). This hopelessness arises from the calamitous outcomes of, for example, the then ongoing war in Vietnam. BS, according to Holloway, gave musical shape to this desperation. BS’s desperation is then paralleled with the biblical tradition of “the lament” as expressed in the Psalms. “In their pain,” Holloway writes, “the psalmist questioned the very heart and nature of God” (18). BS’s music, like a biblical lament, seeks to give an honest voice to the human experience of hopelessness.

In chapter three, Holloway continues his discussion of the prophetic and the apocalyptic. Taking as his starting point Sabbath’s 1970 *War Pigs*, Holloway further details how the violence inflicted

by the American military on South-East Asia during the 60s and 70s inspired Sabbath's message. The "theology" in *War Pigs*, Holloway writes, "assumes that the evil ones waging war know that what they are doing is evil" (34). Consequently, the generals who orchestrated and organized said violence are not deserving of sympathy: "Relentless evil," Holloway writes, "demands relentless judgment" (33). Adhering to both Nietzsche's critical view of biblical morality, and Heschel's interpretation of the prophetic tradition, Holloway stresses the importance of retribution in Sabbath's thought – what he calls their "act-consequence theology" (37). The sins committed in this world by willfully violent individuals necessitate a rejection of those acts and a condemnation of those people; Holloway calls this the "prophet's burden" (39). The prophet – like Jeremiah and indeed BS – speak forth an apocalyptic vision which stresses the need for radical justice in order to counter the radical injustice of their time.

In chapter four, Holloway unpacks the importance of themes like class in BS by tracing the influence that their working-class context had on their musical output (52). Holloway argues that BS's style and content emerge from the social tensions of blue-collar Britain in which the band arose (58). These ills are to be confronted, not via an appeal to the flower-power rebellion of the 60s which merely resulted in a "withdrawal into [the] self," but by a refusal to accept the status quo "to imagine and create other ways of being, based on love and justice rather than hate and violence" (65).

Holloway's focus on BS's message of social change is given critical analysis in chapter five, where their link with black musical culture is explored. Holloway details the connection between rock music in general and the forgotten or ignored influence of black artists from the gospel, blues, and jazz genres on the development of rock. As Holloway notes, although Sabbath "did not seek to imitate" the musical influence of black blues voices, they did "follow after that blues spirit" to "feel their way toward musical creativity" (69). The

bulk of this chapter unpacks both the productive and the problematic outcomes of this exchange.

In chapter six, entitled “No More Illusions,” Holloway wrestles with a key tension that arises from a disillusionment with the status quo. Following Heschel and Walter Brueggemann, Holloway writes, “Indictment of the present order brings unfettered imagination, but also tragic awareness of the fetters” (81). One such “fetter” that anchors modern Christianity, he writes, emerges from the “wholesale rejection of reality” by the “White American” Evangelical church (88). The issue that arises for Holloway, here, is how to name the evils of the modern world, without making the world itself evil. To circumvent this tension, Holloway advances the image of futurity that BS offers; theirs is one that recognizes the problems of the present *and* the possibility of a future promise that, perhaps, can convert the tensions of the present into prospects of “transformation” (94).

Chapter seven turns its attention to the figure of Satan in BS’s music. Holloway discusses the link between Satanism as voiced by thinkers like Alister Crowley, and BS’s music. Although Satanism was never a focus of BS, the figure of Satan is certainly prevalent (98). Holloway, subversively, wants to reflect on the possibility of giving evil and “Satan a godly role in the apocalyptic theology” of Sabbath’s music (96). The specific image of evil that animates their music, Holloway notes, is one that arises from finite actions and social structures (107). Finally, seeing a parallel between the vision of torment that marshalled St. John the Seer’s *Revelation* and BS’s music, Holloway argues that hope in the triumph of justice over evil is elemental to both (111).

In the final chapter, “God is the Only Way to Love,” Holloway turns to what he calls “Sabbath’s theology of love.” This analysis begins by detailing the problematic nature of “Metal Subculture” and its tendency to reflect misogynistic, racist, and

homophobic views (113–115). Holloway places Sabbath within those tensions and identifies how their music subverts those tendencies. Via lyrics which emphasize the centrality of God as the means by which to participate in love, Holloway argues that BS's music, despite its penchant to fetishize the very real tragedies of modernity, makes love and hope a leitmotif of their project.

Holloway's *HoD* is challenging, well researched, and insightful. His engagement with the social and cultural tensions which animated BS helps to underscore and make evident problems that continue to animate our own time. His analysis provides religious studies scholars and theologians with insight into the ways in which classical Christian themes and issues find divergent, provocative, and unexpected areas of expression in popular culture.