ENCOUNTERING VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE

ENCOUNTERING VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE

Edited by
Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Hallvard Hagelia and Markus Zehnder

Friday 22 July 2011 will for ever stand as the day terror hit Norway, with the bomb smashing the political centre of Norway's capital, killing seven persons, and the subsequent shooting of 69 mostly young people at a political youth camp on the island of Utøya not far from Oslo. All of this was wrought by one single person, whose name we would prefer to forget.

These terror attacks, together with those perpetrated on 11 September 2001, and in fact countless others, of which many have not received the amount of public attention they would deserve, have raised a lot of questions, also related to theology and biblical scholarship. The Bible itself, in particular the Old Testament, is full of violence. This is why the first international meeting of the Norwegian Summer Academy for Biblical Studies was devoted to the theme of *Violence and Ethics in the Bible*. The papers presented at the conference are collected in the present volume, supplemented by a study on violence in texts pertaining to the Hasmonean period.[1]

The conference was held on the beautiful campus of Ansgar College and Theological Seminary, overlooking a peaceful fjord in the city of Kristiansand in Norway. This has proven to be an excellent venue to promote transdisciplinary collaboration between scholars from eight different countries working on the same topic. It is natural that biblical scholarship develops in different directions, based on thematic focus, theological and denominational background, as well as regional trends. To balance these centrifugal tendencies, it is important to bring scholars together to further discussions across the aisles. The experience is even more fruitful when several scholars from neighboring fields work together on the same topic in the context of an intimately personal and friendly environment. We are glad that the first international meeting of the Norwegian Summer Academy for Biblical Studies could offer a framework in which such an experience was possible.

1.   The introductory speech delivered by Kristin Moen Saxegaard, senior minister of the parish to which the island of Utøya belongs, and the paper presented by Knut Heim ('Violence as an Ethical Challenge in Biblical Poetry') are not part of the present volume. The papers written by Terence Fretheim and Kirsten Nielsen were presented *in absentia*.

Therefore, we want to express our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the event: the distinguished speakers, the auditors, the staff of Ansgar Summer Hotel, the directors of Ansgar College and Theological Seminary, and, last but not least, Sparebanken Pluss as the main sponsor of the conference.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Joshua Berman. Theological education at Yeshivat Har-Etzion; doctoral studies at Bar-Ilan University; PhD in Hebrew Bible at Bar-Ilan University. Currently Professor of Hebrew Bible at Bar-Ilan University (Israel).

Lennart Boström. Theological Education at Bethel Seminary, St Paul, USA; doctoral studies at the University of Lund, Sweden; PhD in Old Testament Exegesis at the University of Lund, 1990; postdoctoral studies at Tyndale House, Cambridge; Current professional affiliation: Lecturer in Old Testament at Örebro School of Theology, Örebro (Sweden).

Friedmann Eissler. Education (theological studies; Islam; linguistics) at the University of Tübingen and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; doctoral studies at the University of Tübingen; PhD in Judeo-Arabic Literature, Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations in the Middle Ages at the University of Tübingen, 2001; postdoctoral studies at the University of Tübingen. Currently Academic Advisor of the Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen (Protestant Centre for the Research on Religious and Ideological Issues, EKD), Berlin (Germany).

Torleif Elgvin. Theological studies at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo); religious and linguistic studies at the University of Oslo; doctoral studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD in Qumran studies at the Department of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998. Currently Professor in Biblical and Jewish Studies, NLA University College, Oslo (Norway); also responsible for publishing texts and artefacts from the Judaean Desert in The Schøyen Collection (see www.torleifelgvin.no).

LarsOlov Eriksson. Theological education at Johannelund Theological Seminary in Uppsala and at the University of Uppsala; doctoral studies at the University of Uppsala; PhD in Old Testament Studies at the University of Uppsala; 1991; postdoctoral studies at the University of Uppsala (Habilitation 2003). Currently Professor in Exegetical Theology at Johannelund Theological Seminary and associate professor in Old Testament Exegesis at the University of Uppsala.

Karin Finsterbusch. Theological education at the Universities of Tübingen and Heidelberg and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; doctoral studies at the University of Heidelberg and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD in New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, 1994; postdoctoral studies in Old Testament at the University of Tübingen (Habilitation 2004). Currently Professor of Old Testament at the University of Koblenz–Landau, Campus Landau (Germany).

Georg Fischer SJ. Theological education at the Universities of Munich and Innsbruck; doctoral studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome; PhD in Old Testament at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1988; postdoctoral studies at the University of Graz (Habilitation 1993). Currently Professor of Old Testament at the University of Innsbruck (Austria).

Terence E. Fretheim. Theological education at Luther College, Decorah (Iowa) and Luther Seminary, St. Paul (MN), doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ; PhD in Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1967; postdoctoral studies at the Universities of Heidelberg, Oxford, Cambridge, and Chicago. Currently Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota (USA).

Hallvard Hagelia. Theological education at Ansgar College and Theological Seminary (Oslo), Svenska Missionsförbundets Teologiska Seminarium (Lidingö), MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo), University of Oslo; doctoral studies at the University of Uppsala; PhD in Old Testament at the University of Uppsala, 1994. Currently Professor of Old Testament Studies at Ansgar College and Theological Seminary (Norway).

Dana M. Harris. Theological education at Stanford University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, IL); doctoral studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; PhD at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2009. Currently Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), Deerfield, Illinois (USA).

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. Theological education at Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary; doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University; PhD in Old Testament at Claremont Graduate University, 1980; postdoctoral studies at the Universities of Cambridge and Tübingen and at Regent College, Vancouver. Currently Professor Emeritus of Biblical Literature at North Park Seminary in Chicago (USA).

Årstein Justnes. Theological education at Ansgar College and Theological Seminary (Kristiansand), MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo)

and at the University of Oslo; PhD in New Testament Studies at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo), 2007. Currently Associate Professor in Biblical Studies, Institute for Religion, Philosophy and History, University of Agder (Norway).

Gordon McConville. Education at the Universities of Cambridge (Modern Languages) and Edinburgh (Theology); PhD in Old Testament at Queen's University Belfast, 1980; postdoctoral studies at the University of Tübingen and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Currently Professor of Old Testament Theology at the University of Gloucestershire (UK).

Kirsten Nielsen. Theological education (as well as studies in French language and literature) at Aarhus University; doctoral studies at Aarhus University; PhD in Old Testament at the University of Aarhus, 1976; postdoctoral studies at the University of Aarhus (Habilitation 1985); Dr. Theol. h.c., MF Oslo, Norway, 2008. Professor Emeritus at the University of Aarhus (Denmark).

Tommy Wasserman. Theological education at Örebro School of Theology (MDiv) and the University of Uppsala (BTheol); doctoral studies at the University of Lund; PhD in New Testament at the University of Lund, 2007; postdoctoral studies at the University of Lund (Habilitation 2010). Currently Researcher at the Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology, Stabekk (Norway).

Karl William Weyde. Theological education at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo); doctoral studies at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD in Old Testament at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Oslo), 1999; postdoctoral studies at MF Norwegian School of Theology (Habilitation 2003). Currently Professor for Old Testament at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo (Norway).

Peter Wick. Theological education at the Universities of Basel and Fribourg; doctoral studies at the University of Basel; PhD in New Testament at the University of Basel, 1993; postdoctoral studies at the University of Basel and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Habilitation 1999). Currently Professor of New Testament Studies at the Ruhr-University Bochum (Germany) and member of the directorate of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Dynamics in the History of Religions' at the Ruhr-University Bochum.

Markus Zehnder. Theological education at the Universities of Basel and Berne; doctoral studies at the University of Basel; PhD in Old Testament

at the University of Basel, 1997; postdoctoral studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University (Habilitation 2003). Currently Professor for Biblical Studies at Ansgar College and Theological Seminary (Norway), Professor of Old Testament at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven (Belgium), and Professor ('Titularprofessor') of Old Testament at the University of Basel (Switzerland).

INTRODUCTION

Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia

Scholarship is not a static matter, it is constantly in movement. Knowledge develops as we talk or write. Talking and writing stimulate ideas. Therefore we need a constant exchange of ideas.

Biblical scholarship is not unaffected by the societal context in which biblical scholars live. New knowledge of antiquity causes biblical scholars to ask new questions to the texts, and the same is true for the developments in other branches of scholarship and in the current public discourse. Thus, biblical scholarship does not and cannot live in a vacuum. New scientific insights and methods have to be taken into account, and new turns in the public discourse raising constantly new political, social and ethical questions force biblical scholars to address them. 'Has the Bible anything to say about these issues?' is a question that is asked both by those having a special interest in the Bible as well as by the broader public.

This is not a new phenomenon, of course. In 19th century America, one of the most crucial questions was how to handle the problem of slavery, while in 20th century South Africa the system of apartheid topped the list of social challenges, to name just two well-known cases. In both instances the Bible was very much a part of the discourse.

Both cases have to do with specific types of violence. And violence has indeed been a constant challenge in the history of mankind. The 20th century saw great wars and large scale killings also outside the battlefield, causing indescribable devastations and the death of tens of millions of people, not least the extinction of six million Jews by the Nazis and the several dozens of millions left dead during the rules of Stalin and Mao. How should biblical scholarship relate to such tragedies? In the latter part of the 20th century the 'cold war' came to an end, but only to be replaced by unprecedented terror attacks and as a response the 'war against terror'. In addition, we continue to witness all sorts of violence and problems that societies of all times have had to deal with.

All this raises serious questions affecting theology in general and biblical scholarship in particular, not least because the Bible itself mirrors so much violence. How shall we respond to societal problems with a ('violent') book such as the Bible in our hands?

Biblical scholarship works with texts, biblical texts. Those texts have been handed over to us from antiquity and, after a longer (in the case of the Hebrew Bible) or shorter (in the case of the New Testament) period of fluidity, were transmitted to posterity in a relatively stable way. But even if the texts themselves became quite fixed, our understanding of them has been marked by constant change. Our knowledge of the world behind these texts has grown considerably, which in turn affects our understanding of the texts profoundly and calls for new ways of interpreting them.

This is the challenge that the speakers at the conference organized by the Norwegian Summer Academy for Biblical Studies took upon themselves, addressing the common theme of violence from different perspectives, marked by their special fields of interest as well as their theological, denominational and national backgrounds. The speakers were free to choose their own topic within the overarching theme *Violence and Ethics in the Bible*, addressing questions related to all types of violence mentioned in the Bible: 'divine violence', divinely ordained or sanctioned violence ('positive human violence'), and (negatively evaluated) human violence, represented both in individual acts of violence and violence embedded in the structure of society.[1]

The papers presented at the meeting of the Norwegian Summer Academy for Biblical Studies are of course by far not the only contributions to the topic of *Violence and Ethics in the Bible* that have been put forward in recent years. Karl William Weyde's article provides an overview of the general discussion as far as the notion of 'holy war' or 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible is concerned. A short presentation of Gerhard von Rad's book on holy war in ancient Israel (1951) and its critics is followed by a review of more recent studies which focus on comparisons between the Old Testament texts and material from the ancient Near East. Weyde identifies two important trends in these studies: In comparison to the extra-biblical material, the Hebrew Bible appears to underline the supremacy of divine law in war and exhibits a concern for the needy ones as being in special need of protection from violence; ethical problems connected to 'holy war' as perceived from a (post-)modern perspective that is informed by uneasiness with war in general attract more attention, together with the question whether and how the biblical passages on 'holy war' can be used as a basis for promoting peace among the nations and for implementing universal human rights. In a cross-cultural perspective—as observed by Hans-Peter Müller—, it is

---

1. Elmer A. Martens distinguishes three types of violence according to agent: violence in society generally; violence by Israel at God's command; violence of which God is more directly the agent (see Elmer A. Martens, 'Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence', in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* [ed. R.S. Hess and E.A. Martens; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008], pp. 33-57 [40]).

worth noting that 'holy wars' in ancient Israel were neither religious wars in the later sense of the phrase designating inner-Christian European wars in the 16th and 17th centuries or wars between Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain or other places, nor 'missionary' wars as those fought by the Caliphs against all sorts of 'infidels', but rather wars undertaken for the sake of survival in the conflict with neighbouring groups in a small land.[2]

There is no corresponding overview of central aspects of violence in the New Testament. The reader may be pointed to two recent collections and a monograph that may fill the gap to some degree: Shelly Matthews' and E. Leigh Gibson's *Violence in the New Testament*;[3] a collection of papers on 'Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices in Early Judaism and Christianity' published in *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009); and Thomas R. Neufeld's *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament*.[4]

One of the most prominent voices that have participated in the debate on violence and the Bible in recent years is Jan Assmann's. It is especially his claim that there is a connection between monotheism and violence that has received a lot of attention.[5] His hypothesis has been widely criticised, among others by Erich Zenger who states that self-reflexive monotheism as found in the Bible has brought with it an increase of voices critical of violence, even of voices that aim at overcoming violence.[6] This is, according to Zenger, especially clear in Isaiah 40–48, where the connection between Yhwh's oneness and renunciation of violence is particularly stressed.[7] Zenger adds that biblical monotheism, because of its universality and its focus on liberation and community, cannot be imposed by force, but can

---

2. See Hans-Peter Müller, 'Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel', in *Krieg und Gewalt in den Weltreligionen* (ed. A.T. Khoury, E. Grundmann and H.-P. Müller; Freiburg: Herder, 2003), pp. 11-23 (18); 'Allerdings sind die Anlässe der heiligen Kriege nicht religiöser Art; sie sind keine Glaubenskriege und haben erst recht keine "missionarische" Absicht. Vielmehr geht es um das Überleben in der Auseinandersetzung mit Nachbargruppen in einem engen Lande'.

3. *Violence in the New Testament* (ed. S. Matthews and E.L. Gibson; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).

4. Thomas R. Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2011).

5. Jan Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Edition Akzente; München: Hanser, 2003).

6. See Erich Zenger, 'Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt—Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.–22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 35-57 (41); '[Es] lässt sich mit dem Aufkommen des selbstreflexiven Monotheismus eine sukzessive Zunahme der gewaltkritischen, ja sogar der Gewalt überwinden wollenden Stimmen beobachten'.

7. See Zenger, 'Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?', p. 50.

only be accepted in an act of free choice, as can be seen in 1 Kings 8; Psalm 46; Isa. 2.1-5; Zeph. 2.11; Jeremiah 16.[8] Thus, biblical monotheism with its universal truth claim is based on the free consent of the individual, which militates against the use of violence. As opposed to other forms of religion, biblical monotheism appeals to the conscience of the inner being and tries to develop humankind's intellectual and empathic faculties, which enables its adherents to put themselves in the position of others and therefore show respect for other religious convictions.[9]

Also Eckhart Otto has a different take on the Hebrew Bible's attitude towards violence than Assmann. Otto underlines that the neurotic compulsion to warfare, stimulated by mythological underpinnings of the legitimation of kingship that is characteristic of, e.g,, the Neo-Assyrian empire and its ideology, is overcome in the Hebrew Bible.[10]

The question raised by Assmann is taken up explicitly in *Kirsten Nielsen*'s study. Her own response consists both in contextualizing the violent passages in the Bible (especially the Hebrew Bible) and in 'over-reading' them by the nonviolent ones. This must not be understood as a type of canon-within-the-canon-approach. Rather, Nielsen's concern is to make visible the innerbiblical dialogue about issues of violence and to participate in it in a respectful way. Literary contextualization and cautious canonical balancing as avenues to address violent passages in the Hebrew Bible are also found in Fischer's, Harris' and Zehnder's studies, though without questioning the legitimacy of divinely sanctioned violence in the same way as Nielsen.

An approach similar to the one proposed in Nielsen's paper, but taken to a problematic extreme, is found, i.e., in Eric A. Seibert's and Eben Scheffler's recent contributions to the debate on violence in the Bible. For Eric A. Seibert, violence in all its forms, be it human or divine violence or divinely sanctioned human violence, is always wrong. Where the Bible condones

---

8.   See Zenger, 'Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?', p. 52 ('Dass der biblische Monotheismus angesichts seiner Universalität und von seiner inhaltlichen Konzentration auf Befreiung und Gemeinschaft her den Weltvölkern nicht mit Gewalt aufgezwungen, sondern diesen nur in Freiheit angenommen werden kann, wird in mehreren Texten unmissverständlich formuliert').

9.   See Zenger, 'Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?', p. 56. Similar views are also found in Erich Zenger, 'Gewalt im Namen Gottes—der notwendige Preis des biblischen Monotheismus?', in *Friede auf Erden? Die Weltreligionen zwischen Gewaltverzicht und Gewaltbereitschaft* (ed. A. Fürst; Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2006), pp. 13-44.

10. See Eckart Otto, 'Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption—Religiöse Legitimationen politischen Handelns in der orientalischen und okzidentalen Antike', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt—Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 220-66 (261): '…eine Überwindung des durch Mythologeme der Herrschaftslegitimation stimulierten neurotischen Zwanges zur Kriegsführung'.

violence, it has to be critiqued. It must never be used to sanction violence, as has often been done in history, with the Crusades as 'one of the most shameful chapters';[11] but also Western colonialism, including 'political Zionism', slavery, violence against women and children, and the condemnation of homosexuals are mentioned.[12] Seibert argues that this problematic legacy is not only a matter of misinterpretation, but that the Bible itself partly is to blame,[13] though not God, who is exclusively characterized by 'grace and goodness'.[14] All the texts have to be read 'nonviolently', in ways that expose and critique violent ideologies embedded in the Old Testament.[15] This is to read them 'in an ethically responsible manner'.[16]

Eben Scheffler distinguishes between different voices within the Hebrew Bible: There are texts that represent 'romanticizing views of war';[17] but what is really distinctive for the Bible are those voices that are critical about the use of violence, especially in the prophets,[18] but other parts of the Bible as well. According to Scheffler, there is a 'basic nonviolent stance of the Old Testament'.[19] Therefore, to use the Bible in the justification of war is 'misuse'.[20] There is no such thing as a 'justified war'; '[w]herever war occurs in the world, it should be opposed by the church'.[21] Ethicists as well as biblical scholars and leaders of the church 'should…be encouraged to reflect on war and violence in view of its eradication and not its justification'.[22]

In the cases of both Seibert and Scheffler, there is no longer room for studying each biblical text on its own terms and trying to listen to it in order to find out how it could be brought into a fruitful dialogue with the challenges of the present-day world; rather, sweeping ethical assumptions dictate the agenda and are used to force the biblical material into pre-established categories. Biblical texts, in such a procedure, cannot be evaluated from inside the Bible any more.

11. Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture—Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 16.
12. See Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, pp. 18-23.
13. See Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, pp. 25-26.
14. See Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, p. 24.
15. See Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, p. 26.
16. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, p. 108.
17. See Eben Scheffler, 'War and Violence in the Old Testament World: Various Views', in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us* (ed. J.T. Fitzgerald *et al.*; SBL Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, 12; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2009), pp. 1-17 (9).
18. See Scheffler, 'War and Violence', pp. 9-11.
19. Scheffler, 'War and Violence', p. 3 (see also p. 12, with reference to Exod. 20.13).
20. E. Scheffler, 'War and Violence', p. 13.
21. E. Scheffler, 'War and Violence', p. 17.
22. E. Scheffler, 'War and Violence', p. 16.

An overly generalizing and a-historic dealing with the legacy of biblical texts may also be found in John J. Collins' monograph *Does the Bible Justify Violence?*[23] Collins not only advocates criticism against all forms of religiously motivated violence, but also against what he seems to perceive as a pre-stage of such violence, the 'sharp antithesis with the Other', the fashioning of 'identity by constructing absolute, incompatible contrasts', indeed the 'absoluteness of the categories…guaranteed by divine revelation'.[24] Hans-Peter Müller's thesis that it is necessary to estimate the politico-cultural need for a space of a delimitable identity in order to prevent wars, sounds like the exact counter-argument.[25]

Fortunately, there are more moderate and nuanced voices in the present debate as well. Walter Dietrich, to name just one example, has written an article entitled 'Legitime Gewalt?' in which he points to the ambivalence of violence both in the Bible and in the extra-biblical ancient world, abstaining from any quick and sweeping pigeonholing.[26]

The third article in the present volume to be mentioned, written by *Terence E. Fretheim*, addresses the question of violence from another angle, taking as a starting point not the problem of divine (or divinely sanctioned) violence, but the notion of God's *power*, tackling especially the problem of God's permission of violence that is exerted against his will, rather than the sanction of violence that is (purportedly) exerted in line with his plans. Central to his study is the concept of divine self-limitation in the exercise of power as part of God's genuine relationship with Israel and the world. This self-limitation opens room for human (and in fact, natural) violence; this is, however, the necessary precondition for real freedom and genuine relationship. God indirectly uses human violence to reduce violence and to exact punishment. These are thoughts that can be found especially in Finsterbusch's and Zehnder's studies. But Fretheim goes an important step further by claiming that God's most basic stance in the face of violence is nonviolence and by pointing out that God also endures violence himself—suffering as a way for healing the world from within, as he puts it.

These deliberations point to the New Testament. *Dana Harris'* study in some ways continues where Fretheim left off, by demonstrating that according to the book of Revelation, it is not God's powerlessness and suffering,

---

23. John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

24. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify*, p. 27.

25. See Müller, 'Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel', p. 21.

26. Walter Dietrich, 'Legitime Gewalt?—Alttestamentliche Perspektiven', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt—Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 292-309.

but his triumph over all sorts of evil, including violence, that will be his last word. Harris shows that Revelation is best understood as the culmination of the overarching 'plot' of God's ultimate purposes first revealed in Genesis 1–2, including an absence of violence as part of the perfect *shalom*, which is expressed in flourishing relationships between human beings and God, each other, and the rest of creation. Violence is not an essential characteristic of God, but divine judgment is a redemptive response to human sin and violence. Divine judgment ultimately overcomes violence, first by means of the atonement, which entails the passive endurance of violence, but then through the eradication of evil, which is related to the active use of force. This is a very broad view that draws together many biblical lines into one coherent picture. The motif of the use of divine force in overcoming evil is the one aspect that is also found in several other contributions, especially Fischer's, Hagelia's, Justnes' and Zehnder's. What is special to Harris'— and in fact Justnes'—material is that the use of such force is postponed to the eschatological period. The postponement of the use of force to the end of times (almost) without human participation is an element that connects important layers in the Hebrew Bible with both Qumranic texts and the New Testament.[27]

Peter Wick's contribution takes up in a specific way the motif of divine suffering of violence mentioned in Fretheim's study, by focusing on Jesus's teaching of mercy and love as a way of overcoming violence. Jesus's approach in the Sermon on the Mount entails a willingness on the side of his followers to renounce even legitimate kinds of force and to accept to suffer unjust violence, without however doing away with the legitimate use of force by human courts altogether. Aspects of this theme are also found in Fretheim's and McConville's studies, as well as, e.g., in Dietrich's analysis of violence in the Hebrew Bible.[28]

Gordon McConville's study is part of a series of three thematic investigations on specific aspects of human violence in the Hebrew Bible (Berman, Hubbard, McConville). It scrutinizes the ambiguous relation between the *dominium terrae* granted to humankind as created in God's image on one side and violence on the other. Two of the three examples for human misconstrual of this God-given dominion connect this article with other studies in the volume: the Pharaoh of the exodus story with Fischer's study, and the Assyrians' violent misuse of power with Finsterbusch's and Fretheim's articles. McConville takes up directly the ethical question of how, if at all, human beings may exercise 'dominion' in truth, justice and peace, and whether there can be a justification for any kind of coercion, which connects

27. Cf. also Müller, 'Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel', p. 21 (he intreprets this postponement as a beginning of the critique of war in general).
28. See W. Dietrich, 'Legitime Gewalt?'

his study with Fretheim's and Wick's. His response adds a different perspective to those found in the other articles, by referring to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea that the Church takes the form of Christ in the public arena, neither withdrawing from public life nor identifying with the prevailing political power. There is here a clear similarity to a basic concept of the Sermon on the Mount as presented by Wick.

Robert Hubbard's study of the Old Testament institution of cities of refuge deals with the question of the nature of divinely ordained legal measures that aim at dealing with different kinds of fatal acts of human violence, investigating roots and functions of the blood-restorer and the cities of refuge as described in the Torah. According to Hubbard, an important element of these institutions was the goal of furthering *shalom*, which connects this study with Harris' thoughts on Revelation, while the main question of how to contain and deal with human violence is closely related to Wick's study, with the two forming an interesting pair of comparison between Old Testament and New Testament ethics. The final remarks on the institution's reflection of God's justice and mercy are again closely relatable to Harris' study; the balance between justice and mercy is evocative of both Fischer's and Harris'—and to some degree again Wick's—contributions, and different in various respects from Fretheim's and Nielsen's.

Joshua Berman tackles the question of divinely sanctioned human violence in an unusual non-defensive way, not questioning whether the Israelites really were commanded to use violence, for example in the course of the occupation of the promised land, but rather asking what the *constructive* role of engagement in warfare can be according to the book of Deuteronomy. Berman identifies four elements as positive byproducts of the engagement in warfare: to bolster cultural confidence, to serve as a vehicle of self-reproach, to act as an agent of national bonding, and to serve as a spur to greater faith. Some aspects of the deliberations presented here can also be found in Zehnder's study. There is a certain thematic overlap because in both articles Deuteronomy and the conquest of Canaan play an important role; however, the specific questions addressed are different, even if the fundamental perspectives informing the dealing with the material are in full agreement. On the other side, Fretheim's reflections on the conquest of Canaan, culminating in the assumption that the Israelites may have misunderstood God's intentions, take the reader in another direction. The differences point to important hermeneutical and theological questions that need to be studied further.

Georg Fischer's article deals with the question of God's violence connected with the story of the Egyptian army's destruction at the Reed Sea read in the context of Exodus 1–15. Fischer demonstrates that it is the Egyptian Pharaoh who is the root of violence and also the cause of its increase. His continued injustice, resistance, and unreliability are the reasons why God,

finally, destroys 'Egypt'. The theme of the beneficiary character of God's 'violence' to contain and overcome evil forms of human violence connect Fischer's study with several other articles, especially those of Fretheim, Hagelia, Harris and Zehnder. It is perhaps the single most important motif and element of common agreement running through a good number of the articles presented in this volume, and in fact also represented in other voices participating in the debate.[29]

The question of divine and divinely ordained violence is also at the core of *Markus Zehnder*'s study, focusing on the specific question whether the biblical texts referring to the conquest of Canaan can be interpreted in terms of 'genocide'. As opposed to the cases of, e.g., the Nazis' and the Hutus' mass killings during the Second World War and in 1994 respectively, 'genocidal' traits cannot be found in the case of the conquest of Canaan if a relatively narrow and precise definition of the term 'genocide' is used. However, lethal actions are in fact *pre*scribed in Deuteronomy and *de*scribed in Joshua, related mostly to the concept of the 'ban'. According to Zehnder, these actions are not directed against the Canaanites per se, but primarily against the Canaanite cities and their rulers as the main representatives of the Canaanite religio-political system. They are not based on ethnical distinctions and denigrations of the human character of the opponents, but on the notion of the potentially endangered religious integrity of the people of God. Therefore, violent action on the side of the Israelites is conditional: If the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land do not pose a danger to the identity of God's people and their independence, the main reason to expel or kill them is gone. As mentioned before, there is a certain overlap both in subject matter and basic outlook especially with Berman's, and to a lesser degree with Fischer's contribution, while Fretheim's comments on the conquest offer, as already mentioned, a somewhat alternative interpretation of the biblical texts in question.

Lennart Boström's article deals with an incident in which God himself appears as perpetrating an act of violence that can hardly be understood: the death of Uzzah who tries to prevent the ark of the covenant from sliding off the cart. Boström takes a close look at the history of interpretation of this story and questions of genre. In his own theological evaluation, he holds—as opposed to Seibert who is explicitly mentioned in the article—that there are in fact 'dangerous' aspects of God's dealings with humankind, but also gives attention to human responsibility in preventing violence. The last aspect resonates especially with McConville's deliberations, while the first relates Boström's approach to all those articles that also try to point to the

---

29. See again, e.g., W. Dietrich, 'Legitime Gewalt?', especially p. 295 (God's 'violence' as a means 'zur Eindämmung oder Rückdrängung anderer, klar negativer Gewalt').

positive sides of divinely sanctioned violence or divine acts of judgment (see especially Fischer, Fretheim, Harris and Zehnder), adding, however, the important elements of unpredictability and incomprehensibility.

Karin Finsterbusch investigates the rhetoric of destruction in Jeremiah 1–6. Violence in this case is part of God's judgment. Finsterbusch demonstrates that this judgment is neither God's first nor his last word, but a reaction to his people's misbehavior that God himself would like not to be necessary. The first word, according to Finsterbusch, is the call to the people to turn away from unjust violence, to repent and turn back to God, exactly in order to prevent the violent judgment from happening; and the last word is a word of hope according to which the sin-punishment-cycle will be broken by God. And amid the threats of violent judgment, it is also made clear that there will not be a total annihilation of God's people. The analysis of the interplay between the prophet's call and the people's response is a specific trait of Finsterbusch's study, while the themes of justification, limitation, and conditionality of God's violent judgment are found in several articles, especially Fischer's, Fretheim's, Harris's, McConville's and Zehnder's'.

Hallvard Hagelia focuses mainly on issues of human violence, studying the prophetic indictment of various kinds of violence perpetrated especially against the lower strata of society in 8th century Israel as depicted in the book of Amos. Divine 'violence' in the form of the announcement of God's judgment also enters the picture. As compared to Finsterbusch's study of Jeremiah, the weights are distributed in the opposite way: While Finsterbusch focuses mainly on the divine response to human misbehavior, Hagelia focuses more on the latter. But the concept of a sin-punishment-cycle is found in both studies, as of course in one way or another also in others, especially Fischer's and Harris'.

LarsOlov Eriksson's article also deals with human violence. In this case, it is the violence perpetrated by the psalmist's enemies that stands at the centre of the study. Two dimensions of this violence are explicitly given attention: the sheer reality and pervasiveness of human violence together with its dire consequences for the victims on the one hand, and the rootedness of such violence in the disdain for God's law on the other hand. The first dimension is reflected in different ways also in Fretheim's, Hubbard's and McConville's studies, while the second is found especially in Fischer's, Hagelia's and Harris' contributions. The new element introduced by Eriksson consists mainly in the special vulnerability of the pious persons to human violence.

Two articles are dedicated to extra-biblical Jewish texts of the Second Temple period, bridging the literary and chronological gap between the Old Testament and New Testament texts. *Torleif Elgvin*'s study is dedicated to the rule of the Hasmoneans, who built their kingdom by military and violent means, used both against external enemies and internal opponents. On

the one hand, the politically positive results of these policies were seen as fulfillment of scriptural prophecies; the Hasmoneans themselves legitimized their reign and expansionist policy through an active use of the Scriptures. On the other hand, Hasmonean policy and propaganda led to criticism in opposition circles, evident from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Psalms of Solomon.* Elgvin shows that these opposition circles used the Scriptures in their own way to delegitimize the new rulers; the double office of the Hasmoneans (as ruler/king *and* high priest), seen by pro-Hasmonean circles as a sign of eschatological fulfillment, was criticized by others. The positive evaluation of human violence wrought on God's behalf is a motif that connects Elgvin's material with Berman's and Zehnder's. Interesting relations of contrast can also be seen with the texts dealt with by Harris and Wick, demonstrating clear differences in how the Old Testament heritage was taken up and applied by the Hasmoneans on one side and New Testament authors on the other, with the latter explicitly renouncing the concept of positive human violence to usher in the fulfillment of God's eschatological promises.

Årstein Justnes investigates the Qumran community's relation to violence by responding to Alex P. Jassen's recent article 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence' in which Jassen claims that the Qumran community had a violent worldview and that violence was a central preoccupation of the community. Justnes demonstrates that it is *divine* 'violence' that stands at the centre of Qumran texts and that most of the passages commonly described as violent are of a literary and fictional character. The closest relations of this study's topic can be found with Harris' article; also, the worldview of the Qumran texts and Revelation seem to be broadly in agreement, according to the interpretation offered by Justnes and Harris of their respective materials.

Tommy Wasserman's article treats a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that scribes, translators and interpreters through history have perceived as difficult and offensive, as reflected in various attempts to soften the text and its interpretation. These efforts may prefigure to a certain extent modern readers' uneasiness with divine or divinely sanctioned violence. Some of the passages under scrutiny are related to incidents of divine 'violence', others to human violence. There is a direct overlap between the treatment of 2 Sam. 6.7 and Boström's article, while the discussion of Jn 2.14-15 is an important addition to Wick's study of the Sermon on the Mount, corroborating the view that Jesus's approach to the use of force is not 'pacifistic'. Rather, the incident described in John 2 builds a bridge between Jesus's teaching on the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Revelation as described in Harris' article. The result of Wasserman's analysis is discussed in relationship to the classic text-critical criterion *lectio difficilior potior* and a possible subcriterion labeled *lectio vehementior potior*.

It is difficult in the current debate to take up the topic of violence and religion without also casting a glance at the situation in Islam. This is the main

reason why a study on violence in Islam was invited in addition to the stud-
ies on biblical and intertestamental texts. In addition, such a paper also has
the potential to sharpen the eye for the specific profile of the biblical mate-
rial and allows an insight into a particular part of the Bible's *Wirkungsge-
schichte*. *Friedmann Eissler*'s study points to the fact that violence as an
ethical challenge in Islam is related to different (often labelled 'traditional-
ist', 'modernist', 'Islamist', 'progressive') currents within Islam that advo-
cate different perspectives on how the correspondence of Allah's power and
the role of human vicegerency is to affect and/or shape the implementation
of political and social goals. There is a striking relation between Eissler's
observations and especially Fretheim's, and to a minor degree McCon-
ville's, papers: The dominant Islamic tradition with its characteristic view
of the relationship between humankind and Allah, already formulated in the
Qur'an itself, appears as the exact antithesis to the biblical concept of divine
self-limitation and human freedom. The marked difference between the bib-
lical texts on the one hand and the Islamic tradition on the other stands in
clear contrast to the strong interwovenness of the various biblical texts even
across the boundaries of the two Testaments.

It was not the aim of the conference to cover all the different aspects
of the broad topic of *Violence and Ethics in the Bible*, and even less to
give definitive answers to theoretical questions or solve practical problems.
Therefore, the present collection of papers read at the conference has a
goal that is considerably more modest: to contribute to the debate about the
theme of violence in the Bible and the potential it has to shed new light on
problems in the biblical texts themselves and their significance in address-
ing historical and present experiences of violence. Even so, we need to learn
to live with questions that cannot be answered easily and problems that
cannot be solved.

Why Must Israel Be Warriors?
The Constructive Role of Warfare in Deuteronomy

Joshua Berman

Abstract

While many are prepared to accept that God punishes as He sees fit, the command to Israel to annihilate the nations of Canaan is particularly troubling, because the responsibility to do so is given over to human hands. Why must Israel be warriors? In this paper I seek out four constructive roles that Deuteronomy envisions in the engagement of warfare: to bolster cultural confidence, to serve as a vehicle of self-reproach, to act as agent of national bonding, and as a spur to greater faith.

Introduction

One of the most pressing questions about violence in the Hebrew Bible concerns the divine command to Israel to conquer and annihilate the seven nations of Canaan. While many are prepared to accept that God punishes as He sees fit—whether in the Flood, or at Sodom and Gomorrah—the command to Israel to annihilate the nations of Canaan is particularly troubling, because the responsibility to do so is given over to human hands. If Yhwh was displeased with the conduct of these nations, the question is asked, why could He not punish them without human intervention? Why must Israel be warriors? In this paper I will address that question from the perspective of the Book of Deuteronomy, seeking out the constructive roles that Deuteronomy envisions in the formation of a nation of warriors.[1] My paper is,

---

1. For discussion of the ideological place of war in Deuteronomy, see William T. Cavanaugh, 'Killing in the Name of God', in *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (ed. C.R. Seitz and C.E. Braaten; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 127-47; Alexander Rofé, 'The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity', *JSOT* 32 (1985), pp. 23-44; Anselm C. Hagedorn, *Between Moses and Plato: Individual and Society in Deuteronomy and Ancient Greek Law* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 172-99; Harold C. Washington, 'Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach', *BibInt* 5 (1997), pp. 324-63.

to some degree, a repudiation of the basic premise of this conference. This conference addresses *violence* in the Bible, the Hebrew Bible particularly. *Violence* is a distinctly pejorative term. 'Good violence' is almost an oxymoron. It is telling that there is no word in biblical Hebrew that corresponds to our English term *violence*, as a display of physical force. The closest we come is with the word חמס, which, tellingly is translated by BDB as 'a violent wrong'.[2] Note carefully—not any employment of physical force, but such force used toward an improper end. My paper assumes that there are uses of force that the Bible justifies, even lauds. War in Deuteronomy, I claim, is a case in point.

Most will agree that there are times when arms must be borne in self-defense. But can participation in armed conflict play a constructive role in fostering civic virtue? For some republican thinkers, such as Montesquieu, the patriotism of a citizenry is achieved by the more noble concerns of social education, which is perceived to stand in opposition to martial discipline. It is only when virtue ebbs that attachment to the common good is promulgated through the common enterprise of war.[3]

I would suggest that in the book of Deuteronomy the constructive role of violence—of participation in the military—can well be understood with reference to Greek discussions of virtue. The Greek polis was universally grounded in a well-developed notion of *citizenry*: the strong sense of fraternity, order and responsibility shared by members of a common polity and their sense of striving for virtue, variously defined. These virtues, in turn, would dictate the traits of the ideal person, a citizen aware of his traditions and obligations.[4] Contra Montesquieu, for Greek republican thinkers, the more sublime and contemplative virtues were not necessarily at odds with military ones. As Aristotle wrote:

> For men must be able to engage in business and go to war, but leisure and peace are better; they must do what is necessary and indeed what is useful, but what is honorable is better. On such principles children and persons of every age which requires education should be trained.[5]

---

2. See similarly, NIDOTTE 2.177-180.

3. Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 11:13, 17; Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 121.

4. Peter Riesenberg, *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 34. See, in particular, the funeral oration ascribed by Thucydides to Pericles in *The Peloponnesian War* 2:34-46. Some scholars question the historicity of the oratory. Yet, even if viewed as propaganda spun by Thucydides himself, the text highlights his own sense that there are virtues particular to being an Athenian that are worth inculcating.

5. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VII, 1333a 41-1333b 5 (trans. B. Jowett; available at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.7.seven.html [accessed December 26, 2007]).

This provides a helpful framework with which to appreciate how Deuteronomy incorporates armed warfare into its overall conception of virtue and citizenry. Participation in armed conflict, for Deuteronomy is not an exigency, an aberration from an otherwise peaceful norm. Rather, it is an organic part of the formation of a covenantal citizenry. From a literary standpoint, Deuteronomy is structured as a series of addresses to Israel as a collective 'you': '*You* shall love the Lord your God with all your heart' (Deut. 6.5); '*you* shall feast [in the temple] before the Lord your God, happy in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed *you*' (Deut. 12.7).[6] This 'you' constitutes a fraternal citizenry that is the foremost political body within the polity. It is called upon to perform all of the more sublime aspects of the covenantal calling, and it is this collective 'you'—the covenantal community—that is charged with conquering the land. This stands distinct within the theological landscape of the ancient Near East, where it was kings who were expected to engage in conquest and upon whose shoulders this responsibility rested.

Why does Deuteronomy place the burden of conquest upon the people? I would suggest that Deuteronomy saw armed conflict for Israel as a catalyst to four vital spiritual traits.

1. *Warfare and the Formation of Cultural Confidence*

A recurring concern throughout the Hebrew Bible is that Israel will seek to assimilate and conform to the cultures that surround her. The impetus to assimilate, generally speaking, arises when a smaller or weaker culture seeks the security of joining a larger or stronger one, and to remove enmity that may have existed between them. The only bulwark that can prevent a smaller culture from doing so is when it is confident of its own standing, and its own vitality, and thus feels no need to assimilate. The first and foremost reason that Deuteronomy assigns the task of conquest to human hands, then, is that Israel will achieve this degree of cultural confidence. Consider Deut. 7.1-6:[7]

> [1]When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—[2]and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with

---

6. To be sure, 'you' in Deuteronomy sometimes refers to individuals. But this does not preclude understanding much of the book's message as being addressed to the polity as a whole. On the singular and plural addresses within Deuteronomy and their implications for both diachronic and synchronic readings, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB, 5; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 15-16.

7. All Bible translations are from NRSV.

them and show them no mercy. ³Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. ⁵But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. ⁶For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

A close reading of the passage underscores the social psychology at work here. In v. 1, the Lord promises that he will deliver nations more numerous and mighty than is Israel into her hand. Thus, the victory will represent a huge achievement for the victors. Verse 2 stresses that it is Israel that will destroy them—not the miraculous hand of God—and that the destruction must be total. Verse 3 serves in a contrastive capacity: rather than following the divine plan, which will instill Israel with confidence, Israel may be tempted to reach accommodation and peace, an option ruled out by v. 4, which promises that such behavior will only lead to ruin. Verse 5 uses particularly forceful language to describe the actions to be taken against heathen holy sites. I would suggest that all of this is not ruthlessness for its own sake, but so as to breed strength of character that will foster cultural confidence, thus obviating the need for accommodation and assimilation. Verse 6 draws the passage to its conclusion: Israel must be a 'holy'—that is, distinct—people. The confidence that Israel must discover can come only by delivering the devastation herself. Were the Lord to act and Israel were to observe in passive fashion, the effect would not be achieved.⁸

The notion that military victory is a culture's bulwark against assimilation may not appear intuitive in the modern age, and to illustrate just how potent an agent this is, I would like to draw attention to two examples from modern Jewish history. It is now a familiar sight to see an orthodox Jew in the streets of any American city wearing a *kippah* (skullcap) on his head. But this was not always the case—even in America. Once upon a time orthodox Jews would don the *kippah* at home, or at synagogue, but not in the public sphere. This changed abruptly at a single moment in time: Israel's victory in the Six Day War in 1967. A sense of pride, but even more so of confidence, allowed Jews to feel that it was legitimate to symbolically express their Jewishness even in the public sphere.⁹ The Six Day War was

---

8.   See, in a similar vein, Deut. 28.7-10. Note how these ideas play out in Israel's early history: Following the establishment of the southern confederation (Josh. 9.1-2), the elders suddenly seem eager to establish a treaty with foreigners (Josh. 9.3-27). The book of Judges reports that demographic proximity to her heathen neighbors following inconclusive battles lead Israel to social and political accommodation (Judg. 3.1-6).

9.   On the greater public confidence felt by American Jews following the Six Day

a watershed moment as well, in the history of the Soviet Jewry dissident movement. The widely felt desire of Jews such as Anatoly Sharansky to emigrate from the Soviet Union and settle in the land of Israel, a movement which has since seen the arrival of 1 million former Soviet Jews in the State of Israel, is a movement that began in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War.[10] Deuteronomy, I would claim, was keenly aware of the cultural significance of battlefield success as a bulwark of cultural confidence.

2. *Conquest as Self-Reproach*

When Israel fights to destroy heathen nations it not only instills within her confidence, it also serves notice to her, that the same fate awaits her if she does not fulfill her covenantal calling. The rhetoric of the blessing / curse pericope of chap. 28 bears this out. Deuteronomy 28.7 reads, 'The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways'. Yet this immediately puts Israel on call, for she is told that if she fails, the same fate will befall her as well: 'The LORD will cause *you* to be defeated before *your* enemies; *you* shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways' (Deut. 28.25). The idea that the empowerment of conquest can be easily inverted is registered in the warning of the impending destruction in 2 Kgs 21.9-12:

> [9]Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel. [10]The LORD said by his servants the prophets, [11]'Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; [12]therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.

Thus, even as the Israelites prosecute war against the seven nations, their efforts sear into their own consciousness the potential of what awaits them if they fail their calling.

3. *Warfare as an Agent of Bonding*

Republics are susceptible to breakdown along lines of faction. A ubiquitous theme in the annals of political history is that of the attempt to dissolve

War, see Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 186.

10. See Gal Beckerman, *When They Come For Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2011), pp. 102-118.

entrenched kinship structures in an effort to forge a larger collective body. Speaking in the terms of the narrated world of Deuteronomy, its collective strategy could take hold only if there were an attendant weakening of the tribal hierarchy that had figured so prominently during the trek in the wilderness. Toward this end, Deuteronomy largely vitiates the roles played by the tribal chieftains and the elders, relative to the roles these played in the earlier books.[11] It is striking that in Deuteronomy many of these structures are simply absent. There is no mention of the *nĕśi'îm* at all, nor of the ad hoc political body, the *'ēdâ*.[12] Moreover, we note the relatively lesser role granted to the notion of tribe within Deuteronomy. As a federated bureaucratic structure, Deuteronomy seems to know of two units only: the nation and the city. The attempt to dissipate tribal identity is seen in Deuteronomy's rhetoric as well. We are witness in Deuteronomy to a transformation of the valence of the word 'fathers'. In the Book of Numbers, especially, the word 'fathers' is used in exclusive fashion (over 40 times) to refer to the tribal patriarchy in the phrase 'house of the fathers', a reference to the kinship structure of the tribes. An examination of the sermons spoken to the people in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, reveals that the word 'fathers' as a reference to the patriarchs appears only a handful of times (Exod. 3.15; 13.5, 11; Lev. 26.42). In Deuteronomy the trend is reversed. In the various sermons and laws, 'your fathers' never refers to a tribal kinship structure, but, rather, to the patriarchs (over 30 times).[13] The social purpose of this is to stress common ancestry and hence collective national identity, rather than identity fractured along clan and familial lines.

It is in this context that we can appreciate the capacity of collective and national armed struggle to bring cohesiveness to the whole of Israel, vitiating the tight bonds of tribal ancestry. This is the spirit behind Deut. 3.18-20:

> [18]At that time, I charged you (i.e. the tribes of Reuven and Gad) as follows: 'Although the LORD your God has given you this land to occupy, all your troops shall cross over armed as the vanguard of your Israelite kin. [19]Only your wives, your children, and your livestock—I know that you have much livestock—shall stay behind in the towns that I have given to you. [20]When the LORD gives rest to your brothers (i.e. Israel), as to you, and they too

11. See Hanoch Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989); Jacob Milgrom, 'Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel', *JQR* 79 (1978), pp. 65-81.

12. Within my synchronic reading of Deuteronomy, in its final form, as the fifth book of the Pentateuch, I have read this switch of terminology as a reflection of an evolution of the structure of the regime. Diachronic readings of Deuteronomy will typically see these terms as characteristic of Priestly vocabulary, while Deuteronomy utilizes different words and concepts.

13. On this, I am following the position of Norbert Lohfink, *Die Väter Israels im Deuteronomium* (OBO, 111; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1991).

> have occupied the land that the LORD your God is giving them beyond the Jordan, then each of you may return to the property that I have given to you'.

The command is not only a moral imperative; it serves as well to recalibrate identity—all of Israel are 'brothers' first, in national identity, and only thereafter do they possess a tribal identity. The capacity of armed struggle to forge new relationships between formerly disaffected factions of a polity should not be understated. A contemporary example illustrates the dynamic well. The entry of Blacks and Jews into the mainstream of American life was a phenomenon largely set into motion by World War II, when Jews and Blacks, as Americans of all walks of life, fought and died side by side. The newfound sense of national and collective identity trumped old prejudices and sup-group classifications.[14]

The bonding element of warfare is evident as well in the law that restricts the amassing of horses (Deut. 17.16). Were a royal chariot force to serve as the backbone of the nation's defense, it would inevitably emerge as an elite military class.[15] Indeed, the great jurist of Athens, Solon, extended preferred status to the members of the cavalry over other citizens. For Deuteronomy, however, when the citizenry fights, it does so in a fashion that contributes to communal bonding and the formation of a nation of warrior citizens. Deuteronomy foregoes, therefore, the tactical superiority afforded by a cavalry in order to harness the bonding potential of armed conflict to its fullest.

Omissions often make as striking a statement as that which is written; remarkable in this capacity is Deuteronomy's silence about valor on the battlefield. Deuteronomy is keenly aware of the fear that can grip combatants as battle is about to be engaged, and the need to overcome this fear. Yet, note the fashion in which Deuteronomy attends to this is with regard to the legion as a whole (Deut. 20.8): 'The officials shall continue to address the troops, saying, "Is anyone afraid or disheartened? He should go back to his house, lest he cause the heart of his comrades to fail like his own"'. Absent here however, as in the rest of Deuteronomy, is any attention to particularly valorous acts. This stands in striking contrast with the place of valor in, for

14. On the place of Jews in America following World War II, see Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); on the place of African Americans following World II, see Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 236-89. These ideas also animate the narratives concerning the tribes of the Transjordan area in Joshua chap. 1, and chaps. 21-22.

15. Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), p. 225; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 212.

example, the Book of Samuel, where David (1 Sam. 17), Jonathan (1 Sam. 14), and even Saul (2 Sam. 1.17-27) are commended for their feats of valor and prowess. Warrior citizens are expected to fight their best. But there is no celebration in Deuteronomy of he who may excel on the battlefield. In contrast to the focus on the morale of the people as a whole found in Deut. 20.8, consider how valor is extolled in the Thucydides' version of the funeral oration of Pericles:

> Reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonour always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to their country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feast. The sacrifice which they collectively made was individually repaid to them; for they received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all sepulchers—I speak not of that in which their remains are laid, but of that in which their glory survives, and is proclaimed always and on every fitting occasion both in word and deed. For the whole earth is the sepulcher of famous men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men. Make them your examples, and, esteeming courage to be freedom and freedom to be happiness, do not weigh too nicely the perils of war.[16]

Or, consider this section from the Epic of Erra, in which the protagonist is exhorted on the eve of battle:

> Be off to the field, warrior Erra, make your weapons clatter,
> Make loud your battle cry that all around they quake…
> Let sovereigns hear and fall prostrate before you,
> Let countries hear and bring you their tribute,
> Let the lowly hear and perish of their own accord,
> Let the mighty hear and his strength diminish,
> Let lofty mountains hear and their peaks crumble,
> Let the surging sea hear and convulse, wiping out her increase!
> Let the stalk be yanked from the tough thicket,
> Let reeds of the impenetrable morass be shorn off,
> Let men turn cowards and their clamor subside,
> Let beasts tremble and return to clay,
> Let the gods your ancestors see and praise your valor![17]

I would suggest that the de-emphasis on personal courage and accomplishment is also a function of Deuteronomy's view of collective warfare.

---

16. From Thucydides (c. 460/455–399 BCE), *Peloponnesian War*, Book 2.43 (trans. B. Jowett; available at http://tinyurl.com/cqdngbq [accessed October 15, 2012]).

17. Erra Epic, ll. 61-74, translated in Benjamin Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales and Poetry from Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1995), p. 136.

Individuals may indeed excel, but all efforts are valued solely within the context of the manner in which they contribute to the collective effort of Israel, for that alone is important.

4. *Battlefield Vulnerability as a Spur to Faith*

While Deuteronomy says little to extol the virtue of valor in battle, it is keenly aware of the pall of fear and vulnerability that war can cast on those about to engage battle. The pre-battle preparations and hortatory calls of Deuteronomy 20.1-9 speak most directly to this. This fear is harnessed however, in several passages as a resource. The greater the fear of the seemingly indefatigable enemy before the battle is waged, so the greater the appreciation for the Lord's salvation following victory. This animates the hortatory of Deut. 4.37b-40:

> [37]… He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, [38]driving out before you nations greater and mightier than your-selves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. [39]So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

And similarly Deut. 32.29-30:

> [29]If they were wise, they would understand this;
> they would discern what the end would be.
> [30]How could one have routed a thousand,
> and two put a myriad to flight,
> unless their Rock had sold them,
> the LORD had given them up?

Were Israel to stand by passively as the Lord acted, she would be delivered. But only if she tastes vulnerability can she truly internalize the indebted-ness that she must, and this can only be achieved by placing life on the line in the field of battle.

5. *Conclusion*

Deuteronomy was not blind to the potentially corrosive effects of warfare, especially in victory. Victory could lead to an undo sense of self-righteous-ness (Deut. 9.4-6). It could lead Israel to ascribe her military achievements to her own military prowess, rather than the Lord's bounty (Deut. 8.17). The desire to take foreign women as sexual booty would need to be curbed (Deut. 21.10-14). The appetite for conquest could lead Israel to have expan-sionist aspirations beyond that permitted her (Deut. 2.4-5, 9-10, 17-22). At the same time, Deuteronomy sees potential benefits to the character of the nation in formation that could be achieved only if Israel tasted vulnerability and then victory against the most hardened foes.

We, today, live a privileged existence. The victory that we in the West savor in the post-war order is not of victory *in* war, but of victory *over* war itself. Some may recoil against the values that I have laid out here, and view war, as did Montesquieu, as essentially a failure, at best, a necessary evil. But the question before us here is not whether these are values we should adopt for ourselves. Rather, our task is to come with a clear-headed mind and assess as fairly as we can the role—and sometimes even the constructive role—of physical force as it was conceived within the thinking and writing of the Hebrew Bible.

Uzzah's Fate (2 Samuel 6):
A Theological Problem for the Modern Reader

Lennart Boström

Abstract

The Old Testament provides serious challenges for the reader, especially for people who regard the Bible as divinely inspired and authoritative for life and faith. The aim of this study is to compare the way some modern Old Testament theologians deal with the issue of God as violent. The story of Uzzah's death in 2 Samuel 6 is chosen as a test case since it is one of those stories where God is described as actively involved in an act of violence. The text tells that the Lord's anger burned against Uzzah for touching the ark of the covenant. The reader feels sympathy for Uzzah who seems to act instinctively to protect the ark from sliding off the cart.

   Important for the interpretation of texts like these is the question of genre. The text is an individual narrative that picks up the theme of the holy ark that begins in the book of Exodus and runs through the historical books. As other texts about the ark, the Uzzah narrative clearly puts emphasis on the holiness of the ark; the question arises, however, about what theological and historical deductions can be made from there. Interestingly, the text goes on telling that David got so upset by what had happened to Uzzah that he cancelled his plans to bring the holy ark to Jerusalem.

Introduction

The story about Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 is part of a narrative cycle about David that in the preceding chapter has culminated in describing him as king over all Israel with Jerusalem as his new royal center. The text is interesting for several reasons. First, the violence in this text is not caused by any human activity, but is described as God's direct action towards what seems to be an 'innocent' victim—Uzzah. Second, this text has caused theological problems not only for the readers in the history of its interpretation; rather, the problematic aspect is already found in the text itself where it is stated that David reacts strongly against God's assault directed at Uzzah. The story tells that David becomes so agitated and frightened that he cancels his grand mission of bringing the ark to Jerusalem and instead deposits it somewhere else. Third, the story about Uzzah is found in two versions, in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chron. 13.15-16, with slight variations. The version in 2 Samuel will

be the object of this article, but the Chronicler's version will be referred to along the way.[1]

1. *The Holiness of the Ark*

In the biblical text the ark appears for the first time in the book of Exodus, at the beginning of the instructions concerning the building of a sanctuary (Exod. 25–31). The ark is to be built as a relatively small chest, made out of acacia wood overlaid with gold. The instructions end with the following words (Exod. 25.21-22 NIV):

> Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

The text does not identify the Lord with the ark, but there is a close relationship between the two. The theme of the Lord's presence is prominent in the book of Exodus.[2] The sanctuary (משכן) was built in order to make it possible for the Lord to dwell (שכן) among his people, and the very place where he will appear is inside the sanctuary, between the *cherubim* on top of the ark. Since the ark was to be situated in the Most Holy Place where only Moses, Aaron and his sons were permitted to enter, it means that the ark was not visible to anyone else. According to the book of Numbers, Aaron and his sons were instructed to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the testimony with it when the camp moved (Num. 4.5-6). A certain group of Levites, the Kohathite tribal clans, were chosen to be responsible for carrying the vessels of the sanctuary after having been given special instructions. They were not allowed to look at the vessels, not even get a glimpse of them (לראת כבלע), or they would die (Num. 4.20).

Also in the instructions for the Day of Atonement the extreme danger of approaching the ark is emphasized (Lev. 16.2). The high priest before entering the Most Holy Place had to make minute precautions so that he would not die. The reason for the danger is specified: it is because the Lord appears in the cloud over the cover of the ark (כפרת). Here again appears the close connection between the ark and the presence of the Lord, whose glory or face no man is supposed to be able to see and survive (see also Exod. 33.18, 20).

---

1. For a close examination of both texts and their relationship to each other and other versions, see Robert Rezetko, *Source and Revision in the Narratives of David's Transfer of the Ark. Text, Language, and Story in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13, 15* (LBH/OTS, 470; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

2. Emphasized by John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC, 3; Waco, TX, Word Books, 1987), pp. 353-55.

This understanding of the intense holiness of the sanctuary vessels and especially the ark constitutes a background for the story of Uzzah. All the mentioned texts must, however, be regarded as coming from the Priestly source,[3] which raises the somewhat complicated question about their date in relation to the Uzzah story.[4] What can be assumed is that the latter in both 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles seems to build upon an understanding of the ark's holiness similar to the kind found in the P texts.

Other texts, however, do not attribute the same degree of holiness and dangerousness to the ark. The ark is reported as being carried and leading the people when they move through the wilderness (Num. 10.33-36), as well as playing an important role at the miraculous crossing of the Jordan river (Josh. 3.14-17).[5] The ark is further mentioned as being carried around Jericho until the seventh day when the city walls collapse (Josh. 6.20). After the entrance into the land, the ark is at one point reported as having been placed in Bethel (Judg. 20.27) and later it is located in what is referred to as the temple (היכל) of the Lord in Shiloh (1 Sam. 3.3). From there the ark is brought to help in the battle against the Philistines; but the Philistines manage to capture it (1 Sam. 4). No extraordinary safety measures are recorded in their dealings with the ark. The Philistines consider it a deity and, logically, place it in a temple with other gods, but when it is understood to bring devastation, it is moved several times between Philistine cities before it is eventually sent back to the Israelites (1 Sam. 5–6).

Hossfeld and Zenger refer to the ark as an 'easily transportable chest' which originally functioned as a 'war palladium' representing the presence of the Lord in battle. Later it was transferred to the temple and placed beneath the wings of the cherubim, signaling the place where the Lord was invisibly seated as a king on his throne.[6] This may help to explain the difference

3.   For a discussion of the function of the ark in Deuteronomy, see the thorough treatment with extensive references by Ian Wilson, 'Merely a Container? The Ark in Deuteronomy', in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (ed. J. Day; LHB/OTS, 422; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 212-49. Wilson argues against the common view that the ark in Deuteronomy merely functions as a box for the covenant tablets. Based on Deut. 10.8, he claims that the ark also in Deuteronomy is closely associated with the divine presence.

4.   For an overview of the composition of the books of Samuel, see Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, pp. 7-14

5.   The instruction that the enormous distance of 2000 cubits (around 900 meters) were to be held between the people and the priests carrying the ark (Josh. 3.4), may indicate an understanding of the ark as extremely dangerous getting close to.

6.   Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 461-62. On the ark and the cherubim throne, see Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *Namnet och närvaron* (Örebro: Libris, 1987), pp. 127-31; Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, 'Yhwh SABAOTH—the heavenly king on the cherubim throne', in T. Ishida, *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns,

in the descriptions of the ark. In the historical books its function as a war palladium is in focus, representing the Lord and being carried around and transported in different ways by both Israelites and Philistines. In the temple under the wings of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place it is viewed as a footstool for the Lord and a container for the tablets of the covenant. The instructions in the book of Exodus reflect its function as representing the deity and emphasize its extreme holiness, a view that informs the Uzzah story.

2. *The Question of Genre*

Important for the interpretation of texts like these is the question of genre. Patrick D. Miller and J.J.M. Roberts discuss this issue in their excellent book *The Hand of the Lord. A Reassessment of the 'Ark Narrative' of 1 Samuel.*[7] The book was originally published in 1977 and interacts with two then recent books by Franz Schicklberger (1973) and Anthony Campbell (1975). Much of the discussion concerns the identification of an original ark narrative as an independent unit which was later incorporated in the books of Samuel.[8] Miller and Roberts argue against the view that the story in 2 Samuel 6 about the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem belonged to this original ark narrative.[9] According to them, the original ark narrative follows the pattern of other texts of the same genre that deals with the capture and return of idols, while 2 Samuel 6 is associated with other texts that describe the installation of deities in royal capitals. The original ark narrative fittingly ends with the first verse in 1 Chronicles 7 about the ark being stored in Kiriath Jearim.[10]

P. Kyle McCarter elaborates on the observation made by Miller and Robert that 2 Samuel 6 belongs to another genre than the ark narrative in 1 Samuel since it does not deal with the capture and return of a deity. The ark had already been returned from captivity and therefore 2 Samuel 6 should be compared to ancient Near Eastern accounts of the introduction of a national god to a new royal city and its palace, of which there are several Assyrian examples, e.g. Assurnasirpal (9th century), Sargon II and Esarhaddon (8–7th centuries).[11] The texts show a pattern: (1) ceremonial invitation of

---

1982), pp. 113-16; Martin Metzger, *Königsthron und Gottesthron* (AOAT 15:1; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985), pp. 259-79.

7.   Patrick D. Miller Jr. and Jimmy Jack MacBee Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord. A Reassessment of the 'Ark Narrative' of 1 Samuel* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2008).

8.   The discussion is based on Leonhard Rost's theory in *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BWANT, 42; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926).

9.   Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, p. 10.

10. Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, pp. 27-36.

11. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB, 9; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 181, 183.

the deity into the city, (2) presentation of sacrifices, (3) preparation of a feast for the community.[12] All these components are evident also in 2 Samuel 6. The king and a large army of thirty thousand men are there to accompany the ark into the royal city with music, dance and celebrations (2 Sam. 6.1-5, 14). Offerings are mentioned at the second attempt (2 Sam. 6.13, 17), as is the distribution of bread and cakes to the people (2 Sam. 6.19).

   The question of genre may also include theories about the cultic use of the ark. It may have been used in temple festivities extolling the glory of the Lord. McCarter[13] points to Psalm 132, where, after the relation of David's firm and immediate resolution to build a dwelling for the Lord, the following statement is found (Ps. 132.6-8 NIV):

> We heard it in Ephrathah, we came upon it in the fields of Jaar.
> Let us go to his dwelling place, let us worship at his footstool—
> arise, O Lord, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.

The psalm continues with affirming the Lord's decision to uphold the Davidic succession (though there is an 'if' included) and to have Zion as his resting place for ever and ever.[14] The theory that Psalm 132 as well as other psalms were used in ritual processions in the temple is appealing and even probable, though speculative since there is so little material to build upon to reconstruct the temple liturgy. The Uzzah incident is not hinted at in the psalm and it is difficult to imagine how it could have been part of any cultic usage.

3. *The Setting of 2 Samuel 6*

Second Samuel 6 is part of David's success story reaching its zenith in 2 Samuel 8.[15] Despite hardships and resistance, everything has turned David's way. In the preceding chapter, he is made king over both Judah and Israel. Jerusalem is conquered and is called the 'city of David'. In 2 Samuel 5, the archenemy, the Philistines, are defeated with the Lord's help. Second Sam. 5.20-21 (NIV) states:

> So David went to Baal Perazim, and there he defeated them. He said, 'As waters break out, the Lord has broken out against my enemies before me.' So that place was called Baal Perazim. The Philistines abandoned their idols there, and David and his men carried them off.

---

12. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 181.
13. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 176.
14. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 176. Hossfeld and Zenger (*Psalms 3*, p. 461) think that the reference is to Ephrathah close to Bethlehem, David's home, and that there they have heard about the ark in the fields of Jaar, which refers to Kiriath Jearim.
15. For an overview of the scholarly theories concerning sources and revisions behind the present shape of the Books of Samuel, see Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, pp. 7-14.

It is interesting to note that David and his men are said to have carried off the idols of the defeated Philistines. Victors taking over the idols from the defeated enemy demonstrated their military strength and the victory thus also had theological repercussions, indicating the weakness of the defeated party's gods or the abandonment of the defeated party by their gods for one reason or another. The narrative of the defeat of the Philistines and their loss of their idols may have been intentionally placed here by the redactor as a parallel to the earlier story in 1 Samuel 4 about the defeat of the Israelites and the loss of their 'idol'—the ark. [16] Another possibility is that the report concerning the idols of the Philistines has been placed here to indicate the fundamental difference between these lifeless idols and Israel's God represented by the ark in the following chapter.

After this comes the story about David's grand project, the bringing of the ark to his city, to Jerusalem. 'Again' he assembles a great army, but not for a military purpose! This was rather a project of political and theological importance. The ark represented the deity, and David now arranges a procession to bring the Lord into his new capital. However, no temple was yet erected in Jerusalem. The text reports that David had prepared a tent (אהל) for it, a construction similar to the tent of meeting referred to in the wilderness narrative.[17]

Robert P. Gordon points out two things about David's project of bringing the ark into his new royal city. First, it was 'a politically astute move on David's part', since it could unite the tribes around the capital and the royal house of David. Secondly, the ark 'played an important part in preserving the link between Israel's religious traditions, especially as they had developed at Shiloh, and the uncertain future under the monarchy'.[18] The ark represented the old Sinai Covenant traditions which by this move were integrated with the emerging Davidic Covenant traditions. Bruce C. Birch points out that Jerusalem became the successor to Shiloh and laid the basis for the influential David–Zion theology.[19] First Samuel 7.2 and the context leading up to 2 Samuel 6 indicate that the ark had been in Kiriath Jearim around seventy years, and, as it seems in the textual material, relatively unknown and perhaps neglected.[20] Goldman comments: 'It is difficult to

---

16. The Chronicler's chain of events is somewhat different: the defeat of the Philistines comes between David's two attempts to transfer the ark to Jerusalem. There it is stated that the Philistines left their idols behind and that David gave orders to burn them (1 Chron. 14.12).

17. Klaus Koch, אהל in *TDOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), I, p. 127.

18. Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel. A Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency Reference Library, 1986), p. 230.

19. Bruce C. Birch, *The First and Second Books of Samuel. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections* (NIB; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), II, p. 1247.

20. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Grand

understand why the ark, the most precious of Israel's religious symbols, had been allowed to remain in Kiriath-jearim, playing no part in the national worship, during the lifetime of Samuel and the reign of Saul'.[21] After this interval without a distinct religious center, David's idea of bringing the ark into the new royal capital must have been seen as a brilliant way to unite the different tribes of the land and to counteract any anti-royal tendencies in the united monarchy. Gordon also notes that the narrator's retrospective comment about Michal in the final verse of 2 Samuel 6 makes it clear that a merger between Davidic and Saulide loyalty groups through an heir would never happen.[22] Michal is referred to as the 'daughter of Saul' when she looks out from the window (2 Sam. 6.16), and David's response to her sarcasm puts emphasis on the Lord's election of him as ruler instead of her father or 'anyone from his house' (2 Sam. 6.21). The centralization is total—both when it comes to location and to ruling dynasty. As the death of Uzzah ends any claim the house of Abinadab might have had on the priesthood in Jerusalem, the infertility of Michal points out the inevitable termination of the Saulide era. Both religious and political power was centralized in Jerusalem and in the hands of David.

Birch notes that the same extensive, formal designation as in 1 Sam. 4.4 is used of the ark in 2 Sam. 6.2: 'the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim'. This reminds the reader that 'when David brings the ark to Jerusalem he is associating his own kingdom with the presence, the military power, and the kingship of Israel's covenant God, Yahweh. David is, in effect, proclaiming a powerful divine alliance for himself in this public ritual'.[23]

A reason for not reckoning 2 Samuel 6 as part of the original ark narrative is the difference in some of the details. In 2 Samuel 6 Abinadab's house is in Baala, not in Kiriath Jearim as in 1 Sam. 7.1. The common view is that the two names refer to the same place, which is supported by 1 Chron. 13.6

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 330. The reference to the ark in the MT text of 1 Sam. 14.18 is awkward and most scholars (see, e.g., Gordon, *I and II Samuel*, pp. 137-38) believe that this verse originally had a reference to the ephod in line with LXX manuscripts.

21. S. Goldman, *Samuel* (Soncino Books of the Bible; London: Soncino Press 1983; first edition 1949), p. 219. Goldman is favorable to the theory that Kiriath Jearim was within the jurisdiction of the Philistines and therefore the ark was inaccessible to the Israelites while it was there. It was not until David had conclusively defeated the Philistines that it was it possible for Israel to regain possession of the ark (*Samuel*, p. 220).

22. Gordon, *I and II Samuel*, p. 230. Birch (*First and Second Books of Samuel*, p. 1248) states concerning the Michal episode that 'the encounter in its present form has less to do with the personalities of Michal and David than with the delegitimizing of Saulide claims'.

23. Birch, *First and Second Books of Samuel*, pp. 1248-249.

where the two are identified. In 2 Samuel 6 it is Abinadab's sons Uzzah and Ahio who guide the ark, while in 1 Sam. 7.1 it is Eleazar who is consecrated as guardian. Though Miller and Roberts regard 2 Samuel 6 as a separate story, they note its dependency upon the ark narrative in 1 Samuel. The house of Abinadab is common to both stories. For the curious fact that Eleazar is exchanged for Uzzah and Ahio their explanation is that 'because, for one historical reason or another, he [i.e. Eleazar] was no longer around'. [24] After around seventy years it is no wonder that Eleazar had been exchanged by someone else in the family. 'Sons' of Abinadab here probably should be understood as grandsons.[25] The fact that it is stated that Eleazar was consecrated (קדש pi.) to guard (שמר) the ark (1 Sam 7.1), indicates that this was a priestly office. In that case, Eleazar's office would naturally, as time went on, have passed on in the family, probably only to Uzzah since his brother Ahio plays an insignificant role in the story in 2 Samuel 6.

4. *The Disaster*

The Uzzah tragedy comes as an unexpected twist in the narrative cycle about David in the books of Samuel. Its consequence is that David's grand procession taking the ark up to Jerusalem is cancelled. It seems almost inevitable to regard this incident as a failure! It represents a short, but radical, break in the narrative cycle just when David's successful route to the throne approaches its climax. King David gets upset as well as scared and decides not to carry through his plans. Instead the ark is put in the house of the unknown Obed-Edom. Most commentators believe Obed-Edom was one of the Philistine soldiers in the service of David.[26]

Several questions arise in the mind of the reader. Most important for our study: what was Uzzah's wrongdoing? Why was the Lord's anger kindled against him? Uzzah's death is not described as an impersonal consequence of his touching something that was taboo. David's subsequent reaction of anger is also interesting. Was David really angry at the Lord for what had happened?

McCarter translates the crucial text as follows (2 Sam. 6.6-10):[27]

> When they came to the threshing floor of Nodan, Uzzah put his hand on the holy ark to steady it, for the oxen had let it slip. Yahweh became angry at Uzzah and struck him down, and he died there before God. David became

24. Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, p. 35.
25. Keil and Delitzsch, *Samuel*, pp. 330-31.
26. The identification of him with the Levite Obed-Edom mentioned in 1 Chron. 15.18, 24; 16.5, 26.4 is usually not adopted. Keil and Delitzsch (*Samuel*, p. 334) argue that he is called the Gittite because his birthplace was the Levitical city of Gath-Rimmon in the tribe of Dan.
27. McCarter, *Samuel*, p. 160.

> angry (the reason being that Yahweh had made a breach in Uzzah—that place is called Uzzah's Breach to this day) and fearful of Yahweh at that time. 'How,' he said to himself, 'can the holy ark come with me?' So when Yahweh's ark arrived, David unwilling to take [it] with him into the city of David, redirected it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

What did Uzzah do that was wrong? The question immediately relates to text-critical issues. In the text from McCarter and other translations, for example the Swedish Bible 2000, it is not stated that Uzzah did something wrong, though it says that Yahweh became angry at him. In the MT, how-ever, a reason is indicated by two words: 'Yahweh became angry at Uzzah and struck him down על־השל, and he died there before God'. The expres-sion על־השל is traditionally translated as meaning 'because of his error'. The term של occurs only here in the Hebrew Scriptures and its meaning is unclear. Koehler and Baumgartner suggest that it could be a scribal error, but go on to explain that it has traditionally been derived from the root שלה. שלה means 'to have rest, be at ease' in Hebrew, but may be related to an Akkadian word with the meaning 'to be careless, negligent, inattentive'.[28] This Akkadian sense of the word might be fitting to the context in 2 Samuel, though it cannot be verified that the term has this meaning in Hebrew. The difficult term is translated and interpreted in similar ways in Greek, Latin and Aramaic versions: 'rashness', 'senselessness', 'ignorance', 'error'. [29] It is probable that the original Uzzah story lacked any explanation. Wasser-man concludes, 'However, it is possible that the original version of the story lacked an explanation for Uzzah's violent death altogether as reflected in one part of the LXX tradition of 2 Samuel, and that the Masoretic text reflects the earliest attempt to supply one'.[30] Both Wasserman and Rezetko are sceptical to the view that של would be something like a contraction of the longer reading in 1 Chron. 13.10: על אשר־שלח ידו על־הארון.[31] The ver-sion in Chronicles is longer but less explanatory. It contains no evaluation

28. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 3rd edn, 1999), IV, pp. 1502-503.

29. See Rezetko (*Source and Revision*, p. 130) who presents a helpful table of the most important textual evidence of the way על־השל appears in different Greek and Latin manuscripts as well as in Targum and 4QSam.

30. Tommy Wasserman, '*Lectio vehementior potior*' (in the present volume), p. 269

31. Wasserman, '*Lectio vehementior potior*', pp. 268-69; Rezetko (*Source and Revision*, p. 132) notes that Samuel's version cannot be regarded as a parablepsis since there is no equivalence of the definite article in the longer version of Chronicles, which in that case would have to have been inserted by a later revision. Gordon, however, refers to the expression in 2 Samuel 6 as a 'torso of a longer reading as in Chronicles' and finds this alternative probable (*Samuel*, p. 232). McCarter calls it 'a remnant of a longer addition' and notes that it is found both in 1 Chron. 13.10 and 4QSam and prob-ably was present in the Greek text used by Josephus (McCarter, *Samuel*, p. 165).

of Uzzah's act and simply reiterates the words from the preceding sentence: Uzzah stretched out (שלח) his hand to steady (אחז) the ark (v. 9); the Lord struck him because he stretched out (שלח) his hand towards the ark (v. 10).

All versions agree about the Lord's anger burning against Uzzah (ויחר־אף יהוה בעזה), but the question remains: why? The only reason that can be deduced from the text of 2 Samuel is in line with the explanation in 1 Chronicles, that it was the simple fact that Uzzah touched or took hold of (אחז) the ark. If we include the insertion from 2 Samuel, על־השל, with the understanding 'error', a moral dimension is added. Uzzah did something that was wrong and this invoked the Lord's anger. The logic would necessitate that Uzzah in that case should have known that touching the ark was forbidden. If שלʾ instead is understood as 'inattention' it may indicate that Uzzah should have been careful. As guardians of the ark, he and his brother were responsible for the transport and the oxen. If the oxen got in trouble at the passage of a threshing-floor, it was regarded as their fault. Then it was not only touching the ark that was the problem, but the incident as a whole. In this case, however, it seems strange that Ahio was spared – as well as David who seems to have been in charge of the whole operation! But Uzzah is the one who actually touched the ark, and the fact that he was punished might indicate that he, not his brother, was consecrated for the office as guardian of the ark.

5. *The Disaster—Whose Fault Was It?*

The reader may still ask herself: who, according to the story teller, was responsible for the fault that resulted in disaster? The main alternatives are Uzzah or David.[32] Since it was against Uzzah the anger of the Lord was directed, it lies close at hand to regard him as guilty. He belonged to the family that for a long time had been responsible for the care of the ark; therefore, should he not have known better? If he was a consecrated priest dedicated to the service of the ark, it was his duty to know how to handle the representation of the deity.

But the disaster can also be understood as David's fault. As king he was the leader who took the initiative and was responsible for the procedures, with Uzzah and others in a subordinated position. It is possible to argue that the reader is supposed to 'read between the lines' and understand that David's motives for the operation were dubious, more political than pious. The strongest arguments against interpreting the text as blaming David, are the context and David's reaction. The context is still focused on David's success story, and it is stated that David not only is scared but also angry at what happened to Uzzah.

---

32. See Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, pp. 134-37 for a presentation of different alternatives and discussion.

Commentators interpret the Uzzah incident in different ways. A.A. Anderson understands the fault to be Uzzah's and builds his case upon the presumption that Uzzah, like Eleazar before him, had been consecrated to guard the ark. Uzzah 'ought to have realized that the falling of the ark was really a *sign*, namely, Yahweh's way of stopping the procession'.[33] In that case, the severe punishment of Uzzah was not caused by a spontaneous and well-intended reaction trying to save a sacred object from sliding off the cart, but for his trying to frustrate Yahweh's will.

Another way to blame Uzzah is Rashi's. He blames Uzzah from the standpoint that it was presumptuous on Uzzah's part to believe that the ark of the Lord needed his assistance.[34]

Brueggemann finds the fault to be both Uzzah's and David's:

> The ark is enormously welcome in Israel. However, the ark must not be presumed upon, taken for granted, or treated with familiarity. The holiness of God is indeed present in the ark, but that holiness is not readily available. To touch the ark is to impinge on God's holiness, to draw too close and presume too much. Thus Uzza suffers the same fate as the 'men of Beth-Shemesh' in I Samuel 6.19… David may intend to use the ark for his own purposes, for religious equipment has powerful legitimating effect. Such a political use, however, does not empty the old symbol of its formidable theological power.[35]

An unusual interpretation built upon David's role is mentioned by Birch who adopts a theory from C.L. Seow, stating that 'David may have shaped this procession as a ritual drama drawn from an ancient mythic pattern chronicling the victory of the divine warrior and his subsequent victorious procession to ascend the royal throne'.[36] One element of this ritual drama would have been the demonstration of divine power of this divine warrior, which the Uzzah incident then displayed. Birch, however, finds the idea that 'that there might have been a ritual battle at the threshing floor (v. 6) to reenact the death of the Lord's enemies' somewhat speculative.[37]

In this search for the cause of the disaster, it needs to be noted that the description of preparations made in 2 Samuel 6 is brief. The initiative is presented as David's with Uzzah and his brother in a secondary role. Nothing is stated about special arrangements except that the ark was placed upon a new cart (עגלה חדשה).[38] This reminds us of the report in 1 Samuel 6

---

33. A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC, 11; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), p. 104.

34. From Goldman, *Samuel*, p. 221.

35. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 249.

36. Birch, *First and Second Books of Samuel*, pp. 1247-1248.

37. Birch, *First and Second Books of Samuel*, p. 1248.

38. The second occurrence of the term חדשה may, however, be part of a haplography and is wanting in LXX manuscripts; see note in *BHS*.

about the Philistines, when they had decided to return the ark to Israel. It is reported that they made thorough investigations from their priests and diviners how to do this and were given detailed instructions. Among other things, they were to get a new cart, עגלה חדשה, to put the ark upon, which is also reported that they did (vv. 1 and 7). When the same specification appears in the story in 2 Samuel 6, it seems to be used intentionally to point out that David's men simply followed the example emanating from Philistine priests! This must be what is alluded to in 1 Chron. 15.13 where David says to the Levites that at the first attempt they did not inquire the Lord about the proper way to return the ark. The Chronicler's version clearly points to this matter as the reason for the disaster, and it is also stated that at the second attempt 'the Levites carried the ark with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord' (1 Chron. 15.15 NIV). In 2 Samuel 6, however, neither of this is stated and it is easy to regard the Chronicler's version as a later interpretation of the dilemma, built upon late P material. However, the specification of the new cart in 2 Samuel 6 may be regarded as a more subtle way to point out the same fact!

6. *The Historical Question*

Before we turn to hermeneutical matters, the significance of historicity for stories like 2 Samuel 6 will be considered. The historicity of stories like these can of course not be established with certainty; it can only be surmised as more or less probable depending on the way the story and its different components are presented, the context and comparison with other sources.

For the reader texts like the Uzzah story may be difficult for different reasons. The historical question may be important, especially if the reader regards the text as in some sense revelatory. If the story is understood as fictional, or at least as carrying only little historical information, and transmitted primarily to convey some truth about the relationship between God and man, the reader may find it easier to accept its brutality—since the events did not happen in reality. In this perspective, the depiction of God is a motif to illustrate, for example, the sanctity of God's presence. On the other hand, if the story is understood as something that actually happened, more or less exactly as it is presented, the theological difficulties may be experienced as more acute. In that case, God acted in a brutal way against Uzzah and may do so in other instances as well.

Miller and Roberts conclude their sketch of comparative material to the ark narrative with the following remark: 'In the first place, it should forever squelch the oft-repeated assertion that the Philistines would not have

returned the ark, that such an action is "unglaubwürdig"'.[39] Their analysis of comparative texts makes them conclude that these stories about capture and return of divine images seem to relate events that actually have historical background. Their arguments can easily be extended to the text in 2 Samuel 6. There are a number of parallel texts to 2 Samuel 6 where divine objects are transported. Miller and Roberts relate an interesting text where Marduk commands Esarhaddon to rebuild Babylon and its shrines and return the divine statues there, something which Esarhaddon claims to have done. Elaborate arrangements are set in place, with a large army accompanying the king and the deity, music day and night, brush piles and torches along the way as well as offerings.[40] The parallels to 2 Samuel 6 are striking!

An argument for some kind of historicity of the Uzzah incident is the fact that it constitutes a break in the narrative cycle that is written to enhance David's position. The incident puts David in an unfavorable position, his project of making Jerusalem the new political and religious center for the nation fails, at least temporarily. Anderson argues that '[i]t is difficult to believe that the Uzzah story is a mere invention. For some reason or other, Uzzah must have died and his death was interpreted as Yahweh's punishment and/or warning'.[41] Anderson also argues against the view that 2 Samuel 6 should be regarded as an etiological legend, giving the background to the place name Perez Uzzah, and that the person Uzzah would never have existed.[42]

In summary, the most that can be said concerning the historical background is that the comparative material from the surrounding cultures enhances the probability that there is some degree of historicity in the story about David bringing the ark to his new royal city. When it comes to the Uzzah incident, the argument for its relative historicity can be seen in its crucial position as a breach in the rather continuous story of David's grand accomplishments.

7. *Theology—Can a Text Like This Teach Anything about God?*

Biblical theology is about understanding the views about God and man in biblical times, but should also relate to hermeneutics: how do we relate to biblical texts in our day? Is the description of God in the Uzzah incident possible to reconcile with belief in God as just and merciful in our contemporary context?

39. Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, p. 24.
40. Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, p. 22.
41. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, p. 104.
42. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, p. 104.

7.1. *The Texts and Reality*

An important aspect of hermeneutics and theology is the question of how literally a modern reader should read and understand Old Testament narratives. In a recent book Eric A. Seibert identifies a number of narratives in the Old Testament that contain what he terms 'disturbing divine behavior', among them the Uzzah story. His view is that these texts should not be understood literally and that such a reading may fundamentally misrepresent God's true nature. The modern reader has to bear in mind that the worldview of the Old Testament times was radically different from ours. This means that events that we explain by referring to natural causes, in biblical times were understood as divine interventions. He also notes that the story tellers behind biblical narratives did not aim at what we call historical accuracy, and that modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that events did not happen as they are recorded in the Bible.[43] This leads Seibert to conclude that a literal reading is impossible to uphold when it comes to texts describing God's activity.

> There is not a perfect degree of correspondence between the textual God and the actual God. In fact, given the portrayals we have been considering in this study, there sometimes seems to be very little, if any, correspondence at all![44]

Seibert's aim is to endorse sound theology as well as to maintain respect for the Bible, and most modern readers would agree with him, at least partly. Seibert's main argument is that we have to be 'discerning readers' who employ a dual hermeneutic that is able to both critique and affirm texts.[45] The crucial matter for Seibert and others is how to establish the criteria for which elements in biblical texts should be rejected and which should be affirmed, with a view also to the Uzzah story.

7.2. *Protest*

As noted in the introduction, the interesting thing about 2 Samuel 6 is that there is a protesting voice already within the text. David was scared (2 Sam. 6.9); perhaps he feared that what happened to Uzzah could also happen to him as the one being responsible for the arrangement.[46] But it is also stated that David was angry, and his anger is described in similar words as the anger of the Lord against Uzzah: ויחר לדוד על אשר פרץ יהוה פרץ בעזה

---

43. Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior. Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 91-129.

44. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior.* p. 180.

45. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, pp. 209-15

46. John R. Franke (ed.), *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, IV; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 344; he cites Jerome: 'Although he was righteous and anointed by God, David feared a similar judgment after observing the Lord strike Uzzah for his ignorance'.

(2 Sam. 6.8). It is rare in Hebrew Scriptures that human beings get angry at God,[47] and, since the wording is less direct, David's anger has been interpreted in different ways. The verb translated 'burn / be angry' is common to the anger of the Lord and of David, but the noun 'anger / wrath' is not present in the statement about David. Neither is the object of David's anger clearly stated, as it was about the Lord's anger: 'at / against' Uzzah. But the corresponding clause 'because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst against Uzzah' (NRSV) must be regarded as next to equivalent to a specification of the object. Rezetko compares the different ways of expressing anger using the verb חרה and argues that 'Yahweh's anger expressed by Y ב X אף חרה (2 Sam. 6.7//1 Chron. 13.10) and David's anger expressed by X ל חרה (2 Sam. 6.8//1 Chron. 13.11) are *not* qualitatively different; rather, the latter is a *stylistic* circumlocution for the maintenance of reverence'.[48]

It is common to soften the statement about David's reaction in translations and commentaries. Keil and Delitzsch may be an example of such strategies:

> The burning of David's anger was not against God, but referred to the calamity which had befallen Uzzah, or speaking more correctly, to the cause of this calamity, which David attributed to himself or to his undertaking. As he had not only resolved upon the removal of the ark, but also had planned the way in which it should be taken to Jerusalem, he could not trace the occasion of Uzzah's death to any other cause than his own plans.[49]

Such an explanation seems farfetched and an attempt to salvage the text from theological problems. Rezetko reasons about the Uzzah story and other difficult texts where God bursts out against seemingly innocent people, and notes:

> The history of scholarship on these passages has been profoundly influenced by the drive to find rationality, morality, and consistency in the character of Israel's God.[50]

There are other texts in the Old Testament that question God's justice and challenge God's actions, for example the book of Job, lament psalms like Psalm 44, Abraham's and Moses' protests against God when he sets out to annihilate cities in the Dead Sea area or the Israelite people.[51] David's

---

47. Other instances are Cain (Gen. 4.5-6), Samuel (1 Sam. 5.11) and Jonah (Jon. 4.1, 4, 9).

48. Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, p. 128. Also: 'In the few cases when a person expresses anger with Yahweh, the construction is inevitably X ל חרה and Yahweh is the *implied* object' (p. 143).

49. Keil and Delitzsch, *Samuel*, p. 333.

50. Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, p. 138.

51. Genesis 18; Exod. 32; Num. 14.

reaction may be understood in line with these, and together they represent textual material that is small in quantity, but constitutes an essential part of the Old Testament. These texts may, to use Brueggemann's terminology, be called Israel's 'countertestimony'.[52] The book of Job makes clear that the voice of revolt at times may be more true than the voice of the defenders of God's justice. At the end of the book of Job (Job 42.7), the Lord speaks against Eliphaz and his friends with the same terminology as in 2 Samuel 6: חרה אפי בך ובשני רעיך. To the reader of the book of Job it may be shocking to hear that despite all the pious attempts of Job's friends to defend the justice of the Lord, they had not spoken what was right (נכונה) about the Lord, as his servant Job had. If Job's challenge of the Lord's justice is connected with David's anger, we may arrive at the conclusion that the correct attitude to the story in 2 Samuel 6 is to defend Uzzah and side with David in his protesting anger against what seems like an injustice or exaggerated reaction from God.

7.3. *God as Dangerous*

Is the God of the Old Testament dangerous? This question needs to be asked after reading 2 Samuel 6 and other pertinent texts. We have noted the strict instructions in some Old Testament texts concerning the handling of the ark. It seems as if most texts in the Old Testament require some kind of distance or barrier between God and human beings to safeguard the latter. Brueggemann in his writings puts much emphasis on the dangerousness and unpredictability in the depiction of the Lord in the Old Testament. The God of the Old Testament is firmly committed to Israel, but at the same time he is autonomous and beyond manipulation. Brueggemann uses the term 'self-regard' to express this and states that there is a 'hovering danger in which Yahweh's self-regard finally will not be limited, even by the reality of Israel. One never knows whether Yahweh will turn out to be a loose cannon, or whether Yahweh's commitment to Israel will make a difference'.[53]

The Uzzah incident and the fate of the men of Beth Shemesh also demonstrate the absolute dangerousness of the ark to human beings. There are some uncertainties in the text of 1 Samuel 6,[54] but it seems clear that the cause of the disaster had something to do with the handling of the returned ark and that a number of people were struck down by God (1 Sam. 6.19). The text describes a reaction of fear in Beth Shemesh parallel to David's reaction in 2 Sam. 6.9. The men of Beth Shemesh asked themselves: 'Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark

---

52. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocay* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 317-403.

53. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 296.

54. See Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 103 for a short overview.

go up from here?' (1 Sam. 6.20 NIV). This leads to the ark being removed and taken to the house of Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim, some distance away from Beth Shemesh. In 2 Samuel 6, after David's reaction of fear, the ark is not brought up to Jerusalem but diverted to the house of Obed Edom.

This theme of God's dangerousness to human beings is clearly present in the Old Testament and needs to be contemplated upon also today by anyone who believes that these Scriptures may teach us something of importance concerning the relationship between God and man. The depiction of the God of the Old Testament may create an unwillingness among human beings to get close to him in the same way as David after the Uzzah incident was unwilling to bring the ark into his city. The depiction of God in the Old Testament may also stir curiosity and fascination. What convinced David of the benevolence of the Lord was the blessing that Obed-Edom and his house received, which encouraged him to finally bring the ark to Jerusalem.

7.4. *Another View of Uzzah's Mistake*

Another aspect of learning from Uzzah's mistake shall be mentioned at the end of this study. A few years ago, Rabbi Steve Gutow wrote an article concerning his participation in a public protest against the continuing genocide in Darfur. He suggests that Uzzah's offence was not that he dared to touch the ark, but that 'Uzzah's greater offense was his failure to act before it was too late, before disaster struck'.[55] By this he means that Uzzah's mistake was to abstain from protesting against the king's inappropriate arrangements for the transport of the ark. From this perspective, the story about Uzzah may help us realize our responsibility to stand up for what is right and protest against what we find unfair and wrong, even if it would cost our lives.

---

55. Steve Gutow, 'On Darfur, We Cannot Sit Back', *Washington Jewish Week* 42.17 (2006), p. 15.

God's Power and Man's Vicegerency on Earth: Violence as an Ethical Challenge in Islam

Friedmann Eissler

Abstract

According to Islamic tradition, one of the 'Most Beautiful Names' of God is *al-Jabbār* (the Compeller). Qur'anic anthropology describes humanity as Servant of God and his Vicegerent on earth (Qur'an, Surah 2). In historical and sociological dimensions, the *hijra* of the Prophet and his followers (622 CE) marked the transition of the Mekkan theological polemical discourse to the pragmatic political realm of the rulings within the Medinan *umma* (global Muslim community). Violence as an ethical challenge in a Muslim perspective is related to the various (traditionalist, modernist, Islamist, progressive) discourses on whether and how the correspondence of God's power and the role of human vicegerency is to affect and/or shape the implementation of political and social goals.

1. *Theo-logy*

Power is absolutely and unreservedly God's. He is 'the Creator of all things' (Q 6.102) and 'the mighty doer of what He intends' (Q 11.107 Sh).[1] God 'leaves straying those whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases: and He is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom' (Q 14.4 YA; cf. 35.8). Strict Oneness in essence and effectiveness (*Wirksamkeit*) is characteristic of the orthodox Islamic concept of the Divine. Relentless exercise of his power submits any manifestation of life to the immediate effect of God's sovereignty. Even the acts of people are God's creation ('Allah has created you and what you make', Q 37.96 Sh). Memorizing and reciting the 99 Most Beautiful Names of God is one of many ways to praise God. They reflect God's power, greatness, and mercy. One of these attributes is, according to Surah 59.23, *al-Jabbār* 'the Compeller', the Arabic root *j-b-r* usually being used for the most violent behaviour with the negative connotation of tyranny and rebellion against God (Q 11.49; 14.15; 28.19; 40.35). Another

---

1. Abbreviations for the translations of the Qur'an used in this paper: Sh = Shakir (*The Qur'an* [trans. M.H. Shakir, 14th edn; Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2000]), YA = Yusuf Ali (A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an—Text, Translation and Commentary* [Lahore/Cairo/Riyadh, 1934]).

'name' of God is *al-Qādir* (*al-Qadīr*) 'the All Powerful', corresponding to attributes like *al-Qahhār* 'the Subduer'. *Al-Mu'izz* 'the Bestower of Honors' and *al-Mudhill* 'the Humiliator' are among the contrasting attributes coming in pairs. According to famous Islamic teachers as Abū l-Fath Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastani (d. 1153), God determines the fate of his slaves in detail, good or evil.

2. *Anthropology*

On the other hand, the Qur'an is quite clear about the mandate and the duties of humankind vis-à-vis God and its neighbour. There is no explicit 'anthropology' in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, contours of a theological anthropology evolved in later tradition and can be grasped from different texts dispersed throughout the Qur'an. Humanity is created 'in the best of moulds' (Q 95.4), the earth is given to it (Q 67.15) for its 'enjoyment' (or: 'provision', *matā'an*, Q 16.80); the earth has been made subservient to him, Q 31.20 (Sh): 'Do you not see that Allah has made what is in the heavens and what is in the earth subservient to you, and made complete to you His favours outwardly and inwardly?'[2]

We cannot go into the details of the historical and textual contexts of the verses quoted above. But the Qur'anic evidence and later theological reception are consistently suggesting that the *dominium terrae* encompasses the use of the earth for personal and economic purposes as well as the establishment of a social order reflecting the divine regulations for an Islamic society (*shari'a*). God is the master and teacher of creation. God himself teaches man the abilities required to implement what he is supposed to. The very first words of the Qur'anic revelation, as Islamic tradition has it, attest to that circumstance (Q 96.1-5 Sh):

> (1) Read in the name of your Lord Who created. (2) He created man from a clot. (3) Read and your Lord is Most Honorable, (4) Who taught (to write) with the pen (5) Taught man what he knew not.

In Q 55.1-4 (YA) we read:

> (1) (Allah) Most Gracious! (2) It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. (3) He has created man: (4) He has taught him speech (and intelligence).

The far-reaching authorisation of man through divine instruction has its predominant Qur'anic expression in the notion of *khalīfa* 'successor, representative, Vicegerent' (Q 2.30). Man has been created to be God's Vicegerent on earth. As such, human beings are highest in rank of all creatures; even the angels (including Iblīs, who is identified with Satan) were obliged to fall down before Adam (Q 2.34).

2. Cf. Q 16.12, 79-83; 17.10; 20.53-55; 27.60-66.

2.1. *Vicegerent*

A closer look at the concept of Vicegerent seems helpful, since it is cru-cial for the Islamic normative reflection on human action ('ethics'). We shall not look into the dispute about the original meaning of *khalīfa* in the Qur'an. The common rendering of the term as 'caliph' points to the succes-sor of the prophet Muhammad leading the Muslim *umma* (global commu-nity of Muslims). As a fundamental purpose of the human condition, *khalīfa* means trustee of God's will who is responsible for the implementation of the divine ordinances and, thus, God's representative on earth (Q 2.30-39).[3]

Probably the most meaningful illustration of the nature of *khalīfa* is the naming of the animals within the Qur'anic story of creation (Q 2.31-33 Sh):

> (31) And He taught Adam all the names, then presented them to the angels; then He said: Tell me the names of those if you are right. (32) They said: Glory be to Thee! we have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely Thou art the Knowing, the Wise. (33) He said: O Adam! inform them of their names. Then when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not say to you that I surely know what is hidden in the heav-ens and the earth and (that) I know what you manifest and what you hide?

Naming the animals is Adam's first task in both the Qur'anic and the bibli-cal narratives. The characteristic of the Qur'anic story becomes tangible in comparison with the biblical account of the scene. According to Gen. 2.18-20, and popularised in playfully extended versions in the Midrash (as in *Gen. R.* 17.4), Adam is mandated to name the animals autonomously—which is to be understood as a sort of creative act with a highly symbolical meaning, since the hitherto unordered world is being structured. It is a kind of vanquishing the 'chaos', likened to God's eliminating chaos through cre-ation. Adam is being conceded autonomous and free decision; he becomes God's partner in creation.[4] In Islam, on the other hand, the demarcation line between God and humankind remains carefully drawn. Knowledge and authority comes from God. God the creator is teacher and master at the same time, whereas man performs what his master has to tell him. 'And He taught Adam the names of all things' (Q 2.31 YA), that is, Adam more or less repeats what he has learned from his master. In this particular regard,

---

3. *In lieu* of this, biblical tradition uses the concept of man made 'in the image of God' (*imago Dei*) which, based on Gen 1.26-27, became a basic notion of Jewish anthropology, and even more so in Christian anthropology where Christ as *the* image of God appears in central christological contexts (Col. 1.15; Heb. 1.3). The particu-lar approach to the relationship between God and man expressed in the concept of incarnation is alien to the Qur'an. From the outset, the Qur'an and in its wake Islamic scholarship categorically excludes possible misconceptions of the 'imago', like anthro-pomorphic banalizations insinuating a 'physical appearance' or any kind of apotheosis.

4. Cf. Stefan Schreiner, 'Partner in Gottes Schöpfungswerk—Zur rabbinischen Auslegung von Gen 1,26-27', in *Judaica* 49 (1993), pp. 131-45.

Adam acts with a minimum of responsibility and own decision-making, rather as an earthly 'deputy'. He is much more like a channel for God's wisdom than God's partner and counterpart (which is true for the Islamic prophetic paradigm as such; in Islam, Adam is a prophet, too). 'According to the teachings of Islam, all human beings are commanded to fulfill their individual roles as Vicegerents to God. Because they are aware of this injunction, Muslims must strive to adhere to and advance God's word by establishing something like a divine society on earth; that is, they serve as "agents" or "vicegerents" of God by carrying out his moral laws'.[5]

2.2. *Servant of God*

The one and foremost purpose of all creatures is to *serve* God (Arabic root *'-b-d*). Q 51.56 (Sh):

> And I have not created the *jinn* and the men except that they should serve Me.

As a 'Servant of God' (Arabic *'Abd Allāh*, one of the most common first names for Muslim males), man comes nearest to his essential vocation (Q 1.5; 2.21, 207; 25.63-76).[6] This is corroborated by the structure of the prophetic message in general. A paradigmatic story of the prophetic vocation (*Berufungsgeschichte*) is that of Moses/Mūsā as narrated in Surah 20.9-23. In vv. 11-15 (Sh) we read:

> (11) So when he came to it (i.e. to the fire), a voice was uttered: O Musa: (12) Surely I am your Lord, therefore put off your shoes; surely you are in the sacred valley, Tuwa, (13) And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed: (14) **Surely I am Allah, there is no god but I**, therefore **serve Me and keep up prayer** for My remembrance. (15) Surely **the hour is coming**—I am about to make it manifest—so that every soul may be rewarded as it strives.[7]

These verses contain the Qur'anic credo in a nutshell (v. 14): 'God' and 'the Hour', more precisely the confession of the uniqueness of God (*tauhīd*: 'There is no god but I') and the *'ibāda* ('Therefore serve Me') *in the face* of 'the Hour' which means the eschatological Day of Judgment. This is the

---

5. Charles E. Butterworth and Sana Abed-Kotob, 'Vicegerent', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, IV, p. 305.

6. Whereas under the premises of Q 5.18, the notion of being God's 'child' as rooted in the New Testament soteriology is being rejected. The verse reads (YA): '(Both) the Jews and the Christians say: "We are sons of Allah, and his beloved." Say: "Why then doth He punish you for your sins? Nay, ye are but men, of the men he hath created: He forgiveth whom He pleaseth, and He punisheth whom He pleaseth: and to Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between: and unto Him is the final goal (of all)"'.

7. The emphasis is mine. Cf. for the story of Moses' calling: Q 19.51-53; (26.10-17;) 27.7-12; 28.29-34; 79.16.

main message of all prophets.[8] In the ethical dimension, every act, be it right or wrong, will have consequences beyond this life on earth, and will be accounted for in the Last Judgment (cf. Q 99.6-8).

2.3. *Sin and Failure*

The Servant might fail in abiding by the moral laws. The Qur'an knows of human weaknesses and the possibility of failure, as Surah 12.53 (YA) indicates: 'The (human) soul is certainly prone to evil'. Man is created out of black mud and the spirit of God breathed into him (Q 15.28-29) which means according to the exegetes that he incorporates basically conflictive aspects ('soil' and 'soul'). There is a dark side of God's Servant and Successor. Therefore, humankind might go astray and fall into weakness, but God is 'Forgiving and Merciful' (Q 12.53 and often). The result is many 'falls' but not the Fall of Man as narrated in Genesis 3 that entails humankind's fundamental entanglement with sin. Any idea of 'original sin' is rejected by the Qur'an (cf. Q 2.30-38), as is the idea of any vicarious responsibility or even atonement (Q 6.164; cf. 53.38; 17.15; 35.18; 2.48; 4.111).

   In sum, we have on the one hand the divine decree and control which is unlimited (Q 57.1-7). On the other hand, the Qur'an summons humankind to obey God's will and to follow the divine instructions transmitted by the Prophet(s). Obviously, human action is regarded as at least partially depending on human decision and free will (cf., e. g., Q 2.21, 82, 110; 3.51, 57; 6.60; 25.63-76; 99, 6-8). Otherwise, reward and retribution as broadly addressed in the Qur'an would hardly make sense. The notion of divine justice necessitates a concept of the agent's accountability.

3. *Traditional Approaches*

Islamic theology has been aware of the ambivalent principles laid down in the Scripture and of its inherent logical contradictions. In the formative period of classical Islam, different schools emerged focusing more or less on either of the two poles, i. e. on the divine decree on the one hand, and on human free will and man's responsibility on the other.[9] The starting point of the Muʿtazilites (flourishing from late 8th to 11th centuries) was divine justice (*ʿadl*), insisting on man's responsibility for his actions and, therefore,

---

   8. Cf., e.g., Q 21.25 (Sh): 'And We did not send before you any messenger but We revealed to him that there is no god but Me, therefore serve Me'.
   9. Cf. Louis Gardet, ʿIlm al-Kalām, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* , 2nd edn, III, p. 1141-150; Daniel Gimaret, Muʿtazila, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd edn, VII, pp. 783-93; Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 2002); Tilman Nagel, *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie. Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1994).

advocating human free will at least to a certain extent. God is just *because* he rewards good deeds and punishes transgressions.

More or less the opposite standpoint was formulated by the school of *Abū l-Hasan ʿAlī al-Ashʿarī* (d. 935/36), whose adherents tried to ensure God's absolute sovereignty and omnipotence without forsaking man's responsibility. Following al-Ashʿarī's thought, the divine concourse provides for the capability and the 'competence' to act one way or the other. Thus, God remains the creator and the real cause of every single act. But, nevertheless, man deliberately and consciously (and inevitably) 'acquires' (*kasb, iktisāb*) what he effectively carries out, and, therefore, is to be held fully liable for his acts.[10]

The Muʿtazili school has not become prevalent in Islamic theology, whereas the doctrine of the Ashʿarites (Ashʿariyya) became what might be called the 'official theology' of Sunni Islam (about 90% of all Muslims).

4. *Ethics*

Ethics has to do with the study of practical justification. It focuses on describing and evaluating the reasons individuals and groups give for judgments they make about right and wrong or good and evil, particularly as those terms relate to human acts, attitudes, and beliefs.[11] If we start from the Aristotelian understanding of ethics as a sort of philosophy of the 'good' (*agathon*), we may be puzzled by the observation that there is hardly any such tradition in Islam.

To be sure, the tradition of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics is taken up in Islamic thought, namely as *Kitāb al-akhlāq* ('Book of Virtues'). However, the very title of this genre shows the shift from a (philosophical, fundamental) consideration of ethical principles to a quasi phenomenological 'science of virtue'. This kind of science—the Arabic rendering is *'ilm al-akhlāq*—focuses on the character traits of individuals (*Charaktereigenschaftskunde*).

Another term within Islamic ethical thought is *adab* 'letters', used to indicate a variety of types of writing reflecting on the noble ideals of good conduct in the various activities important to society. Thus, we find writings about character and practical advice on how to move and how to act

---

10. We may add that the Ashʿari insistence on permanent creation ('occasionalism') with its rejection of what we call 'laws of nature' (*Naturgesetze*), enforced the conviction that there be no change, no development, no single act, positive or negative, without God being its effective cause. This perspective usually implies that the discussion about any 'natural law' (*Naturrecht*) is regarded as obsolete. For the Ashʿari theologian there are no 'external' or 'universal' points of reference for an ethical reasoning—which resembles similar debates in European nominalist traditions.

11. Cf. John Kelsay, 'Ethics', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, I, pp. 442-46.

adequately, in ways that are socially and morally correct and successful. Yet, what does 'morally correct' mean?

Following the (Muslim mainstream) Ashʿarite presuppositions, moral correctness or ethical adequacy cannot be derived from principles. In fact, philosophical reasoning and rational reflection on the substantiation of moral judgment might even curtail God's sovereignty and omnipotence. If there was an absolute 'good', wouldn't God be in a way relative or even subordinated to 'something'?—which would conflict immediately with the idea of *tauhīd*, the absolute uniqueness and 'Oneness' of God! As a result, following Ashʿarite thought, categories like 'good' and 'evil' cannot belong to or categorise certain acts or practises *per se*, but are given in and through revealed texts. Hence, the only way for human beings to distinguish right and wrong is through reading and interpreting the Qurʾan and the *Sunna* (the practices, habits, and customs attributed to the prophet Muhammad himself as the best example). The ethical quality of a specific act thus cannot be defined by intellectual philosophical conjecture, but exclusively by the divine norms posited through revelation. Human action is good or evil *because* God has declared it right or wrong, good or evil. God's justice is *his* justice, irrespective of any human intellectual access. In recognition of the absolute inaccessibility of the divine judgment, Islamic tradition coined the formula *bilā kaif* 'Without (asking) How'.

To summarize, 'ethical' reasoning has quite a limited scope in mainstream Islam. We can even state that there is no such thing as 'ethics' in Islam in the wider sense of ethical judgment.[12] In fact, Islamic anthropology belongs to the realm of Islamic law (*fiqh* resp. *shariʾa*) which interprets the revealed texts in due consideration of the contextual conditions and practical demands in every individual case ('casuistics').

4.1. *Sources*

The pool of ethical advice is based primarily on the *Qurʾan* which is the most important source of ethical ideas, and on the *Sunna* of the Prophet. Here, we have in the first place to think of the six 'canonical' *hadith*-collections with their most authoritative prophetic ordinance and binding instruction of the 'beautiful pattern (of conduct)' of the prophet Muhammad (*uswa hasana*, Q 33.21). The notion of the *uswa hasana* as the best example of Muhammad himself constitutes an important constant of Islamic 'ethics'. Furthermore, we have to consider theological and juridical compilations through manuals and *adab*-literature up to collections of stories like the 'Arabian Nights' (*'1001 Nacht'*) as ethical sources. The casuistic nature of ethical reasoning within the traditional Islamic framework entails a more or less immediate

---

12. Cf. Peter Antes, *Ethik und Politik im Islam* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1982), pp. 40-56.

impact of textual interpretative options and hermeneutics of Scripture on ethical attitudes. We confine ourselves primarily to the Qur'anic evidence and a few aspects of the *hadith*-literature.

4.2. *The Qur'anic Evidence and Glimpses of the Hadith*

The Meccan period of the Qur'anic revelation (610–622 CE) is characterised at large by a basically defensive stance of the prophet Muhammad which is expressed for instance in moderate statements about other religions and unbelievers. The prophetic message lays emphasis on ethical values and religious injunctions. As a result, we have less violence in the Meccan passages of the Qur'an as compared to later texts.[13]

The Medinan period of the Qur'anic revelation (622–632 CE) is characterised by Muhammad's position of power in the Medinan context where he was establishing the new Muslim community. Here, the Prophet becomes an arbitrator and a judge, a political and military leader of an increasingly well-organised community. Politics and religion are not separated, as community life and the responsibility of the individual are thoroughly moulded by the prophetic rulings documented in the Qur'an (and later in the *Sunna*).[14] The Five Pillars (*arkān*) of Islam are at the core of this integrative and universal perspective.[15] There is no individualisation of ethics, as there is no individualisation of religion. The later office of the caliph is both a political and a religious office. This means that in Islam the purpose of the state is a religious one. From this vantage point, the power-political success of Islamic dominion proves the truth of Islam.

The most characteristic trait of *sharia*-compliant ethical ruling is the relatedness to the *umma*. Whatever is good and beneficial for the *umma*, is good to do. Whatever hinders the Islamic religious practice and/or the development of the *umma* has to be rejected if not fought against. The integrative, collective *umma*-orientation is plausible from the perspective of the Muslim community as the guarantor of right and justice. According to Surah 3.104, the Muslims are those 'who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong' (Sh). And Surah 3.110 reads (Sh):

---

13. There were attempts to focus the modern interpretation of the Qur'an on the message of the Meccan Surahs, but a religious thinker like the Sudanese Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1909–1985) ultimately lost his life for teaching the individual's freedom on the ground of the 'second message' of the Qur'an as opposed to the shariatic understanding of the Qur'anic legislation.

14. In line with this, former Azhar-principal Sheikh al-Marāghī states that the famous guideline 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's' is pointless in Islam, because Muslims understand this distinction in general as division in two totally separate realms; see Louis Gardet, *Islam* (Cologne: Bachem, 1968), pp. 236-37.

15. Confession of Faith (*shahāda*), Ritual Prayer (*salāt*), Ramadan-Fasting (*saum*), Charity (*zakāt*), Pilgrimage (*hajj*).

> You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) men; you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and believe in Allah; and if the followers of the Book had believed it would have been better for them; of them (some) are believers and most of them are transgressors.[16]

Violence resp. violent exercise of power interpreted as legitimate use of power in a religious perspective is systematically legitimized via Qur'anic evidence (cf. the restrictive statements against unbelievers, for the protection of the *umma*, for the implementation of an Islamic 'commonwealth',[17] but also dealing with women, with apostates or criminals etc.). The notion of Jihad makes aspects of violence broadly topical within the Qur'an as shown, e. g., in Surah 2.190-195, 246; 5.35; 9.19-22, 29, 88, 111; 22.39-40; 47.4-6; 49.15.[18] Often the 'striving in the way to God' (*jihād fī sabīli llāh*) is referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam which is a particular expression of the political aspect of the mutually supportive community (*Solidargemeinschaft*). The traditional *Sunna*-compilations of the *hadith* like that of *al-Bukhari* (d. 870) as well as the several thousand-page compendia of the Islamic Universal Histories up to the *maghāzī*-literature and the reports about the Islamic conquests (*futūhāt*) have long chapters about *jihād*.

In the wake of the *sharia*-compliant ruling of moral laws, the Jihad-rulings occupy a prominent place. The classical theory divides the world into two, the 'House of Islam' (*dār al-islām*) and the 'House of War' (*dār al-harb*); the juridification of this division basically took place during the reign of Harun ar-Rashid (786–809 CE). The 'House of Islam' can have non-Muslim minorities (*dhimma*), if Muslim governmental sovereignty is ensured. The 'House of War' in contrast has to be diminished, and eventually eliminated. This pivotal theory on Muslims and non-Muslims has not been revoked or at least been seriously challenged by Islamic authorities up to the present day. Modifications like the adoption of a *dār al-sulh* 'House of Contract' (or: *dār al-shahāda*, or *dār ad-daʻwa*), where Muslims can freely practise their religion under a non-Muslim government, have not removed the original concept.[19]

---

16. Cf. Q 3.114; 7.157; 9.71, 112; 22.41; 31.17.

17. From 624 CE on the military and violent aspects of '*jihad*' increasingly came to the fore. Muhammad expelled and/or annihilated three big Jewish tribes of Medina, the Banu Nadir, the Banu Qainuqaʻ, and the Banu Quraiza.

18. We do not consider in this paper either the *hudūd*-punishments of the Sharia or the gender aspect.

19. Freedom of religion is not envisaged in the traditional Islamic model of society. The often cited Qur'anic counter-reference is Q 2.256 (Sh): 'There is no compulsion in religion'; however, the verse continues as follows: 'truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Shaitan [Satan] and believes in Allah he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handle, which shall not break off, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing'. The historical context adds to the textual context

5. *Highlighting Various Options from Past and Present (Historical Aspects up to Date)*

a. In the early Umayyad period, Muslims were embroiled in armed conflicts about the legitimacy of the Muslim leadership, the Caliphate. The radical Khariji opposition accused the Umayyad leaders of their allegedly illegitimate assumption of power, regarding it as *jabrūt* 'tyranny'. The *jabbār* is a tyrant, like the Pharao was as recorded in the story of Moses in the Qur'an (Q 40.35). The Khawarij, on the other hand, contended that the religious (and political) leader should prove to be a *muslih* 'peace-maker' (*Heilstifter*), and not a *mufsid* 'mischief-maker' (cf. Q 2.11-12), regardless of his origin and descent. The example of the Prophet showed that the lawful leadership be characterised solely by the power of recitation (of the Qur'an) and has to avoid despotism (Q 50.45; cf. Q 19.14, 32). The true and only *jabbār* is God himself (Q 59.23). The Khawarij made it obligatory to proclaim illegitimate and depose the leader who had strayed from the right path (in their eyes); this, together with their radical strive to establish the rightful *jabrūt* of God, entailed a fundamentalist, anti-liberal, and generally conflictual attitude which in history quite often proved to result in the use of violence. The ideology of the Khawarij partly survived not only among the moderate Ibadiyya (for example in Oman), but also in modern forms of radical Islamism and Islamist terrorism.

b. Islam and Islamism: The *jihād*-doctrine in a variety of interpretations of the term itself is part of Islamist political conceptions. The roots of 'Islamism' go back to medieval interpretations of the 'Constitution of Medina' and its social and political contexts in early Islam. Islamists often refer to Ibn Taimiyya (1263–1328 CE) and to other conservative scholars of Islamic law and philosophy. The dogmatic and puritanical Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab (1704–1792 CE) with his doctrines and strict policy became a model of a consequent implementation of the divine commandments. In connection with the dynasty of the Saʿud he pushed on with the political enforcement of his ideas. Islamism further draws on the anti-secularist critique of the 'Salafiyya' (Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida) and their ideological heirs, both puristic-nonviolent and modern jihadist activists like the Muslim brotherhood (Hasan al-Banna) and the revolutionary branch inspired by intellectuals like Abu l-Aʿla al-Maududi or Sayyid Qutb.

and has to be taken into account. Rudi Paret interpreted the verse as an expression of disillusionment and resignation rather than as an expression of ethical advice ('There is no possibility to force people to believe and to follow…' as the Prophet's experience made clear). Cf. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 5th edn, 1993), pp. 54-55; Patricia Crone, '"Es gibt keinen Zwang in der Religion": Islam und Religionsfreiheit', in *CIBEDO* 1 (2008), pp. 4-9.

c. The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought of Jordan issued an 'Open Letter And Call From Muslim Religious Leaders To Christian Leaders', dated 13 October 2007, addressed to the Pope and other Christian leaders, and signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals from around the world.[20] The main body of the letter was given the title 'A Common Word Between Us and You'. This letter invites Christians to agree together with Muslims on principles of love for God and one's neighbour, for the sake of harmony, justice, and freedom of religion. The document prompted a lively debate about the common ground between Christianity and Islam. At its heart, it is a presentation of Islamic teaching on love for God and love for one's neighbour, and an invitation for Christians to see Jesus as a truthful representative of that common ground.

The letter declares that Muslims are not against Christians: 'As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes'.[21] Thus, the letter leaves open the question how Muslims react in case of taking (real or imagined) offence by non-Muslims. The ductus of the document suggests that violence is an option if Muslims feel threatened in some way or another. The authors do not address the pressing problem of today's violence including Islamist terrorism but, quite the contrary, seem to fuel it. In short, 'A Common Word' does not renounce violence and, moreover, gives room for the traditional Jihad-theory (and practice).

d. The Centre for Research on Islamic Law and Ethics (ILAC) in Doha, Qatar: One of the latest developments in the field of Islamic ethics has been initiated by the highly controversial duo of 'moderate Islamists' or 'Islamic modernists' Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan, both famous Sunni thinkers and promoters of a modern sharia-based Islam. Tariq Ramadan is the director of a new research centre in Doha, Qatar, that seeks to direct more attention on the ethical dimension of Islam. The centre is calling for a new interpretation of the Qur'an in order to advance a contemporary Islamic understanding of matters such as environmental ethics and gender issues. The protagonists recognize that 'from the side of Islamic law, the ethical dimension is not stressed enough'. As the deputy director, Jasser Auda, says, '[t]he word "law" in Islam means more a code of ethics than a legal system in the modern sense'. The more or less static constitution of the traditional set of ethical regulations should be overcome by a new *ijtihad* which means an active and rational, and methodically reasonable finding of justice for modern times.

20. Drawn from 43 nations and representing various Sunni, Twelver Shiʿa, Zaydi, Ibadi and Sufi constituencies, including traditionalists, Islamists, and several liberal Muslims.

21. Cf. Q 60.8.

    e. Muhammad Sameer Murtaza gives a contemporary example of a critical in-depth reflection on violence in Islam in the weekly journal *Die Zeit* (15 [2012], 4 April 2012, p. 11). He uses the killing of three Jewish children and a rabbi by the Muslim Mohamed Merah in Toulouse earlier in 2012 as an opportunity to oppose resolutely the killing of innocent people (including Muslim soldiers), and to appeal urgently to the responsibility of all Muslims in such a case. Surah 5.32 serves as evidence for the universal obligation to consider human life sacred. Murtaza criticises the Wahhabi-Khariji position which he sees in a radicalised version present in the al-Qaida terrorism, and claims that Muslims and Jews share a common 'ethics of responsibility'. In his view, the Muslims themselves bear responsibility to put a stop to the propagation of Wahhabi Islam. He recommends at least four provisions to achieve this goal: (1) education of Imams in European societies; (2) critical dealing with Muslim literature and Islamic websites on the internet; (3) better follow-up for new converts to Islam; (4) a renewal of Islam. This aim can only be achieved by the theological and historical condemnation of false teaching. In Murtaza's opinion, Islam has degenerated into a legalistic religion of blind obedience; what is needed is a religion of mercy and common sense (*Vernunft*).

6. *Conclusions*

Islam is not 'only' faith or belief, but an overall perspective and a 'holistic' system (*nizām*) that includs belief, *adab* (Islamic etiquette), ethical conduct, social norms, and political striving. It is not Islam *per se* which is not compliant with fundamental and individual ethical reasoning, as can be drawn from our discussion of the Muʿtazila and other predominantly reason-based approaches in Islamic theology and philosophy. Primarily it is the traditionalist interpretation of Islam which promotes the understanding of the correspondence of God's power and the human vicegerency with its impact on the implementation of political and social aims. Violence as a legitimate aspect of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is prominent in Islamist interpretations of Islam in their modernist or jihadist shapes.

    As long as the leading contemporary Islamic scholarship does not embrace some kind of historical-critical appraisal of Muhammad and the foundational textual sources of Islam, this circumstance will remain a serious impediment to an ethical discourse on a par with Western modern and liberal ethical discourses.

Hasmonean State Ideology, Wars and Expansionism

Torleif Elgvin

Abstract

The Hasmoneans built their power and kingdom by military and violent means, which they used both against external enemies and internal opponents. Through remarkable military achievements the tiny province of Judaea expanded into an independent state that in size matched the united kingdom of David and Solomon. The new Judaean entity was seen as fulfilment of scriptural prophecies, and the Hasmoneans were hailed as small 'messiahs' who brought messianic prophecies to a partial fulfilment. The Hasmoneans legitimized their reign and expansionist policy through an active use of the Scriptures. Hasmonean propaganda and ideology is most evident in 1 Maccabees, but can also be identified in one of Josephus' sources.

Hasmonean policy and propaganda led to criticism in opposition circles, evident from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Psalms of Solomon.* These opposition circles used the Scriptures in their own way to delegitimize the new rulers. The double office of the Hasmoneans (as ruler/king *and* high priest), seen by pro-Hasmonean circles as a sign of eschatological fulfilment, was criticized by others.

In its last part, the article draws connecting lines from Hasmonean messianism and state-building to King Herod and later messianic movements in the Land of Israel.

1. *Hasmonean State-Building and Biblical Presuppositions*

The Maccabean project started as a guerrilla revolt for Torah, Temple, and Israelite purity. It developed into a state-building project with an organized army, territorial ambitions, and a military expansionist policy vis-à-vis the surrounding nations. In the process, Hasmonean rulers and their supporters enlisted the Torah, the Prophets, Davidic Psalms, and even Daniel as legitimation for their new state, a Judaea with messianic pretensions. Scriptures and divine election were used to legitimate a leadership that used a hard fist both against external and internal threats.

Expansion of territory was followed by forced conversion of the Itureans north of the Galilee and the Idumeans in the south around 100 BCE (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257-258, cf. 13.397). This tough policy created anti-Jewish reactions among non-Jews in the ancient world. With the military conquests

of John Hyrcan (135–105) and Alexander Yannai (103-76), an Israelite state was established that matched the biblical accounts of the united kingdom—and, according to historians and archaeologists, by far superseded the size of the bourgeoning state of David and Solomon. This remarkable achievement would necessarily lead to messianic fervour in some circles, and to critical reflection in others.

Some biblical texts would be attractive as hermeneutical keys to the upheavals of the second century. Early Davidic psalms and prophetic texts evidence the idea or ideal of a Davidic *Grossreich*, where the Davidic king will rule over a large territory with peoples paying homage to him; Ps. 2.8-11; Mic. 5.3-5; Ps. 89.26. In exilic and postexilic texts such an earthly Davidic kingdom is transformed to a *Weltreich*: אפסי ארץ (עד), originally intended as '(to) the borders of the land' (Ps. 2.8; Mic. 5.3),[1] could now be read 'to the ends of the earth' (Ps. 72.8-11; Zech. 9.10). כל הארץ, originally read as 'all the land',[2] would in later tradition be read in terms of a messianic rule over 'all the earth'.[3] 'From the sea to the sea' and 'from the River to the sea' originally read as 'from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea / the Gulf of Aqaba', 'from Eufrat to the Mediterranean' could now be interpreted as terms for a coming Davidic *Weltreich* (Amos 8.12; Ps. 72.8; Zech. 9.10; cf. Ps. 89.26).[4]

The exilic texts Isa. 11.6-10 and Amos 9.11-15 describe a restored Davidic kingdom with terminology that could suggest some kind of new creation, even if these passages originally were coined in symbolic language.

Against this scriptural background, a restorative eschatology that saw the Hasmoneans as fulfilling biblical promises of a Davidic *Grossreich* would be close at hand for their supporters. For voices critical to the new rulers, study of other biblical texts (such as Isa. 11; 24–27; Amos 9; Daniel 7–12) would support a more apocalyptic theology and a postponement of the messianic kingdom to the eschaton.

The high priests of the Hellenistic period paved the way for Hasmonean priests as rulers of the people. For generations the high priest was both civil and religious leader of the Judaean province.[5] Therefore Ben Sira can

---

1.   Micah 5.4-5 demonstrates that the Davidic king would guard and rule his own land. Most Christian Bible translations, however, render v. 3 'to the ends of the earth'.

2.   In the royal Psalm 45, cf. v. 17 'princes in all the land', and further on King Josiah's actions in 'all the land of Israel' (2 Chron. 34.7). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of biblical texts are my own.

3.   Ps. 110.6 'He will strike rulers throughout the wide earth'. As God is king of 'all the earth' (Ps. 47.3, 8), so will his Davidic viceroy be. 4QMessianic Apocalypse asserts that 'heaven and *earth* shall obey his messiah' (4Q521.1.i.2).

4.   Magne Sæbø, 'Vom Grossreich zum Weltreich. Erwägungen zu Pss. lxxii 8, lxxxix 26; Sach. ix 10b', *VT* 28 (1978), pp. 83-91.

5.   James C. VanderKam argues convincingly that the high priests from 320 (Onias

connect civil or royal prerogatives with the priestly line ruling at his time.[6] And Ben Sira's eschatological poem on Zion (chap. 36) does not mention a Davidic ruler at all, only the coming renewal of Jerusalem and the temple. The same is true for the concluding Zion hymn in the contemporary book of Tobit, Tob. 13.8-18.[7] Ruling priests who downplay the hope of a Davidic messiah are therefore no *novum* with the Hasmoneans. The memory of the Oniads ruling the province of Judaea made it easier for governing Hasmonean priests to implement harsh measures against dissidents.

2. *Pro-Hasmonean Voices*

Perhaps written in the beginning of Yannai's rule, 1 Maccabees is a consistent apology for the Hasmoneans as elect deliverers of the Judaean nation (1 Macc. 5.62). First Maccabees 2.24-28 makes Phinehas' zeal for the purity of Israel a paradigmatic ideal. By repeating the deeds of 'Phinehas our father' (2.54), Matthatias and his sons earn God's favor: 'In his zeal for the Torah he acted as Phinehas did'.[8] Through their actions the Maccabees restored the righteousness and independence of Israel. The covenant of Phinehas, which gave legitimacy to the high priesthood of (the House of) Zadok, is superseded by the new covenant with the House of the Hasmoneans.[9]

I) to 200 BCE (Simon II) functioned as political leaders of the Judaeans: *From Joshua to Caiaphas. High Priests after the Exile* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 122-57.

6.   Sirach 50.1-4 portrays the high priest Simon acting as the leader of the people. Cf. William Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians. Biblical and Historical Studies* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), pp. 43-50. Sirach 45.24-26 makes the covenant with Aaron greater than that with David. The Hebrew version of v. 25 limits the Davidic promise to Solomon, while the covenant with Aaron is lasting: 'And there is also a covenant with David, son of Isai, from the tribe of Judah; the inheritance of a man [i.e. David] is to his son alone, the inheritance of Aaron is also to his seed' (Ms.B, translation Horbury). The panegyric praise of Simon in chap. 50 hardly allows for a Davidic ruler at the side of the priest. However, the section on David and Solomon in Ben Sira's praise of the fathers could suggest a possible future fulfillment of Davidic promises: 'The Lord…exalted his [i.e. David's] horn for ever; he gave him a royal covenant and a glorious throne in Israel… But the Lord would not go back on his mercy, or undo any of his words, he would not obliterate the issue of his elect, nor destroy the stock of the man who loved him; and he granted a remnant to Jacob, and to David a root springing from him' (47.11, 22).

7.   While Tobit likely has an Eastern Diaspora background, the added Zion hymn with its address *to Zion* represents a *novum* in Hebrew psalmody, originating in Judaea or Jerusalem; see Torleif Elgvin and Michaela Hallermayer, 'Schøyen ms. 5234: Ein neues Tobit-Fragment vom Toten Meer', *RevQ* 22 (2006), pp. 451-61 (460).

8.   Translation of OT Apocrypha follows *The Jerusalem Bible* (1966).

9.   John J. Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas, the Bible, and the Legitimation of Violence', *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 3-22 (12-13); Horbury, *Messianism*, pp. 48-50.

   The Hebrew version of Sirach 50 (a text likely known by the author of 1 Maccabees) concludes with an eulogy of the Zadokite high priest Simon:[10] 'May His mercy be with Simon and uphold in him the covenant of Phinehas; so that it never will be cut off from him, and may his offspring be as the days of heaven' (50.24 Ms. B, translation mine). First Maccabees 2.24-28, 54, as well as the eulogies of the Hasmoneans Judah and Simon, and the decree on Simon's powers in 140 BCE (see below), all demonstrate that the Hasmoneans are seen as the new hereditary high-priestly line. Josephus' statement that already Judah took hold of the high-priestly office might well be historically plausible (*Ant.* 12.414, 419, 434; *Ant.* 20.237-8, on the other hand, seems to contradict a high priesthood for Judah).[11] When the Greek version of Sirach came into being around 130 BCE, the eulogy of the earlier high priest Simon was omitted. This textual change reflects the Hasmonean line's take-over of the high priesthood. The translation was made in Ptolemaic Egypt, but also there one needed to acquiesce to the new reality in Jerusalem. The temple in Heliopolis, established by the Zadokite Onias IV around 170 BCE (see Josephus, *Ant.* 13.72; *Wars* 7.426-432) was not mentioned.

   From Jonathan onwards the Hasmonean rulers occupied the double office of civil leader (from 104: king) and high priest. Psalm 110 with its priestly Son of David would be a natural reference text for the supporters of the Hasmoneans. When the eulogy of Simon praises him for 'crushing the power of the kings' (1 Macc. 14.13), this could echo Ps. 110.5-6, 'He [i.e. God] will strike kings on the day of his wrath … he [i.e. the king] will strike leaders throughout the land'. And when Judah 'brought bitterness to many a king' (1 Macc. 3.7), the eulogy alludes to royal psalms such as Pss. 2.1-4, 10-12; 110.1-2, 5-7. Thus, messianic hopes, priestly and Davidic, would be connected to the Hasmoneans and their restoration of the Judaean state.[12]

   The Hasmoneans saw themselves as an integral part of biblical history, walking in the footsteps of Joshua, David, and Solomon. This is evidenced in two eulogies honouring Judah and Simon after their deaths, 1 Macc. 3.3-9; 14.4-15, which contain a number of echoes of biblical texts on the

   10. Either Simon II ca. 200 BCE, or more probably Simon I, early 3rd century (thus VanderKam, *From Joshua*, pp. 137-54). This high priest was responsible for fortifying the city and improving its water sources, tasks of a civil leader (Sir. 50.3-4).

   11. M.O. Wise reconstructs 'Judah' before '[Jon]athan, Simon' in the list of high priests of 4QpsDan^c, written around 100 BCE, and argues that Judah *de facto* acted as high priest when he dedicated the temple and reorganized priestly service; see Michael O. Wise, '4Q245 (psDan^c ar) and the High Priesthood of Judas Maccabaeus', *DSD* 12 (2005), pp. 313-62.

   12. Cf. Jonathan A. Goldstein, 'How the Authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees Treated the "Messianic" Promises', in *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (ed. J. Neusner *et al.*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 97-109.

future Davidic kingdom. Here these priestly rulers were hailed as small messiahs, bringing to some kind of fulfillment Davidic prophecies from the Bible.[13] Key words recur from Gen. 49.9; 1 Sam. 17.5, 38 (cf. the description of Juda's armour, 1 Macc. 3.3, with that of Goliat, Saul, and David); 1 Kgs 5.3-5; 8.13; Isa. 11.4; Mic. 4.4; 5.3-5; Zech. 9.10; Pss. 2.10; 45.18; 72.4, 17-19; 110.5-6. On Judah we hear, 'he was like a lion', 'his memory is blessed for ever and ever', 'his name resounded to the ends of the earth'. Judah the Maccabee is thus the 'Lion of Judah' (Gen. 49.9-10) of his time. And about Simon it is said, 'he gained access to the islands of the sea', 'they farmed their land in peace', 'each man sat under his own vine and fig tree', 'his fame resounded to the ends of the earth', 'he established peace in the land', 'no enemy was left in the land to fight them, the kings in those days were crushed', 'he gave strength to all the humble', and 'gave new splendour to the temple'.

Such a realized eschatology does not exclude a more comprehensive future fulfillment of the prophecies, cf. the conditional clause about Simon (and implicitly his descendants) as high priest and civil leader perpetually 'until a true prophet arises', 1 Macc. 14.41. The Hasmoneans and their reign were probably seen as a nucleus of an awaited messianic kingdom, comparable to the self-understanding of orthodox Jewish settlers in the West Bank today (see below). First Maccabees was written around 100 BCE, but these two laudatory poems probably existed before their present prosaic literary context. The poem on Judah could have been phrased as early as the time of Jonathan (160–142). These poems teach us that Hasmonean reign was connected to Davidic texts also before Aristobul I and Jannaeus took the title of king from 104 BCE.

First Maccabees repeatedly uses the term 'Judah and his brothers' (1 Macc. 3.25, 42; 4.36, 59; 5.10, 61, 63, 65; 7.6, 10, 27; cf. 1 Macc. 8.20; 2 Macc. 2.19 'Judah the Maccabee and his brothers'). This phrase consciously recalls the same term in Genesis (Gen. 37.26; 38.1; 44.14, cf. 1 Chron. 5.2) and alludes to the patriarch Judah (David's ancestor) as leader of 'Israel'. This is another indication that the Hasmoneans incorporate Davidic prerogatives.

---

13. These two poems are not discussed by Gerbern S. Oegema, who states that '[f]rom the Maccabeans no messianic expectations have been handed down to us'; see G.S. Oegema, *The Anointed and his People. Messianic Expectations from the Maccabees to Bar Kochba* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 73. Cf. Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 244, 490-91; he holds that 'the abundant echoes of prophecies in the poem here are intended to suggest to the Jewish reader that the age of fulfilment of the prophesies of Israel's glory had begun in the years of Simon's rule' (p. 490); and Horbury's remark, 'The rulers thus have some of the glamour of what could be called in a broad sense a fulfilled messianism' (*Messianism*, p. 49).

The territorial expansion of the Judaean state under Hyrcan and Yannai would necessarily be seen by many Judaeans as signs of the messianic age. The inclusion of the Idumeans and Itureans into the Jewish common-wealth would bring into mind texts such as Isa. 2.1-4 and Zeph. 3.9. Hyrcan's razing to the ground of the Samaritans' city Shechem and the temple on mount Garizim (some time between 130 and 108 BCE; see Josephus, *Ant.* 13.254-256; *Wars* 1.62-63) would easily be connected to texts referring to the Son of David's victory over the enemies of God's people (Pss. 2; 110; Mic. 5.1-5).

The Prayer for King Jonathan, strangely enough preserved in a Qumran document (4Q448), testifies to messianic connotations connected to the Hasmonean kingdom.

> Awake, O Holy One, for king Jonathan and all the congregation of Your people Israel, who is dispersed to the four winds of heaven. Let peace be on all of them and on Your kingdom! May Your name be blessed!

> For you love Is[rael][14] from morning until evening [ ] Come near [ ] and visit them for a blessing [ ] calling upon Your name [ ] kingdom to be blessed [ ] to complete his wars [ ] Jonathan and all Your people [ ] to come near[

The theme of 'God with us and the king' that penetrates this prayer echoes royal psalms in the Psalter. The term ממלכה is used both for God's kingdom in the first stanza and for the kingdom of Jonathan (= Alexander Yannai) in the second. Yannai's wars and territorial expansion were seen as a fulfill-ment of biblical promises.

First Maccabees demonstrates that Hasmonean state ideology developed in a dialectic process, where pro-Hasmonean voices responded to others who were critical to or stood at a distance from the new establishment. 1 Macc. 2.59-64 enlists Daniel and his three friends as types and ideals for the Hasmonean cause, certainly in response to critical voices that used the book of Daniel.[15] The ultimate powers given to Simon by a Judaean assem-bly in 140 BCE must have been triggered by active opposition. First Macc. 14.41-44 gives the following account:

> Simon should be their perpetual leader and high priest until a trustworthy prophet should arise…[16] [H]e was to administer the country, to take charge of the sanctuary, and everyone had to obey him; all official documents in the country were to be drawn up in his name … No member of the public

---

14. The translation 'Is[rael]' is not self-evident, as the text uses *samek*, not *sin*. Translation of this text mine.

15. Yonder Moynihan Gillihan, 'Apocalyptic Elements in Hasmonean Propaganda: Civic Ideology and the Struggle for Political Legitimation', forthcoming in *The Seleu-cid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview* (ed. L. Grabbe).

16. Translation of 1 Macc. 14.41 mine.

> or the priesthood was to be allowed to set aside any one of these articles or contest his decisions, or convene a meeting anywhere in the country without his leave… Anyone contravening or rejecting any of these articles was to be liable at law… And Simon accepted and consented to assume the high-priestly office and to act as military commissioner and ethnarch of the Jews and their priests, and to preside over all.

First Maccabees may have been written before the violent divisions within the people under Yannai in the 90s, and had probably not seen Yannai's slaying of tens of thousands of his opponents (see Josephus, *Ant.* 13.372-376, 379-383). But also this book repeatedly refers to opponents of the Hasmoneans, 'ungodly and treacherous Israelites', who allied themselves with external enemies (1 Macc. 7.23-4; 9.23-26, 73; 10.14, 21, 61). Tough measures against dissenters are thus qualified as sanctified violence, i.e. 'violence performed by human agents that is believed to be sanctioned and/or required by God'.[17]

3. *Anti-Hasmonean Voices*

To the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Hasmonean messianism belongs the contrasting messianism of the *Yahad*, an opposition group that sociologically defined itself as a 'small community' in contrast to the 'center', constituted by the present temple and the ruling circles.[18] Also this community saw themselves as an integral part of biblical history.

No specific Qumran text directly castigates the Hasmonean leaders for occupying the double office of king/leader and high priest (but see below on 4QTest). The *Yahad*'s critique against the 'Wicked Priest' (an acronym either for Jonathan, Simon, or a sequence of Hasmonean rulers) refers to misuse of wealth, a wicked, divisive and violent leadership, and disobedience to halakhic rules of purity.

A talmudic text with parallel in Josephus refers to Pharisaic critique against Jannaeus (Talmud) or Hyrcan (Josephus), asking the ruler to quit one of the two offices (*b. Qid.* 66a; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.288-292). Vered Noam recently argued that the talmudic text has roots in the first century BCE and renders a Pharisaic response to the divisions in the Hasmonean period and specifically to the *Yahad*. According to Noam, this text distinguishes the

---

17. Alex P. Jassen, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination', *BibInt* 17 (2009), pp. 12-44 (p. 15 n. 7).

18. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community, and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 42, 114; Alison Schofield, *From Qumran to the Yahad. A New Paradigm of Textual Development for The Community Rule* (STDJ, 77; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009), pp. 47-51, 274-75. Oegema states: 'There might be an analogy between the Hasmonean priest-kings and the [Qumran] eschatological "Messiahs from Aaron and Israel"' (*The Anointed*, p. 100).

Pharisees from those who criticized the king, and mirrors specific *Yahad* terminology in its polemic.[19]

4QpsDaniel^c (4Q245), a probably non-sectarian text written around 100 BCE, contains two separate lists of kings and high priests, presupposing a separation of these offices.[20]

Two Qumran texts, 4Q175 (4QTest) and 4Q378/379 (*Apocryphon of Joshua*) describe two evil brothers, who rebuild 'the city' and fall under Joshua's curse over Jericho, Josh. 6.26 (4Q175 21-30; 4Q379 22). Their father is 'an evil man of Belial', and the sons brutally shed blood in Jerusalem. Most scholars connect these texts with Hyrcan's sons Aristobul I, Antigonus, and/or Jannaeus, and 'the city' with Hasmonean Jericho. Milik's suggestion that the brothers are Jonathan and Simon who fortified and rebuilt Jerusalem (see 1 Macc. 10.10-11; 12.36; 13.52) remains a valid option.[21] Whatever the right interpretation of these two Qumran texts, in biblical perspective rebuilding Jerusalem is more important than Jericho.[22] A rebuilding of the city by a ruler in Jerusalem could be interpreted as a sign of the messianic age (cf. 1 Macc. 3.3; 4.60; 12.36-7; 14.7, 15; *Ant.* 13.181-3), and again lead to the polemic in 4Q175 and the *Apocryphon of Joshua*, sectarian counter-texts to Hasmonean claims of 'messianic' rebuilding of the Israelite state.

The future hope of 4Q175 includes the separate offices of *prophet*, *Davidic ruler*, and *priest*—again in critical response to the double office of Hasmonean rulers. 4Q175 may be seen as a mirror of the edict of 140 BCE that made Simon and his descendants both high *priest* and *ethnarch* of the Judaeans 'until a true *prophet* arises' (1 Macc. 14.41, cf. 4.46). Thus, also 1 Macc. 14.41 recognizes the three offices of prophet, priest, and civil ruler. Two of them are already functioning, while the office of prophet is postponed to the future. The collection of Scriptures in 4Q175 represents

19. 'A Pharisaic Reply to Sectarian Polemic', lecture SBL Annual Meeting, 18.11.2012. Some *Yahad* terms recur in the talmudic text, such as איש לין רע ובליעל 'a man of naught, frivolous and evil', cf. CD 1.14 איש הלצון, 4QTest 23-24 ויבדלו חכמי ישראל בזעם; איש ארור אחד ובליעל 'the sages of Israel separated themselves in anger', cf. 1QS 5.1 להבדל מעדת אנשי הועל.

20. Wise ('4Q245 [psDan^c ar] and the High Priesthood', p. 339) sees these lists that deliberately separate priest from prince as a silent critique of the Hasmoneans. Two or three of the Hasmoneans are mentioned as priests, not rulers, see n. 11.

21. Hanan Eshel, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 63-89; Józef Tadeusz Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 61-64.

22. Architectural features of the Hasmonean temple were preserved in Herod's temple. The eastern balustrade, the colonnade of Solomon, belongs to this stratum: J. Ådna, *Jerusalemer Tempel und Tempelmarkt im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 4-31.

a silent protest: The present 'anointed leadership' is illegitimate, the *Yahad* still waits for the right prophet together with the anointed ones of Aaron and Israel—'until the prophet and the messiahs of Aaron and Israel will arise' (1QS 9.11).[23]

The pesharim of the *Yahad* are outspoken in their treatment of the Hasmonean leadership. The *Habakkuk Pesher* criticizes the Wicked Priest for violently persecuting the Righteous Teacher (the priestly founder of the *Yahad*) on his day of fast, i.e. on Yom Kippur as celebrated according to the calendar of the *Yahad* (1QpHab 11.2-8). He is further castigated for pride, a life in luxury, and halakhic impurity (probably connected to temple service and marital relations). 1QpHab 8.7-13 notes:

> This refers to the Wicked Priest who had a reputation for reliability at the beginning of his term of service; but when he became ruler over Israel, he became proud and forsook God and betrayed the commandments for the sake of riches. He amassed by force the riches of the lawless who had rebelled against God, seizing the riches of the peoples, thus adding to the guilt of his crimes, and he committed abhorrent deeds in every defiling impurity.

The *Nahum Pesher* (4Q169) calls Alexander Yannai 'the Lion of Wrath', and castigates him for hanging the Pharisees (the 'seekers of smooth things') alive on the tree, alluding to Yannai's persecution of Pharisaic political opponents in the 90s BCE (4QpNah 3-4.i.4-8; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.372-383). The 'Lion of Judah' (cf. Gen. 49.9-10) is thus perverted into a destructive ruler who does not represent the will of God. For members of the *Yahad*, obedience to the Hasmoneans (cf. 1 Macc. 14.41-44) is exchanged for 'faithfulness to the Righteous Teacher' (1QpHab 8.2-3).

Second Maccabees ceases its condensed chronicle in 161 BCE. The book reflects a diaspora background, perhaps related to the Jews of Alexandria. The dating of the narrative of 2 Maccabees is difficult, 'almost anywhere in the last 150 years BC'.[24] Second Maccabees praises Judah the Maccabee as leader of the revolt, but gives no hint of the continuing Hasmonean dynasty. The ultimate honour is given to God, who intervenes and gives Judah and the Israelites victory over the enemies. Judah is portrayed as a warrior, not as the civil leader of Judaea. Thus we perceive a distance to the Hasmoneans who succeeded Judah as civil leaders.

---

23. Translations of Qumran texts usually follow Accordance.

Josephus also enters this debate, as he saw Hyrcan 'accounted by God worthy of three of the greatest privileges; the rule of the nation, the office of high priest, and the gift of prophecy' (*Ant.* 13.299-300, translation *Loeb* edition). Elsewhere Josephus reports a prophetic revelation given to Hyrcan in the temple during his priestly service (*Ant.* 13.282-283), a tradition positively affirmed in the Tosefta (*t. Soṭ.* 13.5).

24. Robert Doran, *2 Maccabees. A Critical Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 14-17 (14).

Some of the *Psalms of Solomon* were phrased shortly after the Roman conquest in 63 BCE, by authors close to the Pharisees. The royal-Davidic hymn in 17.21-44 is weary of Hasmonean rulers who levy taxes on the people to finance their luxury and wars. The ideal is a future son of David who inaugurates a time of peace. Psalms of Solomon 17.33-35 states:

> He will not rely on horse and rider and bow,
> Nor will he collect gold and silver for war.
> Nor will he build up hope in a multitude for a day of war.
> He shall be compassionate to all the nations
> who reverently stand before him.[25]

Psalms of Solomon 2, 4, and 8 see the Roman conquest as a just punishment for the sins of the preceding generations and their leaders:

> Because the sons of Jerusalem defiled the sanctuary of the Lord,
> they were profaning the offerings of God with lawless acts…
> And the daughters of Jerusalem were available to all
> … because they defiled themselves with improper intercourse.
> … For you have rewarded the sinners according to their actions,
> and according to their extremely wicked sins (2.3, 13).

> Let crows peck out the eyes of the hypocrites,
> for they disgracefully emptied many people's houses
> and greedily scattered them (4.20).

> God exposed their sins in the full light of day
> … Everyone committed adultery with his neighbours wife…
> … They stole from the sanctuary of God
> as if there were no redeeming heir.
> They walked on the place of sacrifice of the Lord
> in all kinds of uncleanness;
> and with menstrual blood on them they defiled the sacrifices
> as if they were common meat.
> There was no sin they left undone in which they did not surpass the gentiles
> (8.8, 10-13).

The *Testament of Levi* in ch. 14, finally edited in the second century CE, may reflect an earlier Jewish source critical to the Hasmoneans. In 14.4-7 Levi prophesies to his offspring:

> You will bring down a curse on our nation, because you want to destroy the light of the Torah…teaching commandments opposed to God's just ordinances. You plunder the Lord's offerings; from his share you steal choice parts, contemptuously eating them with whores. You teach the Lord's commands out of greed for gain; married women you profane; you have

---

25. Translation of the *Psalms of Solomon* and the *Testament of Levi* follows James Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983/ 1985).

intercourse with whores and adulteresses. You take gentile women for your wives and your sexual relations will become like Sodom and Gomorrah. You will be inflated with pride over your priesthood.

4. *Conclusions*

First Maccabees demonstrates that restorative messianism was a prominent feature in Hasmonean ideology. Hasmonean messianism represents an eschatology different from the more apocalyptic eschatology shared by other circles in second century Judaea, such as the *Yahad* and the authors of the Enochic books. Gabriele Boccacini has noted that the more a contemporary text supports the Hasmonean dynasty, the less apocalyptic it is.[26] Both the *maskilim* of Daniel and the *Yahad* are peaceful opposition groups who defer the fight against the evil to the eschaton.[27]

In contrast, the Hasmoneans advocate a restorative eschatology, not an apocalyptic one. Their restorative messianism is used to legitimate a tough policy against internal dissenters and an expansionist policy to defend and enlarge the new kingdom. Others were not 'of the same mould as those to whom the deliverance of Israel had been entrusted' (1 Macc. 5.62).[28] The developing Judaean state is seen as fulfillment of biblical prophecies and the Hasmoneans as part of biblical history. Texts from the Torah on Phinehas and Judah were enlisted as legitimation for the Hasmonean leaders who combined priestly and royal prerogatives. Royal psalms and prophetic texts referring to the coming son of David would offer themselves as attractive proof texts.

Both pro-Hasmonean theology and the deeds of the new rulers led to critical reflection and voices who criticized the new dynasty. These voices found expression in *Yahad* texts, the *Psalms of Solomon*, and the *Testament of Levi*. They may be silently sensed in 2 Maccabees as well, and is reflected in a story preserved both by Josephus and the Talmud as mentioned above. It should be noted, however, that apart from *Ps. Sol.* 17.33-35 it is difficult to find in these sources a critique against the expansionist policy of the new rulers. The double office, halakhic impurity, a luxurious lifestyle, and tough Hasmonean policy against dissenters is condemned, but not the establishment of a new Judaean state as an heir of the united kingdom.

26. Gabriele Boccacini, 'Non-Apocalyptic Responses to Apocalyptic Events. Notes on the Sociology of Apocalypticism', forthcoming in Lester L. Grabbe, *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods.*

27. 'Confidence in God's ultimate vengeance frequently becomes rationale for passivity, non-retaliation, and even merciful behavior in the face of persecution' (Shelly Matthews, 'Clemency as Cruelty: Forgiveness and Force in the Dying Prayers of Jesus and Stephen', in *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice in Early Judaism and Christianity* [ed. R.S. Boustan; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010], pp. 117-44 [134]).

28. An echo of 2 Sam. 2.18, where deliverance is entrusted to David: Goldstein, 'How the Authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees Treated the "Messianic" Promises', p. 80.

5. *Perspectives: Later Messianism and State-Building in Judaea*

The Hasmonean state-building project can be compared with that of Herod the Great. Herod inherited the kingdom of the Hasmoneans, by then well integrated in the Roman commonwealth. Herod continued to build the kingdom; he developed its infrastructure and got the economy to flourish (at least for the benefit of the upper classes). Herod's state-building was probably not supported by messianic aspirations. As a third-generation Jew with Idumaean ancestry he could hardly claim Davidic or Aaronite prerogatives. However, Josephus describes Herod the temple builder with terminology showing God's favour to him, a divinely blessed king of the Judaeans (see *War* 1.400, 462; *Ant.* 15.383-387; 16.132-133).[29]

Hasmonean messianism can also be compared with the New Testament, where the kingdom of Jesus is 'not of this world' (Jn 18.36). John 10 portrays Jesus in the temple courts during the festival of Hanukka, the festival inaugurated by the Maccabees and celebrated in their memory. Solomon's Porch (the eastern balustrade) was part of the Hasmonean renovation of the temple. On this spot and at this festival time Jesus is asked about which *deeds* he can show that can support his claims. The three-fold expectation of 4Q175 and 1 Macc. 14.41 can be traced also in the New Testament. Different texts can portray Jesus as anointed prophet (Lk. 4.17-21; Mt. 21.11; Jn 6.14), son of David (Mt. 21.1-9), and anointed high priest (Hebrews, cf. Rev. 1.5; 5.9). John the Baptist is asked whether he is the prophet or the (priestly) messiah (Jn 1.19-21).

Messianic and eschatological fervour was part and parcel of the Zealot's uprising in the first Jewish revolt.[30] The Romans' brutal crushing of this revolt led both to literary and liturgical responses. *Second Baruch* and *4 Ezra* struggle with the painful loss of Jerusalem and the temple.[31] Another voice is represented in the book of Revelation. The militant Jewish Christian hope of John, the author of the book, was likely formatted by his experience of the Roman campaign in Galilee and Judaea in 68 CE.[32] Rome and its Caesar became images of the Antichrist. The subsequent generation, that of the early second century, saw an addition to the daily Jewish prayer, *birkat*

29. Cf. Horbury, *Messianism*, pp. 83-122 (90-91); Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes. Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1969), pp. 475-76.

30. Doron Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 355-71. See, e.g., Josephus, *War* 2.433-448; 6.310-315.

31. Mendels, *Jewish Nationalism*, pp. 371-75.

32. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC, 52; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), pp. xlix-lxx, cxx-cxxxii; Torleif Elgvin, 'Priests on Earth as in Heaven. Jewish Light on the Book of Revelation', in *Echoes From the Caves. Qumran and the New Testament* (ed. F. Garcia Martinez; STDJ, 85; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009), pp. 257-78 (271-77).

haminim. This 'benediction' curses the sectarians as well as the 'arrogant kingdom', a cipher for the Roman Empire, which so brutally had brought an end to the temple and Jewish life in freedom. The text reads as follows:

> For the apostates and the arrogant kingdom let there be no hope,
> May they be speedily uprooted, crushed and humbled in our days,
> And may the *notzrim* and the *minim* perish in a moment.[33]

Three hundred years after the Maccabean uprising, another Jewish revolt with messianic aspirations broke forth, that of Bar Kokhba (132–136 CE). According to the Palestinian Talmud, the prominent rabbi Akiva proclaimed Bar Kosiba to be 'Bar Kokhba', the son of the star who fulfilled the messianic promise of Num. 24.17:[34]

> Rav Shimon ben Yochai taught: My teacher Akiva would expound the verse 'A star (*kokhav*) will come from Jacob' as 'Kosiba will come from Jacob'. When rabbi Akiva saw bar Koziba he would say, 'There is the king Messiah!' (*y. Taʿan.* 4.5 68d, par. *Lam. R.* 2.2)

Shimon bar Kosiba was neither priest nor from the tribe of Judah. His deeds nevertheless proved him to be a royal messiah in the eyes of his supporters. However, the Talmud continues with a protest from rabbi Yohanan ben Torta, 'Akiva, grass will grow on your cheeks (i.e. on your grave), and the messiah will still not have come'.[35]

---

33. Geniza version B. Translation adapted from Yaakov Y. Teppler, *Birkat haMinim* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 23.

34. Translation mine. I am not convinced by Schäfer or Novenson, who argue that the encounter between Akiva and Bar Kokhba is a later talmudic invention without historic roots; see Peter Schäfer, 'R. Aqiva und Bar Kokhba', in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums* (ed. P. Schäfer; AGJU, 15; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), pp. 65-121; 'Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis', in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome* (ed. P. Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 1-22; Matthew V. Novenson, 'Why Does R. Akiba Acclaim Bar Kokhba as Messiah?', *JSJ* 40 (2009), pp. 551-72. Anyway, the evidence of Justin and the *Apocalypse of Peter* clearly shows Bar Kosiba's own messianic self-understanding.

35. Akiva's longings are reflected in his prayer for the rebuilding of the temple, included in the Passover liturgy: 'Therefore, O Lord our God and the God of our fathers, bring us in peace to the other set feasts and festivals which are coming to meet us, while we rejoice in the building-up of Your city and worship You in joy; and may we eat there of the sacrifices and of the Passover-offerings whose blood has reached with acceptance the wall of Your altar, and let us praise You for our redemption and for the ransoming of our soul. Blessed are You, O Lord, who redeem Israel' (*m. Pes.* 10.6, translation adapted from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933]). Ben Torta's remark mirrors later rabbinic reflection, and should be seen as an addition to the original saying.

Both letters from this revolt, unearthed in the Judaean Desert,[36] Justin Martyr, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, authored in Egypt in the aftermath of the revolt, testify to Bar Kokhba's tough policy against fellow Jews who did not support his cause. The *Apocalypse of Peter* shows that Jewish Christians ('sprouting boughs of the fig tree') refrained from joining this revolt, probably thinking, 'This is not our messiah, this is not our war'; it proved to be a stance leading to martyrdom at the hands of Bar Kokhba.[37] Chapter 2 of the *Apocalypse of Peter* reads as follows:

> Have you not grasped that the fig tree is the house of Israel? Verily, I say to you, when the boughs have sprouted at the end, then shall deceiving messiahs come and awaken hope with the words, 'I am the messiah, who am come into the world'… But this deceiver is not the messiah. And when they reject him, he will kill with the sword and there shall be many martyrs: Then shall the boughs of the fig tree, i.e. the house of Israel, sprout, and there shall be many martyrs by his hands: they shall be killed and become martyrs.[38]

Justin's account points the same way (*First Apology* 31.6):

> For even in the recent Jewish war, bar Kokhba, the leader of the rebellion of the Jews, ordered only Christians to be led away to fearsome torments, if they would not deny Jesus as the Christ and blaspheme him.[39]

A painful response to the bloodshed of 132–136 is contained in *Gen. R.* 22.9 where Shimon bar Yochai, a survivor of the war, accuses his God of allowing the murder of perhaps half the Jewish population of Judaea.

> Commenting on the verse, *The voice of your brother's blood cries unto me from the ground* (Gen. 4.10), rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, 'I find what I have to say very difficult, but I have to say it. This matter can be compared to the case of two gladiators fighting to death in the arena. Finally, one gladiator gets the upper hand, and is about to run his sword through his victim. Before doing so, he looks up to the emperor who is watching the bloody contest from the royal seat. If the emperor shows the 'thumb down' signal, the victor has royal assent to kill his victim. But if the emperor shows 'thumb up', the victim is spared. As the gladiators look up to the emperor, the Roman ruler who has the fate of the loser in his hands shows

---

36. Cf. Muraba'at letter 24: 'From Shimon Ben Kosiba to Yeshua Ben Galgula and to the fortress men, peace! I call heaven as a witness against me that unless you destroy every Galilean who are among you, every man, I will place shackles on your feet, as I did with Ben Aflul'. Some have speculated if the 'Galileans' could refer to Jewish Christians.

37. Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple. Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), p. 201.

38. Edgar Hennecke *et al.*, *New Testament Apocrypha II* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 669.

39. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxfor Eearly Christian Texts; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 167.

the sign of condemnation. Then before he is slain the victim calls out to the emperor, "You should have wished you had spared me: now my blood will cry out accusing you of my murder"'.[40]

From the mid-second century the rabbis reflected on the Hasmonean experience and that of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Bar Kosiba (as his name is spelled in the letters from the Judaean Desert) appears in rabbinical writings as Bar Koziba, 'the Son of Lie'. In hindsight he was named a false messiah. In the choice between the sword and the book, the rabbis decided for the Book of Torah and accommodation to the empires of this world. Judaism consciously stayed with this policy through the centuries until the Zionists armed themselves to establish the new state of Israel. The rabbis downplayed the military achievements of the Maccabees when they reformulated the tradition of Hanukkah. A new miracle from God was 'invented' to move the attention from an armed revolt to God's intervention. This can be seen in the Babylonian Talmud, *b. Šab*. 21b:

> Why Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislew [commence] the days of Hanukkah… For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the menorah] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a festival with Hallel and thanksgiving.[41]

Moving to our own days, West Bank settlers who follow the lead of rabbi Abraham Kook and his son Zvi Yehuda Kook see themselves as the nucleus of the coming messianic kingdom.[42] Ehud Sprinzak states:

> Israel's victory in the Six-Day War transformed the status of Kooks`s theology. Suddenly it became clear to his students that they were indeed living in the messianic age. Ordinary reality assumed a sacred aspect; every event possessed theological meaning and was part of the meta-historical process of redemption … Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook … defined the State of Israel as the Halakhic Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Israel as the kingdom of heaven on earth. Every Jew living in Israel was holy; all phenomena, even the secular, were imbued with holiness… The single most important conclusion on the new theology had to do with Eretz Israel, the land of

    40. Translation adapted from Chaim Pearl, *Theology in Rabbinic Stories* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1997), p. 64.
    41. Adapted from the Soncino edition.
    42. Hanne Eggen Røislien, *Bosettere på hellig grunn. En reise blant jødiske nybyggere* (Oslo: Pax, 2006), pp. 84-120; Ehud Sprinzak, *Gush Emunim. The Politics of Zionist Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York: American Jewish Committe, 1986). Abraham Kook, Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel in the early 20th century, interpreted the secular Zionists as precursors of the messiah.

Israel. The land—every grain of its soil—was declared holy in a funda-
mental sense. The conquered territories of Judea and Samaria had become
inalienable and nonnegotiable, not as a result of political and/or security
concern, but because God had promised them to Abraham four thousand
years earlier, and because the identity of the nation was shaped by his prom-
ise. Redemption could take place only in the context of greater Eretz Israel,
and territorial withdrawal meant forfeiting redemption. The ideologists of
Gush Emunim ruled that the Gush had to become a settlement movement
because settling Judea and Samaria was the most meaningful act of partici-
pation in the process of redemption.[43]

There are many reports of violence perpetrated by Jewish settlers against
Palestinian civilians.[44] The Gaza war in 2008/2009 was by an Israeli rabbi
declared a war against 'Amalek', the biblical archetype for Israel's ungodly
enemy.[45]

Christian Zionists and Messianic Jews residing in Israel may easily asso-
ciate the state of Israel and its army with God's side, and Palestinians with
God's enemies. Such a political theology is based on an eschatological and
apocalyptic messianism, expecting Jesus to return at the Mount of Olives to
inaugurate the messianic millennium.[46]

At the same time one needs to remember that opponents of the state of
Israel such as Hamas also understand their fight in religious terms: It is Allah
who has commanded them to keep all the land of Palestine as part of 'the
House of Islam', so that the holy city, *al-Quds*, again can be in Muslim hands.

All kinds of millennialists can learn from the Hasmonean experience
that the 'golden age' or the eschaton may not be so close at hand as first
believed. And Hasmonean state theology should function as an antidote
against too close ties between nationalism and state-supported religion in
the modern world.

43. Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against brother. Violence and Extremism in Israeli Pol-
itics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), pp.
153-54.

44. A report by EU heads of mission in Jerusalem lists 411 attacks by settlers in
2011 resulting in Palestinian casualties and damage to property, against 132 such
incidents in 2009: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/21/israel-settlers-violence-
palestinians-europe. Cf. Røislien, *Bosettere*, pp. 116-20, 129-37.

45. The chief rabbi of Safed, Shmuel Eliyahu, on 15 January 2009 declared the war
against Hamas 'a war of the people of Israel against Amalek'. Cf. the following charac-
terization of 'religious violence': 'Instigators of religious violence believe that they are
carrying out God's directive as articulated in the Bible': R.S. Boustan, A.P. Jassen and
C.J. Roetzel, 'Introduction: Violence, Scripture*,* and Textual Practice in Early Judaism
and Christianity', Boustan, *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice,* pp. 1-12 (4).

46. S. Sizer, *Christian Zionism—Road-map to Armageddon* (London: Intervarsity
Press, 2004). See further various contributions in *Mishkan. A Forum on the Gospel and
the Jewish People*, 2/2008. I have encountered this double identification many times in
Israeli messianic congregations and their newsletters.

THE ENEMIES IN PSALM 119

LarsOlov Eriksson

Abstract
The article deals mainly with three questions in relation to Psalm 119. First, a very short survey of the psalm in recent research is given. Secondly, the place and role of the enemies in the psalm is discussed; this is the focal point of the article. Thirdly, the form of the psalm is investigated by looking especially at the beginning and ending of the psalm and at its place in the book of Psalms as a whole. As a result of the investigation, it is shown that Psalm 119 is a genuine and unique prayer, in which the psalmist frequently mentions his adversaries. They are a real threat to him, since they make his life difficult on a personal level, and at the same time they are representatives of those who do not obey the instructions of the Lord.

Introduction

Through time readers of the Psalms in the Old Testament have reacted against the presence of violent language in the Psalter. The so called imprecatory psalms have been especially troublesome, not least because of the open mention of vengeance in some of them.[1] In one psalm the psalmist boldly asks God to '[b]reak the teeth in their [i.e., the wicked's] mouths',[2] and in another the writer declares, 'O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks'.[3]

But also in psalms in which the language is much less violent, enemies are frequently mentioned, often in contrast to the psalmist and/or to God himself. It is a not uncommon prayer that the Lord would deliver the person praying from his adversaries. Already in the very first mention of enemies

---

1. The psalms most often mentioned are Pss. 58; 69; 109; and 137. For a recent study of three of these psalms from a Christian perspective, see John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005).

2. Psalm 58.7 (Engl. 58.6). Translations of biblical texts are those of the NIV, unless otherwise stated.

3. Psalm 137.8-9.

in the Psalms this is evident: 'Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked'.[4]

In this paper I will restrict myself to study the occurrence and role of enemies in Psalm 119, a psalm which, because of its form, by many readers is not expected to contain violent language or mention of adversaries at all.

First, I will give a very short survey of recent research on Psalm 119. Secondly, I will study the way in which the enemies of the psalmist are described in the psalm and what their role is. Thirdly, I will pay attention to the beginning and ending of the psalm and its general character in order to assess its genre and place in the book of Psalms.

1. *Psalm 119 in Recent Research*

Psalm 119 is in many ways an impressive piece of poetry. Today there is a growing insight that this psalm, contrary to the opinion of several commentators from the first part of the last century, is an important part of the book of Psalms in the Old Testament. Bernhard Duhm's famous, not to say notorious, verdict—'In any case, this "psalm" is the most empty product that has ever darkened a piece of paper'[5]—probably finds few supporters among scholars today. The same goes for statements like 'a particularly artificial product of religious poetry'[6] and similar opinions. It is also striking that several commentators from this period treat the psalm rather shortly in their commentaries; they simply do not seem to have much to say about a psalm they consider repetitious and more or less meaningless. Artur Weiser, for example, devotes only one full page of his commentary to the exposition of the entire psalm, since he considers it unnecessary[7] to comment on the psalm in detail.

During the last few decades, however, a series of important studies regarding Psalm 119 have been published, beginning with Alfons Deissler's 1955 monograph on the anthological style of the psalm.[8] Some of these studies relate to the acrostic form and general poetical format of

4. Psalm 3.8 (Engl. 3.7).

5. 'Jedenfalls ist dieser "Psalm" das inhaltsloseste Produkt, das jemals Papier schwartz gemacht hat'; Bernhard Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (KHAT, 14; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2nd edn, 1922), p. 427.

6. '[E]in besonders künstliches Produkt religiöser Dichtung'; Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (ATD, 14/15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 7th edn, 1966), p. 509.

7. His own word is 'überflüssig'; Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, p. 510.

8. Alfons Deissler, *Psalm 119 (118) und seine Theologie: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der anthologischen Stilgattung im Alten Testament* (Münchener Theologische Studien I. Historische Abteilung, 11; München: Zink, 1955). For one of the latest contributions including a substantial bibliography, see Kent Aaron Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher: The Exemplary Torah Student in Psalm 119* (VTSup, 137; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010).

the psalm;[9] some are more interested in the question of genre;[10] some work with the content and theology of the psalm;[11] and some look at the psalm in relationship to the book of Psalms as a whole.[12] But despite the many contributions and the new interest, Psalm 119 continues to puzzle commentators, and the psalm still appears to be in many ways enigmatic not least when it comes to its mixture of genre.

For obvious reasons much energy has been spent on analyzing the use of the different designations for 'law' in Psalm 119, while other aspects of its content have not been given the same attention. As far as I know, there are only a couple of shorter studies devoted to the aspect of the enemies in the psalm.[13] My contribution in this article should be seen as a small attempt to make some observations and pose some questions regarding the occurrence of the adversaries in Psalm 119 in relationship to its genre and place in the book of Psalms as a whole.

2. *The Enemies in Psalm 119*

In a psalm which at first glance does not seem to contain very much of action, it is noticeable that in several of its strophes antagonists to the psalmist and to the Lord are mentioned. Throughout the poem they are presented under different designations, most of which can also be found in other psalms in the Psalter.

Beginning in v. 21 the enemies are called 'the arrogant' or 'the presumtuous' (זדים),[14] a word which can be found also in vv. 51, 69, 78, 85, and 122.[15] Next they are mentioned as 'the wicked' (רשעים) in vv. 53, 61, 95,

9. E.g. David Noel Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Biblical and Judaic Studies, 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

10. E.g. Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting* (CBQMS, 23; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991).

11. E.g. John Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: A Conference with the Commentators* (JSOTSup, 199; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 13-52; Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), pp. 77-95. See also John Goldingay, *Psalms 3: Psalms 90–150* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008) and his exposition of the psalm.

12. E.g. Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup, 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 36-87.

13. Félix Asensio, 'Los Zēdîn [sic] del Salmo 119 en el área "Dolo-mentira"', *EstBib* 41 (1983), pp. 185-204; Philippus J. Botha, 'The Function of the Polarity Between the Pious and the Enemies in Psalm 119', *OTE* 5 (1992), pp. 252-63.

14. For statistics of the use of terms for enemies, see Soll, *Psalm 119*, pp. 139-40.

15. Goldingay renders the Hebrew word with 'willful' and explains it in the following way: 'The willful…are arrogant people who decide themselves how to run their lives, people who make up their own mind about behavior'; Goldingay, *Psalms 3*, p. 762.

110, 119, and 155. In vv. 84, 150,[16] and 157[17] they are named 'persecutors' (רדפים). In vv. 98, 139, and 157 the adversaries are simply called 'enemies' or 'foes' (with two different Hebrew words, איבים and צרים);[18] in v. 115 they are designated as 'evildoers' (מרעים); in v. 121 they are given the name 'oppressors' (עשקים). Nowhere are the enemies identified, but in two instances they are called 'rulers' (שרים, vv. 23 and 161) without further detail.[19] There are only two instances in which one of the designations for 'enemy' is used at the beginning of a line in order to adhere to the alphabetic acrostic, namely vv. 51 (זדים) and 161 (שרים). In v. 46 the word 'kings' (מלכים) appears, which by some is taken as yet another designation for enemies.[20] In my opinion this is highly improbable, since there is no trace of antagonism in the verse.

Of the enemy terms used in the psalm, the first (זדים) is uncommon outside of Psalm 119, with only a few occurrences in the rest of the Old Testament.[21] The noun רשעים, however, is common and belongs to the vocabulary of wisdom literature; it is often used in contrast to the righteous and godly.[22] Of the rest of the terms, several are broadly used in the Old Testament, not least in the prophetic and poetic literature.

When it comes to what the adversaries do, the list is long: They 'mock' the psalmist 'without restraint' (v. 51); they 'bind me with ropes' (v. 61); they 'have smeared me with lies' (v. 69); they 'dig pitfalls for me' (v. 85); they 'persecute me without cause' (v. 86); they 'are waiting to destroy me' (v. 95); and they 'have set a snare for me' (v. 110). Several of the descriptions of their deeds are similar to how the adversaries are portrayed in other psalms,[23] in parts of the prophetic literature, and in the wisdom books of the Old Testament.[24]

---

16. The verse contains a text critical problem. MT has 'those who persecute [i.e. seek] evil plans'. It should probably—following some Hebrew manuscripts, the Septuagint and other old versions—be revocalized to read 'my persecutors with malicious intent'.

17. NIV translates 'Many are the foes who persecute me'; MT has 'Many are my persecutors and my enemies'.

18. The word צר in the singular in v. 143 should most probably be translated 'enmity' rather than 'enemy', since the enemies are always mentioned in the plural in the psalm. *Contra* Botha, 'The Function', p. 254.

19. Soll takes this as one of several indications that Ps. 119 is a royal psalm and that the enemies are foreign rulers; see Soll, *Psalm 119*, pp. 139-40. For other more or less fanciful suggestions as to who the enemies are, see Deissler, *Psalm 119*, pp. 9-10.

20. So, e.g., Botha, 'The Function', p. 254.

21. Of ten occurrences in the plural in the Old Testament, six are in Ps. 119, two in Malachi, and one each in Isaiah and the book of Psalms outside of Ps. 119.

22. Goldingay, *Psalms 3*, p. 755.

23. Some of the expressions used in the psalm are reminiscent of similar expressions in the lament psalms; see, e.g., Pss. 119.110 and 9.17 (Engl. 9.16).

24. For parallels see, e.g., Prov. 21.24 (for Ps. 119.51); Prov. 5.22 (for Ps. 119.61);

But the enemies not only oppress and persecute the psalmist; they have also turned away from the Lord, since they 'have forsaken your [i.e., the Lord's] law' (v. 53) in contrast to the psalmist, who has 'not forsaken your precepts' (v. 87). And in the very first mention of them, they are said to be 'cursed' and 'stray from your commands' (v. 21).[25] At the end of the psalm it says that '[s]alvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees' (v. 155). Therefore the prayer of the psalmist is that God would soon interfere and put things right. The poet pleads, 'May the arrogant be put to shame for wrongdoing me without cause' (v. 78); 'do not leave me to my oppressors' (v. 121); 'let not the arrogant oppress me' (v. 122). The wish of the psalmist is that God would turn wrong into right, 'It is time for you to act, O Lord; your law is being broken' (v. 126). The prayer that the Lord would act against the enemies of the psalmist is at the same time a prayer that God should take measures against those who break the law of the Lord. The enemies of the psalmist are also the enemies of God, and their basic wrongdoing is not that they behave badly against the psalmist, but that they do not obey the commands and teaching of the Lord. Disobedience is the basic characteristic of the foes.

Beside this frequent mention of persecution from enemies, there are also several more general descriptions of the situation of the psalmist. He talks about 'scorn and contempt' (v. 22) or about being 'laid low in the dust' (v. 25). His 'soul is weary with sorrow' (v. 28), he talks about his 'suffering' (v. 50), and he says that 'indignation grips' him (v. 53). In some of these instances the enemies are mentioned, while in others they are not. Again the prayer of the psalmist is that God would redeem him (v. 134). The description of the psalmist's suffering is nowhere described in detail; the terms used are rather general.

In many ways the description of the enemies in the psalm gives the same picture as can be found in psalms which are generally classified as complaint psalms or laments.[26] But there is one trait which characterizes the enemies in Psalm 119 that cannot be found in the same way in other psalms: The adversaries do not obey the law of the Lord. Therefore the foes are mentioned in contrast to the law-obedient psalmist and to others who keep the commandments of the Lord. In a sense, therefore, the enemies are not—unlike the case in the lament psalms—the real problem in Psalm 119. This is, however, not to say that the adversaries are merely a

---

Job 13.4 (for Ps. 119.69); Ps. 57.7 and Isa. 18.22 (for Ps. 119.85); Ps. 56.7 (Engl. 56.6, for Ps. 119.95); Ps. 140.6 (Engl. 140.5) and Ps. 142.4 (Engl. 142.3, for Ps. 119.110).

25. See Asensio, 'Los Zēdîn', pp. 190-91. In his article Asensio comments on all verses that contain enemy-language and notes the recurring contrast between the wicked and the just.

26. Deissler, *Psalm 119*, pp. 284-86.

literary construct.[27] There is nothing in the psalm that indicates that the enemies are not for real.

The reason why the psalmist is persecuted by his oppressors is that he—as opposed to his adversaries—obeys the commands of God.[28] Therefore there is no interest in or need for giving a closer identification of the enemies. Who they are does not seem to be the point; what they represent is what is important. Reynolds calls the enemies in the psalm 'flat characters' and 'a foil',[29] which seem to be appropriate characterizations. In contrast to the psalmist and to the Lord, the adversaries are not presented as individuals. Their role in the psalm is to picture the psalmist, rather than to inform the reader(s) very much about the enemies themselves.[30] The existential wresting so apparent in Psalm 119 is not with the enemies as such, but with the fact that the instructions of the Lord are not followed.

3. *The Beginning and Ending of Psalm 119*

It is a known fact that the beginning and ending of a literary piece tell a great deal about the genre of the piece in question. The beginning normally signals the form; the ending gives a summary of some kind—at least if the author has done his job properly.

The beginning of Psalm 119 with its two 'Blessed …'-formulas in vv. 1-2 and the affirmative 'yes' (אַף)[31] in v. 3 are very much reminiscent of the beginning of the book of Psalms, since Psalm 1 is also introduced by a 'Blessed…'-formula.[32] The difference is that in Psalm 1 it is a blessing addressed to an individual, while in Psalm 119 it is directed to a group of people, 'they whose ways are blameless' and 'they who keep his statutes' (vv. 1 and 2). Verse 3 seems to have a summarizing function; it is more of a saying, not to say a proverb.[33] It qualifies the content of the two first verses.

---

27. *Contra* Botha, 'The function', p. 252. He calls the enemy in Ps. 119 'a literary motif', with the function to 'create polarity with the devotion of the pious to the Torah'.

28. Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, pp. 79-83.

29. Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, p. 79.

30. Among commentators there are many more or less fanciful suggestions regarding the identity of the adversaries in Ps. 119. For a short survey, see Deissler, *Psalm 119*, pp. 9-10.

31. Not translated in NIV.

32. Many commentators and scholars have studied the similarities and connections between Ps. 1 and Ps. 119. See. e.g.. James Luther Mays, 'The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter', in *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook of the Psalms* (ed. J.L. Mays; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 128-35.

33. Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms 3*, p. 382.

The three introductory verses all have a general character. They are not addressed to the Lord but rather to the readers of the psalm, which make them different from the rest of the psalm.[34] In a way they give the theme and the hermeneutical key to the entire poem,[35] with the mention of both the ways of the Lord in v. 3[36] and the law and statutes of God in vv. 1 and 2. All lines of the psalm are directed to God, with the exception of the three first verses, v. 5, and v. 115.[37] This last verse, with the exhortation directed at the 'evildoers' to go away from the psalmist, has its own format without parallel in the rest of the psalm.

Similar to the beginning of the book of Psalms as a whole, the readers or listeners to Psalm 119 are met with a benediction. The connection to Psalm 1 is certainly not accidental; there are too many similarities between the two psalms for not to recognize that there is a relation between them.[38] In the same way as the reader of the first psalm is congratulated for beginning with the reading of the book of Psalms, the readers of Psalm 119 are congratulated for their choice of way.

Thus Psalm 119 is a prayer which starts with a benediction for those who pray. After that follows a series of lines directed to the Lord. There is no easily detectable structure in the psalm; the different lines are kept together by the overall alphabetical order, rather than by thematic connections. Each line stands, as it seems, on its own.[39]

The plural in the first three verses stands in contrast to the singular in the following. The enemies will be talked about in the plural, but the one praying is in the singular. The 'I' who will dominate the rest of the psalm appears for the first time in v. 5, where the psalmist prays, 'O, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!' Since the introductory lines are in the

---

34. It has been called a kind of rubric for the whole psalm; see Tina Arnold, 'Die Einladung zu einem "glücklichen" Leben: Tora als Lebensraum nach Ps 119,1-3', in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. E. Zenger; BETL, 238; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), pp. 401-412.

35. Erich Zenger, in Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen III: Psalm 101–150* (Neue Echter Bibel Altes Testament; Würzburg: Echter, 2012), p. 698.

36. Note also 'the way' in v. 1, even if it is not there directly connected to the Lord.

37. The wish expressed in v. 5 has no direct addressee, but the phrase 'your decrees' in the second half of the verse makes it part of the prayer to God.

38. Goldingay (*Psalms 3*, p. 381) states, 'in part Ps.119 could be seen as a vast expansion on Ps. 1'.

39. Eaton summarizes the use of the different words for 'law' in the psalm as follows, 'The various names for God's healing word are told over and over again like beads on a rosary' (*Psalms of the Way*, p. 52). What he says about the word 'law' with its synonyms could well be said about the lines of the poem at large.

plural, and the psalmist most probably must be counted among the blessed, he is also a representative of the many.[40]

Turning to the end of the psalm, it can be observed that the last verse (v. 176) is in its poetic form unlike all other verses with its three lines instead of two. It is a plea that the Lord would seek his servant. As a final prayer, the psalmist asks God to remember that even if the psalmist has 'strayed like a lost sheep', he has all the same 'not forgotten your [i.e., God's] commands'.

The content of the verse stands in contrast to that of the introduction to the psalm; thus there is a tension between the beginning and the end of Psalm 119. This tension can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as a contrast between the exaltation of the law of God and the humiliation of the psalmist's chaotic life.[41] Or it could be an example of the tension common in laments, a prayer that God would save his servant when distress and difficulty dominate his life.[42] Or it could be an illustration of the contrast between the enemies and the psalmist: he is obedient, while they are disobedient; he may have 'strayed', but without forgetting the Lord's commands, while they have both strayed and forgotten God's law.

The ending of Psalm 119 is in a sense open. It is not a final word. Unlike the beginning of the psalm it is not proverbial in any sense. It is rather realistic: This is what life is like, also godly life. Going a few verses back in the last strophe, it is a prayer filled with longing for salvation, with wishing to live to praise the Lord, and with longing for continued life according to the teachings/law of God (vv. 174-175).

The beginning and ending of Psalm 119 reveal a genuine prayer. The contrast between the introductory and the concluding lines mirror the tension within the psalm as a whole. In this contrast the righteous or blameless—including the psalmist himself—stand against the enemies of the psalmist and of the Lord, or more precisely the Lord's commands.

4. *Psalm 119 in the Book of Psalms*

Before more explicitly addressing the question of the genre of Psalm 119, I will shortly consider the psalm in its context within the book of Psalms as well as make a few observations about its poetic character.

To begin with the last point, Psalm 119 has been called 'a mechanical and technical marvel' with its 'intricately woven structure'.[43] It is an odd psalm in the Psalter, not only because of its length and consistent alphabetical

40. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL, 15; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 311-12.
41. Freedman, *Psalm 119*, p. 93.
42. Goldingay, *Psalms 3*, p. 443.
43. Freedman, *Psalm 119*, p. 80.

acrostic, but also because of its other alphabetical devices more or less easy to detect on the surface of the text.[44]

The place of the psalm in the Psalter has been the subject of several studies, often studies which make use of a canonical approach.[45] Some suggest that Psalm 119 at one time was the last psalm of the book of Psalms.[46] But even if that were the case, it does not say much about its present position. As it now stands, it comes after a group of Hallelujah psalms (Pss. 111–117[118]) and before the Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134). Whether this placement between two groups of psalms used at the two pilgrim festivals of Passover and Tabernacles indicates that the psalm should be related to the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)—the feast in between—or not, is an open question.[47] It is, however, striking that there are thematic links between Psalm 119 and the Songs of Ascents, not least when it comes to the theme of the way.[48]

The acrostic of Psalm 119 is probably meant to indicate fullness, completeness, first of all regarding the law or instruction of the Lord, but also in other respects. The length of the psalm is in itself a sign that it is an important piece. The placement between two rather distinct groups of psalms also gives it special attention. But exactly what this means for the interpretation of the psalm is unclear.

When it comes to determining the genre of the psalm, opinions are divided, to say the least. Many have noted the difficulties in assessing the genre of the psalm due to the fact that it contains examples of all different kinds of types of psalms.[49] It does show traits of individual lament,[50] of

44. For examples, see Freedman, *Psalm 119*, esp. pp. 25-86.

45. Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS, 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) is a pioneer work. See further Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, pp. 148-67, where he discusses the place of Ps. 119 in the book of Psalms.

46. First suggested by Claus Westermann, later developed by others; see Whybray, *Reading the Psalms*, pp. 18-35.

47. For a discussion, see Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 195.

48. Kirsten Nielsen, 'Salme 119', in *Dansk Kommentar til Davids Salmer III* (ed. E.K. Holt and K. Nielsen; Copenhagen: Anis, 2002), pp. 188-200, esp. p. 193. See also Kirsten Nielsen, 'Why Not Plough with an Ox and an Ass Together: Or: Why Not Read Ps 119 Together with Pss 120–134', *SJOT* 14 (2000), pp. 56-66. For another way of looking at the significance of the order of the psalms around Ps. 119, see Yair Zakovitch, 'The Interpretative Significance of the Sequence of Psalms 111–112.113–118.119', in E. Zenger, *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, pp. 215-27.

49. Mays maintains that '[a]ll the styles of the principal types of psalms appear in this psalm' (James Luther Mays, *Psalms* [Interpretation Bible Commentary; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994], p. 384). For a recent survey of different opinions, see Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, pp. 21-29.

50. Thus Mowinckel, who classifies the psalm as 'a (noncultic) individual psalm

wisdom—even if this seems to be one of the most difficult genres to deter-
mine[51]—of hymn, thanksgiving, didactic poem, etc. There are arguments for
and against most classifications. This is also true for the classification which
Hermann Gunkel advanced, when he suggested that Psalm 119 belonged to
a group he named *Mischgattung*[52] (in English: mixed form).[53]

Taken as a whole, Psalm 119 is simply one of a kind; it has no real par-
allels in the Old Testament. It is a prayer for the pious who live in a world
filled with opponents and general hardship. It is also a model prayer for
others to use. It is a psalm for the way, the walking with God.[54] This is actu-
ally indicated already at the beginning of the psalm, where it says that those
'whose ways are blameless' are blessed, because they 'walk according to
the law of the Lord' (vv. 1 and 2) and 'they walk in his [i.e., God's] ways'
(v. 3). And the way of the Lord is to be found in his various instructions, as
the readers / listeners are so beautifully reminded of throughout the entire
psalm.

5. *Conclusions*

What then are the conclusions to be drawn from the observations made ear-
lier in this paper?

First of all the enemies. They are many, and they are pictured as oppo-
nents of the psalmist and of the Lord. They are real, and at the same time
representatives of what the psalmist does not want to be, and what he is
not. The adversaries of the psalmist are part of the same reality every pious
person is also part of. The attention the psalmist gives to the enemies is a
point of departure, a basis, for his prayer to God to be listened to and helped.
The interest is not in the enemies as such; they serve as a background and a
contrast to the righteous, of whom the psalmist is one.

---

of lamentation' (Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship II* [New York:
Abingdon Press, 1962], p. 78 n. 9); so also Soll, who is even more specific: Ps. 119 is
king Jehoiachin's song of lament to address his own need at the time of the Babylonian
conquest of Jerusalem 597 BCE (see Soll, *Psalm 119*, pp. 59, 153-54).

51. Grogan, *Psalms*, p. 18. The discussion about the genre 'wisdom psalm' is exten-
sive and not very conclusive.

52. Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen
Lyrik Israels* (HKAT. Ergänzungsband zur II. Abteilung; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &
Ruprecht, 1933), p. 403.

53. By talking about a mixture of form / genre as a genre in itself, the question arises
whether the form critical approach to the Psalms has come to a dead end.

54. See further LarsOlov Eriksson, 'Vägen i Psaltaren', *SEÅ* 63 (1998), pp. 33-40.
Seybold calls it a manual for a life according to the word and will of God, a kind of
exercitia spiritualia; see Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT, I/15; Tübingen: J.C.B.
Mohr, 1996), p. 472. Goldingay similarly talks about 'a manual of moral and religious
spirituality' (*Psalms 3*, p. 443).

Secondly, the beginning and the ending of the psalm. They show that Psalm 119 is a genuine prayer. The difference between the psalmist and his oppressors is underlined in the contrast between the introductory blessings and the final prayer. Despite the enemies, blessing awaits all who adhere to the will of God.

Thirdly, the psalm in its context in the book of Psalms. The acrostic format of Psalm 119 is unique in its consistency and intricacy. Its placement singles it out from the psalms before and after; they belong to groups of psalms, while Psalm 119 stands by itself. But there are connections between the psalm and especially the Psalms of Ascents following it, the main connecting point being the mention of 'the way'. As far as genre is concerned, Psalm 119 probably could best be described as a unique psalm, it is a psalm *sui generis,* to use Reynolds's designation.[55]

The enemies in Psalm 119 play an important role in the psalm, maybe not so much because of their deeds, but because of the fact that they are part of the world the psalmist is also part of; they belong to the same reality. He has chosen the way of the Lord, while they have chosen not to follow that way. In a sense the adversaries are no real threat to the psalmist. They make his life difficult, and he wishes they were not there, but in the end he knows to whom victory belongs. Therefore the language in Psalm 119 does not need to be overly violent. It can be realistic, that's enough.

---

55. Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, p. 29.

Violence against Judah and Jerusalem: The Rhetoric of Destruction within Jeremiah 1–6

Karin Finsterbusch

Abstract

This article argues that for an appropriate understanding of the rhetoric of destruction in Jeremiah two points are crucial. First, to pay attention to the placement of the units containing such rhetoric. Secondly, to distinguish between the pre-exilic addressees of the prophet in the intern world of the book on the one hand, and the intended book readers, who live after the catastrophe of 586 BCE, on the other. As test cases Jer. 4.5-15 and Jer. 6.9-15 are examined.

Introduction

The main theme of the book of Jeremiah is the conflict between Babylon and Judah which finally lead to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and to the exile of the people. Therefore, it is by no means astonishing that the book contains many images of and statements about war, violence and destruction. Three 'voices' in the book may serve as examples for this:[1]

a. Jer. 6.5: Warriors to each other against Jerusalem:

> 'Rise up, and let us attack at night
> and let us destroy her (i.e., Jerusalem's) palaces!'

b. Jer. 6.11aβ.b: Yhwh to Jeremiah:

> 'Pour it (i.e., the wrath of God) out on (the) suckling in the street
> and on (the) gathering of young men together'.

c. Jer. 6.29-30: Narrator to book readers:

> A bellow snorted from strong fire,
> (but) lead in vain he (i.e., the refiner) refined, refined
> and the wicked were not separated out.
> 'Rejected silver', they (i.e., the nations) called them,
> for Yhwh has rejected them.

---

1. The translations of the biblical texts in this article are my own.

Such statements are of course not exclusively found in the book of Jeremiah. For example, the motive of the killing of a suckling—the most innocent and weak member of society—occurs several times in the Hebrew Bible and other works of the ancient Near East.[2] However, the occurrence of such rhetoric in Jeremiah as well as in other biblical canonical texts undoubtedly presents a problem: as history has demonstrated, violent statements within sacred texts have encouraged their readers to act violently. Therefore, it is necessary to learn how to read those texts and how they should not be understood.[3]

For an appropriate understanding of the rhetoric of destruction in Jeremiah I consider two points to be crucial. First, to pay attention to the placement of the units containing such rhetoric. Secondly, to distinguish between the pre-exilic addressees of the prophet in the intern world of the book on the one hand, and the intended book readers, who already live beyond the catastrophe of 586 BCE, on the other. In this study I will concentrate on the first part of (the masoretic book[4] of) Jeremiah (Jer. 1–6). I will demonstrate that there is a turning point in Jer. 4.5 with a dramatic increase of rhetoric of destruction. Then I will examine as a test case two units in which Yhwh appears as God of destruction (Jer. 4.5-15 and Jer. 6.9-15) focusing on the functions of the rhetoric of destruction. Finally, I will point to some critical positions concerning the image of Yhwh as God of destruction within the book of Jeremiah.

2. Cf. Rüdiger Lux, 'Die Kinder auf der Gasse. Ein Kindheitsmotiv in der prophetischen Gerichts- und Heilsverkündigung', in *'Schaffe mir Kinder…' Beiträge zur Kindheit im alten Israel und in seinen Nachbarkulture*n (ed. A. Kunz-Lübcke and R. Lux; Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte, 21; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), pp. 197-221 (p. 205 n. 41).

3. Cf. Gerlinde Baumann, *Gottesbilder der Gewalt im Alten Testament verstehen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), pp. 72-83.

4. MT-Jer. and LXX-Jer. impose a significantly different structure; see, with respect to the first units, Karin Finsterbusch, 'MT-Jer 1.1–3.5 und LXX-Jer 1.1–3.5. Kommunikationsebenen und rhetorische Strukturen', *BZ* 56 (2012), pp. 247-63. The question of how the masoretic text of the book of Jeremiah and its Greek translation relate to each other is extensively debated; see Georg Fischer, *Jeremia. Der Stand der theologischen Diskussion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), pp. 31-45; Armin Lange, *Handbuch der Textfunde biblischer Bücher von Qumran und den anderen Fundorten* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), pp. 304-314; Emanuel Tov, 'The Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah in Light of Its Textual History', in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible. Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (ed. E. Tov; VT.S, 72; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 363-84; Rüdiger Liwak, 'Vierzig Jahre Forschung zum Jeremiabuch. I. Grundlagen', *ThR* 76 (2011), pp. 131-79 (163-73).

1. *The Structure of Jeremiah 1–6 according to the Different Levels of Communication*

The difficulty in finding a coherent order in the book of Jeremiah is frequently observed. There is no consensus with respect to the criteria of arrangement and of demarcation of units (as a cursory look at the commentaries shows). To my mind, not enough attention was paid to the fact that the book as a whole is a narrative.[5] Therefore, it should be first and foremost analyzed as a narrative. The book of Jeremiah is in some respects comparable to Deuteronomy: in both cases, we have a book narrator that tells his readers a story by mainly reporting long speeches. The speakers are Moses and Jeremiah, respectively, both speaking on behalf of God. Unlike Moses, however, Jeremiah in the intern world of the book quotes alongside God's words frequently himself (cf. 1.6) and other persons such as the inhabitants of the north (cf. 3.22b-25), the personified Jerusalem (cf. 4.19-21[6]) and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah (cf. 6.19-21). In most cases, I believe, the voices can be identified with a high degree of probability by introduction formulas[7] and/or other rhetorical devices.[8]

With help of the two main levels of communication the structure of Jeremiah 1–6 can be described as follows:

---

5. Usually, prophetic works are not regarded as 'narratives'; cf. Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book. Writing in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), p. 11. For the analysis of narratives in the Hebrew Bible see especially Jean-Louis Ska, *'Our Fathers Have Told Us'. Introduction to the Analysis of the Hebrew Narratives* (Rome: Bible Institute, 2000).

6. The 'I' refers to Jerusalem; cf. Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, o Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr, 44; Rome: Bible Institute, 1993), p. 139.

7. Cf. Jer. 3.6.

8. Due to the constraints of this article only three examples can be given here: First, in the case of Jer. 4.5-15 (quoted below) the authors and redactors, immediately before the shift of speakers, introduce a keyword that indicates who is going to speak: end of v. 7: 'inhabitants', v. 8: inhabitants speak; end of v. 9: 'prophets', v. 10: Jeremiah speaks; end of v. 12: 'them' (people of Judah/Jerusalem), v. 13: people speak. Second, Jer. 10.17-25 contains a sequence of speakers (Jeremiah–Judah–Jeremiah–Judah); with help of the keywords, the speakers can be easily identified: end of v. 18: 'they' (i.e., the Judaeans), vv. 19-20: Judah speaks; end of v. 22: 'cities of Judah', vv. 23-25: Judah speaks. Third, in Jer. 10.1-16 a second voice is interwoven four times into the oracle of God (vv. 6-8, 10, 12-13, 16). It is the voice of Israel, who is immediately addressed before Jeremiah quotes this second voice (v. 5). Cf. Karin Finsterbusch, 'Gegen die Furcht vor den Göttern der Welt: Eine Art "Psalm" Jeremias für Israel in MT-Jer 10,1-16', in *'Ich will Dir danken unter den Völkern' (Ps 57,10). Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Gebetsliteratur* (ed. A. Grund *et al.*; Festschrift B. Janowski; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), pp. 356-72.

| **(I) 1.1-3: Narrator to the book readers: introduction to the book** |
| Time the narrator refers to: 13th year of Josiah–Exile of Jerusalem (586 BCE) |

| **(II) 1.4–6.28: Jeremiah to the people of Judah** |
| Time/perspective: pre-exilic (cf. 3.6) |

| **(I) 6.29-30: Narrator[9] to book readers: concluding remarks** |
| Time of the alluded event: destruction of Judah/Jerusalem (586 BCE) |

The table shows the crucial difference between level I and level II in Jeremiah 1–6: for the narrator and the book readers the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and the exile are already *past events* (cf. Jer. 1.3). In contrast, for Jeremiah and his Judaean addressees in the intern world of the book[10] there is a possibility that these events may take place in their *future*.

---

9. Most commentators understand Jer. 6.27-30 as a dialogue between Yhwh and Jeremiah; see, e.g., Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1—20. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 447-48; Georg Fischer, *Jeremiah 1–25* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2005), p. 282. The 'I' in v. 27 refers undoubtedly to Yhwh, speaking to 'you', who is his prophet (it is Jeremiah's task to assay the way of the people). Verse 28 is best understood as Jeremiah's response to Yhwh, presenting the result of his assay regarding the *present* people ('they are all stubborn'). However, vv. 29-30 is in my view not part of the dialogue, but a distant narrative of the rejection of the people by Yhwh that *already happened* (3. pers. sing.!). The speaker alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah in 586 BCE (cf. the metaphor 'fire' in v. 29 according to *qere*). These observations point to the narrator as speaker.

10. The book readers must know who the addressees of the *dramatis personae* are (cf. the case of Deuteronomy: the narrator gives this information in his introduction, Deut. 1.1-5). The book readers can conclude that in the *intern world of Jeremiah*, most *oracles* collected in Jer. 1–6 were proclaimed during the reign of King Josiah (because of the explicit references to the time of Josiah, cf. Jer. 1.2 and 3.6). The question remains who, in the intern world of the book, the addressees of the *whole units* in Jer. 1–6 are, including not only the divine oracles but also Jeremiah's call, his comments etc. The narrator gives the answer in Jer. 36. Jeremiah 36 is certainly not a historical report, even if it may contain valuable historically true information about the production of the prophetic collections; cf. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 184-88. Rather, the account is to be taken first and foremost as a hermeneutical key to understanding *the intern organisation of the book*; see esp. Hermann-Josef Stipp, 'Baruchs Erben. Die Schriftprophetie im Spiegel von Jer 36', in '*Wer darf heraufziehen zum Berg JHWHs?'. Beiträge zu Prophetie und Poesie des Alten Testaments* (ed. H. Irsigler; Festschrift Ö. Steingrimsson; St. Ottilien: EOS; 2002), pp. 145-70 (166-67), and Eckart Otto, 'Jeremia und die Tora. Ein nachexilischer Diskurs', in R. Achenbach *et al.*, *Tora in der Hebräischen Bibel. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte und synchronen Logik diachroner Transformationen* (BZAR, 7; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), pp. 134-82 (146-47). According to Jer. 36, Jeremiah was ordered at a certain moment in history, namely in the fourth year

In the first units of the book on the second level of communication, we do not find a *massive* rhetoric of destruction. Rather, the first units have a kind of 'introductory' function, containing Jeremiah's report of his call and commission (1.4-19), as well as a most critical divine analysis of the unfaithful behaviour of present Judah (2.1–3.5[11]), and a call for repentance to the north with the perspective of a peaceful life for Israel and Judah in the future (3.6–4.4). If Judah and Israel had obeyed and returned to Yhwh at that point after hearing these divine words, proclaimed by Jeremiah, all would have been well. However, this is not the case, as the continuation of the book shows. With Jer. 4.5 the tone changes significantly.[12] The rhetoric of destruction now dominates, because the *focus* in the following units lies almost completely on the foe from the north and on the details of the pronounced devastation of Judah and Jerusalem in the future.[13] These units have a 'dramatic' function: they illustrate the dimensions of the destruction in all its callousness.

The sequence of these units is arranged as follows (and represents my own suggestion as to a possible structure):

of King Jehoiakim (605 BCE), to write down the *already promulgated divine oracles* for public reading to Judaean addressees in Jerusalem in order to cause the people to return. After the first scroll was burned by the king, Jeremiah dictated the text of the first scroll all over again to the scribe Baruch, who produced thus a second scroll. Jeremiah 36.32 concludes with the sentence 'and many (words) like these were added to them'. It is most meaningful that the subject is not specified; the act of adding words is not limited to Jeremiah or Baruch; cf. Otto, 'Jeremia', pp. 147-48. In light of this account, the book readers must conclude that alongside the material *about* Jeremiah and the material relating to the time *beyond* the lifetime of the prophet (Jer. 52), material was added and revised *by the prophet himself* between 605 BCE and 586 BCE (cf. Jer. 1.3). Consequently, in the intern world of the book, Jeremiah is to be seen as responsible for beginning his words with the report on his call or for adding the interwoven voices of different speakers into the divine oracles (for example Jer. 4.8, 10, 13; 6.10-15). On a diachronic level, however, Jeremiah is to be treated 'as the creature of its author or authors, who intend to convey meaning to us, as readers, through their portrayal of him' (Stuart Weeks, 'Jeremiah as a Prophetic Book', in *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* [ed. H.M. Barstad and R.G. Kratz; BZAW, 388; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 265-74 (272).

11. For the structure of this unit see Finsterbusch, 'Kommunikationsebenen'.

12. Cf. Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, p. 145. The change in Jer. 4.5 is also underscored by the orders of Yhwh to a *group* of prophets in the following units, whereas in the first units God's prophetic addressee was Jeremiah *alone*.

13. Cf. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Daughter of Zion*, pp. 137-142; John Hill, *Fried or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 40; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 64-65.

4.5-31: Jeremiah quotes and comments God's words to a group of prophets		
4.5-15:	directive to proclaim:	
	announcement of the coming enemy (end: *appeal to repentance*)	
4.16-31:	directive to proclaim:	
	announcement of the coming war (end: *'death'*)	

5.1-19: Jeremiah illustrates a process (investigation in Jerusalem—exile of the people) by quoting different voices		

5.20–6.23: Jeremiah quotes and comments God's words to a group of prophets		
5.20 (introduction):		
Declare this in the house of Jacob, and make it heard in Judah, saying:		
5.21–6.8:	directive to listen:	
	announcement of the coming war (end: *appeal to repentance*)	
6.9-15:	messenger formula:	
	announcement of the advancing enemy (end: *'fall'*)	
6.16-21:	messenger formula:	
	announcement of divine judgement (end: *'perish'*)	
6.22-23:	messenger formula:	
	announcement of the advancing enemy (end: *'against you'*)	

6.24-28: Jeremiah illustrates different perspectives of the announced devastation of Judah and of his role as prophet by quoting different voices		

The unit Jer. 4.5-31 contains two oracles, the unit Jer. 5.20-6.23 four. The *first* oracle in both units ends up with an urgent warning: Lady Jerusalem should wash her heart from evil 'now' (4.14-15), and she should correct herself 'now' (6.8). The following oracles announce what will happen in case the people do not return: the end will be destruction and death. The perspectives of the devastation and its consequences are further underlined and intensified by the two collages of different voices (Jer. 5.1-19; 6.24-28). I will now analyze the rhetoric of destruction in Jer. 4.5-15, the first subunit within Jer. 4.5-31; and in Jer. 6.9-15, the second subunit within Jer. 5.20–6.23.

2. *Jeremiah 4.5-15: Rhetoric of Destruction alongside the Call to Return*

Jeremiah 4.5 opens with a directive of Yhwh to a largely anonymous prophetic group ('you')[14] which Jeremiah belongs to.[15] Alternating voices are used in the structure of the subunit Jer. 4.5-15.[16] The divine oracle which

---

14. Jeremiah quotes God's order to the group to pronounce his oracle. Therefore, this group must be a group of prophets, and not merely messengers or heralds; *pace* William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 149.

15. Jeremiah's reaction in v. 10a indicates that he himself belongs to the prophetic group (cf. 6.9, 10 and see below).

16. Jeremiah 4.16 contains a new directive for the prophetic group, marking the beginning of a new subunit (4.16-31). Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1–25*, p. 133: 'The most

the group must proclaim begins in v. 5aβ and continues through v. 15. Inter-woven are the voices of the people (vv. 8[17] and 13[18]) and the voice of Jer-emiah (v. 10).[19] Within the intern world of the book, all voices are quoted by Jeremiah.

> [*Jeremiah quotes Yhwh's words to a group of prophets:*]
> 5aα 'Declare in Judah, and in Jerusalem make hear and say:[20]
> 5aβ "Now[21] blow the trumpet in the land!
> 5bα Cry out, fill (i.e., cry out with full voice) and say (to each other):

satisfactory procedure, it appears, is to find in the clusters of imperatives or prohibi-tions the beginning of respective units'. However, Holladay fails to see in 4.16 the beginning of a new unit.

17. The speakers ('we') *react* to the announced events which in their perspective *have already happened*. Therefore, the speakers should be considered as the suffering inhabitants; cf. Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, p. 211. According to Holladay, *Jeremiah 1–25*, p. 146, and Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, p. 334, Jeremiah is speaking to the people (v. 8a) and on their behalf (v. 8b). However, v. 8 is one single sentence. The imperatives in v. 8a can be easily interpreted as directives among the people to each other, cf. v. 5bβ.

18. As in v. 8, the 'we' *react* to the announced events which in their perspective *have already happened*; cf. Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, p. 211. According to Holladay, *Jeremiah 1–25*, p. 147, v. 13a continues the war news and is thus spoken by Yhwh, whereas v. 13b is spoken by the people. However, in vv. 11-12 Yhwh speaks *about* the people and his judgement; in v. 13 the tone changes with the הנה.

19. The interwoven voices are not heard by the 'original' addressees of the prophets. Verse 8 (as v. 13) is not part of the divine oracle, because it contains a statement *about* Yhwh. Thus, v. 9 is not the continuation of v. 8, but of v. 7; v. 11 does clearly not con-tinue v. 10, but v. 9 (vv. 9 and 11 are introduced by time indicators). In the intern world of the book, the interwoven voices should be ascribed to Jeremiah, who inserted them 'secondarily' (cf. Jeremiah's own comment in v. 10). See also above, n. 10.

The systematic interchange of speakers is certainly one of the most striking features in the book of Jeremiah; cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1–25*, p. 137. Holladay notes that there is a similar quantum jump in the Greek drama. An interesting look at the phenomenon of the participant-reference shifts in the book of Jeremiah is provided by Oliver Glanz, 'Who is Speaking—Who is Listening? How Information Technology Can Confirm the Integrity of the Text', in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation. Stud-ies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. W.T. van Peursen and J.W. Dyk; Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 57; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), pp. 337-59. Concerning the phenomenon of the intervowen voices see also Fin-sterbusch, *Furcht*.

20. The Imperative ואמרו is to be understood in the sense of לאמר, cf. Jer. 5.20, and further 31.10; 46.14; 50.2; and see Taro Odashima, 'Zu einem verborgenen "Weit-blick" im Jeremiabuch. Beobachtungen zu Jer 4,5aα-β', in *Prophetie und geschichtli-che Wirklichkeit im alten Israel* (ed. R. Liwak and S. Wagner; Festschrift S. Herrmann; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991), pp. 270-89 (278). Odashima, however, fails to recog-nize that the divine oracle follows immediately after v. 5aα and not only after v. 5bα.

21. Many commentators read תקעו with *qere*; see, e.g., Holladay, *Jeremiah 1–25*, p. 140; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, p. 332. However, it is not impossible that the sen-tence begins with ו, cf. Jer. 9.21.

5bβ <Gather together and let us[22] go into the fortified cities!>
6 Set up a flag, to Zion take refuge, don't just stand there!
For I (i.e., Yhwh) am bringing evil from the north and a great shatter.
7 A lion has come up from his thicket and a destroyer of nations set out,
he has gone forth from his place to make your land a desolation,
your cities will be ruined[23] without inhabitant.

> [*Inhabitants to each other in view of the lion*:]
> 8 'Because of this put on sackcloth, lament and wail,
> for the burning anger of Yhwh has not turned away from us'.

9 And it will happen on that day—oracle of Yhwh:
The heart of the king will fail and the heart of the officials,
and the priests will be appalled and the prophets astounded.

> [*Jeremiah to Yhwh*:]
> 10 And I said: 'Ah, my Lord Yhwh,
> really you have deceived, deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying:
> "Peace will be with you!", but the sword has reached the soul'.

11 At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem:
<A harsh wind (from) the bare heights in the desert
(is coming) toward the daughter-my-people,
a wind not to winnow and not to swift out,
12 a wind stronger than these (winds) will come on my behalf.[24]
Now, indeed I will speak judgments against them.>[25]

> [*The people at that time to each other*:]
> 13 'Look! Like clouds he comes up,
> and like a whirlwind (are) his chariots,
> swifter than eagles are his horses,
> woe to us, for we are devastated!'

14 Wash your heart from evil, Jerusalem, that you may be saved!
How long will it (i.e., the evil) lodge within you (as) your schemes for harm?
15 For a voice declares (harm) from Dan and makes hear harm from Mount Ephraim"'.

Jeremiah's addressees hear or read God's directives to the prophetic group
(v. 5aα). Subsequently, they hear or read the divine oracle, which at the
beginning breathes a sense of utmost urgency (v. 5bα and 6a: twice three
imperatives!). According to the first part of the oracle (until v. 12), Yhwh is

---

22. The 'us' are clearly the Judaeans. Therefore, the ואמרו in v. 5bα must refer to the Judaeans.

23. MT תצינה is probably a scribal error (read: תנצינה, cf. Eduard König, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* [Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 7th edn, 1936], p. 285).

24. Cf. Isa. 6.8; König, *Wörterbuch*, p. 192.

25. Cf. Jer. 1.16.

going to cause vast destruction of land and people: שבר גדול (v. 6b).[26] The dimension of the danger is illustrated by several metaphors from nature: the lion is a metaphor for cruelty and power of the enemy (v. 7), the strong wind from the desert (the scirocco) a metaphor for intensity and uncontrollable speed of destruction (v. 11).[27]

The last aspect is echoed in the cry of the people in v. 13 by the metaphors of cloud, whirlwind and eagle.[28] In the people's cry in v. 8, there is a highly emotional tone; the vast destruction is described as an expression of God's *burning anger* (חרון אף יהוה). Also Jeremiah's response to God's announced censure of the kings, princes, priests and prophets (v. 9) is highly emotional: it is an expression of shock and critique.[29]

With the help of the artfully interwoven voices, Jeremiah[30] intensifies the horror of the future destruction found in the first part of the oracle. However, the aim of the oracle is expressed in the second part, in vv. 14-15: Lady Jerusalem should clean herself. Therefore, in light of those two verses, the Judaean addressees within the world of the book should understand the preceding rhetoric of destruction undoubtedly as a *warning*. The dramatic message is quite clear: it is still not too late. If they return now, Yhwh will not destroy them (cf. Jer. 36.2-3). Or as Kathleen M. O'Connor puts it, Jeremiah's dystopian rhetoric 'acts as a kind of shock therapy to frighten the community into altering its idolatrous ways and, thereby, averting the impending catastrophe'.[31]

The book readers, or in historical terms, the intended Jewish addressees, living in the postexilic (supposedly Persian and/or Hellenistic) period knew of course that the images of the vast destruction had become reality. In terms of the text: God *did* repay evil (רעה; v. 14) with evil (רעה; vv. 6, 14). For them, Jer. 4.5-15 provides mainly an *explanation* for the catastrophe.

---

26. Cf. Jer. 6.1; 14.17; 48.3; 50.22; 51.54.

27. Cf. Job Y. Jindo, *Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered. A Cognitive Approach to Poetic Prophecy in Jeremiah 1–24* (HSM, 64; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), pp. 190-91.

28. Cf. Jindo, *Metaphor*, p. 192.

29. Jeremiah quotes a shalom-oracle (cf. Jer. 14.13; 23.17). Obviously, at the time of the proclamation of the shalom-oracle in Jeremiah's represented world, the prophet himself trusted it. Otherwise, his first massive opposition to Yhwh in the book would not have been understandable. In the Jeremianic tradition, 'only here is it admitted that the prophets were themselves deceived rather than the deceivers' (Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah. A Commentary* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986], p. 161).

30. See above, n. 19.

31. Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Jeremiah's Two Visions of the Future', in *Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature* (ed. E. Ben Zvi; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society, 92; Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 86-104 (102).

Guilty Judah refused to return. Jerusalem listened neither to Jeremiah nor to other prophets.

There is another point. In contrast for example to Deuteronomy, I believe the authors or redactors of Jeremiah did not intend their addressees to *identify* themselves with the addressees in the intern world of the book.[32] However, *after* the catastrophe is in some respect a bit like *before* the catastrophe. Therefore, the intention of texts like Jer. 4.5-15 can be described not only as *explanatory* but as *paraenetic* as well: the addressees, after reading or hearing such texts, may analyze *their* 'status quo'. They may ask themselves if there is need for a return (in order to prevent another catastrophe like the one that took place in 586 BCE).

3. *Jeremiah 6.9-15: Rhetoric of Destruction and the Explanation of its Radicalism*

The first verse of the unit Jer. 5.20–6.23 serves as a general introduction:

> [*Jeremiah quotes Yhwh's words to a group of prophets:*]
> 'Declare this in the house of Jacob, und make it heard in Judah, saying: "…"'

The first oracle Jer. 5.21–6.8, which the group of prophets is to proclaim to the Judaeans,[33] contains vivid images of the coming war against Jerusalem. However, it ends with an appeal to repentance: Jerusalem should correct herself (6.8). Each of the next three oracles begins with the messenger formula (6.9a; 6.16a; 6.22a);[34] in each oracle the destruction of city, land and inhabitants plays a central role. I turn now to the oracle Jer. 6.9 and the added voices of Jeremiah and Yhwh:

---

32. Within the world of Deuteronomy, Moses, on his last day, hands over the last part of God's law, which is valid for all generations to come, to Israel ('you'). The reader should identify himself with the 'you' Moses speaks to. Concerning this 'rhetoric of identification' see Karin Finsterbusch, *Deuteronomium. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), p. 213. Within the world of Jeremiah, the prophet proclaims divine oracles directed at and limited to a specific generation in a specific historical period.

33. In Jer. 6.1, the Judaeans are called 'sons of Benjamin'; cf. Jan Joosten, 'Les Benjaminites au milieu de Jérusalem. Jérémie VI 1ss et Juges XIX-XX', *VT* 49 (1999), pp. 65-72 (71-72): 'Nous avons soutenu que le vocative "Benjaminites" en Jer vi 1 ne doit pas être pris au pied de la lettre—les destinataires de la prophétie sont Judéens—mais qu'il s'agit d'un trope renvoyant au récit du crime de Guivéa (Jg xix-xx). Ainsi, le texte laisse sous-entendre que ceux qui se sont retranchés à Jérusalem aux jours de Jérémie sont comparables, moralement, aux Benjaminites criminels des jours d'antan, et que le sort qui a touché ces derniers les menace eux aussi'.

34. If the messenger formula in Jer. 1–6 comes at midpoint, it is explicitly connected with the context, e.g. Jer. 6.6: צבאות יהוה אמר כה **כי**; Jer. 6.21: יהוה אמר כה **לכן**.

6.9 'Thus Yhwh of hosts has said:
<They shall glean, glean as the vine, the remnant of Israel!
"Bring again your hand like a grape-picker over the shoots!">'

> 10 [*Jeremiah's comment:*]
> To whom shall I speak and give testimony that they may listen?
> Look! Uncircumcised (is) their ear, and they cannot listen.
> Look! The word of Yhwh has been to them an (object) of scorn, [35]
> they take no pleasure in it.
> 11aα And with the wrath of Yhwh I am filled,
> I am weary of holding (it).[36]
>
> [*Yhwh to Jeremiah:*]
> 11aβ 'Pour out (the wrath) on (the) suckling in the street,
> 11aγ and on (the) gathering of young men together.
> 11b For even husband and wife will be taken, the old with the one full
> of years.
> 12 And their houses will be turned over to others, fields and wives
> together,
> for I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land—
> oracle of Yhwh.
> 13 For from the least of them to the greatest of them,
> everyone is greedy for unjust gain,
> and from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely.
> 14 They wanted to heal the shatter of my people lightly,
> saying <Shalom, shalom!>,
> but there (was/is/will be) no shalom.
> 15 They were put to shame, for they have committed abomination.
> Indeed they are not at all ashamed, indeed they do not know how to
> blush.[37]
> Therefore they shall fall among those falling,
> at the time I reckon with them, they will stumble—has said Yhwh'.

How would Jeremiah's addressees in the intern world of the book under-
stand the 'remnant of Israel' in the oracle in v. 9?[38] In their perspective,
the remnant may designate the surviving Israelite inhabitants of the north-
ern kingdom, and/or the inhabitants of the small vassal state Judah during
the reign of Assyria, and/or the surviving inhabitants after the attack of
the foreign army, described in the preceding oracle (cf. Jer. 6.1-6). How-
ever, the decisive point is that the subject in the oracle, 'they', will utterly

---

35. Cf. Ps. 31.12.

36. Contra Lux, 'Kinder', p. 205, who translates 'zurückhalten'.

37. The infinitive can be better understood as niphal (instead of hiphil; cf. Jer. 8.12).
Niphal is 'the usual parallel with בוש, *Qal*, elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah' (Geof-
frey H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah. Doublets and Recurring
Phrases* (SBLMS, 51; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000), p. 95.

38. In the book of Jeremiah, the expression 'remnant of Israel' occurs only in 6.9.

destroy the remnant. The 'they' are supposedly the warriors mentioned in Jer. 6.3.[39] The gleaning metaphor 'conveys extreme judgement'.[40] In 6.9b Yhwh identifies himself as the cause of destruction: he himself will command the foreign emperor ('you') to complete his work.[41]

In the added comment of Jeremiah (vv. 10 and 11aα) and the reaction of Yhwh (vv. 11aβ-15),[42] the *radicalism* of the announced catastrophe is explained. *Every adult member* in society is guilty: from the least to the highest (cf. v. 13a), from priest to prophet (cf. v. 13b-15).[43] Their guilt is *constant* and *severe*, which is expressed by the metaphor of the uncircumcised ears (v. 10). Consequently, the divine judgement will be comprehensive. It will fall on everyone, even on the suckling playing in the streets (v. 11aβ). Although the preceding oracle ended with an appeal to return (cf. 6.8), Jeremiah's addressees learn now that is it *nearly* too late to return. Yhwh has already given his prophet the order to pour out his wrath (v. 11aβ).

For book readers living in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, Jer. 6.9-16 rescues above all the idea of a just God: in spite of *continuous* intensive prophetic warnings, as is demonstrated in the units in Jer. 4.5–6.28, the Judaeans did not return. Thus, the vast destruction at the beginning of the 6th century BCE is to be understood as a just and understandable divine *reaction*.

---

39. Another possibility is to refer the 'they' to the 'Foe from the North'; see Jindo, *Metaphor*, p. 200.

40. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, p. 424.

41. Contra Jindo, who maintains (*Metaphor*, p. 200): 'It is not explicitly stated to whom 6.9b is addressed; however, because Jeremiah responds to this utterance in the next verse, we can understand 6.9b to be addressed to him. God asks Jeremiah to act like a grape gatherer toward the "branches" of the vine before the arrival of the enemy'. In my view, it is not reasonable to assume that God commands first to destroy (9a, cf. 11aβ-15) and immediately afterwards to preserve (9b). For divine warfare in ancient Near Eastern texts see especially Reinhard Achenbach, 'Divine Warfare and Yhwh's Wars: Religious Ideologies of War in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament', in *The Ancient Near East in the 12th–10th Centuries BCE: Culture and History* (ed. G. Galil and A. Gilboa; AOAT, 312; Münster: Ugarit, 2012), pp. 1-27.

42. Cf. Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, p. 260; v. 11aβ is not to be understood as an isolated appeal of the prophet to the deity or the enemy (v. 12 continues v. 11aβ-b); *pace* Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 196.

43. As Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, 'The Priests and the Temple Cult in the Book of Jeremiah', in *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (ed. H.M. Barstad and R.G. Kratz; BZAW, 388; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 233-64 (237-38), has convincingly shown, the priests and prophets remain subject in vv. 14 and 15. The word 'abomination' (v. 15) refers most likely 'to the failure of the religious leadership to bring the people's sins to their attention. We may therefore conclude that, as in Jer. 5.31, the priests, as well as the prophets, are accused of being irresponsible religious leaders rather than of failings within the cultic realm'.

4. *Other Perspectives on the Destruction and the Justice of God within the Book of Jeremiah*

The analysed texts are genuine 'theological' literature. Their postexilic authors and redactors tried very hard to associate the God of Israel with the destruction experienced at the beginning of the 6th century BCE. They tried to exonerate their God and to explain this disaster with the help of a sin-punishment-cycle. Although this is the dominant pattern in the book of Jeremiah (as well as in other literature in the Second Temple period),[44] it is not the only one.

First, we find some surprising elements of hope alongside the rhetoric of destruction. I quote Jeremiah's interwoven comment in the second oracle, Jer. 4.16-31 (within the unit Jer. 4.5-31):

> 23 I saw the earth, and look! *tohuwabohu*,
> and (I saw) the heavens, and their light was not there.
> 24 I saw the mountains, and look! They were quaking
> and all the hills were tossing about.
> 25 I saw, and look! The human was not there
> and all the birds of the skies had fled.
> 26 I saw, and look! The *karmel* was a desert
> and all its cities were ruined before Yhwh, before his burning anger.
> 27 For thus had said Yhwh (and thus it came to pass):
> 'All the land will be desolate,
> yet I will not[45] annihilate (it) completely.
> 28 On account of this the earth will mourn and the heavens above be dark,
> for I have spoken, (and) I have laid plans
> and (finally) I have not repented and I will not turn away from it (i.e., the land)'.

---

44. The sin-punishment-cycle is a dominant pattern in Deuteronomy and was often used in literature of the Second Temple period; cf. Karin Finsterbusch, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Deuteronomistic Movement', in N. Dávid *et al.*, *The Hebrew Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (FRLANT, 239; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), pp. 143-54. For a discussion of the sin-punishment-cycle in some prose sermons in Jeremiah (7.16-20; 8.18-23; 11.17; 25.1-11; 32.26-35; 44.1-14), see Samantha Joo, *Provocation and Punishment. The Anger of God in the Book of Jeremiah and Deuteronomistic Theology* (BZAW, 361; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 155-222.

45. Some scholars omit the לא (in my view without text-critical evidence, because MT has the support of the versions); see, e.g., Helga Weippert, *Schöpfer des Himmels und der Erde. Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Jeremiabuches* (SBS, 102; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), p. 54; Bernd Janowski, 'Eine Welt ohne Licht: Zur Chaostopik von Jer 4,23-38 und verwandten Texten', in *Katastrophen und ihre Bewältigung* (ed. A. Berlejung; FAT, 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), pp. 119-41 (126). On the other hand, the MT is followed by, among others, Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, p. 356, and Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, p. 226.

Most astonishing is the statement in v. 27b: Yhwh will not annihilate the land of Judah completely.[46] In the context of Jeremiah's vision this statement it inconsistent. There are a few more similar cases in the following unit Jer. 5.1-18 (cf. 5.3; 5.10; 5.18b). The Judaean addressees in the world of the book must recognize those statements alongside the vision of the creation returning to chaos (4.23-26)[47] and the images of destruction as a quite irrational element of hope or at least as an irrational element of divine hesitation or reluctance to act. For the postexilic readers of the book, such statements indicate that the God of Israel is not to be reduced to justice. The *just* God of Israel would have destroyed his unfaithful people *completely* and without mercy. Justice and destruction, however, did not have the last word: the readers of the book themselves belong to the surviving part of Israel.

Secondly, we find an implicit critique of the position that the destruction of 586 BCE was a *legitimate* act of a just God. I quote Jer. 31.31-34:

> 31 'Look! Days are coming—oracle of Yhwh,
> when I will cut with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a new covenant.
> 32 Not like the covenant that I cut with their fathers on the day
> I took them by hand to bring them out from the land of Egypt,
> my covenant, that they, they broke, though I, I was their master—oracle of Yhwh.
> 33 For this is the covenant that I will cut with the house of Israel
> after those days—oracle of Yhwh:
> I gave[48] my torah in their midst (once), but upon their hearts I will write it (then).
> And I will be God to them and they, they will be people to me.
> 34 And they shall not again teach each person his fellow
> and each person his brother saying:

---

46. *Karmel* in v. 26 points to the land of Judah, cf. Jer. 2.7; and see Weippert, *Schöpfung*, p. 51 n. 97. However, the catastrophe is described in cosmic terms; cf. Janowski, 'Welt', p. 125.

47. This 'world-turned-on-its-head scenario' is not unique in ancient Near Eastern literature. For further examples see especially the Balaam Text from Deir 'Allā (8th century BCE); cf. Erhard Blum, 'Die Kombination I der Wandschrift vom Tell Deir 'Alla. Vorschläge zur Rekonstruktion mit historisch-kritischen Anmerkungen', in *Berührungspunkte. Studien zur Sozial- und Religionsgeschichte Israels und seiner Umwelt* (ed. I Kottsieper; Festschrift R. Albertz; AOAT, 350; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2008), pp. 573-601; Janowski, 'Welt', and Paul A. Kruger, 'A World Turned on its Head in ancient Near Eastern Prophetic Literature: A Powerful Strategy to Depict Chaotic Scenarios', *VT* 62 (2012), pp. 58-76.

48. The Hebrew perfect is not to be rendered as future; see Karin Finsterbusch, 'Ich habe meine Tora in ihre Mitte gegeben. Bemerkungen zu Jer 31,33', *BZ* 49 (2005), pp. 86-92, and Hermann-Josef Stipp, 'Die Perikope vom "Neuen Bund" (Jer 31,31-34) im Masoretischen und Alexandrinischen Jeremiabuch. Zu Adrian Schenkers These von der "Theologie der drei Bundesschlüsse"', *JNWSL* 35 (2009), pp. 1-25 (11).

"Know Yhwh", for they, all of them, shall know me,
from the least of them to the greatest of them—oracle of Yhwh,
for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again'.

This oracle implies a severe critique of the sin-punishment-cycle. It illustrates that the present people in the intern world of the book are by no means able to abide by the Torah. In light of this oracle, Jeremiah's addressees must conclude that the announced destruction is not avoidable through repentance, but only if God himself changes their hearts (which means changing the human constitution).[49] And the readers of the book must doubt that the catastrophe of 586 BCE can be explained as a *just* reaction of a just God.

The different positions on violence and destruction within the book may lead modern readers to an important insight: Jeremiah is to be taken as a complex specific Jewish Second Temple period book, in which different authors and redactors referred to one of the worst catastrophes for ancient Israel. The book finally became 'Scripture':[50] Jeremiah as Scripture may be regarded as an instrument to treat the catastrophe from several viewpoints and above all to inspire and warn the contemporary readers. The book may also help to broach the issue of violence and destruction in terms of 'integrating' the catastrophe as a genuine part of Israel's postexilic identity. This identity is based on the experience of destruction as well as on the experience of survival and restoration.

---

49. Cf. the similar statement in Deut. 30.6; see Finsterbusch, *Deuteronomium*, p. 181.

50. Cf. especially Roland Deines, 'The Term and Concept of Scripture', in *What is Bible?* (ed. K. Finsterbusch and A. Lange; Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology, 67; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), pp. 235-81.

Who Is Violent, and Why?
Pharaoh and God in Exodus 1–15 as
a Model for Violence in the Bible[1]

Georg Fischer

Abstract

The death of the Egyptians in Exodus 14 is often perceived as an indication that the biblical God is violent. Contrary to this widespread understanding, a close analysis of Exodus 1–15 shows that it is the Egyptian Pharaoh who is the root of violence and also the cause of its increase. His continued injustice, resistance, and unreliability are the reasons why God, finally, destroys 'Egypt'. Exodus 1–15 depicts a model conflict and requires a symbolical as well as a critical reading. Furthermore, common translations and interpretations, like the 'despoiling' of 'the Egyptians' (Exod. 3.22; 12.36), or the 'hardening of Pharaoh's heart', have to be corrected. Similarly, the slaying of the firstborns takes on a new value, when understood in relation to Israel's role for Yhwh and as an etiology for the respective laws.

Introduction

A key event in Israel's faith history is *its liberation by God at the Reed Sea*, narrated in Exodus 14. One of the final sentences of this text is 'and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore' (Exod. 14.30).[2] Shortly thereafter, songs in praise of God, delivered by Moses, the Israelites, Miriam, and the women at the Reed Sea (Exod. 15.1-21) follow as the response of the people.

For many years and in various locations, this understanding of events *has provoked sharp reactions* on the part of listeners and readers. The death of so many Egyptians as a basis for Israel's liberation evokes feelings of rejection and disgust.[3] A god who needs to inflict a terrible fate on others, perhaps even on innocent victims, in order to free his people is hardly acceptable and seems to contradict what other passages in the Bible say about him.

---

1. I thank Mrs Felicity Stephens for the correction of the English of this article.
2. Translations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
3. The liturgy for the Easter Vigil in the Catholic rite requires at least four Old Testament readings, and allows for choice among selected passages, while stipulating that Exod. 14 must not be omitted. Every year this causes trouble, and there are pastors and communities who omit the prescribed reading.

My aim in this paper is twofold:

(1) I want to demonstrate that Exodus 14 cannot be regarded as a self-contained text, but can only be understood within *the whole narrative of Exodus 1–15*, and its sequence.[4] As a result, the Egyptian Pharaoh appears as the real source of violence.

(2) In addition to viewing this account of a seemingly violent God as an 'ethical challenge', I perceive it as a *hermeneutical challenge*. It demands reflection on our ways of reading and interpreting such biblical passages.

I shall proceed in two steps. First there is a need for some clarifications (1). On the basis of these, I suggest a 'symbolic'[5] reading of Exodus 1–15 (2), particularly with respect to its relevance for the theme of violence in the Bible as an ethical challenge.

1. *Context and Clarifications*

1.1. *The Place of Exodus 14 within the Liberation Narrative*
Exodus 14 is neither a beginning nor an independent unit. It is only understandable as the *result of a development which started in Exodus 1*.[6] Let us look at some salient features of this narrative cycle:

 a. In Exod. 1.9-22, a new Pharaoh starts to see the Israelites as enemies and as a threat. He oppresses them and tries to diminish their number by ordering their newborns to be killed.
 b. In Exodus 5, another Pharaoh reacts with increased oppression on hearing of the desire of the people to celebrate a feast in honor of God. He demands an impossible amount of work from them.
 c. In Exodus 7–11, the Pharaoh promises at various moments to let the Israelites leave the country (8.4, 24; 9.28), yet always revokes

---

4. Especially the encounter with God at Mount Sinai: God's self-presentation in Exod. 20.2 and some of the laws are connected with the liberation narrative and presuppose it.

5. 'Symbolic' is not intended to mean 'not historical'. It leaves open the question of the historicity of the narrative, and seeks to point to a deeper and fuller message in it.

6. And even earlier, with Joseph's being sold and brought to Egypt and the subsequent transfer of Jacob's family to the country, see Gen. 37–50. To my mind, there are problems with the position of K. Schmid, J.C. Gertz, and E. Blum who view the traditions about the patriarchs and the exodus out of Egypt as originally independent, a position recently taken up by Rainer Albertz, 'Der Beginn der vorpriesterlichen Exoduskomposition (K^EX). Eine Kompositons- und Redaktionsgeschichte von Ex 1-5', *TZ* 67 (2011), pp. 223-62. The liberation '*out of Egypt*' presupposes that some people connected with what later becomes 'Israel' have previously arrived in the country of the Nile. Thus the Genesis and the Exodus narratives are firmly interwoven and can hardly be separated.

his permission. Finally, he ends the dialogue from his side with a
threat (10.28).[7]

   d.   In Exodus 12, after the slaying of the firstborn, the Pharaoh sends
        Moses and his people away from his country (vv. 31-32).
   e.   In Exodus 14, he regrets his own decision and pursues the Israelites
        with his army and best forces (vv. 5-7).

Taking into account all these elements, Exodus 14 is but the *culmination
of a long, continuous resistance,* by the reigning Pharaoh, to the demands
of God and his people.

The Israelites have done no harm to Egypt,[8] whereas the Pharaoh has
treated them unjustly on many occasions. Exodus 1–15 is therefore also
marked by the *issue of justice.*

The sufferings inflicted on Egypt in Exodus 12 and 14 are the result of
repeated breaking of promises, and as such are merely the *ultimate* way in
which God deals with resistance, showing the extremes to which God will
go if nothing else works. It is a wonder that God restrained himself for such
a long time.

1.2. *Some Philological Clarifications*

Readers of Exodus are sometimes *bewildered* by certain phrases and expres-
sions, and rightly so. Most of the translations render the original, in some
instances, in ways that lead to a misunderstanding of the biblical texts. Let
me mention the more important ones found in Exodus 1–15:

a. The final phrase of Exod. 3.22 is generally translated 'thus you shall
despoil the Egyptians'.[9] This suggests an act of injustice on the side of the
Israelites on the eve of their departure from Egypt. Yet, the Hebrew original
has the root נצל which normally, in the hiphil, means 'to tear / pull out, to
save' and is used in this sense a little earlier, in Exod. 3.8. The analyses of
Y.T. Radday[10] and B. Jacob[11] demonstrate that this meaning also applies to
the piel and that therefore the sentence has to be rendered as 'and you will
save Egypt', or, alternatively, 'and you will be saved with Egypt'.

---

7.   The real end of the dealings between Pharaoh and Moses is Exod. 11.8, telling
about Moses' departure. Exod. 11.1-8 has a special function, namely to deepen the dia-
logue with a divine intervention. See Georg Fischer, 'Exodus 1–15—eine Erzählung',
in M. Vervenne, *Studies in the Book of Exodus* (BEThL, 126; Leuven: Peeters 1996),
pp. 149-78 (pp. 156-57).

8.   The only exception is Moses in Exod. 2.12, slaying the Egyptian foreman.

9.   See also the similar passage in Exod. 12.36. Exodus 11.2-3, too, is close, but
does not use the verb in question.

10.   Yehuda Thomas Radday, 'The Spoils of Egypt', *ASTI* 12 (1983), pp. 127-47. He
even sees an option for a *niphal* understanding in Exod. 3.22.

11.   Benno Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1997), p. 357.

Whereas the biblical text has in view a *friendly departure* of the Israelites (see also Exod. 12.35), the modern translations[12] portray a conflict between the two groups and an instance of unjust behavior on the part of the Israelites, at the end of their stay in Egypt, thus causing a theological problem. The context in both passages (Exod. 3.21-22 and 12.35-36, and similarly in 11.2-3) also clearly pleads in favor of a farewell in mutual esteem.

b. In Exod. 4.21, God says: 'I will harden his heart'.[13] This translation interprets the Hebrew verb חזק 'to make strong, tough, firm' as 'to harden', thus implying a negative connotation. E. Kellenberger[14] has convincingly argued against such a biased understanding. The traditional, mostly uniform, translation of all three verbs in question (קשה, כבד, חזק) with 'to harden' points in a false direction.

What is intended by the original phrase seems to be rendered most accurately as '*to confront*',[15] leaving aside the notion of a direct divine intervention into the Pharaoh's interior. Idioms using 'heart' are often not to be taken literally: the German phrase 'das Herz fällt in die Hose' has nothing to do with a new position of the human organ at the place where the trousers are, but corresponds to the English idiom 'to lose heart', which similarly does not indicate the loss of the heart, but that courage is diminished. The English phrase 'to speak from one's heart' has a German equivalent in 'frisch (or: frei) von der Leber weg sprechen'; I imagine that there is no difference between people speaking English ('heart') or German ('liver') with respect to the source of spoken statements. Instead, both idioms refer to interior organs without supposing that they are the real roots of speaking. Other languages also exhibit this use of 'heart'; as a final example, the French 'apprendre par cœur' is parallel to 'learn by heart', and neither expression means to state that the human organ mentioned in these idioms is the actual

12. The Septuagint is the source of this misunderstanding and mistranslation which has been followed by nearly all present-day renderings. See Georg Fischer, 'Wann begannen die Israeliten, die Ägypter auszuplündern? Zur Interpretationsgeschichte von Ex 3,22 und 12,36', in Robert Rollinger, *Von Sumer bis Homer* (Festschrift Manfred Schretter; AOAT, 325; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), pp. 257-68. Joel Stevens Allen, *The Despoliation of Egypt in Pre-Rabbinic, Rabbinic and Patristic Traditions* (VCS, 92; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), p. 28, comes to the same conclusion.

13. Similarly often, altogether ten times with God as subject in Exodus, and ten times with other subjects. Also other verbs, like כבד 'be / make heavy', in Exod. 8.11 and more often (the same as in Isa. 6.10 for Israel), and קשה 'to make heave / hard', only in Exod. 7.3, are used.

14. Edgar Kellenberger, *Die Verstockung Pharaos. Exegetische und auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Ex 1–15* (WMANT, 171; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

15. Georg Fischer and Dominik Markl, *Das Buch Exodus* (NSK-AT, 2; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009), pp. 73-75.

instrument for memorizing. In a similar way, the Hebrew idiom should *not* be translated with 'heart' or understood literally, but in its intended sense: God does not cause the Pharaoh to sin, but he *challenges* and confronts him.

c. It is common to dub the events described in Exod. 7.14-10.29 as 'plagues', understanding them as blows which God inflicted on Egypt. Yet, God himself calls them '*signs and wonders*' (Exod. 7.3) which means that they are primarily intended to show his might, and thus to bring Egypt to recognize him and to achieve the liberation of Israel.[16] Signs are used to demonstrate something, and this is God's aim. Only in Exod. 11.1, for the first time, does he use the term 'plague', to announce a final action; it will be the slaying of the firstborn in Exodus 12.

    God's primary intention is not to harm Egypt, but to make them *acknowledge him and his power to save* his people from unjust oppression.

d. Another constant problem, which was already present in Exod. 3.22 (and often elsewhere), is the rendering of מצרים in English. It may be translated as:

    (i)   Egypt, referring to the country, the nation or its power, which is always vocalized miṣrajjim and never has a definite article;

   (ii) *Egyptians*, the people living in Egypt; yet for this meaning there exists another expression which the Masoretes vocalized differently.[17] This corresponds to the plural of the *nomen gentilicium*, which in the singular is מצרי '(an) Egyptian'.[18]

    The use of מצרים is of *particular importance for Exodus 14*. It never has the word מצרי '(an) Egyptian' in the plural (pronounced *miṣrim*, which should be translated 'Egyptians'), but always מצרים with the vocalization *miṣrajjim*, denoting primarily the nation or the country. Furthermore, it construes this word sometimes with the verb in the singular, for example in v. 25: 'And Egypt said: "I will flee before Israel…"'.[19] The same applies

---

    16. Dennis J. McCarthy, 'Plagues and Sea of Reeds: Exodus 5–14', *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 137-58, is indicative of such an interpretation. He speaks of 'Moses dealings with Pharaoh' (p. 137 n. 1), picking up the title of a previous article (*CBQ* 27 [1965], pp. 336-47), and points to the close connection with Exod. 14 (p. 158).

    17. They suggested and demanded for this meaning the reading *miṣrim*, instead of *miṣrajjim*.

    18. Exodus 2.11-12, 14, 19 are the only instances in the Exodus narrative using the singular, in the latter case even (falsely) for Moses by the daughters of Jethro. The plural is always used with the definite article ־ה, e.g. in Gen. 12.12, 14; 43.32; Deut. 26.6 and Josh. 24.7.

    19. My translation; NRSV has: 'The Egyptians said: Let us flee from before Israel…', changing also the *numerus* in the quote ('us').

to v. 30, where 'dead' is in the singular. Correctly it should be rendered as: 'And Israel saw *Egypt* dead upon the seashore'.[20]

This seems to indicate that key passages in Exodus 1–15 do not view the Egyptians so much as individuals, but 'Egypt' as a force, connected with the Pharaoh as its leader, rebelling against God. 'Egypt' (and even 'Egyptians', if one wants to stick to this translation) primarily denotes a *symbolic power* in opposition to God. It dies forever in the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14.

Thus, a close look at passages that tend to cause problems for modern readers reveals that the Hebrew original is *far more nuanced* than most translations and does not contain some of the critical issues that trigger negative feelings in many readers.

1.3. *Some Key Motifs*

a. *The firstborns*. Maybe the greatest riddle in the Exodus narrative is the *death of all the firstborns in Egypt*: 'The Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle' (Exod. 12.29). A solution to this problem is connected with the *other occurrences* of this motif in the Book of Exodus:[21]

(i)   God states in Exod. 4.22-23: 'Israel is my first-born son…if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son'. Right from the beginning he establishes a correspondence between the role and treatment of his people and the fate of Egypt's firstborns.

(ii) God's announced threat is repeated twice: in the critical phase at the end of the dialogue in Exod. 11.5, and in his instructions in Exod. 12.12. The threat is then executed (Exod. 12.29). Afterwards, the theme occurs again in Exod. 13.15, which refers back to Exod. 12.29. This indicates a key role played by this motif in the resolution of the conflict.

(iii) Another aspect of the motif of the firstborn comes to the fore in Exodus 13, in the immediate sequence to Exodus 12 where the

20. NRSV translates: 'and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore'. The Hebrew word מצרים 'Egypt' is used most often within the Old Testament in Exod. 14, alltogether 26 times. Five instances connect it with verbs in the plural (vv. 4 and 18 'to know'; vv. 9 and 23 'to persecute'; v. 27 'to flee'), three with verbs in the singular (in addition to the two verses mentioned, there is also v. 10, where Egypt 'sets out for' Israel [NRSV: 'the Egyptians were marching after them']); the rest of the passages in Exod. 14 cannot be decided with respect to the *numerus*. Of particular importance is also the use of the first person singular for Egypt in v. 25, already mentioned above.

21. For an overview on this motif in Exodus see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus. Volume 1* (HCOT; Kampen: KOK 1993), pp. 429-30, and Karin Finsterbusch, 'Vom Opfer zur Auslösung. Analyse ausgewählter Texte zum Thema Erstgeburt im Alten Testament', *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 21-45, esp. pp. 25-31 and 36-40.

Egyptian firstborns die. At the start, in 13.2, God commands: 'Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine'. This establishes a close connection between the preceding narration of Egypt's fate and the following divine law.

(iv) Exodus 13.12-13 enhances this stipulation, and vv. 14-15 oblige the Israelites to teach their children the 'historical' background of this tradition. The request to pass it on to the next generation is an indication of its importance.

(v) Later in the Book of Exodus, the laws in 22.29-30 and 34.19-20 pick up and confirm Israel's duty to dedicate all firstborns to the Lord.[22]

These passages show that the motif of the firstborns plays out on *three levels* in Exodus:

(1) Israel is God's firstborn and thus an important *part of his family*.

(2) Whoever maltreats it and refuses to allow it to lead a free life has to *suffer correspondingly*; here in the Exodus narrative[23] it is that 'Egypt' is affected.

(3) Finally, the motivating force behind this form of presentation seems to be connected with, or even to stem from, the desire to construct an *etiological explanation for the laws* regarding the consecration of the firstborns, of both men and animals.

b. *The service*. '*De la servitude au service*' is the title of George Auzou's commentary on Exodus.[24] It aptly describes the fundamental contrast between Israel's slavery under the Pharaoh in Egypt and the service which God envisions for the future, namely that the Israelites revere him at 'this mountain'.[25] This motif thus has two sides, both expressed by the same Hebrew root עבד. I start with the work load demanded from Israel by Egypt:

---

22. Exodus 22.29-30: 'The first-born of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your sheep…'. And Exod. 34.19-20: 'All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb… All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem'.

23. Historically, no record of such an event is extant, and, in itself, the event, as depicted in Exod. 12.29, seems unlikely to have happened exactly in this way.

24. George Auzou, *De la Servitude au Service* (Paris: Éditions de l'Orante, 2nd edn, 1964).

25. See his announcement in Exod. 3.12.

(i)   'So they[26] made the people of Israel serve with rigor … with hard service' (Exod. 1.13-14). This marks the beginning of the intensified exploitation of the Israelites' workforce.

(ii) Later on, its foremen call themselves 'your servants' three times before the Pharaoh.[27]

(iii) After the dismissal of Israel, the Pharaoh and his Egyptian subordinates (in Hebrew also 'servants') regret their decision and ask: 'What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?' (Exod. 14.5).

(iv) Even the Israelites, being pursued, desire to serve Egypt and prefer this to death in the wilderness (Exod. 14.12).

(v)   Appropriately, God calls Egypt '*house of bondage*'.[28]

On the other hand, God desires that Israel might *serve him* (Exod. 3.12; 4.23; 13.5 [twice]; 23.25…).

(i)   This can also be understood as worship, and is sometimes connected with 'sacrifice' (e.g. Exod. 3.18; 5.3) or with 'celebrate a feast' (as in Exod. 5.1; 10.9).

(ii) Whom Israel may serve is a central point in the discussions between Moses and the Pharaoh.[29]

(iii) Finally, Israel reaches Mount Sinai and is willing to accept God's offer and serve him (Exod. 19–24).

The motif of Israel's 'service' shows a *stylized contrast* of two different expectations and attitudes. The Pharaoh's claim on Israel's working force is countered by God's desire to free the Israelites and bring them to worship him.

c. *Recognition of God and his might*. This theme recurs with many variations, notably regarding the subjects:

God knows, Exod. 2.25; 3.7, 19; 4.14 *passim*.

The *Pharaoh* does not yet know Yhwh, Exod. 5.2; but he and Egypt shall come to know, Exod. 7.5, 17; 8.6…14.4, 18. This is finally fulfilled in Egypt's recognition in Exod. 14.25: 'The Lord fights for them against the Egyptians' (better: 'Egypt').

Also *Israel* will gain knowledge about God, Exod. 6.7; 10.2 *passim*.[30]

---

26. In Hebrew: 'Egypt'.
27. Exodus 5.15-16; cf. also v. 18.
28. Literally 'house of slaves', Exod. 13.3, 14; 20.2 *passim*.
29. For example Exod. 10.8, 11, 24, 26. In 10.7 even Pharaoh's servants plead that the Israelites may leave and serve their God.
30. An additional aspect to this theme in Exodus is that Moses knows even Pharaoh's thinking (Exod. 9.30).

The theme of *God's revelation of himself* is in the background of Exodus 1–15. He announces it several times, and it is, at least partially, fulfilled in Exodus 14–15.[31] Whereas 'Israel' will recognize him in his power to save them, 'Egypt' will come to know his might when their attempts to hinder his intended liberation are thwarted.

This first part sought to deal with some major problems regarding God's violence in Exodus 1–15. Let us focus on the *results*:

    (i)   The death of the Pharaoh and of 'Egypt' in the Reed Sea in Exodus 14 is only the final *reaction* of God to the continued violence from their side and their stubborn unwillingness to accept the justified request of letting the Israelites go.

   (ii)   The Hebrew text is much more nuanced than most translations. It does *not contain the 'despoiling'* of the Egyptians, *distinguishes* between the nation and the people, and also between (many) 'signs' and (one) 'plague'.[32] Thus many obstacles to an appropriate understanding of the liberation narrative are not present in the original text.[33]

 (iii)   Several motifs point towards a *deliberate, contrastive presentation* of Israel's liberation in the Exodus out of Egypt. It seems to serve as a legitimization for the laws of the firstborns and of the worship of Yhwh.

2. *A Symbolic Reading*

What arose upon closer scrutiny in part 1) has consequences for the interpretation of the whole narrative. It demands to be read not mainly as an exact rendering of historical events, but in its broader meaning, with its desire to *communicate a spiritual and theological message*. This is what I want to imply by the use of the term 'symbolic'. Furthermore, this understanding can also bear fruit for the further investigation of the topic of violence in the Bible. Exodus 1–15 contains many important insights with regard to this.

2.1. *Exodus 1 as a Point of Departure*
Exodus 14 is not the starting point, but just the final moment in a long process of increasing violence. It is necessary to look at *its roots*, described in the attitudes of the Pharaoh in Exodus 1, and at the dynamic process which is revealed throughout the ongoing narrative.

---

31. Israel, in singing the song at the Reed Sea, confesses and proclaims who Yhwh is. So they have come to know him, and God has, at least partially, reached his aim.

32. The final action of Yhwh to bring about the liberation of his people, regarding the firstborns, is identified as a 'plague' in Exod. 12.

33. Most of the theological problems of modern readers disappear when the Exodus narrative is read in the Hebrew original and understood correspondingly.

Exodus 1 mentions some *aspects relevant to the origin of violence*:

(i) The 'new king' of Egypt does not know about Joseph and what he has done formerly (v. 8). What happened in the past seems to be forgotten, and the merits of the Israelites' ancestor no longer count. *Ignorance of history / traditions and lack of fidelity*[34] often cause simplified world-views and become sources for violence.

(ii) In v. 9, the Egyptian king sees—or creates?—a conflict between the Israelites and his people, playing the card of 'national differences', *evoking fears* that the 'natives' are losing the 'competition' against these 'immigrants'. Similar 'reasoning' is being used right up to the present day by those politicians who emphasize the contrasts between ethnic groups within a population for their own purposes.

(iii) The Pharaoh is driven by the wish to remain '*superior*' (v. 10)[35] and increases the fear, by projecting a scenario of coming war in which the Israelites would take the side of Egypt's enemies. In fact, this never happens as projected here.[36]

(iv) He devises a tactic of *submission and oppression* of the Israelites (vv. 11 and 13-14),[37] yet the outcome is the reverse (v. 12).

(v) After the failure of this first measure, the Pharaoh resorts to another strategy, *aiming indirectly*, through the midwives, *at the fertility* of the Israelites (vv. 15-16). He demands explicitly the killing of the male babies and thus ushers in a new, higher level of violence. To diminish the increase in population and reduce the reproduction rate of certain ethnic groups[38] is still today a means by which some leaders and groups try to uphold their power.

(vi) When this second tactic also fails (vv. 17-21), the Pharaoh, as a third step, *orders directly the killing* of 'all new-born male babies in the Nile' (v. 22, my translation).

34. While, e.g., Gen. 45.16-20 and 50.6-7 show a favourable disposition of the Pharaoh and his men towards 'Israel', it has disappeared completely in Exod. 1.

35. Literally 'let us act wisely against them', whereas NRSV renders with 'let us deal shrewdly with them'. The only other instance of חכם htp. within the Hebrew Bible is Eccl. 7.16; in addition it is also encountered in Sir. 10.26; 32.4. In all these other passages, too, it has a nuance of elevating oneself over others and a negative connotation.

36. What happens in Exod. 14 is an ironic reversal of Pharaoh's fear: It is Yhwh who takes the side of Israel, and they don't even lift a hand.

37. Usually Exod. 1.13-14 is attributed to the 'Priestly' source or redaction, but it is more appropriate to see in these verses a kind of comment from the author of the narrative: Georg Fischer, 'Keine Priesterschrift in Ex 1–15?', *ZKTh* 117 (1995), pp. 203-211.

38. Some (e.g. according to the definition of the United Nations) would call this 'genocide'. However, a narrower definition of this term seems more fitting; for this see Markus Zehnder's contribution in this volume, pp. 112-13.

Exodus 1 is *very rich* with regard to the motifs and the dynamics of violence. This short passage contains in a nutshell a portrayal of possible roots for violence, and for its development.

It is very clear that *violence starts with the Pharaoh* and that he is responsible for its increase, and the consequences, whereas the Israelites have not done any injustice to him or his people. Interestingly, God remains in the background[39] and does not oppose him directly.

2.2. *A Model Conflict*

We have already encountered some facts that point to Exodus 1–15 as being an *example*:

 (i)   the *extent and development* of the conflict, covering fifteen chapters, i.e. more than one third of the Book of Exodus (A, 1);
 (ii) the continuous *usage of 'Egypt'*, and avoidance of 'the Egyptians', in *all* the relevant passages (A, 2);
 (iii) the *etiological features* in the motif of the firstborns (A, 3a);
 (iv) the *fundamental opposition* of serving Pharaoh as slaves and rendering service to God (A, 3b);
 (v)   the importance of the theme 'to *know* God' (A, 3c).

To this we may add some further aspects:

 (i)   The *missing names* of the Egyptian kings.[40] Obviously it does not matter who they are / were. What is aimed at here is the depiction of typical 'pharaonic' behavior.
 (ii) The obvious *contrasting* of the Pharaoh—the term in Egyptian meaning 'Great House' and the bearer of the title being regarded as a god in the Egyptian culture—with Yhwh, the 'God of the forefathers'[41] and 'God of the Hebrews' (Exod. 3.18; 5.3). This points to a fundamental opposition and a dispute about who is really 'God'.
 (iii) The *prolonged dealings* between the Pharaoh and Yhwh in Exodus 7–11. The nine signs are arranged in a kind of spiral turning round

---

39. Exod. 1.17, 21 mention the reverence of the Hebrew midwives for God, and vv. 20-21 God's positive reaction on their behalf. In Exod. 1 human actions, motivated by the fear of God, thwart Pharaoh's intentions.

40. In contradistinction, the names of the Hebrew midwives are given in Exod. 1.15 as Shiphrah and Puah.

41. Exodus 3.6, 15, 16, etc.; Exod. 3.15 contains a fivefold designation of the biblical God as 'Yhwh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob', and thus forms an opposition to the 'five names' for Pharaoh in official Egyptian texts.

thrice,[42] with a negative outcome. The protracted discussions between Moses and Pharaoh allow for multiple dialogue situations, and thus enable forms of resistance to be displayed in great variety.

(iv) The motif of *God's 'judgments'*[43] indicates a forensic dimension. This underlines further the issue of justice, already seen above in dealing with the place of Exodus 14 in the liberation narrative (cf. A, 1, towards the end). The image of the biblical God would be continuously flawed if he were to pass over the injustice described in Exodus 1 and 5 without any reaction.

(v) The *revocation* of the first dismissal (Exod. 12.31-32) by the pursuit of civilians leaving the country in Exodus 14 by an army. The Pharaoh counteracts his own earlier command and thus heightens his violent attitude to a final climax. Exodus 14.6-7, 9 depict a choice military force deployed against unarmed people, among them women and children.[44]

Still another aspect favors an understanding of Exodus 1–15 as a model conflict. The end of A, 3a alluded to the *question of historicity*, in the absence of any record of a systematic dying / killing of firstborns in Egypt.[45] Besides this, there is also no indication that any of the Pharaohs in the relevant time span[46] died by drowning, as is suggested in Exodus 14.[47] The 'battle' at the Reed Sea is related to two totally unequal levels: the Israelites don't even have to defend themselves; everything is done by God.[48] This conveys a rather idealistic or even utopian image of the conflict and its solution.

42. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus. Volume 2* (HCOT; Kampen: KOK, 1996), p. 19, refers to medieval Jewish exegetes who observe the parallel beginnings of first, fourth and seventh, second, fifth and eighth, third, sixth and ninth sign. Thus the symbolic number 'three' is multiplied, again with 'three', and used as an organizing principle. Also Jacob, in his commentary on Exodus (finished in 1943) speaks of three rounds with three signs ("Gottesschläge"; *Das Buch Exodus*, p. 180), whereas McCarthy ('Moses' Dealings', pp. 341-43) tries to elaborate a concentric structure in addition to the multiple three-principle.

43. See Exod. 6.6; 7.4; 12.12, in the latter instance on Egypt's gods.

44. For such assaults on an uneven basis there are parallels even in the present time: see recent attacks on Syrians fleeing to Turkey or Lebanon, the shootings at the former German 'Mauer', or at North Korea's border. In fact, many features of the Pharaoh in Exod. 1–15 can be perceived even today in the behavior of dictators and in various kinds of absolute rule.

45. Such an event would certainly have been put down in writing in Egyptian annals.

46. Generally to be considered around 1200 BCE, thus concerning kings of the XIXth dynasty.

47. All mummies still exist and have been investigated, yet none died by suffocating in water.

48. See the key word 'to fight', used in Exod. 14.14, 25 only for God; compare also the future king in Zech. 9.9-10, who 'is helped'.

Taken together, all these points indicate that Exodus 1–15, as the narrative stands now, is a deliberate *literary construct*. As it is presented, it has to be read in a symbolic way, interpreting the figure of Pharaoh as the 'stylized opponent' of God, and his actions and violent behavior as a model for resistance against God and his plans.

2.3. *Violence 'in Context'*

The present investigation has clearly demonstrated that violence *cannot be regarded in an isolated way*. It has *roots*, in the case under investigation in the Pharaoh, his fears, political interests, attitudes,[49] phantasies, and ideologies (of superiority, etc.). It may be said that even today, it is such an 'unclean spirit / way of thinking' that is the cause of violence.

In addition, Exodus 1–15 describe a *dynamic movement*, already present in the first chapter.[50] In Exodus 5, the Pharaoh increases the oppression of the Israelites upon learning of their desire to worship God. Exodus 7–11, too, show a progression: at the beginning there are dialogues between the king of Egypt and Moses; in 10.28 the Pharaoh terminates all the negotiations with a threat.

These situations and motifs correspond to reality: (a) Violence tends to intensify, when it is not countered or stopped. (b) Sometimes talking only delays a solution, or is used to gain time. (c) As long as the conflicting parties stay in dialogue, there may still be the chance of a peaceful outcome.

A key element for the outbreak and increase of violence in Exodus 1–15 is the *Pharaoh's unreliability* and frequently treacherous behavior. In the dealings with Moses he withdraws his permission several times for the Israelites to leave the country. When he finally gives in, in Exod. 12.31-32, it is only for a short time. A few days later, he pursues them, hoping to drive them back by force. It is only because of the Pharaoh's repeated resistance and *breaking of his word* that God brings a violent end upon him and 'Egypt', the force which he represents and leads.

3. *Conclusion*

Who is violent, and why? Exodus 1–15 is a *model*, demonstrating the fundamental opposition between human violence, exemplified by the Pharaoh, and God's determination to end such violence—even by the exercise of his power, if all other means fail.[51]

---

49. For example regarding the life of others, in this case the babies of the Israelites.
50. Cf. the three stratagems of Pharaoh in Exod. 1.10-11, 16, 22.
51. At the NSABS meeting in Kristiansand, we had a discussion about 'justified violence'. There was a tendency to see the use of force in some cases as being legitimate,

At the same time the *literary elaboration* of this conflict displays some features[52] that require an awareness of ideological moments in the narrative and therefore demand a symbolical as well as a critical reading.

One aspect of Exodus 1–15 remains a cause for astonishment: in the long period of suffering the Israelites *never use violence themselves*. The only exception is Moses in Exod. 2.11-12, which by its consequences is shown to offer no solution and leads to a dead end.[53] It is left to God to counter Pharaoh's oppression, and he does it—a desirable ideal, and certainly a stimulus to reflection.[54]

although difficult to argue for absolutely, as human reasoning and understanding is always limited and relative. I prefer to use 'power' (in German 'Kraft, Stärke, Macht') for God, instead of 'violence' (corresponding to 'Gewalt').

52. Like the motifs of the firstborn or the presentation of the narrative as a model, which poses the question of its historicity.

53. Cf. also Exod. 4.24-26, as God's delayed reaction to it.

54. This comes close to some texts of the New Testament and its ethics of non-violence (see the article of Peter Wick in the present volume).

Violence and the God of the Old Testament

Terence E. Fretheim

Abstract

The Old Testament is a book filled with violence. If it were only a matter of human violence, the discussion could be briefer, if bloody. But that is not the case. The most basic theological problem with the Bible's violence is that it is often associated with the activity of God. With remarkable frequency, God is the subject of violent verbs. Any theological portrayal of the biblical God must take this phenomenon into account. The recent proliferation of literature seeking to address this biblical reality is often helpful. At the same time, further reflection seems in order, particularly regarding 'the kind of God' depicted in the texts. We need to move beyond efforts to read the text in and through traditional images of God (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.). I will suggest that the language of divine self-limitation on the part of a God in genuine relationship with Israel and the world is most helpful.

Introduction

In the history of biblical interpretation, at least from Marcion on, the Bible's presentation of God has created problems, not least the association of that God with a remarkable range of problematic words and actions (e.g., violence). Indeed, Marcion emerged with a truncated New Testament in order to rid it of any remnants of problematic (to him) Old Testament God talk. Through the centuries Marcion has had many heirs (at times unwittingly so!). These ongoing concerns about the God of the Bible have been raised to new intensities in recent decades, not least because of changing cultural sensitivities, an increasingly diverse readership (e.g., female readers and non-Western readers), and a more varied range of personal experience.

One effect of these developments is that both church and academy have begun to give more intense attention to difficult images for God.[1] At the same time, such renewed attention to the 'problem of God' in the Bible has not always been welcomed. It is sometimes suggested that any special consideration of these issues is, finally, in the interests of a theodicy that seeks

---

1. For example, Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).

to defend God in the face of the realities of sin and evil that ravage our world—and God needs no defense. Perhaps this is true of some studies. At the same time, not all responses to these kinds of God questions fall into the category of 'defense'. Indeed, some such responses—including my own—catch God up in significant levels of responsibility for this kind a world.[2] Many such responses to evil and suffering can be profitably related to struggles with these issues within the Old Testament itself (e.g., Job; the lament psalms; Jer. 11–20).

In addition, it is important to recognize that at least some negative responses to the issue of theodicy are prompted by an often vigorous defense of another kind (perhaps unstated), namely, a defense of traditional understandings of God. Indeed, readers might ask if at least some of the difficulties with the violence of the God of the Bible are related, not to the textual images as such, but to the impact of such traditional understandings of God on interpretation.[3] These include such claimed divine characteristics (often unqualified and insufficiently nuanced) as: omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, impassible, and atemporal. Though the Bible uses none of these words, and they are not peculiarly Christian, their associated ideas have had an immense influence, consciously or unconsciously, on the way in which many readers interpret the word 'God' whenever they encounter it in the text. The result is that many of the actual biblical images for God are neglected or have been harmonized to fit with these post-biblically formed divine attributes.[4] However much that might or might not be the case—and studies of such possible effects on biblical interpretation are needed—the textual images for God need closer attention.

From another angle, we should not forget the power of personal experience. It is now generally recognized that Bible interpreters are not blank slates when they read or interpret the Bible. Something of 'who we are' as

---

2.   See Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

3.   See Robert A. Oden, *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to it* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). While I don't agree with Oden's basic direction of reflection, some of his comments are helpful. For example: 'The theological tradition carries with it clear limitations that have threatened and still threaten to restrict the range of questions considered appropriate to raise of texts and themes in the Bible and, when confronted with a voice contrary to the prevailing theology, often resorts to explanation by reference to the inexplicable' (pp. vii-viii).

4.   A prominent exception in Old Testament theological work is Walter Brueggemann. See especially his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997). At the same time, one should ask whether his presentation of God in the Old Testament is overstated on the problematic side. See Terence E. Fretheim, 'Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God', in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. T. Linafeldt and T. Beal; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 24-37.

interpreters will inevitably be a part of any meaning we claim to see in a text. We are deeply affected by what we have been taught and the broad range of our life experiences, including communal and familial experience. The recent Norwegian experience of violence *will* shape the interpretation of texts of violence. We should also not underestimate the power of the churchly tradition within which we have been reared; whether recognized or not, such traditions will have commonly become deeply set within us over time.

I will begin to explore these God issues by taking a closer look at the topics listed below and the implications they have for thinking about violence in the Bible:

1. *Violence and God's Relationship to the World*
2. *The Relational God of Creation*
3. *The Created Moral Order as Agent of God*
4. *God's Use of Agents in the Historical Process and Consequent Violence*
5. *In a World of Sin, God's Unfailing Promises Make Room for More Violence*

1. *Violence and God's Relationship to the World*

The recent violent event in Norway, and I think also of 9/11 in the USA, are superb examples of how the category of relationship is important for understanding violence. We have been deeply affected by the violence of one individual (or a few), not least through intensified forms of anxiety. No matter how well we may be in control of our own violent tendencies, we are personally often invaded by violent events, and they will have deep and ongoing effects individually and communally.

Foundational to an understanding of God's association with violence in the Old Testament is this: God has entered into a *genuine relationship* with the world.[5]

For the Old Testament, relationships are constitutive of life itself; through relationships all things are woven together (think of a spider web). Interrelatedness is a basic characteristic of God (see Gen. 1.26), the God-Israel (and God-world) relationship, and the very nature of the created order. To live in a relational world means that every creature will be affected by the actions of every other creature, including their violence.[6] Creaturely

---

5. For detail, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 13-22; Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 71-78.
6. It is important to recognize that there was violence in God's world before the

actions ripple out and affect the entire created order (see, for example, the linkage between human violence and negative effects upon the nonhuman world in Hos. 4.1-3). Violence perpetrated anywhere reverberates everywhere through this relational structure of life, often with devastating effects. Because Israel understood that God is deeply engaged in the affairs of this world, even the Creator will be affected by, indeed get caught up in, every act of violence.

This understanding of relationship places a key question on the table: What does it mean for God to be a faithful member of this relationship with Israel (and the world) in the midst of all its violence? I make a claim at this point and return to it along the way. God so enters into relationships with creatures that God is not the only one with something important to do and the power with which to do it. Creatures in relationship with this kind of God have been given genuine power (e.g., Gen. 1.28), and God so honors this relationship—is unchangeably faithful to it—that God freely chooses to be self-limiting in the *exercise* of divine power. It would be commonly agreed that, by definition, genuine relationship entails self-limitation—making room for the other in relation to oneself.[7] For this essay I am particularly interested in the image of divine *self*-limitation. I use this language to make it clear that it is *God*, not human beings, who chooses to limit the divine self in relating to the world. This act is a profoundly gracious move on God's part.[8] In creating that which is not God, God makes room in God's new world (it is new for God, too!) for that which is genuinely 'other', to which God, at the same time, chooses to be related.

This divine self-limitation, necessary for the genuine freedom of creatures within the relationship, is a key factor in understanding human violence in the Bible. God's will for the human world is non-violence; because there is human violence that must mean that God's will for the world is being successfully resisted. Israel's (the world's) long story of resistance to God's will has had deep effects on every aspect of life and the resultant violent reality complicates God's working possibilities in the world.

---

emergence of human beings; one thinks of such realities as stellar explosions and even fungi (cf. 'bondage to decay', Rom. 8.21). See my *Creation Untamed*. I focus in this essay on the violence of human beings.

7. If the language of 'self-limitation' proves too difficult for readers, an option could be: a necessary manifestation (or demonstration) of a genuinely relational self. It might also be noted that the God who makes such moves is a 'holy' God; holiness does not necessarily stand over against self-limitation (see the language of holiness for creatures that are *not* God, e.g., Lev. 19.2; Exod. 19.6).

8. I purposely avoid using the language of '*kenosis*' so as not to be caught up in the interpretation of New Testament texts such as Phil. 2 and related theological claims. I believe that divine 'self-limitation' is an Old Testament theme and needs to be developed on that textual turf as far as is possible. At the same time, I invite others to develop whatever link there may be across the testaments.

Because of God's committed relationship to the world, no resolution will be simple, no 'quick fix' available, even for God. One might wish that God would force compliance and stop the violence, but for the sake of a genuine relationship God has chosen not to micromanage our lives.[9] God has chosen to relate to the world in such a way that constraints and restraints in the use of divine power will come into play. The Bible with all its violence tells it like it really is for God and world—an ongoing reality.

In sum, to live in such an interrelated world means that all creatures are bound up with one another in such a way that each of us is involved in the plight of all of us. God has chosen to be caught up in this spider web of relationships in a self-limiting way. God will move with these interrelating creatures into a future which is to some extent unsettled, dependent in part on what the creatures do with the powers they have been given *by God*. Let me note that this perspective about divine self-limitation does not necessarily stand over against understandings of God as omnipotent. As I will note, the issue, finally, is not God's omnipotence, but God's *exercise* of omnipotence.[10]

2. *The Relational God of Creation*

How we think about God and violence will be sharply affected by how we portray the God of the creation accounts. It is common to say that God created the world alone, with overwhelming power and absolute control, working independently and unilaterally. But, if this understanding of God in creation is correct, then those created in God's image could *properly* understand their role regarding the rest of creation in terms of power over, absolute control, and independence. What if the God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship, chooses to work in and through human and nonhuman agents, with a consequent self-limitation in the use of divine power and freedom? If that is so, the way in which the human being as image of God exercises dominion is to be shaped by that power-sharing model.

I see five types of textual evidence in both creation accounts that can assist us in reflecting on this angle of vision.[11] These points are stated in a very general way here.

---

9. I hope to explore this issue more fully in a subsequent paper.

10. Whether this might change in the *eschaton* is not made as clear in the texts as we might hope.

11. These matters are more fully developed in the book noted in footnote 2. I assume common literary and historical reflections on these texts. For a basic and thorough discussion, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984). I work with the two creation accounts together; the present edition of the biblical text invites readers to do so (and the author of the first account may very well be the one responsible for the juxtaposition of these texts).

1. God creates in and through the use of existing matter. Male and female, for example, are not created 'out of nothing', but out of already existent creatures, both human and nonhuman (Gen. 2.7, 22). The Creator 'gets down in the dirt' and creates in direct contact with the raw material. The matter with which God chooses to work has an effect on what is being created. This is an act of self-limitation.

2. God speaks *with* already existing creatures and involves them in creative activity: 'Let the earth bring forth', and 'the *earth* brought forth' (Gen. 1.11-13).[12] By inviting the participation of that which is not God in the creative process, God *necessarily* limits the divine role and gives power to the creature. God chooses not to be the sole actor in creation. This is an act of self-limitation.

3. As God shares power with the divine council (Gen. 1.26; 'let us'), so God shares power with those created in the image of God. Hence, God's *first* words to the human beings in Gen. 1.28 constitute such a power-sharing move, a sure sign of an interdependent divine way with the world. Human beings are invited, indeed commanded by God to play an important role in the becoming of their world in and through the exercise of power: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion. God here chooses not to retain all power, but to share it with human beings.

Then, in Gen. 2.19-21, God lets the *human being* determine whether the animals are adequate to move the evaluation of the creation from 'not good' to 'good'. The human naming of the animals in the creative process is directly parallel to God's naming in Genesis 1. One could also cite Eve's testimony to *both* human and divine involvement in the 'production'[13] of her son, Cain (Gen. 4.1). God chooses to act in and through creatures in matters of creational development. These are acts of divine self-limitation.

In sum, God takes the ongoing creational process into account in shaping new directions for the world, one dimension of which is using creatures in creative acts. Divine decisions interact with creaturely activity in the becoming of the world. Creation is a process as well as a punctiliar act; creation is creaturely as well as divine. God's approach to creation is thus communal and relational.[14] That is an act of self-limitation.

4. God as evaluator. In evaluating each creature over the course of Genesis 1, God *experiences* what has been created and is *affected* by that

---

12. All translations are taken from the NRSV.

13. The Hebrew verb קנה is used in Gen. 14.19, 22 for the *divine* creation of 'heaven and earth'.

14. While the biblical testimony, finally, witnesses to creation out of nothing (Rom. 4.17; Heb. 11.3), there is strong consensus that such an idea only exists on the edges of Genesis 1–2 (and, in any case, would apply to several creational details rather than creation as a whole, 1.6-7, 14-19). It should be noted that the only 'event' needed to sustain a *creatio ex nihilo* perspective is a 'Big Bang' (or its predecessors).

experience. In other terms, God *reacts* to what has been created and lets that reaction shape the next divine move. For God to react, and not simply to act, is an act of self-limitation.

5. God rests.[15] In the language of the text, God keeps the Sabbath day (Gen. 2.1-3).[16] It is important to emphasize that this Sabbath is a day on which *God* rests (not human beings). This affirmation is testimony to a period of time in which God suspends the divine activity and allows the creatures, each in its own way, to be what they were created to be. In resting for a specific time, God lets the world develop itself, giving creatures a certain independence and freedom. That God rests is an *explicit* reference to self-limitation.

God chooses to stand back, without managing the creaturely activity, both with respect to the human and the nonhuman. With regard to human beings, God leaves room for genuine decisions on their part. With regard to nonhuman creatures, God releases them from tight control and permits them to be the creatures they are. The latter includes the becoming of creation, from the movement of tectonic plates to volcanic activity to the spread of viruses to the procreation of animals. This claim means that there was violence in God's world before there were any human beings on the scene and that the nonhuman world continues to be itself in our world and will continue to participate in violence. Such a divine commitment to the workings of the natural order is a decision that we might wish God had not made, especially when suffering and death are in view. But God will remain true to God's commitments, come what may. God rests so that the creatures may thrive. As a result, the actions of creatures make a difference with respect to the future of the creation, indeed *God's* future with creation. That is, God's actions in the future will be shaped at least in part by what creatures do.

And so God gives to human and nonhuman creatures creational responsibilities in such a way that *commits* God to a certain kind of relationship with them. In other words, God exercises a sovereignty that gives genuine power over to the creatures for the sake of a relationship of integrity. God does not manage their activity, intervening to make sure every little thing goes right. At the same time, this way of relating to creatures, not least God's use of them as agents of the divine will (see below), reveals a divine vulnerability, for God opens God's own self up to resistance and hurt should things not go according to plan. The agents in and through which God chooses to work often do go astray, often violently so, because God's will can be successfully resisted, at least in the near term.

---

15. For detail, see the exposition of Gen. 2.1-3 in Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 61-64.

16. For God to rest on a specific day, for a specific time, raises issues of divine temporality, that is, past, present, and future are 'real' for God. God therein genuinely enters into time and makes it God's own, hallowing it thereby.

3. *The Created Moral Order as Agent of God*

The study of creation has shown that Israel's relational God works in creation in and through agents. Another such agent in God's creation pertinent to our conversation is the moral order, which God builds into the very texture of creation.

The created moral order might be defined as a complex, loose causal weave of act and consequence. That human sins have negative consequences is ongoing testimony to the *proper* functioning of the moral order, and this reality can be named the judgment of God. Just how God relates to the movement from sin to consequence is difficult to sort out, not least because the Old Testament does not speak with one voice about the matter.[17] But, generally speaking, the relationship between sin and consequence is conceived in intrinsic rather than forensic terms; that is, consequences grow out of the deed itself rather than being imposed from without by God as a penalty. As an example of the nature of God's involvement, see Ezek. 22.31. God declares: 'I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath'. What that entails is immediately stated: 'I have returned [√נתן] their conduct upon their own heads'.[18] Notably, given the nature of the created order, God does not (need to) introduce judgment into the situation; the destructive effects are already springing forth from the human deed.

This understanding could be expressed in language such as 'your sins will find you out' or 'you reap what you sow' (Prov. 22.8; Gal. 6.7). But Israel often, though not always (e.g., Hos. 4.1-3), explicitly linked God to the connection between sin and consequence. Interpreters have used several different formulations to speak of how God is involved: God midwifes, facilitates, sees to, puts in force, mediates, or completes the connection between sin and its effects. Whatever the language, God gives people over to the consequences of their own choices. In terms of vocabulary usage, the same Hebrew word is used for the wicked deed and for the consequence of that deed (רעה leads to רעה; עון leads to עון). The judgment experienced flows out of their own wickedness, referencing the appropriate functioning of the moral order.[19]

The created moral order, however, does not function in any mechanistic, precise, or inevitable way; it is a loose causal weave, not a tight causal

---

17. For a recent effort, see Gene Tucker, 'Sin and "Judgment" in the Prophets', in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim* (ed. H. Sun *et al.*; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 373-88.

18. I have found over fifty Old Testament texts that link divine wrath with such formulations (e.g., Ps. 7.12-16; Isa. 59.17-18; 64.5-9; Jer. 6.11, 19; 7.18-20; 21.12-14; 44.7-8; 50.24-25; Lam. 3.64-66).

19. See note 18.

weave.[20] And so it may be that the wicked will prosper (Jer. 12.1), at least for a time, and the innocent will suffer (Job) or get caught up in the effects of the sins of others (Israel in Egypt). Ecclesiastes 9.11 even introduces an element of randomness in relating human deeds to effects, 'time and chance happen to them all'. One cannot therefore conclude that any experience of violence must be specifically due to that person's or that community's sin. Especially when working with communal violence, innocents (children, for example) may suffer deeply because of the interconnectedness of the world and the random ways in which the moral order can work. It is just such an issue that informs Abraham's question in Gen. 18.25, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?').[21]

This moral order is allowed to be its creaturely self without close divine management. The details of divine involvement in the moral order cannot be factored out, except to say that the looseness of the causal weave does allow God to be at work in the 'system' without violating or suspending it.

4. *God's Use of Agents in the Historical Process and Consequent Violence*

God's use of agents in creation provides a pattern for considering God's use of agents in history.[22] I would claim that God always works in history in and through agents; God does work directly, but always through means. God primarily works in and through human agents, sinful human agents, though God can also work through nonhuman agents such as storm and flood (that do the destruction; e.g., Gen. 7.6, 10-12, 17-20, 24). I focus on prophetic texts, especially Jeremiah. Jeremiah's way of thinking about divine agency is typical for the Old Testament and often entails violence (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar).

The first issue I note is the surprisingly common claim that the God of Jeremiah is imaged as acting in an unmediated way. For example, Robert Carroll, in connection with Jer. 13.9, claims that 'Yahweh does the destroying rather than Babylon'.[23] Several commentators will speak of Babylon as

---

20. The understanding of רעה issuing in רעה may be observed in several formulations. God brings disaster (רעה), which is 'the fruit of *their* schemes' (Jer. 6.19). Or, 'I will pour out *their* wickedness upon them' (Jer. 14.16). Or, God gives to all 'according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings' (Jer. 17.10). Ezekiel 7.27 puts the matter in these terms: 'According to their own judgments I will judge them'. Like fruit, the consequence grows out of the deed itself. This leads to some correspondence thinking in the prophets; like produces like (e.g., Jer. 50.29); the people will stew in the juices they have prepared.

21. To use a cloth image, the moral order is more like burlap than silk.

22. See my discussion of Gen. 18–19 in Terence E. Fretheim, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 74-92.

23. Israel's understanding of God's use of agents in the historical process may have

God's 'instrument', but then claim that Yahweh is the only 'real agent'. For example, Walter Brueggemann in a variety of contexts makes claims such as: 'there is no mediating agent'; '[t]he army may be Babylonian, but the real agent is Yahweh'.[24] He goes on to claim that 'the rule of Yahweh is not done "supernaturally," but through historical agents'.[25] But I cannot discern any theological space between God being the only 'real agent' and God acting 'supernaturally'.

Such theological statements regarding agency in Jeremiah discount the genuine role that the Babylonian armies play; they are no less 'real' than Yahweh. One must not diminish the distinction between God and God's agents or discount the very real power of that human army. Just how God is involved in this activity cannot be factored out, though Jer. 51.11 may contain a clue: God 'stirred up ($\sqrt{}$ עוּר) the spirit of the kings of the Medes' (cf. Zech. 1.14; Jer. 6.22; 25.32; 50.9, 41; 51.1).

The second issue pertains to the *ethical implications* of God's use of creatures to act in the world in and through *violent action* and *violent speech*. God chooses to be dependent on that which is not God to carry out the divine purposes in the world. This risky move links God with the often violent activities of the chosen agents.

Note the commonality of verbs and metaphors in the chart below. Remarkable correspondences exist between God's actions and those of Nebuchadnezzar.

	GOD		NEBUCHADNEZZAR/ BABYLONIANS
Jer. 13.14	I will dash (נפץ) them	Jer. 48.12	they will break in pieces (נפץ)
Jer. 13.14	I will not pity (חמל), or spare (חוס) or have compassion (רחם)	Jer. 21.7	he…pity (חמל), or spare (חוס) or have compassion (רחם)
Jer. 13.14 (also 13.9)	when I destroy (שחת) them	Jer. 36.29 (cf. 51.25)	He will destroy (שחת)
Jer. 9.15; 13.24; 18.17; 30.11	I will scatter (פוץ)	Jer. 52.8; 23.1-2	have scattered (פוץ) the flock

been in place prior to Israel's understanding of God's use of agents in creation. We cannot be sure.

24. Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 294.

25. For example, Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 54, 70, 176, 193, 428, 430, 439. 460; even that Yahweh is 'the One who wields the sword'; see also Carroll, *Jeremiah*, pp. 763-64, 811.

Jer. 24.9; 27.10	I will drive them away (נדח)	Jer. 50.17 (cf. 23.2)	Israel driven away (נדח) by Assyrians and Babylonians
Jer. 21.5	I will fight against you (לחם)	Jer. 21.2	he is making war against us (לחם)
Jer. 21.6	I will strike down (נכה)	Jer. 21.7	he shall strike them down (נכה)
Jer. 21.14	I will kindle (יצת) a fire	Jer. 32.29	They will kindle (יצת) a fire
Jer. 49.20	God has plan (יעץ) and purpose (חשב)	Jer. 49.30	N. has plan (יעץ) and purpose (חשב)
Jer. 49.38	God will set (שים) his throne	Jer. 43.10	N. will set (שים) his throne
Jer. 19.11	God will break (שבר) the people	Jer. 43.13	N. will break (שבר) Egyptian holy objects
Jer. 25.9	those slain (חלל) by the Lord	Jer. 51.49	Babylon must fall for having slain (חלל) Israel
Jer. 27.8	Until I have completed its destruction …	Jer. 27.8	… by his hand [i.e., the hand of the king of Babylon]
Jer. 12.12; 47.6	sword of the Lord	Jer. 20.4	they shall fall by the sword of enemies
Jer. 25.8; 49.19	God imaged as a lion	Jer. 4.7; 5.6	foe from the north like a lion
Jer. 29.4, 7, 14	God sends into exile	Jer. 29.1 (and often)	N. sends into exile
Jer. 29.17	God will pursue (רדף) them	Jer. 39.5; 52.8	Chaldaeans will pursue (רדף) them
Jer. 30.3; 31.20	I will bring them back to land	Jer. 42.12	he will bring them back to land
Jer. 30.3; 31.20	I will have mercy	Jer. 42.12	he will have mercy

It is only when one combines these lists that it becomes clear that God's actions are not 'stand-alone' actions; God is working in and through Babylonian agents.[26] That God is the sole subject of verbs of violence in certain contexts cannot be taken in isolation. Again and again, the larger contexts in which these instances occur make it clear that God is, finally, not the sole subject of verbs of violence.

What conclusions might one draw from this common fund of language? Such harsh words appear to be used for God because they are used for the actions of those in and through whom God mediates judgment. God's

26. Generally, note the uncommon God-talk in the oracles against Babylon (Jer. 50–51). Some violent acts are ascribed to both Jeremiah and God (cf. Jer. 1.10 and 24.6; 25.15-29).

language in Jer. 27.8 puts the matter in a nutshell, 'I have completed its destruction by his hand'. In view of this mediation, God refers to Nebuchadnezzar as 'my servant' (Jer. 25.9; 27.6; 43.10). Others whom God designates 'my servant' in Jeremiah are David, the prophets, and Israel! In some sense God has chosen to be *dependent* on Nebuchadnezzar in carrying out that judgment.[27] Exodus 3.8-10, where *both* God and Moses (often called 'my servant') are said to bring Israel out of Egypt, could function as a paradigm for such textual considerations (cf. Jer. 23.1-3).

   These striking parallels suggest that *the portrayal of God's violent action in Jeremiah is conformed to the means that God uses*. God is portrayed in terms of the means available. And so God becomes associated with violence because of the agents in and through whom God has chosen to work. God thereby accepts any fallout that may accrue to the divine reputation. In this functioning of the moral order, God is a genuine agent. But God always works in and through non-divine agents. People's sin generates snowballing effects; God is active in the interplay of sinful actions and their effects; 'third parties' are used by God as agents for that judgment (e.g., Babylon).[28]

   As Nebuchadnezzar is identified as God's servant,[29] so, at the time of the return from exile, another 'pagan' king, Cyrus of Persia, is identified as God's 'anointed one' (Isa. 45.1-7). As with Cyrus (Isa. 45.4),[30] Nebuchadnezzar does not know Yahweh. The coalescence of God's actions and those

---

27. On issues of divine dependence on the human, see Terence E. Fretheim, 'Divine Dependence on the Human: An Old Testament Perspective', *Ex auditu* 13 (1997), pp. 1-13. Brueggemann's perspective on this issue is stated in his *Jeremiah*, p. 106 (cf. p. 463): God is 'not dependent on what is in the world'.

28. See Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, p. 77. This dynamic understanding of sin and its effects can also be observed in the use of the verb פקד, 'visit'. Its translation as 'punish' in NRSV is often problematic, as in Jer. 21.14; 'I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings'. A more literal translation is more accurate: 'I will visit upon you the fruit of your doings' (see Jer. 5.9; 14.10). It needs to be considered whether the word 'punish' is ever an appropriate translation of the verb פקד (see the related noun פקודה, often translated 'punishment', e.g., Jer. 46.21). See the formulation of Gerhard von Rad regarding Israel's 'synthetic view of life' and Israel's lack of punishment language in his *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), I, pp. 265, 385. The practical implications of the translation of פקד can be seen in a comparison of RSV and NRSV in Exod. 20.5b. RSV translates 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children'; NRSV, however, changes that to read, 'punishing children for the iniquity of parents'. Strangely, the NRSV translates the same formulation in Exod. 34.7 as 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children'.

29. See Thomas Overholt, 'King Nebuchadnezzar in the Jeremiah Tradition', *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 39-48.

30. It is helpful to note that the granting of *mercy* could take place through the king of Babylon (Jer. 42.11-12). Both the removal of peace and mercy (see 16.5; 21.7) and its restoration are thus related to his agency.

of Nebuchadnezzar are abundantly clear in these texts. God will bring Babylon's armies against Israel and destroy them (and their neighbors); both God and Babylon are agents.

To recapitulate, God is not the sole agent in these situations; God acts in and through the agency of Babylon. At the same time, the latter will certainly act as kings and armies in that world are known to act. That is predictable and God (and other observers) know this from experience with conquerors such as these. This portrayal of God is a kind of extreme realism regarding what is about to happen to the people. And when the people do experience the pillaging, burning, and raping of the Babylonian armies, readers can be sure that they were real agents. Jeremiah also makes this witness when describing the actual destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 39; 52) in terms that hardly mention God.

Another factor to be considered here are those texts wherein God calls Jeremiah to bring a word of *non*violence through Israel's submission to Babylon (see Jer. 27–29; 38.17-18). This divine command, which intends to reduce the violence, was announced after Babylon's subjugation of Jerusalem in 597 BCE and before its destruction in 586 BCE. With a political realism, God announces that, if Israel would not rebel against Babylon, its future would take a less violent course. In other words, Babylon would function as agent of divine judgment in different ways, depending upon how Israel responded to the call for nonviolence. *Israel's own resorting to violence would lead to its experience of even greater violence as well as to a greater association of God with such violence, which is in fact what happens.*

It may be said that God's most basic stance in the face of potential violence is nonviolence. But, in order to accomplish God's work in the world, God may respond in and through potentially violent agents for the express purpose that sin and evil not go unchecked in the life of the world.

The ethical implications of such a perspective are considerable. If God were the only 'real' agent, then the humans through which God works are diminished and, finally, they do not 'count'.[31] Such a perspective cheapens their creaturely status, devalues their words and deeds, making them finally inconsequential. For Jeremiah, however, both God and human agents have a crucial role to play, and their spheres of activity are interrelated in terms of function and effect. God is not only independent and the humans involved only dependent. God has so shaped the created order that there are overlapping spheres of interdependence and genuine responsibility is shared with human beings.

---

31. Walter Brueggemann uses this language in his *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), p. 77. My colleague Frederick Gaiser has addressed the issue of agency in response to such claims in '"To Whom Then Will You Compare Me?" Agency in Second Isaiah', *Word and World* 19 (1999), pp. 141-52.

In sum, these perspectives regarding agency are testimony to a fundamentally *relational* understanding of the way in which God acts in the world. There is an ordered freedom in the creation, a degree of openness and unpredictability, wherein God leaves room for genuine human decisions as agents exercise their God-given power. Even more, God gives them powers and responsibilities in such a way that *commits* God to *a certain kind of relationship* with them. God does not intervene to make sure every little thing is done correctly. These texts are testimony to a divine sovereignty that gives power over to the created for the sake of a relationship of integrity. At the same time, this way of relating to people, not least the use of agents, reveals a divine vulnerability, for God opens the divine self to suffering should things not go according to the divine will. And the actions of the agents often do go violently wrong, *despite* God's best efforts.

Several summary statements regarding the divine use of agents may further the conversation.

a. God chooses to work in and through human beings and other creaturely agents (including human language and the created moral order) to achieve God's purposes for Israel and the world. I could put it even more strongly: God *always* uses agents in God's working in the world. It may be said that much, if not all, of the violence associated with God in the Bible is due to God's decision to use agents that are capable of violence.

b. God does not perfect human beings (or other creatures), with all their foibles and flaws, before deciding to work in and through them. God works with what is available, including the institutions of society, certain ways of waging war, and other trappings of government. More generally, violence will *inevitably* be associated with God's work in the world because, to a greater or lesser degree, violence is characteristic of the persons and institutions in and through which that work of God is done. Thus such work by the agents will always have mixed results, and will be less positive than what would have happened had God chosen to act alone.

c. God does not (micro)manage the work of the agents, but exercises constraint and restraint in relating to them. This point is demonstrated by texts that show that God's agents may exceed the divine mandate, going beyond anything that God intended. See, e.g., Zech. 1.15, where God says: 'I am extremely angry with the nations that are at ease, for while I was only a little angry, they made the disaster worse'. God was only 'a little angry'! The nations exceeded God's will and their misuse of power complicated God's merciful activity on Israel's behalf.

The agents of God are not puppets in the hand of God! They retain the power to make decisions that fly in the face of the will of God (to which the wrath of God is responsive). Hence, the will and purpose of God, indeed

the sovereignty of God, active in these events is not 'irresistible'.[32] God was not the only agent at work in the situation, as if God could at any time push a button and 'fix' matters. Hence, God's way into the future is not reduced to a simple divine decision to act. Because of God's committed relationship to the world, no resolution will be simple, even for God.

Even more, God often passes judgment on these agents for their excessiveness (e.g., Babylon in Jer. 25.12-14; 27.6-7; 50–51). It is assumed (as with the oracles against the nations generally) that moral standards are available to the nations, to which they are held accountable. In some sense God risks what the Babylonians will do with the mandate they have been given.[33] One element of that risk is that God's name will become associated with the violence, indeed the excessive violence, of the Babylonians.[34]

So, God may confer a negative value on the work of God's own agents: They overdid it! Many prophetic texts speak of divine judgment on those nations that have been agents of God (Jer. 25.12-14; 27.6-7; 50–51; Isa. 10.12-19; 47.1-15; Zech. 1.15).[35] They retained the power to make decisions and execute policies that flew in the face of the will of God; the God active in these events is not all-controlling.

Notably, God assumes a share of the responsibility for that violence and will take on a certain blame for using such agents (Jer. 42.10: 'I am sorry for the disaster that I brought upon you').[36] How are we to understand this striking divine admission?[37] It appears that this divine response carries with it the sense of genuine regret; the judgment and its painful effects proved

32. Contrary to Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 222.

33. The 'how' of the giving of this mandate is not made clear. Whether a given person or nation can be identified as an agent is, finally, a matter of true/false prophecy; one would then have to get into such criteria and their specific application in order to make such a decision.

34. For a comprehensive statement on divine risk-taking, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

35. God's relationship to Babylon changes in view of its conduct as the agent of judgment. By its excessively destructive behaviors it opens itself up to reaping what it has sown (Jer. 50.29; 51.24). God turns against God's own agent on the basis of issues of justice (see Exod. 22.21-24). Such texts (cf. the oracles against the nations) assume that moral standards are known by the nations, to which they are held accountable.

36. The translation of חם‍ is difficult (NRSV, 'be sorry'; NAB, 'regret'; NIV/NEB, 'grieve'). Each of these translations carries the sense of a pained divine response to God's own actions.

37. See the discussion of William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), II, p. 1033. For an earlier treatment of this and other texts, see Terence E. Fretheim, '"I was only a little angry": Divine Violence in the Prophets', *Interpretation* 58 (2004), pp. 365-75.

to be more severe than God had intended, or even thought they would be.[38] God, who does not foreknow absolutely what and how the agents will speak and act, accepts some responsibility for what has happened.[39]

d. Human beings, then or now, do not have a perfect perception of how they are to serve as God's agents in the world. They are finite creatures. While it is difficult to evaluate Israel's perception, it is important to note that the role of divine agents is often expressed in terms of the direct speech of God. Inasmuch as this is a phenomenon rare in the New Testament (and perhaps for other reasons), should we understand such direct divine speech in the Old Testament in less than literal terms? Israel may have put into direct divine speech understandings they had gained through study and reflection rather than an actual hearing of God's words. And might we say that Israel did not always fully understand? Israelites did understand themselves to be the agents of divine judgment against, say, Canaanite wickedness (Deut. 9.4-5) and understood themselves to have received a word from God to that end.[40] It is possible that they did not fully understand.

In our reflections about such texts, we must certainly not set them aside just because they offend us; we must learn to read the Bible *against* ourselves, to let its texts be in our face. But, must we not also ask: is everything violent in the Bible that offends us appropriately offensive? One thinks of the absence of a condemnation of patriarchy or slavery, or the divine ordering of the wholesale slaughter of cities.

Another way into this questioning conversation is to note the extent to which key biblical characters raise questions about God and make challenges regarding God's (anticipated) violent actions. One thinks of Abraham's challenge to God in Gen. 18.25, 'shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?'; or, think of Moses' engagement with God in Exod. 32.7-14, in the wake of the sin of the golden calf, citing the ancestral promises. God is responsive to human challenge regarding violence. These texts invite Bible readers to engage in similar challenges to formulations regarding divine violence.

e. That God would stoop to become involved in such human cruelties as war and other forms of violence is finally not a matter for despair, but of hope. God does not simply give people up to experience violence. The tears of the people are fully recognized by God; their desperate situation is named for what it is. Again and again, God takes the side of those entrapped

---

38. For the idea that God thought something would occur, but did not, see Jer. 3.7, 19-20.

39. On the issue of divine foreknowledge, see Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, pp. 45-69.

40. For violence connected to the conquest of Canaan, see M. Zehnder's study in the present volume.

in violence and its effects and does so in such a way that God himself, entering deeply into the life of the world, bears the violence in order to bring about good purposes.

   These texts reveal something of the inner life of God who uses agents that cannot be divinely controlled and is deeply pained at the results. God, however, is not bereft of resources to act in the midst of God's own suffering. Indeed, suffering becomes a *vehicle* for divine action. Suffering is God's chief way of being powerful in the world. God does not relate to suffering as a mechanic does to a car, seeking to 'fix it' from the outside. God enters deeply into the suffering human situation and works for the necessary healing *from within* (Christians would say that this kind of move by God is most truly revealed in the cross of Christ). By choosing to participate in their messy stories, God's own self takes the road of suffering. Because God suffers the effects of violence, God thereby makes possible a non-violent future for the world.[41] For God to so enter into the situation means that mourning will not be the last word.

5. *In a World of Sin, God's Unfailing Promises Make Room for More Violence*

The first clear divine promises in the Bible occur at the end of the flood story (Gen. 8.21-22; 9.8-17). God promises never to act in such a destructive way again. God states the promise twice and formalizes the matter in covenantal terms (9.8-17). Such a promise entails an eternal divine self-limitation in the exercise of power in response to evil in the world.[42] For God will keep promises.

   The repeated reference at the beginning of the flood story to God's response of tears and regret at human behaviors (Gen. 6.6-7) is accompanied by strong references to God as the Creator. The God who weeps and regrets is the Creator of heaven and earth! Such a portrayal of divine vulnerability assumes that human beings have successfully resisted the Creator's will for the creation. To say that the will of God is resistible becomes a key for understanding many texts that follow, not least the many passages that speak of divine anger.[43] Notably, human beings are said to be just as sinful

---

41. See earlier language regarding this matter in Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, including 'In order to achieve God's purposes, God will in effect "get his hands dirty"' (p. 76). For a discussion of details regarding divine judgment, see Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 157-65.

42. The reference to 'seedtime and harvest' in Gen. 8.22 suggests that the divine promise is more extensive than a simple reference to 'no more floods'. For an initial effort regarding divine promise and other divine actions as entailing self-limitation, see Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, p. 72.

43. The 500+ references to potential and actual divine anger in the Bible (both Old

after the flood as they were before the flood (Gen. 6.5; 8.21). But this time God's response to the human situation is different; it is decisively shaped by a divine promise.

I look more closely at Genesis 8.21. I suggest that this verse addresses two related matters. The first has reference to *a change in the functioning of the moral order* to which God now stands committed. That is, God 'will never again curse the ground [or, better, regard the ground as cursed] because of humankind'.[44] This divine change in the way that the created order functions is necessary if the second divine commitment is able to be fulfilled: God's promise regarding the future of creation, 'nor will I ever again destroy every living creature', a promise formalized with a covenant in Gen. 9.8-17.

The first matter, which introduces the statement about human sin ('for', כִּי), has reference to the created moral order; God both places limits on the move from sin to consequence within the natural order *and* limits God's possible actions related thereto. The limitation regarding the curse seems to signal a fundamental shift in the way in which the created order functions or what might be called the causal weave. In effect, God puts into place a new boundary for the functioning of the causal weave. God provides for a constant natural order within which life can develop without any concern about human sin 'triggering' another disaster of the magnitude of the flood. In effect, a divine move to 'blot out' the world (Gen. 6.7) in the wake of the human condition announced by God in Gen. 6.5 *will no longer be available to God* in view of God's own edict.

The second matter has still further reference to the effect of that new boundary *for God*; it is first stated negatively (no destruction of 'every living creature') and then positively ('seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease', Gen. 8.22). This multi-faceted divine promise means that the route of world annihilation has been set aside by God as a (divine) possibility.[45] Divine judgment there will be

Testament and New Testament) is testimony to the successful resistance of the will of God. Otherwise, why would God be angry? For details, see Terence E. Fretheim, 'Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament', *HBT* 24 (2002), pp. 1-26.

44. The language of Gen. 8.21 has been thought to refer to (a) no more floods; (b) no additional curses on the ground (see 3.17); (c) the abandonment of the existing curse; or (d) more generally, the end of the reign of the curse. It seems best to regard the phrase as some combination thereof; that is, God's newly stated word provides for a constant natural order within which life can develop without any concern about human sin 'triggering' another disaster of the magnitude of the flood. That is, God places an eternal limit on the functioning of the moral order. See discussion in Terence Fretheim, 'The Book of Genesis', in *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), I, p. 393; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, pp. 454-56.

45. For a comparable understanding of God's promise to David, see 2 Kgs 8.19: 'Yet the LORD would not destroy Judah, for the sake of his servant David, since he had

(e.g., Genesis 18–19, Sodom and Gomorrah), but it will be limited in scope. Sin and evil, and their now limited effects, will be allowed to have their day and God will work from *within* such a world to redeem it, but will not over-power it from without.

Again, what do such promises mean *for God*? For God to promise not to do something ever again entails an eternal divine self-limitation regard-ing the *exercise* of *both* freedom and power with respect to any related mat-ters. That is, God thereby limits the divine options in dealing with evil in the life of the world. And, given the fact that God will be faithful and keep promises, does that not mean that divine self-limitation yields real limita-tion for God? That is, God may be said to be *capable* of doing anything,[46] but the certainty of God's faithfulness means that God *cannot* break a divine promise. Consider, say, the marital relationship (an oft-used metaphor for the God-Israel relationship): the individuals involved *are capable of* being unfaithful, but they *cannot* do so and still be faithful. Comparably, God is able, but God cannot.

We have seen that God's way with the world has been shaped from the beginning in terms of divine self-limitation. When faced with another flood in the world's experience because of continuing human sin (Gen. 8.21), God does not pull back from that creational way of relating to the world (evident in Gen. 1–2). Instead, God intensifies that divine way with the world, entering even more deeply into self-limiting ways.

In other terms, God determines that, in view of humanity's unchanging wickedness, the divine self-limitation that has been in place since the cre-ation needs to be made even more thoroughgoing. More is at stake here than, say, God's patience with human beings in their sinfulness or God's decision not to act in one or another situation.[47] God gives to the creation itself new boundaries within which it now functions in ways that will not allow for another flood ('never again'). Such a change in the created order is deemed necessary so that the divine promise can be kept.

---

promised to give a lamp to him and to his descendants forever' (see also 1 Kgs 11.36-39; 15.4).

46. And hence it would still be appropriate to speak of divine 'omnipotence'. One might say that God's promises limit the divine options regarding the *exercise* of omnipotence.

47. For examples of interpretive options, Claus Westermann correctly notes (con-trary to several scholars) that Gen. 8.21 is not a note regarding a transition from curse to blessing; the effects of the curse continue in significant ways. At the same time, Westermann does not go far enough when he claims that the 'never again' only means that God 'decides to put up with this state of evil… He can simply let things be, put-ting up patiently with people just as they are with their inclination to evil' (*Genesis*, p. 456). At the least, his comments do not take into account the continuing divine suf-fering that we have noted. He is closer to the mark when he speaks of the world's 'sta-bilization' (*Genesis*, p. 457). But more seems to be at stake.

If such a change in the very nature of the world itself and in God's relationship with creation can be so characterized, might this help readers come to terms with later biblical texts that speak of violence, indeed divine violence? What difference might it make in the interpretation of such texts of violence if they are read in and through God's promise at the end of the flood story, wherein *God places a limit on what God is able to do about violence*? Indeed, is it not the case that such a divine way with the world may issue in even more violence? That is to say, by promising 'never again' to bring a violent world to an end, does not God thereby open up that world to unending violence, even if 'never again' catastrophic? From another angle, by loosening the divine control of the world (which the divine 'never again' entails), God becomes even more closely associated with its potential for violence and its actual violence, and one might speak of guilt by association. That is, if God had maintained tighter control of the structures of the causal order, there would not have been so much violence!

And so, we can conclude that, in a world of sin, God's promises throughout the Old Testament will continue to be unfailing. At the same time, those divine commitments will make room for even more violence in the world. In the language of Claus Westermann, 'God promises that he will never again allow humanity to be destroyed… There is no power that can shake this promise'.[48] I would add: not even divine power.

---

48. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, p. 456. Compare the statement of William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999): 'God's unconditional commitment to remain true to creation's formfulness and integrity without destructive intervention' (p. 57). This idea is on target except that the problematic word 'intervention' narrows too much the range of the limits that God places on God's own actions.

Violence, Judgment and Ethics in the Book of Amos

Hallvard Hagelia

Abstract

The prophet Amos lived in a century characterized by a strong contrast between the affluence of a rich upper class and the poverty of a much broader lower class in the northern kingdom of Israel. The book of Amos, mirrors a society marked by social oppression and economic exploitation. The opening chapters of the book contain oracles against neighboring nations, followed by an indictment directed at the peoples of Judah and Israel, with the latter as its main target. The message of the book is addressed to the political authorities in Samaria and the religious authority in Bethel. The violence described in the book is both inherent in the societal structures and actively pursued by the powerful against the powerless. Divine judgment of injustice is also described in violent terms. The (often metaphorical) language of the book of Amos is dramatic, mirroring the dramatic economic and moral decline of the people and their authorities. The focus of the book lies more on violence and judgment than on ethics. The latter is to be inferred from the general description of the former, as the criticism of human misconduct reflects basic ethical principles and implied principles of law.

Introduction

Amos is probably the earliest prophet whose traditions have been collected in a particular 'book'.[1] The editor of the book of Amos presents him as one 'who was among the shepherds of Tekoa' (1.1),[2] a village in the hill country of Judah, identified as modern Khirbet Tequ'a. In his vocation story Amos himself emphasizes, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"' (7.14-15). Amos stands in opposition to the prophet guilds known from much earlier in Israelite religious history (cf. 1 Sam. 10.5), and he had been reluctantly dragged into prophetism.

1. Biblical 'books' were actually scrolls.
2. Bible translations are taken from NRSV.

The structure of the Book of Amos is somewhat complex. Some main editorial features are evident, but others seem arbitrary. One possible way to arrange the book is to follow the structure proposed by Erich Zenger:[3]

1.3–2.16	Oracles against nations,
	with end formula in 2.16: '…, says the LORD'.
3.1–6.14	Judgment oracles against Israel,
	with end formula in 6.14: '…, says the LORD, the God of hosts'.
7.1–9.6	Vision cycle,
	with end formula in 9.6: '…the LORD is his name'.
9.7-15	Salvation oracles for Israel,
	with end formula in 9.15: '…, says the LORD your God'.

Violence, judgment and ethics are closely interrelated, and should be treated together. Violence and judgment are actually more present in the text than ethics, which is more elusive. Whether Amos had a special war ethics is a complex matter.[4] Was there an assumption of human rights? Was there an assumption of natural law, based on the assumption that life was created by God, and therefore should not be violated? In the book of Amos ethical premises often have to be read out of the criticisms and judgments, and related to ethical premises given otherwise and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible—or outside of the Hebrew Bible.

Violence has different faces, which is also mirrored in the book of Amos. Violence could be war, it could be active oppression and it could be systemic oppression, related to the political and social system. In Amos the latter two are most prominent.

The subject studied in this article is the book of Amos and its relation to violence. Our knowledge about the prophet himself is at best fragmentary. A few biographical features are revealed about him, but in general Amos is hidden in a historical shadow.[5]

But we have a book conveying the memory of him. Whether all oracles in this book really come from Amos himself we don't know. But this question is not important for the present article. At any event, there is a text, and this article will relate to the text, and not bother very much about its relation to Amos himself, except for those few cases where the text actually has biographical connotations.

3. Erich Zenger *et al.*, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Studienbücher Theologie; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995). p. 386.

4. Cf. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Engendered Warfare and the Ammonites in Amos 1.13', in *Aspects of Amos: Exegesis and Interpretation* (ed. A.C. Hagedorn and A. Mein; London: T. & T. Clark, 2011), pp. 15-40 (21).

5. Paul M. Joyce argues that 'we can know next to nothing of Amos' own personality, let alone his psychology' (Paul M. Joyce, 'The Book of Amos and Psychological Interpretation', in *Aspects of Amos*, pp. 105-116 [108]).

The book of Amos is part of the Minor Prophets, and could profitably be read in relation to this collection of books.[6] In the present study, however, the book of Amos shall be investigated on its own.

The prophet's vocation is dealt with relatively broadly in the book of Amos, in 3.7-8 in a somewhat subtle way, and in 7.10-17 in a more explicit way. It is first and foremost the meeting between Amos and the priest Amaziah in Bethel that causes Amos to tell his vocation story. Amaziah charged Amos of conspiracy against the king, Jeroboam II, and reported the case to the king in Samaria. Amos had allegedly announced deportation of the Israelites and the death of the king. No reason is explicitly given for this fate, but it caused the priest to try to chase the prophet away to Judah, which caused Amos to sharpen his message.

The two first verses of the book of Amos (Amos 1.1-2) set the frame and the theme of the book of Amos. The first verse dates the visions to 'two years before the earthquake'. Earthquake becomes somewhat of a theological motif in the book of Amos.[7] The second verse is a kind of program declaration for the book of Amos (cf. Isa 1.2 and Micah 1.2).[8] The effect of the earthquake and the effect of the voice of the LORD are somehow similar; both are seen as theophanic. The divine 'thunder' from Zion mediates judgment upon Israel's and Samaria's godlessness and injustice described in the rest of the book of Amos.

The book of Amos presents the prophet as a messenger from Zion/Jerusalem to the northern kingdom of Israel, its political authorities in Samaria and its religious authorities at the sanctuary of Bethel (cf. 1.1-2). As a shepherd (√נקד) from the south (1.1), Amos talks against the shepherds (√רעה) of the north (1.2). This constellation reveals the religious and political tensions behind Amos's mission, as Jerusalem was considered as the only legitimate cultic centre, with the cultic centres in the northern kingdom implicitly considered as illegitimate. There were also deep political tensions between the two states, which is clearly reflected in the book of Amos.

1. *The Prophet's Authority*

Amos was not modest on behalf of his God; he had a vocation and he repeatedly referred to the authority given to him by the Lord, expressed in variants of the messenger's formula, 'thus says the LORD'. In 3.7-8 he presents

---

6.   Cf. Martin Lang, *Gott und Gewalt in der Amosschrift* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2004), pp. 15-16.

7.   Cf. Katharine J. Dell, 'Amos and the Earthquake: Judgment as Natural Disaster', in *Aspects of Amos*, pp. 1-14.

8.   On the structural and contextual position of Amos 1.1-2 and its theology and relation to the Minor Prophets, cf. Lang, *Gott und Gewalt*, pp. 20-27.

a prophet as a person with a vision of the divine will, and a person under obligation from a fearsome God (cf. Jer. 20.7).

He repeatedly addressed the people with the demanding phrase 'hear this word' (3.1; 4.1; 5.1). The same kind of authority is emphasized in 4.13:

> For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
> reveals his thoughts to mortals,
> makes the morning darkness,
> and treads on the heights of the earth—
> the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

The prophet did not convey his personal opinion, but rather talked on behalf of his God. When he used the messenger formula, 'thus says X', he talked as if the X himself was present, as if God in person was speaking. This also implies that the prophet has authority to challenge the addressees in the sphere of ethics.

2. *Oracles against Judah and Israel and their Neighbours (1.3–2.16)*

2.1. *The Broad Picture*
In Amos 1.3–2.16 we find one of the most schematized and well structured units of the Hebrew Bible, comprising prophecies against Damascus, Gaza, Tyrus, Edom, Moab, Judah and Samaria, demonstrably encircling Samaria as representative of the northern kingdom.[9] Whereas these oracles regularly comprise two or three verses, the oracle against Samaria has no less than 11 verses; therefore, there is no question where the emphasis lies. The indictment of the brutal behaviour of Israel's neighbours serve to point out the fact that Israel's and Samaria's brutality and lack of religious integrity is even worse (2.6-16).

Each of the oracles follows a particular scheme:[10]

- An introductory prophet formula, 'Thus says the LORD';
- counting of transgressions with the formula 'For three transgressions of X, and for four…';
- the name of the actual city or nation inserted into the counting;
- affirmation that 'I will not revoke the punishment';
- specification of the cause for punishment, 'because' (כִּי),
- description of the violence;
- description of the corollary punishment.

The series of these styled charges reveals what will be even clearer later in the book of Amos, its universalistic outlook. The violence described is

---

9. Cf. Anselm C. Hagedorn, 'Edom in the Book of Amos and Beyond', in *Aspects of Amos*, pp. 41-48 (44-46).
10. Cf. A.C. Hagedorn, 'Edom', p. 44.

of different kinds, but all are grave, and they are implicitly set up against divine standards not explicitly pronounced, standards that are assumed as universally valid.

- Damascus is charged of brutality: 'they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron' (1.3b).
- Gaza is charged with deportation, in cooperation with Edom: 'they carried into exile entire communities, to hand them over to Edom' (1.6b).
- Tyrus is also charged with illegal cooperation with Edom and for having broken an unspecified covenant: 'they delivered entire communities over to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of kinship' (1.9).
- Edom is charged with having 'pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity…' (1.11b).
- The Ammonites are charged with cruelty against pregnant women for political reasons: 'they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory' (1.13b).
- Moab is charged with sacrilege against the graves of the king of Edom: 'he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom' (2.1b).
- Judah is charged with opposition against the Torah: 'they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes…' (2.4).
- Lastly, the northern kingdom of Israel is charged of social crime and idolatry (2.6b-8):

> …they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

In summary: The crimes mentioned are brutality, cruelty, deportation, persecution, lack of piety, desecration of graves, adultery, idolatry and social crimes. The charges can be differentiated as civil and religious. The neighbouring nations are charged with civil crimes of different types, whereas Judah and Israel alone are charged with illegitimate religiosity: Opposition to Torah and idolatry. Such charges do not apply to the other nations, as the people of Judah and Israel were the only ones explicitly responsible toward Torah. The people of the Lord was held to be a class of its own, distinct from other nations (cf. Deut. 4.7-8; 2 Sam. 7.23; Ps. 147.19-20), because of its election (Deut. 7.7-8). Therefore, Israel and Judah should be assessed differently.

Holding civil and religious responsibility apart is a somewhat artificial differentiation, as religion and ethics are closely interrelated. But in principle there is a 'horizontal' and a 'vertical' dimension. If religion is assumed

to be superior to ethics, religious belief will influence ethics. But in this case there is an important difference between the oracles against Judah and Israel *versus* other peoples. Israel is charged with social as well as religious crime; the two dimensions, 'horizontal' and 'vertical', are intertwined. The charge against Judah concerns the 'vertical' dimension only. The charges against the neighbouring nations concern the 'horizontal' dimension only.

2.2. *The Details*

a. *Damascus.* What is singled out in this case is that they had 'threshed Gilead with threshing-sledges of iron' (1.4). This may refer to how King Hazael of Damascus had conquered Gilead (2 Kgs 10.32-33).[11] Damascus had 'threshed' Gilead, an area east of the river Jordan, during the long-standing conflict between Israel and Aram (cf. Amos 6.13 and 1 Kings 22). Threshing with oxen is mentioned in Deut. 25.4 and metaphorically in Mic. 4.13, where 'daughter Zion' is compared to an ox before a threshing sledge. Interestingly, in that case 'daughter Zion' is admonished to perform what Damascus is charged with in Amos 1.3-5. In other words, the violent threshing of people is condemned in one case but not in another, though in the latter case we are dealing with a case of metaphor.[12]

Is this indicative of a kind of 'situation ethics'? Can Mic. 4.13 be interpreted as a case of *lex talionis*, 'treshing for treshing'? That such threshing sledges existed is well documented, and that 'threshing' of people was actually performed cannot be excluded. But the texts referred to here might as well be understood metaphorically, as a hyperbole for tough treatment. If indeed the reference to threshing both in Amos 1 and Micah 4 has to be interpreted metaphorically, the problem that the threshing of people was condemned in one case and prescribed in the other disappears.

b. *Gaza.* In the case of Gaza, the crime is described as deporting captives to Edom (1.6-8).[13] Deportation of victims from Gaza to Edom is not known from other historical sources, and we do not know whom the victims were; possibly they were Israelites. Generally, we know about skirmishes between Israel and the Philistines in antiquity, especially at the time of Saul and

11. Cf. Anselm C. Hagedorn, 'Edom in the Book of Amos and Beyond', in *Aspects of Amos*, pp. 41-48 (44-46).

12. Cf. the Tel Dan inscription. The Tel Dan stele was probably erected by King Hazael of Damascus, around 840 BCE, who brags about a brutal war against the northern kingdom of Israel. Cf. Hallvard Hagelia, *The Tel Dan Inscription: A Critical Investigation of Recent Resarch on its Palaeography and Philology* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 22; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2006), pp. 76-77; and Hallvard Hagelia, *The Dan Debate: The Tel Dan Inscription in Recent Research* (Recent Research in Biblical Studies, 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), pp. 33-36.

13. Cf. A.C. Hagedorn, 'Edom', p. 44.

David. Philistines had occupied areas far north, as can be seen from Saul's killing by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam. 31). Also between Edom and Judah there were skirmishes (cf. below). Foreigners should be treated well in ancient Israel. Here deportation is implicitly condemned by Amos. The Israelites were not known for performing deportations, as opposed to the Assyrians and the Babylonians.[14]

c. *Tyrus*. Tyrus as well is charged with taking captives and deporting them, also in this case to Edom. According to Amos 1.9, Tyrus did 'not remember the covenant of kinship', without specifying what kind of covenant he had in mind. Considering the early cooperation between Solomon and Hiram (1 Kgs 5) and the tensions between the Israelites and the Phoenicians under king Ahab and queen Jezebel (1 Kgs 16.28-33), it is reasonable to see in the broken 'covenant of kinship' a reference to this early friendship between the united kingdom of Israel and the Phoenicians. That Israelites were force-fully brought by the Phoenicians to Edom as part of the Solomon-Hiram shipping venture should not be excluded (cf. 1 Kgs 9.26-28). Deportation is implicitly condemned also in this case. But the main problem here is sup-posedly the breaking of a covenant, which was a serious matter,[15] not only in ancient Israel, but in the whole area of the ancient Near East.

d. *Edom*. The charge against Edom (1.11-12) was merciless fratricide. Again, no historical details are given. Israel's laws permitted the death pen-alty, and killing was an obvious part of war, but murder was strongly pro-hibited by law.[16] The Cain-Abel narrative (Gen 4.1-16) can be used as a foil and the crown example of the original social crime, the original fratricide.[17]

e. *Ammon*. The Ammonites are charged with ripping open pregnant women for political purposes (1.13-15). In Hos. 14.1 ripping up of pregnant women is described as Yahweh's vengeance for Samaria's iniquity. Thus the Ammo-nites are charged with an act that Yahweh, according to Hos. 14.1, is him-self responsible for. Ripping up of pregnant women is double murder, of both woman and foetus. Like Ps. 137.9, Hos. 14.1b is ethically utterly problematic.[18]

---

14. Of the five Philistine cities, Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron are mentioned here, whereas Gath is mentioned in 6.1.

15. Cf. Exod. 22.21; 23.9; Deut. 10.18-19; 24.17-22; Lev. 19.33-34.

16. However, Ezra had foreign wives sent away (Ezra 10).

17. The phrase לא זכר ברית is equivalent with the frequent phrase (21×) פרר ברית (הפר hi.), cf. Ruppert's article on פרר in Botterweck, Ringgren, Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* XII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 117-20.

18. See the fifth commandment of the Decalogue (Exod. 20.13; Deut. 5.17; cf. Hos. 4.2).

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher argues that 'attack on pregnant women is more than an attack on what moderns would refer to as "non-combatants", and that the meaning of this attack is more nuanced than only an issue of cruelty', cf. his sub-heading 'Attacks on Women and Fertility as Engendered Warfare'.[19] Rape of women was a way of conquering an enemy. Smith-Christopher observes that 'We can certainly say the Ammonites do not fare very well in Israelite historical narrative…' and reckons with 'a particular distaste for the Ammonites' among the Israelites.[20]

f. *Moab*. Moab is charged with the sacrilege of burning to lime the bones of the king of Edom (2.1-3). No historical circumstances are mentioned, but burning of human bones is mentioned also in 1 Kgs 13.2 and 2 Kgs 23.16, 20, in both cases with reference to King Josiah of Jerusalem. A similar practice is mentioned in Isa. 33.12: 'And the peoples will be as if burned to lime', with Yahweh himself as the stoker. The context is a judgment against Jerusalem (Isa. 33.14):

> The sinners in Zion are afraid:
> trembling has seized the godless:
> 'Who among us can live with the devouring fire?
> Who among us can live with everlasting flames?'

Yahweh, then, will do to Zion and Jerusalem what Moab is charged with having done.

g. *Judah and Samaria*. In Amos 1.3–2.16 Judah and Samaria are encircled, a literary device to focus especially on these two nations, in particular Samaria. It is the northern kingdom of Israel who is Amos's main addressee. His attack against Judah and Samaria, with the capital of Samaria representing the whole northern kingdom, is caused by their breaking the Torah. The charges against Judah and Samaria are different from the others. Even though the charges against Judah and Samaria and their neighbouring nations basically follow the same frame, especially the charge against Samaria is very much extended, from three verses against Judah (like the neighbours) to eleven verses against Samaria.

The norm broken by Judah is said to be Yahweh's Torah and statutes. This is a general charge, with no reference to any historical events. The term Torah is here used in parallel with √ חקק, prescription, rule. The terms חק

---

19. Cf. André Lacocque, *Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

20. Ripping of pregnant women is known also from, e.g., the time of Tiglath-pileser I (around 1100 BCE) and from Homer's Iliad; see Hans Walter Wolff, *Dodekapropheton 2, Joel und Amos* (BKAT; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 3rd edn, 1985), p. 195.

(129×) and חקה (100×) often overlap with תורה, משפט and מצוה, because they roughly share the same semantic domain. These terms are often used in cultic contexts.[21] The verb מאס, refuse, reject, is used in a similar way, with the divine law as object, also in 2 Kgs 17.15; Isa. 5.24 and Ezek. 20.24. In the case of Judah (Amos 2.4), breaking the Torah and the divine statutes is described as being 'led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked'. This was a violation of the Decalogue's first commandment (Exod. 20.3; Deut. 5.7). No social crimes are mentioned in the charge against Judah. In 6.1 Amos mentions Zion: 'Alas for those who are at ease in Zion', without being more explicit there either.

Amos' main addressee is the northern kingdom of Israel (2.6-16), more specifically, taking in consideration the book as a whole, the capital of the northern kingdom, the city of Samaria (3.9, 12; 4.1 and 6.1), and the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, addressed as 'Israel' (2.6), 'O people of Israel' (3.1), 'O house of Israel' (5.1), 'those who feel secure on Mount Samaria' (6.1), and derogatively described as 'you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria' (4.1). But at certain places the addressees are the cult places of Bethel (3.14; 4.4; 5.5 and 7-13), Gilgal (4.4 and 5.5) and Dan. (8.14). Bethel and Daniel were the two places selected by King Jeroboam as cult sites in the northern kingdom (1 Kgs 12.26-31). Of these two cult sites Bethel is the most important in the book of Amos, probably for geographical reasons.

Samaria is charged with social ('horizontal') as well as religious ('vertical') crimes and transgressions. Economic exploitation, selling 'the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals' (2.6) is mentioned. In a metaphorical way, the addressees are charged with trampling 'the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way' (2.7a), which refers to oppression. Further, they are charged with adultery or prostitution: 'father and son go to the same girl' (2.7b), which violated sexual taboos (cf. Lev. 20.11 and Hos. 4.14). The indictment also states that 'they lay themselves down…on garment taken in pledge' (2.8), which violated the ordinances of Exod. 22.26-27. Their illegitimate sexual behaviour is said to be performed 'beside every altar' (2.8), assumedly as a kind of 'sacred sexuality', perhaps a *hieros gamos* of sorts? And finally, the text says that 'in the house of their God they drink wine brought with fines they imposed' (2.8), a combination of a desecration of 'their God' and legal injustice. Implicitly, the cult performed is identified as non-yahwistic. In any case, as seen from Jerusalem and the southern kingdom, the only legitimate cult site was Zion.[22]

21. D.L. Smith-Christopher, 'Engendered Warfare', pp. 22-23.

22. Smith-Christopher, 'Engendered Warfare', p. 30. He compares the violence against women in Amos 1.13 with modern cases among Armenians in the Ottoman

The charges set forth against the kingdom of Israel are far more detailed than the charges against Judah and the other neighbours. And they are repeated in various ways throughout the book of Amos, as we will see.

3. *Other Oracles of Judgment against Israel (3.1–6.14)*

This unit is a composite of variegated smaller units and separate oracles.

3.1. *Warnings Directed at Israel (Amos 3.1-8; 4.1-3; 5.1-3)*
Chapters 3, 4 and 5 begin with identical warnings addressed to the northern kingdom of Israel: 'Hear this word…' (3.1; 4.1 and 5.1). This is a solemn invocation of the people to catch their attention for an important message. Each sub-unit is concluded with a similar phrase: 'The LORD has spoken' (3.8), 'says the LORD' (4.3) and 'thus says the LORD' (5.3), to add maximum of authority to the oracles.

In the first case (3.1) the people is addressed as 'O people of Israel'. In the second case (4.1) the addressees are derogatorily called 'you cows of Bashan'. In the third case (5.1) the people is addressed as 'O house of Israel', with a subsequent lamentation (קינה).

a. *Amos 3.1-8.* In Amos 3.1-8 certain obligations are laid on the people and on the prophet himself as a corollary of their election (v. 2). The people are singled out among the nations as something special: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth', which comes with a special responsibility: 'therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'. Verses 3-6 present a series of metaphors based on everyday's causalities, with a conclusion (v. 7) leading up to the obligation laid on the prophet himself (v. 8):

> The lion has roared;
> who will not fear?
> The Lord GOD has spoken;
> who can but prophesy?

The metaphor of people walking together (v. 3) probably refers to how people were expected to 'walk' with their God. The lion, the young lion, the bird and the snare (vv. 4-5) refer to hunting. There is a cause for everything, also how animals act and how hunting devices actuate. The next metaphor refers to why a trumpet is blown (v. 6); it is war, causing disaster in the city. In v. 7 these metaphors are brought to their conclusion: This is why and how the Lord talks to prophets. Therefore the prophet is under obligation to speak to the people (v. 8). Because of the prophetic word, also the

Empire, Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and the massacres in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where latent conflicts among people(s) living together for generations suddenly broke out in open and violent conflict (see 'Engendered Warfare', p. 26, cf. p. 35).

people are under obligation, but they have not fulfilled their obligations. The people are ethically responsible because of their divine election and the implied covenant. The people are demanded to live according to their election, and the prophet is demanded to preach the message given to him from Yahweh.

b. *Amos 4.1-3*. In Amos 4 the addressees are the people of Samaria, 'you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria'. They are charged with pride, with oppressing the poor and crushing the needy and with drinking (v. 1, cf. Isa. 3.16). The ensuing sentence is solemnly announced: 'The LORD GOD has sworn by his holiness', before it is fleshed out with brutal metaphors from butchery and fishing: 'they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhook' (v. 2). The city will be ruined, and the people will be dragged out of the ruins and deported 'out into Hermon' (v. 3), an indication of a future deportation to Assyria. The moral crime attacked here is social oppression, exploitation and abuse of alcohol ('Bring something to drink!')

c. *Amos 5.1-3*. Verse 1 introduces a lamentation (קינה), which follows in v. 2:

> Fallen, no more to rise,
> is maiden Israel;
> forsaken on her land,
> with no one to raise her up.

Here it is 'game over!'.[23] By calling Israel a fallen 'maiden' (בתולה), the text uses sexual allusions, not unlike the erotic language of Jer. 2.23-25, 32. Israel has whored with foreign deities, she is no longer a virgin and therefore discarded as a spousal candidate; like trash she is 'forsaken' by her wooer, Israel's God. The oracle added in v. 3 can be read from two angles. The primary reading is as a condemnation; as a result of her status as fallen and forsaken, judgment will happen to her, and strike ninety percent of her population. However, the other side of the coin is that ninety percent implies a remnant of ten percent, who will escape disaster. The 'remnant-theology' is well known, especially from the prophets.

3.2. *Judgment upon Samaria (Amos 3.9-15)*
In Amos 3.9-15 destruction and catastrophe are predicted for the northern kingdom. The text unit is formulated as a lawsuit, and the addressees are 'the people of Israel who live in Samaria' (v. 12)[24] and 'the altars of Bethel'

---

23. Joyce, 'The Book of Amos', p. 113.
24. The text-critical problems will not be discussed here.

(v. 14) as representatives of the political and religious authority of the king-dom. The people are charged with 'great tumults', 'oppressions' (v. 9), 'vio-lence and robbery' (v. 10) and 'transgressions' (v. 14). The destruction is described as complete (vv. 13-15), except that a remnant is indicated in the metaphor of how pieces are left over from a lion's prey (v. 12, cf. 5.3). The reason given for the misery is ignorance: the people do 'not know how to do right' (v. 10). But ignorance is no excuse for irresponsibility; the LORD will 'punish Israel for its transgressions' (v. 14).

3.3. *Charges against Israel (Amos 4.6-13)*
In 4.6-13 there is a series of charges against the people, followed by a refrain, 'yet you did not return to me, says the LORD' (vv. 6b, 8b, 9b, 10b and 11b), and finally a conclusion: 'Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel: …' (v. 12a). In the first case, Yahweh lets the people starve (v. 6). In the second case, Yahweh manipulates with the rain, some cities being deprived of it (vv. 7-8). In the third case, the crop is struck with 'blight and mildew', gardens and vineyards are laid waste, and locusts devour the fig trees and the olive trees (v. 9). In the fourth case, Yahweh sends pestilence and war (v. 10). In the fifth case, Yahweh sends destructions like in Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 11). But all of this has happened in vain: 'yet you did not return to me, says the LORD'. Why all these calamities were sent is not said explicitly. No ethical or judicial reason is given for these punishments. But in v. 12 the people are summoned before God, evidently to account for something not explicitly mentioned. God has let people know his will, therefore people are responsible before him (v. 13).[25]

3.4. *Invitations to Seek God (Amos 5.4-15)*
This paragraph is a mixture of direct admonitions to seek God (vv. 4, 6, 14) with cautions against false cult (v. 5), evil (v. 15) and evildoers (vv. 7 and 10), said about the evildoers (vv 7) and addressed to them (vv. 10-12), best summarized in v. 15a: 'Hate evil and love good', cf. v. 14a: 'Seek good and not evil'.

The four 'seek'-phrases (in vv. 4, 5, 6 and 14) and the opposite 'hate'-admonition in v. 15 seem to be constitutive for this part of the pericope: 'Seek me and live', 'do not seek Bethel…, Gilgal, Beer-sheba', 'Seek the LORD and live', 'Seek good and not evil, that you may live' and 'hate evil and love good'. Seek and seek not, good and evil. Good is Yahweh, evil are Bethel, Gilgal and Beer-sheba, as well as the neglect of justice and righteousness (v. 7) and the trampling of the poor (vv. 10-11). Yahweh is the single one who is 'good', while evil is associated with a plurality, namely

---

25. Cf. how Paul refers to knowing God through creation (Rom. 1.20), 'natural revelation'.

specific cult places as well as people acting unfair and unjust toward the underprivileged. The ethical misery is that the people have exchanged righteousness with injustice (vv. 7 and 10-12). Verse 13 is somewhat ambiguous; is it just a marginal remark, or is it an advice? Probably the former, the latter would not easily fit with the prophet's own proclamations. Again, there is a reference to a remnant, 'the remnant of Joseph' (v. 15, cf. v. 3).

3.5. *Lamentation (Amos 5.16-17)*
In this paragraph, we find a solemn announcement of the consequences of unrighteousness, comprising a triple 'alas' (vv. 16 and 18) and a reference to 'lamentation' (מִסְפֵּד). Yahweh will judge city and countryside (vv. 16b-17):

> In all the squares there shall be wailing;
> and in all the streets they shall say, 'Alas! alas!'
> They shall call the farmers to mourning,
> and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; in all the vineyards there shall
> be wailing,
> for I will pass through the midst of you,
> says the LORD.

This oracle is related to peasant life, with 'farmers' and 'vineyards'. The lament is described vividly, with wailing in the streets, shouting of 'alas!' and calls to mourning. 'I will pass through the midst of you' is how the judgment is metaphorically described. But nothing is said about why all this lamenting has come to be. No ethical premises are explicitly given, nor any specific descriptions of judgment or condemnation. The text just describes the result of the judgment, after the breaking of not-identified ethical and religious regulations.

3.6. *The Day of the LORD (Amos 5.18-27; cf. also 8.9-14)*
The 'alas' introducing 5.18-27 announces judgment, the threat of the 'Day of the LORD'. There are many references to the 'Day of the LORD' or just a 'day' in the prophets.[26] In most cases the 'Day of the LORD' is described as a day of judgment, which is vividly described in v. 19, where lion, bear and snake represent 'an escalation in horror'.[27] Because judgment of some is delivery and liberation for others, the Israelites had trusted that the latter would be their portion (cf. v. 18), but the prophet emphasized the former. The 'Day of the LORD' is no 'day' at all, it is more of a 'night', a 'day' without light, just deep darkness. 'Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?' (5.20). The reason for this judgment is found in the people's cultic practices (vv. 21-26), and the implementation

---

26. See, e.g., Isa. 2.10-21; 11.10-16; 12.1-6; 13.6-22; Joel 2; Zeph. 1.14-18.
27. Aulikki Nohkola, 'Amos Animalizing: Lion, Bear and Snake in Amos 5.19', in *Aspects of Amos*, pp. 83-104 (84).

of the Day of the LORD consists in the deportation of the people into exile 'beyond Damascus' (v. 27).

Reference to 'the day' comes up again in 8.9-14, introduced by 'On that day' (8.9):

> On that day
> I will make the sun go down at noon,
> and darken the earth in broad daylight.

This day is described in epiphanic terms. The prophet develops his saying from a solar eclipse, and uses the phenomenon as a metaphor for how cultic festivals will be turned into mourning and lament (v. 10). It will be a day of mourning, as after the death of an only child. But nothing is said about why this misery will befall the people.

In v. 11, the 'day' is turned into 'days' for which a different metaphor is used: God will send famine in the land, spiritual famine, without any hope (vv. 11-12):

> The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD,
> when I will send a famine on the land;
> not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
> but of hearing the words of the LORD.
> They shall wander from sea to sea,
> and from north to east;
> they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not
> find it.

Even the strongest youth will faint 'in that day' (v. 13). Worshipping the gods of Samaria and Dan is in vain (v. 14). Spiritual famine, yearning for the word of God, should supposedly be considered as something positive. In this case, however, it is used as part of the judgment, because it will not be satisfied. But again, nothing is said about the reason for this judgment. No ethical or judicial reason is given. However, the reference to their 'feasts' (v. 10) implies that part of the problem is again their cultic behaviour.

3.7. *Being at Ease in Zion, Secure on Mount Samaria (Amos 6.1-7)*

Amos 6 begins with another 'alas' and a verbal attack on 'those who are at ease in Zion and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts' (6.1), and continues with an 'alas for those who lie on beds of ivory…' (vv. 4-6). This is in line with the social criticism against Samaria expressed in 3.12b and 4.1. Here in 6.1 three groups of people are singled out: The people of Jerusalem, i.e. the southern kingdom (Zion), the people of Samaria, i.e. the northern kingdom (Mount Samaria), and those 'first of the nations' on whom the Israelites, whether south or north, rely for sponsoring, protection and alliances. The cities Calneh and Hamath (both in Syria) and the

Philistine Gath are used as examples of bad fortune.[28] The addressees of vv. 4-6 are not specified explicitly. But the allusions to Amos 3.12, 15 and 4.1 point to Samaria. In this case affluent life-style is under divine attack. The corollary judgment is described in terms of deportation (v. 7, cf. 5.27). The reference to Syrian Calneh and Hamath and Philistine Gath implies a certain universality in this judgment, but the main addressee is Samaria.

3.8. *Destruction of Samaria (Amos 6.8-14)*
In Amos 6.8-14, a motif is taken up from 5.3 and sharpened: If ten percent are left unhurt (5.3), at the end none will be spared (6.9); Israel is dead.[29] The message is solemnly delivered with an oath (v. 8a), with no reservation:

> I abhor the pride of Jacob
> and hate his strongholds;
> and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

The objects attacked are 'the pride of Jacob' (cf. 8.7) and 'his strongholds'. The 'pride of Jacob' is not identified. It could be interpreted as the general pride of Jacob, in analogy with 'Israel's pride' in Hos. 5.5 and 7.10. It could also refer to a big house or palace in general. But its parallel position with 'his strongholds' has military connotations, hence one can think of fortified houses. The military connotation is strengthened in the latter part of this unit, as the addressees brag about having taken an area east of the River Jordan from the Aramaeans (6.13). The phrase 'the pride of Jacob', then, refers to general or military pride and arrogance of Samaria and the northern kingdom. The divine judgment against such attitudes is strong and absolute. Yahweh 'abhors', 'hates' and 'will deliver up'; great as well as small houses will be destructed, rich as well as poor will suffer judgment (v. 11).

In the sequel of the text, the people are charged with turning 'justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood' (v. 12). Their pride of conquering the villages of Lo-debar and Karnaim east of the Jordan river (v. 13) is of no benefit, because of the threat from a people who will oppress them from Lebo-Hamat to the Wadi of Arabah, i.e. from Syria to the Dead Sea. Pride paired with injustice is a bad ethical combination.

4. *Amos's Visions (Amos 7.1-9; 8.1-3 and 9.1-4)*

Amos's vocation narrative (Amos 7.10-17, see above) is surrounded by a series of five visions, reported in chapters 7–9, all of them foreboding the people's catastrophe. In 7.1-3 the disaster is caused by locusts, in 7.4-6

---

28. Commentators disagree on why just these three cities are mentioned, but that is of no particular significance here.

29. See Lang, *Gott und Gewalt*, p. 18.

by fire, in 7.7-9 by the destruction of the cult mounds in Israel, in 8.1-3 a basket of mature fruit illustrates the end of Israel, and in 9.1-2 the Lord strikes the capitals of the sanctuary with devastating results. In the first two cases the prophet intercedes with Yahweh, and 'the LORD relented' (7.3, 6). In the latter three visions there are no intercessions and judgment is effectuated.[30] All five visions describe judgment. In 9.1 even 'those who are left' (אחריתם) will be killed by the sword; there is no 'rem-nant' (רשית) left. With a rhetorical alluding to Ps. 139.7-12, it is described how Yahweh will hunt them down everywhere (9.2-4). The creator God, the LORD of hosts, is the sovereign One, from whom no one will escape (see 9.5-6). But nothing is said in these visions about the reason for the judgment.

5. *Dishonest Business (Amos 8.4-8)*

These verses are very explicit as to ethics and judgment. Verse 4 refers to what people do, and vv. 5-6 to what they say, whereas v. 8 gives God's reaction. The people 'trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor', and an extended citation shows how they methodically plan to oppress the needy:

> When will the new moon be over
> so that we may sell grain;
> and the sabbath,
> so that we may offer wheat for sale?
> We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
> and practice deceit with false balances,
> buying the poor for silver
> and the needy for a pair of sandals,
> and selling the sweepings of the wheat.

This is inconsiderate and corrupt business, with no other purpose than profit—at any cost. There is actually nothing new in these verses, as James D. Nogalski documents (for vv. 8-14); the content of these verses just takes up things found earlier in the book of Amos.[31] But this recapitulation of what is previously said in the book emphasizes the book's ethical agenda, and is revealing for what kind of un-ethical behaviour triggers the judg-ments expressed throughout the book of Amos. This is an agenda which has been taken up in modern economic, ethical and political debate, rendering the book of Amos highly relevant in the present situation.

---

30. These visions are formed along similar lines as the two visions in Jer. 1.11-19.
31. See James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve, Hosea-Jonah*, (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011), pp. 344-45.

6. *Salvation oracles for Israel (Amos 9.7-15)*

The latter part of Amos 9 contains various elements. There has been much discussion about its authenticity, but these questions will not be taken up here; I concentrate on the text as it stands.

Verse 8a reads: 'The eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom'. This is an utterly derogative description of the northern kingdom of Israel, summarizing what was earlier said about all kinds of flaws with this nation. The sins are not directly specified. But the nation itself is illegitimate and so are their cult sites and their cult. Verses 8-10 describe a sieving of the people: 'All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us"' (v. 10), '…except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the LORD' (v. 8b). A remnant will be left.

'On that day' the Davidic dynasty will be raised up again (vv. 11-12). This saying assumes the fall of the dynasty with the fall of Jerusalem in 587, and is implicitly an indication of the age of the literary product, the book of Amos.

At the end Paradise is promised (v. 13, cf. 8.11), recalling, e.g., Isaiah 11. The Davidic kingdom will be re-established.

7. *Summary and Conclusions*

John Barton lists six assumptions that according to his view Amos must have taken for granted, if his message was to make sense:[32]

1. Evil deserves to be punished.
2. The nations are answerable for their acts, specifically in the conduct of war.
3. Israel believed they enjoyed a special status before God which reduced the likelihood of God's punishment.
4. Israel did not expect judgment from Israel's own prophets.
5. The sins which Amos accuses Israel of committing were not thought comparable to the sins listed for other nations.
6. It was more obvious to the Israelites that the nations had moral obligations towards each other than that the Israelites had obligations among themselves.

Much violence is described in the book of Amos; cities and nations are judged by God for their violence. There are not so many explicit ethical claims. The ethical premises are often hidden.

---

32. John Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations* (SOTSMS, 6, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 4.

Religion and ethics are closely related matters. Without elaborating on the character of this relation, I assume that religion is basic for ethics. Religious ideas are decisive for how ethics is formed.

Judgment in the book of Amos is directed against various kinds of social violence among the Aramaeans of Damascus, the Philistines in Gaza, the Phoenicians of Tyrus, the Edomites, the Ammonites, Judah and, in particular, the Samarians. In addition the Judaeans and the Samarians are judged for their religious apostasy and their nonchalant attitude to the Torah and the divine ordinances. The Aramaeans are charged of how they treated war victims in Gilead, the Philistines are charged with deporting war victims, the Phoenicians are charged with taking captives and breaking a brotherhood treaty, the Ammonites are charged with cruelty against pregnant women, the Moabites are charged with grave desecration, and the people of the northern kingdom of Israel are charged with injustice, oppression, adultery, prostitution and abuse of someone else's property. I have pointed out that some of these actions are seen as legitimate elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. That is a problem I will not try to address here. We have to live with the fact that the Hebrew Bible is no monolithic unit; a multitude of ethical attitudes are mirrored in the biblical books.

The ethical and judicial basis for the judgments described in the book of Amos is not always explicitly spoken out. What was actually the judicial basis for the judgment? The problem is touched by Terence Fretheim in his comments on Genesis 12–50:[33]

> Rightness or wrongness in Genesis 12–50…is not determined by reference to law code or by ordinances that have been specifically revealed by God, but by the dynamics of long-standing-experience in everyday relationship. In other words, *human* wisdom, *human* discernment, and *human* perception have been integral to the shaping of what is right and what is wrong.

The same can be said about the basis for judgment in the book of Amos.

Fretheim also talks about 'implied law' that points out an 'ought' or an 'ought not', a terminology he borrows from James K. Bruckner.[34] The 'oughts' are presented as an organic ethics by means of creational motifs that are embedded in the narrative, because 'oughts' and 'oughts not' are woven into the foundations of human experience. Therefore, 'outsiders', non-Israelites, are also accountable, 'because law is an integral part of their life and functions independently of any specific covenant relationship'.[35]

---

33. Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 100 (Fretheim's italics).

34. See Fretheim, *God and World*, p. 98; James K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (JSOTSup, 335; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 200.

35. Fretheim, *God and World*, p. 99.

Fretheim further calls attention to natural laws,[36] basic moral laws that God has built into the very structures of the created order, laws that are discernable from observations of the world and how it best works. 'Individuals and nations are held accountable to natural law and for overstepping generally accepted boundaries, apart from any knowledge they might have regarding what is explicitly given by God'.[37] This also applies to the book of Amos, where judgment is not always given a particular ethical or judicial reason.

We have seen that in some cases there are explicit laws regulating life, in other cases not. Life teaches us that some things are right and others are wrong, even disgusting and abhorrent. This is what Amos talks about.

How should we perceive the relationship between human and divine violence in the book Amos? As seen from a modern perspective, the God of Israel is 'violent'. But we should be careful not to read the Bible too much from a modern perspective; it should be read on its own terms. The Bible— and the book of Amos—is a 'child' of its own time. Its language, not least its metaphors, are part of ancient Near Eastern linguistic habits, which modern man often perceive as strange, foreign, archaic or even brutal. The ancient world was brutal, as seen from a modern perspective. That is also the case with the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, etc. (Exod. 21.24; Lev. 24.20), even though the idea behind this law was that a penalty should be adequate and appropriate. There should be a reasonable relation between offence and penalty. In a democratic society people would agree with such a principle, even though according to modern standards, no penalty should be corporal. Divine violence, as described in the book of Amos, is sometimes brutal. But its basis is *lex talionis*, which is found also in other ancient Near Eastern cultures.

The violence described in the book of Amos is recognizable in different eras of history, also in our own era. We hear about such cruelties in the news from different parts of the world almost on a daily basis. Deportation was widely practiced by Stalin; genocide was practiced by Hitler, on the Balkans in the 1990s, in Rwanda and Burundi; these days, similar cruelties are reported from 'biblical' Syria, etc. Rape and mutilation of women and children has been practiced as a part of warfare also in our time. Economic oppression is an integral part of world economy. Bribery and corruption plague nations as well as local communities in many countries.

Will God punish iniquities in our time like at the time of Amos? This might be a question of how we interpret history. We say that history catches up with us. We know that some acts and attitudes bring their own punishments. We say that honesty is the best policy. Some will say that this is

36. See Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 140-44.
37. Fretheim, *God and World*, p. 141.

just how the world functions. Others, with a more theistic understanding, will see a divine will behind it, that God works through moral societal order. In Norway, we have at least brought to justice the criminal who is responsible for the atrocities of July 22, 2011. We do not equal Norwegian law with biblical law, but we have an open and democratic society that we believe will bring justice. We do not have a perfect society, because we have politicians—and that is why we need to have politicians! But nevertheless, we believe that law and order will have the last word. I would like to see it as an expression of divine will and judgment.

Understanding Images of Violence in the Book of Revelation

Dana M. Harris[1]

Abstract

Images of violence in Revelation must be understood in the overall context of violence in the Bible. Revelation is best understood as the culmination of the overarching 'plot' of God's ultimate purposes first revealed in Genesis 1–2, including perfect *shalom*, which is expressed in flourishing relationships between human beings and God, each other, and the rest of creation. Humanity's rejection of God's plan (Gen. 3) ruptures each of these relationships. Thus the Bible's 'plot' concerns God's actions to restore creation and humanity's intended purpose within it. Throughout the Bible, and especially in Revelation, divine judgment is God's response to human sin and violence and concerns his larger purposes of reconciliation and the eradication of evil. Moreover, the scriptural witness indicates that violence is not an essential character of God, but that divine judgment is a redemptive response to human sin and violence. Divine judgment ultimately overcomes violence, first by means of the atonement, but then through the eradication of evil, the end of death, and the restoration of Eden. Understood this way, Revelation offers tremendous hope for those who follow the Lamb in a world of violence and injustice. It also challenges them to consider their own complicity with evil, violent world systems. Ultimately, Revelation leads to worship of the One who executes perfect justice.

Introduction

It often seems people have one of two responses to the book of Revelation: fight or flight.[2] 'Fighters' often view current events as 'fulfillment' of

2. The term 'fight or flight' comes from the field of behavioral psychology and 'is an emotional and visceral response to an emergency that is designed to mobilize energy for attacking or avoiding the offending stimulus' (*APA Dictionary of Psychology* [ed.

Revelation or evidence of divine judgment; in extreme cases, 'fighters' find in Revelation warrant for violence as a means of executing 'divine wrath' (e.g., David Koresh and the Branch Davidians). For most, however, the response is 'flight'. Images of locusts who look like horses with scorpion tails cause some to close their Bibles quickly and to avoid Revelation altogether. Perhaps they also 'flee' a God whom they believe acts in such violent ways.

This essay suggests another option for reading Revelation by arguing that images of violence in Revelation must be understood in the Bible's overall context as the culmination of an overarching narrative of God's ultimate purposes. These purposes are first revealed in Genesis 1–2, which describes perfect peace (or *shalom*), expressed in flourishing relationships between human beings and God, each other, and the rest of creation.[3] Humanity's rejection of God's provision (Gen. 3) ruptures this perfect *shalom*. Hence the Bible's 'plot' concerns what God is doing to restore creation and humanity's intended purpose within it. The NT presents this in terms of reconciliation through Jesus Christ (Col. 1.20). Violence in Revelation is God's final response to human sin and effects his ultimate purposes of restoration and eradication of evil. This canonical context, as well as the historical context of Revelation, is essential for understanding its violent images.

1. *Contexts and Definitions*

Discussion of violence in Revelation naturally brings up the issue of violence in the Bible, which is generally seen as problematic by contemporary biblical ethicists and interpreters.[4] This 'problem' does not go away,

Gary R. VandenBos; Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007], p. 375). I am indebted to my colleague, Stephen Greggo, PsyD, Professor of Counseling, TEDS and Trinity Graduate School for his input.

3. Although some assert that 'overarching narratives' or 'metanarratives' provide a platform for domination or that a unified biblical narrative is not possible, see the insightful critique and challenge to such claims by Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). Thiselton observes, 'Selfhood discovers its identity and personhood within a larger purposive narrative which allows room for agency, responsibility and hope… Christian identity locates self-identity within the larger story of God's dealings with the world' (pp. ix-x). See also Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). In this essay, I am also setting aside questions of sources and redaction, and am considering the Bible in its final form. For a defense of such an approach, see Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987).

4. Although the concept of divine judgment is problematic for many today, this does not appear to have been the case for the original biblical audiences. Thomas

however, by bifurcating the Bible between a wrathful, violent 'God of the OT' and a peace-loving, merciful 'God of the NT'.[5] Indeed, those who see Jesus as the epitome of nonviolence and nonretaliation have difficulty reconciling this image of Jesus with 'the Jesus' in Revelation 19.[6] Yet the divine warrior in Revelation 19 is part of a long trajectory that extends through the Bible and culminates in this final judgment scene, which ushers in the new creation.[7] Other images of violence in Revelation should be understood similarly. A failure to consider this canonical context leads to a distorted understanding of the nature of God and his actions in Revelation and a misguided, if not dangerous, appropriation of the text.[8]

  Biblical images of violence include both human and divine actions, which has led some to speak of 'divine violence' in terms that parallel human violence. For example, Terence Fretheim defines violence as follows: 'any action, verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in what-ever degree of intensity that abuses, violates, injures, or kills'.[9] Such a definition, when applied to divine actions, presents disturbing

---

Neufeld observes: 'Interestingly, whereas today it is the violence of judgement and the imagery of a forcefully intervening God that causes offence, in the Bible itself it is at least as often the patience and forbearance of God in view of injustice and violence that puzzles and enrages victims' (Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011], p. 32).

    5. The 'problem' of violence, however, is more prevalent in the OT. See, for example, Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012).

    6. Cf. the somewhat similar comment in Richard A. Spencer, 'Violence and Vengeance in Revelation', *Review and Expositor* 98 (2001), pp. 59-75 (60).

    7. The background for the 'divine warrior' in Revelation is found in the OT and will be discussed further below. Additional NT passages that challenge the claim that the 'God of the NT' is only love and mercy include the disturbing portrayals of divine judgment in Mt. 13.23; Lk. 19.41-44; and Acts 5.1-11 (see the helpful discussion of these passages by Terence E. Fretheim, 'God and Violence in the Old Testament', *Word & World* 24 [2004], pp. 18-28 [19]). Moreover, many OT passages (e.g., Exod. 34.6-7) present the essential character of God to be merciful and compassionate.

    8. By canonical approach, I am also assuming that the Bible is divinely inspired and thus represents a unified narrative, although the Bible's 'dual authorship', namely, the divine author working through human authors must be taken seriously. Furthermore, I assume that a given text's meaning is the one intended by the divine and human authors, which can be understood (adequately, if not absolutely) by careful exegesis that seeks to locate a passage in its historical, literary, linguistic, and canonical context. (See the helpful discussion in this regard by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], esp. p. 458).

    9. Fretheim, 'God and Violence', p. 19. In this essay, however, I argue that the inclusion of 'divine' in Fretheim's definition is problematic.

implications about the nature of God.[10] The Bible, however, consistently portrays God's nature as good and holy and his purposes as redemptive. Thus divine 'violence' in the Bible is more properly understood in terms of divine 'justice', which is inextricably linked with *shalom* and 'right order' in relationships.[11] Justice is 'a divine attribute alongside of holiness, righteousness, steadfast love, and compassion'.[12] Moreover, divine justice is the consistent response to human *injustice* and is expressed as divine judgment on human sin and violence.[13] Thus this essay will use 'violence' in conjunction with human actions that are the result of sin and 'justice' with God's judgment on that sin.

10. Addressing such implications is one of the goals of Eric Seibert's monograph, *The Violence of Scripture*, which outlines ways to read the OT nonviolently and 'responsibly by critiquing the violence in them while still considering how these troubling texts can be read constructively' (p. 4).

11. This can also be understood in terms of human 'flourishing'; for more on the link between justice and *shalom*, see Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, 'Justice and Peace', in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (ed. D.J. Atkinson and D.H. Field; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 15-21 (19-20).

12. Bruce C. Birch, 'Justice', in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. J.B. Green; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), pp. 433-37 (435). OT commands and prophetic texts (see esp. Mic. 6.1-8) both reveal God's compassion for the marginalized and oppressed and outline Israel's (covenantal) obligations to treat other human beings in line with divine justice. See also Mark A. Seifrid's helpful discussion of justice as a 'creational concept' ('Righteousness, Justice, and Justification', in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture* [ed. T.D. Alexander *et al.*; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], pp. 740-45). For discussion of justice as 'right order', see John N. Oswalt, 'Justice and Righteousness', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (ed. B.T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), pp. 606-609. For a helpful discussion of the relationship between biblical justice and classical ethics, see James K. Bruckner, 'Ethics', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T.D. Alexander and D.W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 224-40. The link between divine justice and compassion towards others is a distinctive aspect of biblical justice; see the helpful discussion in this regard in Dan O. Via, *Divine Justice, Divine Judgment: Rethinking the Judgment of the Nations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), esp. p. 12, and Wolterstorff, 'Justice and Peace,' pp. 17-18.

13. As Via notes, 'To examine justice and injustice in abstraction from the issue of judgment would be to rupture an integrated biblical construct' (*Divine Justice*, p. 1). Via adds that texts such as Amos 1–2 indicate that all nations, not just Israel, are held accountable for their unjust actions (p. 5; see also Hallvard Hagelia's article in the present volume). To miss this connection between divine justice and divine judgment against human sin is to see divine actions only in terms of 'divine violence' that must be reinterpreted or critiqued in order for the text to be read meaningfully in our time, as is the case, for example, in Eric Seibert's monograph, *The Violence of Scripture*.

2. *The Narrative Storyline of Bible*

The violent images of Revelation are best understood in the context of the Bible's narrative storyline. Genesis 1–2 stresses that God purposefully brings order and fullness out of nothing and repeatedly assesses the result as 'good', thereby pointing to an inherent moral attribute of God.[14] The apex of creation, Adam and Eve, is deemed 'very good'. This account presents the perfect *shalom* that resulted from creation—*shalom* expressed in flourishing human relationships in every dimension.[15] Genesis 1–2 also portrays humans enjoying unmediated access to God's presence, suggesting that the garden is a holy space that anticipates the tabernacle, the Temple, and ultimately the new creation (Rev. 21–22).[16] God's 'rest' (Gen. 2.2) ceased his work of creation so that humanity might begin its own participation in creation work.[17] The dominion entrusted to humanity was thus

---

14. Klaas Spronk aptly notes, 'The canonical context should also be taken seriously when it comes to describe the image of God. The Bible is handed over to us in a tradition which has as it basic conviction that the God this book talks about is a good god… The ideal earth as the kingdom of God is a good place for humans. This positive standpoint concerning God indicates that biblical text describing God as violent and describing violence performed in the name of God are regarded as problematic, but also that the source of the problem is probably not God but man' (Klaas Spronk, 'The Violent God of the Bible: A Study on the Historical Background and Its Impact on the Discussion of Human Dignity', *Scriptura* 101 [2009], pp. 463-70 [464]).

15. Although I have used the language of *shalom* to describe God's ultimate purposes for creation, I have arrived at this understanding independently of Graham A. Cole's monograph, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2009); my own understanding of shalom as central scriptural concept, however, was enhanced by his work.

16. This is the main thesis of Gregory K. Beale's monograph, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2004). The goodness of creation is also intimated in the portrayal of the new heavens / new earth in Revelation 21–22 along lines that show continuity (as well as discontinuity) with creation, e.g., the tree of life, an abundant river, fruitful crops, etc.

17. H.A. Lombard ('Katápausis in the Letter to the Hebrews', *Neotestamentica* 5 [1971], pp. 60-71 [65]) notes, '*God ceased one activity in order to continue in another*' (italics original). Consider also Terence E. Fretheim's helpful comments about the 'self-limitation' of God with regard to the creation account: 'What if the God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship, with a consequent self-limitation in the use of divine power and freedom?' ('The Self-Limiting God of the Old Testament', in *Raising Up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson* [ed. K.L. Noll and B. Schramm; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010], pp. 179-91 [181]). He adds: 'God gives up a monopoly on power for the sake of a genuine relationship with the world' (p. 182; see also similar remarks in his study in the present volume). A somewhat similar idea is found in Cole's comments (*God the Peacemaker*, p. 56) about the 'divine generosity' that is evident in Gen. 2.

intended to extend God's rule throughout the world.[18] Additionally, terms used to denote Adam's care for the garden suggest that this was a priestly role.[19] Thus, Genesis 1–2 outlines God's priestly and kingly intentions for humanity.[20] It should be noted that violence is not present in Genesis 1–2.

Genesis 3 records humanity's susceptibility to doubt God's goodness and to reject his perfect provision.[21] This rejection ruptured the original *shalom*, and humanity became alienated from God, each other, and creation. God's judgment—the expulsion from his holy presence—is the immediate consequence of sin.[22] The next recorded consequence is horrific violence; Genesis 4 records Cain's brutal murder of his brother. Thus human violence is inextricably linked with human sin.[23] Indeed the creation account (of life) in Genesis 1–2 is graphically contrasted by the 'uncreation' (or cessation of life) in Genesis 4. The consequences of human sin are also cosmic (e.g., Rom. 8.18-22), yet before Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden God promises that evil will not ultimately prevail (Gen. 3.15).

This promise is significantly expanded in Genesis 12. The blessings of the Abrahamic promises starkly contrast with the curses pronounced at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), which records humanity congregated together, attempting to reach God on its own terms and for its own glory. This rebellion is a complete rejection of the priestly, kingly dominion intended for humanity. Yet the juxtaposition between this event and the Abrahamic promises

18. This is a significant part of Beale's overall argument (e.g., *The Temple*, pp. 81-87). It is also suggested by William J. Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* [Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1984], p. 35), who describes the garden as the 'center of world blessing' to which he parallels Israel's call to be a center of blessing for the nations. This blessing is later developed in explicitly priestly terms (e.g., Exod. 19.5-6).

19. Beale (*The Temple*, p. 369): 'Adam's purpose in that first garden-temple was to expand its boundaries until it circumscribed the earth, so that the earth would be completely filled with God's glorious presence'. See also the discussion in Cole, *God the Peacemaker*, p. 55.

20. Later biblical writers associated this dominion with glory (e.g., Ps. 8 and Heb. 2).

21. The serpent and evil appear in the biblical text without explanation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the difficult issue of the origin and continued presence of evil in the world. As Cole notes, the scriptural record is less interested in explaining the presence of evil in God's good creation than in recording what God intends to do about it (Cole, *God the Peacemaker*, p. 19 n. 2).

22. Although this point cannot be argued here, the fact that Adam and Eve are held accountable for their sin affirms the dignity that God bestowed upon them and the reality of human free will. This same reality of personal judgment anticipates the final judgment of human beings outlined in Rev. 20.11-15 (cf. Cole, *God the Peacemaker*, pp. 77-78).

23. The lexical parallels (e.g., the use of משל) between Gen. 3.16 and Gen. 4.7 further highlight the connection between Eve's sin and the incursion of human violence.

suggests the means by which God will restore the Edenic *shalom*.[24] The covenant and divine oath associated with this promise ground God's assurances to Moses (e.g., Exod. 6.4-5). God's supreme act of deliverance, the Exodus, underscores his covenantal love for his people and his response to Egypt's violent oppression of them.[25] Safely delivered, the true identity of God's people is revealed in priestly and kingly terms on Sinai (Exodus 19), recalling God's original intention for humanity.[26] Additionally, both the tabernacle and the land draw upon Edenic imagery (e.g., a land flowing with milk and honey). Thus, to a certain extent, the conquest represents the initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises and suggests a limited restoration of Eden. Yet this restoration is incomplete as sin necessitated both restricted levels of access to God's presence in the tabernacle and an elaborate sacrificial system.

Significant development of the Abrahamic promises occurs with their linkage to the Davidic dynasty, the temple, and Zion. The scope of the promise expands cosmically to the ends of the earth, and the heir of the promise crystallizes in the Davidic messiah (Psalm 2). Other developments occur in the prophets, especially Isaiah, where God's promise of restoration draws upon Exodus imagery and describes the new creation in Edenic terms (e.g., Isaiah 65–66). Also important in Isaiah is the promised Servant, who would be instrumental in the restoration of *shalom*. The prophetic witness

24. The land promise (Gen. 12.7) reverses the expulsion from the garden (Gen. 3); cf. James McKeown, 'The Theme of Land in Genesis 1–11 and Its Significance for the Abraham Narrative', *IBS* 19 (1997), pp. 51-64. O. Palmer Robertson ('A New-Covenant Perspective on the Land', in *Land of Promise* [ed. P. Johnston and P. Walker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], pp. 121-42 [125]) notes, 'This…restoration to Paradise provides the proper biblical context for understanding God's promise of a land to Abraham'.

25. Thus judgment (or violence) against Egypt redeems Israel from Egypt's violence (Fretheim, 'God and Violence', p. 25). See also Georg Fischer's study in the present volume and Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, 'Biblical Interpretation and the Rhetoric of Violence and War', *Asia Journal of Theology* (2009), pp. 189-203 (194). The Exodus is key for understanding the 'divine warrior' motif that runs through the Bible. This event shows that God both fights *for* his people and fights *against* those who oppose him, which is poetically expressed in Moses' song in Exod, 15. Apart from a robust understanding of divine justice and judgment on human sin, however, this event is often discussed in terms of 'divine violence'—yet another OT example of divinely sanctioned violence (or even genocide); see, for example, Seibert, *Violence of Scripture*, pp. 96-112. One of the problems with this assertion, however, is that God also fights *against* his *own* people when they oppose him. See the excellent discussion in this regard in Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), esp. pp. 31-47. Hence both the Exodus and the conquest show that human sin and rebellion elicits divine judgment for all of humanity— divine judgment does not privilege one nation or ethnic group over another.

26. Dumbrell (*Covenant*, p. 45) notes, 'The priestly/king role that Adam exercised in Genesis 1–2 devolved upon Israel at Sinai'.

continues the motif of the divine warrior whose perfect justice demands judgment for sin and rebellion. Divine judgment is increasingly directed toward Israel's and Judah's covenantal failures and culminates in exile.[27] Yet the divine warrior is also the Redeemer God who delivers his people from exile and judges their oppressors (e.g., Isa. 63; Hos. 11; Dan. 7).[28]

In Jesus Christ, God's promises find their ultimate expression and fulfill-ment. Jesus is simultaneously the Son of God and the perfect human being who reverses the effects of Adam's sin (Rom. 5), and thereby restores the glory originally intended for humanity (Heb. 2). He is the promised Ser-vant who restores *shalom* (consider Jesus' identification with Isa. 61.1-2 in Lk. 4.18-19). By his fully efficacious sacrifice, he effects deliverance from sin (e.g., Mk 10.45; 1 Pet. 1.18-19). He is the incarnate divine warrior, who conquers spiritual powers and authorities (e.g., Col. 2.13-15). Reconcili-ation between fallen humanity and God is now possible (Col. 1.20; Rom. 5.1-10), as well as between humans (2 Cor. 5.11; Eph. 2.11-22). Redeemed humanity is restored to its kingly and priestly status (1 Pet. 2.4-10) and con-tinues the work of spreading God's rule by the proclamation of the gospel, the new means by which sin and violence is 'conquered' (e.g., Acts 1.8; Rev. 12.11). Even so, creation awaits deliverance from the futility to which it was subjected (Rom. 8.18-22).

Revelation culminates this biblical narrative by presenting the victori-ous, risen Christ, the divine warrior, who has effected redemption and rec-onciliation by his death and resurrection, and who will return to eradicate evil and usher in the new creation, wherein redeemed humanity will enjoy the unmediated presence of God.[29] The biblical storyline, thus, makes clear that violence is the consequence of sin and an intrusion into God's creation and his intentions for it.[30] It also shows that the divine response to human violence is divine judgment that flows out of divine justice.

27. See, for example, Lev. 26 and Deut, 28. Space does not permit a fuller discus-sion of this important topic. As Longman and Reid (*God Is a Warrior*, p. 52) note, 'If the Exodus shows God's power on behalf of Israel, the Exile displays God's power against Israel'; see their excellent discussion of God's judgment of Israel, pp. 48-60.

28. The divine warrior is frequently associated with the 'day of the Lord', which is prev-alent in Revelation. This 'day' anticipates both God's final judgment of his enemies and his vindication of his people; see esp. Amos 5.18-20; Joel 2.1; Isa. 61.1-2; Zech. 12–14; Mal. 4.1-6. This motif is also developed in noncanonical writings such as *1 En.* 1 and *2 Bar.* 24.

29. See the excellent discussion in this regard by William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985).

30. As Fretheim ('God and Violence', p. 21) aptly observes: 'In sum: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence'. He adds (p. 18) that texts such as Isa. 2.2-4 and 65.17-25 'constitute a fundamental witness that violence is an unwanted intruder in God's world'. Cf. similar comments by Via, *Divine Justice*, pp. 51-52. See also Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) and his discussion of the 'vandalism of shalom' (pp. 7-27).

3. *Developing Themes*

A few key themes emerge in the biblical narrative that are essential for understanding Revelation. First, the Bible consistently portrays God as good, holy, just, and loving (e.g., Exod. 34.6-7; Isa. 6.1-3; 51.3-11; 1 Jn 1.5-7; 4.8; Rev. 4.8). Corresponding passages about the essential, eternal nature of God's wrath and judgment are not found, indicating that God's wrath and judgment are a response to sin and evil, but not essential characteristics of God.[31]

Second, the image of God as the divine warrior, who both fights for his people against evil and against his people when they reject him for evil,[32] must be understood in the context of sin and violence. Closely related to the depiction of the divine warrior is the divine judge,[33] whose judgment is purposeful and redemptive.[34] A third theme is the future expectation of the eradication of evil (e.g., Isa. 57, 65), which is closely linked with a future restoration of creation (Isa. 54, 57, 65). Both hopes are portrayed in increasingly eschatological terms throughout the biblical narrative.

Two brief conclusions can be drawn from these three themes. First, the scriptural witness indicates that violence is not an essential character of God. Second, this witness also indicates that divine judgment is a redemptive response to human sin and violence.[35]

---

31. The distinction between 'judgment' and 'justice' is essential. Whereas 'justice' is an essential attribute of God, 'judgment' is his just response to human sin and injustice.

32. Cf. Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, p. 17.

33. Similarly Fretheim ('God and Violence', pp. 22-23) notes: 'God's uses of violence…are associated with two basic purposes: judgment and salvation'.

34. As Fretheim ('God and Violence', pp. 25-26) observes, 'God's wrath means the deliverance of slaves (Exod. 15.7), the righteous from their enemies (Ps. 7.6-11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exod. 22.21-24), and Israel from its enemies (Isa. 30.27-30)'. So also Via, who argues that 'judgment, from the biblical point of view, is always an occasion to move into redemption' (*Divine Justice*, p. 74).

35. Both observations address a common objection that divine violence somehow promotes or endorses human violence. As Hans Boersma notes, 'The underlying assumption in many discussions of divine violence appears to be that violence is inherently evil and immoral: A violent God necessarily leads to a violent society, since "what happens above happens below"' (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004], p. 43). Fretheim ('God and Violence', p. 25) adds, 'God's violence … is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God's more comprehensive *salvific* purposes for creation' (italics original).

4. *Key Passages from Revelation*

The difficulties and controversies associated with interpreting Revelation are due in part to the complexities of apocalyptic literature and the uniqueness of Revelation itself.[36] Apocalyptic literature likely emerged during crises when pious Jews sought to reconcile God's promises with foreign occupation and violent oppression.[37] Hope for the fulfillment of these promises began to shift from the present age to the age to come, when God would bring about a cataclysmic end of the present world and usher in the new creation. Closely related is the hope for vindication, judgment of one's oppressors, and the eradication of evil.[38]

The commonly accepted date for Revelation is toward the end of Domitian's reign (CE 81–96), which is supported by his aggressive promotion of the emperor cult and his blasphemous insistence on being addressed as 'lord and god'.[39] In this historical context, the divine judgment depicted in Revelation offered encouragement for those experiencing persecution and challenged those who were complacent or compliant with the Roman Empire.[40] The purpose of Revelation is thus both to encourage and to warn.

---

36. I am assuming that the author of Revelation is the same individual who wrote the Gospel of John and the Johannine epistles, in part based on internal claims in Revelation (e.g., 1.1; 22.8) as well as early tradition (e.g., Papias). Moreover, there are several important conceptual similarities in these writings, such as the designations 'Word' and 'Lamb' to describe Jesus. Ultimately, the points offered in this paper do not depend on Johannine authorship of Revelation.

37. Neufeld (*Killing Enmity*, p. 9) observes, 'It is not an exaggeration to say that violence pervaded the world of Jesus and his followers'. This was certainly true in much of Palestine in the first century, especially in the years just prior to and just after the destruction of Jerusalem in CE 70. But it was likely also true for many (although not all) of the original recipients of Revelation.

38. For extended discussion of these themes, see Dumbrell, *End of the Beginning*.

39. This is based on testimony of Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 5.30.3). Scholars have not found compelling reasons to doubt this date (cf. Adela Yarbro-Collins, 'The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John', in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* [ed. A. Yarbro-Collins; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 50; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996], pp. 198-217 [205]). See also J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), pp. 60-61.

40. Although it is commonly maintained that the purpose of Revelation was to encourage believers who were facing persecution, Craig R. Koester makes a compelling case for the problem of complacency and (perhaps unconscious) collusion with the empire. He discusses the problems of assimilation, especially concerning public festivals honoring various deities and trade guilds, and complacency due to wealth that posed real temptations for first-century believers ('Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire', *Interpretation* 63 [2009], pp. 5-18 [7-9]). Thus, Revelation warns those who may have been unaware of the degree to which they were cooperating with

An implicit question runs throughout Revelation: who is the true Lord of the universe: the Roman Empire or the Triune God? Repeated use of ἐδόθη ('it was given') stresses that Rome's power was ultimately derivative (e.g., Rev. 18). Moreover, behind the Roman Empire was Satan, whose evil power is also circumscribed by God. Thus Revelation reveals that the Triune God controls the entire cosmos, hence he alone must be worshipped and followed. Worship and allegiance are inseparable in Revelation.[41]

Revelation also encourages its audience to understand that ultimate reality is the transcendent realm of God, not the present, temporary world in which evil appears to triumph. Throughout Revelation, this transcendent realm and present realities are depicted with symbolic language, often signaled by ὡς ('like', 'as'), indicating that these realities are being described rather than recorded in a literal (or literalistic) way. Thus the depiction of Jesus as a slain Lamb with seven eyes (Rev. 5.6) describes the reality of Jesus's sacrificial death and his perfect omniscience, but does not state how Jesus looks literally. This symbolic language is highly evocative and intends to elicit a response of worship or repentance. Its graphic nature reveals the horror of sin and evil, while also showing that beyond present realities (such as the Roman Empire) is the Lord God Almighty. Human domination is ultimately illusory. Moreover, the elasticity of this language has enabled subsequent audiences to see contemporary application of many of these symbols.[42]

Although Revelation culminates the canonical narrative, it is itself an extended narrative, whose plot unfolds through a series of visions, which are cyclical, rather than merely sequential.[43] These repeated cycles eventually lead to a culmination of the overall plot. With this understanding of Revelation, the following section will briefly survey some of the violent imagery in Revelation.[44]

---

and benefitting from an empire that was fundamentally opposed to God's character and purposes. Koester also outlines various ways that the Roman Empire sought to portray itself as both divinely blessed and divine: 'This pattern of identifying the political order with the divine order is challenged by Revelation' (Koester, 'Visionary Challenge', p. 11).

41. See esp. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*.

42. 'Keys' for unlocking this symbolic language are constrained by the text itself (e.g., Rev. 1.20), OT backgrounds, conventional usage within contemporary apocalyptic literature, or the historical realities of the Roman Empire.

43. For helpful discussions of the structure of Revelation, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993; esp. pp. 1-37) and Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

44. Further discussion of the background and interpretation of Revelation can be found in David E. Aune, *Revelation* (WBC, 52; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997); M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989); Grant R.

4.1. *The Risen Christ (Revelation 1)*

The opening vision of Revelation presents key themes that are subsequently developed in the book. First, there is the suffering servant and witness, who prevails by faithfulness and obedience, not by domination and coercion. This is epitomized by Jesus, the faithful and true witness, who has prevailed by means of his sacrificial death and has become the ruler of the kings of the earth (v. 5). These themes reoccur with the martyrs in Revelation 6 and the witnesses in Revelation 12, who also overcome because of the Lamb's shed blood and his faithful witness. Such images encourage a response of perseverance and witness in the face of evil and human violence.

The depiction of Jesus as the universal ruler (v. 5) poses the question, Who is Lord of the universe? Unlike Rome who ruled by violent oppression, Jesus's rule was achieved by his sacrificial death. Moreover, this death effects deliverance from sin, recalling the paradigmatic Exodus event. An allusion to Exodus 19 is also found in the description of Jesus's followers as a kingdom of priests who serve God (v. 6). This suggests that through Jesus the original intention for humanity is now realized.

The allusion to Daniel 7 (Rev. 1.7; developed in v. 12) introduces the divine warrior motif. Subsequent imagery (vv. 11-16) underscores the absolute sovereignty and authority of the risen Christ and draws upon both kingly and priestly symbols, such as the robe with a golden sash and pure white hair. His sovereignty is underscored by the fact that he holds seven stars, which are associated with the seven churches (v. 20). From his mouth comes a double-edged sword and in his hands are the keys of death and Hades (v. 18), indicating that he, not Rome, holds the power of life and death. Thus this opening vision declares that Jesus alone is worthy of worship and allegiance.

4.2. *The Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)*

The themes of witness and overcoming are developed in the messages given to the seven churches. Churches that have not compromised are assured vindication and are exhorted to persevere (e.g., Smyrna); churches that have grown weary or complacent are warned and urged to repent (e.g., Laodicea). In both cases, divine judgment is depicted as redemptive, either delivering God's people from evil or judging them for the purpose of repentance. Moreover, despite the brutality of Roman oppression, believers are urged to overcome by witness and faithfulness, not violence (e.g., 2.13).

4.3. *The Slain Lamb (Revelation 4–5)*

Although Revelation 4 and 5 are one vision, there is a clear distinction between the two chapters. Revelation 4 focuses on the holy, transcendent

Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

God; other-worldly beings surround the throne of God in unending wor-
ship, but humanity is not obviously present. One clear implication is that
the Creator God alone is worthy of worship, and the claims of Roman
emperors to be 'the lord and god' were blasphemous to the core. Another
implication, however, is that unless God intervenes, humanity cannot
access the heavenly throne room.

   This is amplified by the appearance of the scroll in Revelation 5 and
the inability of anyone in all of creation to open that scroll and thereby
accomplish God's ultimate purposes. The words of the elder to John—'See,
the Lion of the tribe of Judah…has triumphed' (v. 5)—might suggest that
power qualifies one to open the scroll. Hence the appearance of the slain
Lamb (v. 6) is unexpected and heightens the reality depicted in Revela-
tion that true victory comes through suffering. The image of a lamb recalls
the sacrificial Passover Lamb,[45] and the Exodus, alluding to God's previ-
ous works of redemption. This scene presents the perfect Davidic King who
assumes the throne by virtue of sacrifice (ironically under Roman rule), not
force. The 'new song' (v. 9) celebrates the Lamb's ultimate victory.[46] The
powerful image of the slain Lamb underscores the reality that divine judg-
ment is redemptive and ultimately necessary to overcome human violence
and sin. Moreover, the image of Jesus as the slain Lamb underscores the
shocking reality that God himself offers the sacrifice that redeems and rec-
onciles sinful humanity.[47]

4.4. *God's Judgment of the World (Revelation 6–16)*
In this section of Revelation, there is a stark contrast between those who
follow the Lamb and those who oppose him, as well as a stark contrast
between what is happening on earth (divine judgment and human rebellion)
and what is happening in heaven (the vindication of the saints and unend-
ing praise before God's throne). Events in these chapters are punctuated by

---

   45. The imagery of 'seven horns' (v. 6) indicates power and recalls the divine war-
rior motif (Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, p. 181). Bauckham notes, 'By plac-
ing the image of the sacrificial victim alongside those of the military conqueror, John
forges a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death' (*Climax of Prophecy*, p. 215).
   46. See the excellent discussion of the expression 'new song' in the Bible as 'a tech-
nical term for victory song' in Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, p. 45.
   47. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss contemporary challenges to tradi-
tional atonement theories, such as J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand
Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2011). Although Weaver's 'narrative Christus Victor'
approach reclaims and appropriates an important aspect of the atonement, the rejection
of a forensic understanding of the atonement as a substitutionary satisfaction of God's
wrath does not account for the totality of the biblical witness. For helpful evaluations
of Weaver and other nontraditional atonement theories, see Boersma, *Hospitality*, and
Cole, *God the Peacemaker*.

interludes that contrast the destruction of the present order with the eternal reality of heaven. Woven throughout are allusions to the 'day of the Lord', further underscoring divine judgment.[48]

The seven seals, trumpets, and bowls, are best understood as intensifying and recapitulating the same series of events rather than unfolding sequentially. The images are cumulative and stress the reality of divine judgment so as to urge repentance. The agents who execute divine judgment are given authority from God (note the repetition of ἐδόθη, 'it was given') that is circumscribed both temporally and spatially. For example, the fourth horseman in Revelation 6 is given power to slay one-fourth of the earth, indicating that divine judgment is not yet final and repentance is still possible. The progressive intensification of these judgments likely stresses the need for repentance. Parallel to the plagues upon Egypt, these judgments are also directed toward a world that has steadfastly refused God and has become resolute in its rebellion against him. Just as plagues preceded the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, so too here plagues precede the final release of God's people from a violent world that is under judgment and will be destroyed. In this regard, these judgments represent the undoing of creation so as to prepare the way for the new creation.[49] Thus, despite the violence of these judgments, their redemptive nature is evident.

Revelation 7 presents the great multitude before the throne of God, which likely alludes to the Abrahamic promise of innumerable descendents (Gen. 13.16; 15.5). Their martyrdom is actually their victory (vv. 13-14), and parallels the slain Lamb. In contrast to this heavenly multitude is the growing assembly who gather against God at Armageddon (Rev. 16.16). They are led by the two beasts who join the dragon to form an unholy, counterfeit alliance that parodies the Triune God. Throughout these chapters, numerous allusions to the Roman Empire underscore its blasphemous nature and allegiance to the 'dragon' (Satan) and his agents.[50]

Finally, in Revelation 12, the dragon's ultimate aim is starkly depicted in the sign of the woman and the child. The woman is most likely the messianic community (faithful Israel), from whom the Messiah emerges. The vision makes clear that Satan's unrelenting goal has been Jesus's destruction, yet Jesus's exaltation vindicated his death and revealed his ultimate victory. This vision also reveals that those who have overcome by the blood of Lamb signal Satan's ultimate defeat (Rev. 12.11).

48. See, for example, Rev. 6.10, 14, 17; 11.18; 16.6-7.

49. Cf. Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 184, 188; see also Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 291.

50. For extended discussion of such allusions, see Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, pp. 49-70.

4.5. *The Eradication of Evil (Revelation 17–20)*

In Revelation 17–18, the Roman Empire is depicted as a brazen harlot who flaunts her violent lust for blood and insatiable desire for luxury. The blasphemous names that cover the beast upon which she sits recall epithets taken by Roman emperors, such as θεῖος ('divine'), σωτήρ ('savior'), and κύριος ('lord'), indicating their self-deification. The image of the harlot contrasts with the image of the bride of Christ in Revelation 19. Whereas the harlot is clothed in luxurious garments of gold and pearls (depicting the unbelievable wealth of the Roman Empire, but which was obtained at price of human lives), the bride is clothed with righteous deeds (Rev. 19.8). The depiction of the harlot underscores Rome's supreme arrogance and unquestioned confidence in its own abilities and resources (Rev. 18.6).[51] This is also reflected in the list of cargoes outlined in Revelation 18, which ominously ends with 'the souls of humans'. Thus Rome epitomized opposition to the True God at every level: it glorified itself, indulged itself in every possible way, exploited human beings and the rest of creation, and violently suppressed its opponents. Yet the sudden destruction that comes upon the supposedly 'eternal' city stresses the sovereignty of the true Lord of the universe (Rev. 18.8).

The so-called 'Hallelujah Chorus' is actually the heavenly response to the judgment of the harlot. The laments of three groups who can no longer profit from her (Rev. 18) are answered antiphonally by three groups who worship before the throne, praising God for his perfect justice and vindication (Rev. 19). This chorus is followed by preparations for the marriage feast of the Lamb (vv. 6-10). Although the arrival of the bridegroom is clearly anticipated, the divine warrior appears instead (v. 11), indicating that the banquet cannot begin until evil has been eradicated.

Every aspect of Jesus's appearance in Rev. 19.11-16 underscores his identity as the divine warrior and his complete victory. He appears on a white horse with blazing eyes (emphasizing his omniscience). He wears numerous crowns (depicting his limitless authority) and a robe dipped in the blood of those who have yet to be slain (emphasizing his certain victory). He is the King of Kings come to wage war in righteousness and to tread upon evil. From his mouth proceeds a sharp sword of judgment. The certainty of his victory is underscored by the invitation to the carrion birds to feast before the battle begins. The opposing army is slain by a word from Christ (v. 21). Just as God spoke the world into existence, here Christ reverses the intrusion of evil with a word. The host who accompany Christ are dressed in fine linen, suggesting that they are prepared for the marriage banquet and not for war. This imagery thus stresses two key points; God alone executes

---

51. Osborne, *Revelation*, pp. 640-44.

his judgment, and his judgment is inseparable from worship.[52] The leaders of the evil army are thrown alive into the fiery lake, anticipating the eternal punishment of Satan (Rev. 20).

4.6. *The Restoration of* Shalom *(Revelation 21–22)*

Once the final judgment and eradication of evil have taken place, the restoration of *shalom* is possible. Revelation 21–22 presents a vision of the new creation. The statement in Rev. 21.1 that there is no sea symbolizes the absence of evil as the sea was commonly understood as a symbol of evil and chaos.[53] The depiction of the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth suggests a (re)merging of that which was ruptured at the fall as well as a reversal of Babel. Moreover, Rev. 21.1 describes the new heaven and new earth, whereas verse 2 presents the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and verse 3 shifts to tabernacle imagery, suggesting that all three images describe the same reality. Verse 3 then describes God's presence among his people in terms that echo earlier covenantal promises and that indicate that God's presence is the true temple. Thus Rev. 21.1-8 outlines the restoration of the perfect *shalom* that existed at creation.[54] The perfect dimensions of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21.9-27) depict a cosmic holy of holies, where unmediated access to God's presence and glory has been restored; the arboreal imagery of Rev. 22.1-6 portrays the restoration of Eden. Thus, Revelation 21–22 depict the eternal garden-city in which redeemed humanity is a kingdom of priests who serve God before his throne.

5. *Conclusions and Implications*

Several implications flow from this overview of Revelation. First, although the divine judgment depicted in Revelation is graphic, it not unwarranted. Revelation presents divine judgment as redemptive and purposeful, both vindicating those who have faithfully followed the Lamb and judging those who have steadfastly opposed him. Moreover, divine judgment ultimately overcomes violence, first by means of the atonement, but then through the

---

52. The link between (divinely initiated) 'holy war' and worship cannot be discussed here, but see Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, pp. 34-37.

53. This symbolism is well-developed in Daniel; see Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, p. 64. This verse also recalls the divine warrior motif and God's victory over chaos; see Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, p. 187. In Rev. 13.1, the sea is the abode of the second beast.

54. Beale (*The Temple*, pp. 23-24) develops this shift from new creation to an 'arboreal city-temple'. He also notes that the statement in Rev. 21.27 that nothing unclean shall enter the new Jerusalem makes best sense when the city is understood along the lines of the OT temple (e.g., 2 Chron. 23.19; 29.16; 30.1-20) and suggests that all of the new creation should be understood the restored 'city-temple'.

eradication of evil, the end of death, and the restoration of Eden. Under-stood this way, Revelation offers tremendous hope for those who follow the Lamb in a world of violence and injustice. It also challenges followers to consider their own complicity with evil, violent world systems. Indeed, it may challenge those who are unaware or uncritical of such complicity to reevaluate allegiances and objects of worship.

Another important implication is that God alone judges. Nowhere in Rev-elation are believers called to execute divine judgment.[55] Human violence is perpetrated by those who oppose the Lamb, not those who follow him. In Revelation, violence cannot be separated from sin and evil. This does not mean that any use of force or violence is unwarranted here and now; indeed, violence may be necessary to prevent or stop other violence (one thinks of violence used to stop a mass shooter).[56] But it is also clear that Revelation offers no warrant for violence perpetrated in the 'name of God'.[57]

At the beginning of this essay, the possibility of another response to Rev-elation, beyond 'fight or flight', was suggested.[58] The logic of Revelation, and indeed the entire Bible, points to a response of worship—the very pur-pose for which humans were created. This worship is expressed in praise to the One who executes perfect justice, in allegiance to the Triune God, in witness to the Lamb, in confidence that evil will not prevail, and in humility in how one interprets and appropriates this part of the Bible.

55. John E. Phelan Jr. observes, 'The book of Revelation does not offer the slight-est support to Christians acting violently toward their enemies' ('Revelation, Empire, and the Violence of God', *Ex Auditu* 20 [2004], pp. 65-84 [78]). In his response, Grant R. Osborne adds, 'It is clear that the only human violence in the book is enacted by the evildoers, not the saints' ('Response to Phelan', *Ex Auditu* 20 [2004], pp. 85-88 [86]).

56. Indeed one might even consider the actions of a police officer to constrain vio-lence as somewhat parallel to divine restraint of human violence. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the pacifist challenges to some of the views presented here, such as those advocated by Seibert, *Violence of Scripture*, or Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*.

57. Spronk rightly comments, 'When God uses violence it is usually to punish trans-gressors or to bring liberation… Applying [these texts] to one's present situation and using them as indication that in a given situation violence can be used in the name of God is dangerous and may be blasphemous' ('Violent God of the Bible', p. 464).

58. 'Flight', as a response of repulsion to the horrors of human sin and evil, how-ever, is an appropriate response to the violent images in Revelation. Indeed some type of deep, visceral response to the violent images in Revelation is entirely appropriate as these images of the horrors of human sin and the reality of divine judgment depict graphically that the present order is 'not the way that it is supposed to be', to borrow Plantinga's phraseology (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*).

Rest for the Wary:
Cities of Refuge and Cycles of Violence[1]

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr

Abstract

The Old Testament institution of Cities of Refuge arises from the inter-section of two overlapping legal systems in ancient Israel. Each system responds to a shared issue of great importance, the killing of someone who belongs both to a clan and to the larger Israelite community. The first system is clan-based and seeks to protect and (when necessary) restore clan vitality lost through a killing, whether accidental or intentional. Its response is to authorize a blood-restorer to exact life-for-life retribution on the killer. The second responds to and incorporates the latter practice into the Cities of Refuge institution to promote corporate wholeness (*shalom*). This study analyzes the roots (i.e., the driving ideology, reasons, purposes, etc.) that guide and motivate each system in order to understand the two Israelite approaches to violence. The essay's closing reflections suggest several ways in which the intersection of the two legal systems might illumine a modern understanding of violence.

Introduction

The curious Israelite institution of Cities of Refuge has long interested Old Testament scholars and ordinary Bible readers alike.[2] For the purposes of

1. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided me by my Teaching Assistant, the Rev. P. Markus Nikkanen, in the preparation of this paper.

2. The scholarly discussion on this topic is long and voluminous. For the history of Israel's legal handling of homicide, see Henry McKeating, 'The Development of the Law of Homicide in Ancient Israel', *VT* 25 (1975), pp. 46-68. For literary-critical matters, cf. Nicolaj M. Nicolsky, 'Das Asylrecht', *ZAW* 48 (1930), pp. 146-75; Moshe Greenberg, 'The Biblical Conception of Asylum', *JBL* 78 (1959), pp. 125-32; Jacob Milgrom, 'Sancta Contagion and Altar/City Asylum', in *Congress Volume Vienna 1980* (ed. J.A. Emerton; VTS, 32; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), pp. 278-310; A. Graeme Auld, 'Cities of Refuge in Israelite Tradition', *JSOT* 10 (1978), pp. 26-40; Cornelis Houtman, 'Der Altar als Asylstätte im Alten Testament: Rechtsbestimmung (Ex. 21, 12-14) und Praxis (1 Reg. 1–2)', *RB* 103 (1996), pp. 343-66; Alexander Rofé, 'The History of the Cities of Refuge in Biblical Law', in *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation* (ed. A. Rofé; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), pp. 121-47. For Old Testament

this volume, it offers us a glimpse into ancient Israel's understanding of and response to human violence. In fact, the practice involves two acts of violence—the killing of one human by another and the killing of that killer in response (barring intervention to the contrary) by a relative of the deceased. In other words, in this case violence concerns a lethal act, one of ultimate concern to the society in which it occurs, not lesser non-lethal acts such as forms of physical or verbal assault. The roots of this essay lie in the general observation that behind the program for Cities of Refuge stand two competing legal systems—one clan-based, the other community-wide— each with its own approach to violence. Its guiding question is, what shapes the understanding of violence that drives the response of each legal system to it? To be specific, from what roots does the violent response to the initial killing spring, and how might study of them further illumine the roots of other forms of violence, including modern ones? And from what roots does the societal response that the Cities of Refuge embody (henceforth, COR) spring,[3] and how might it shape an appropriate ethical response to human violence more broadly?

To set the scene for what follows, and given the lively scholarly discussion concerning the COR, it is only fair that I lay out my larger assumptions concerning that institution.

My first two assumptions concern the nature of the biblical materials that inform us about it. First, I assume that the primary traditions behind it— Exod. 21.12-14; Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 19; Joshua 20—are best understood as complementing, rather than correcting, each other.[4]

The second assumption is a corollary of the first: while complementary, each tradition reflects shaping by the ideology and interests of its compilers— for example, the priests in Numbers 35, the deuteronomists in Deuteronomy 19, and probably both in Joshua 20—as well by their unique historical settings. So, for example, I would read the oft-cited conflict between Deuteronomy 19, which counts only three cities (and without names), and Joshua

---

asylum law more generally, cf. Jeffrey Stackert, 'Why Does Deuteronomy Legislate Cities of Refuge? Asylum in the Covenant Collection (Exodus 21:12-14) and Deuteronomy (19:1-13)', *JBL* 125 (2006), pp. 23-49; Pamela Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2006), XIII, pp. 636-40; Charles L. Feinberg, 'The Cities of Refuge', *BibSac* 103 (1946), pp. 411-17. Discussion of the Deuternonomic materials finds a good summary in Timothy M. Willis, *The Elders of the City: A Study of the Elders-Laws in Deuteronomy* (SBLMS, 55; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2001), pp. 1-6, 36-50.

3.   In what follows, the letter 'C' in 'COR' represents either 'city' or 'cities' depending on the context.

4.   Similarly, Willis, *Elders of the City*, pp. 118-31.

20, which lists six cities by name (vv. 7-8), as reflective of different circum-stances. Deuteronomy 19 (vv. 1-7) reflects a small Israel of only three major parts—hence, the need for only three COR—but holds out hope that an expan-sion of territory might require the addition of three more (vv. 7-9).[5] Joshua 20, by contrast, reflects the ideal (versus real) Israel settled both east and west of the Jordan—hence the need for three cities on each side of the Jordan.[6]

Third, as the basis for my discussion, I will draw on what I deem to be the common elements concerning the COR in which all the texts share or at least compare. When I cite evidence from outside the consensus, I will do so to illustrate possible ways to fill some gaps or to explain aspects of the consensus. In working from a consensus of texts, I am aware of (and hope to avoid) the potential criticism that my approach may, in effect, construct an institution that actually may not have existed as such. Finally, though many regard the COR as either fictitious or ideal, I assume that the texts reflect an actual practice, if not an institution, albeit carried out differently or for varied purposes depending upon the setting.[7] My intent is that interpretive conclusions carefully drawn will benefit this volume's larger discussion regardless of whether or not the COR was a real institution in any sense.

1. *The Cities of Refuge: A Consensus View*

Behind the practice of COR stands the well-known, ancient, clan-based custom of retaliation or blood revenge for homicides. This custom permits a close relative of a homicide victim—the 'restorer of blood' (גאל הדם)—to avenge the latter's death by killing a member of the presumed killer's family.[8] The COR institution provides the homicide suspect—wary of the

---

5. Willis (*Elders of the City*, p. 144) wonders whether the designation of three additional COR correlates to a period of territorial expansion such as occurred, for example, during the reign of Josiah.

6. The tradition of allocating six COR may go back to the tenth century (cf. Josh. 20–21; 1 Chron. 6.39-66), the most likely period for the territorial extent presupposed; cf. Willis, *Elders of the City*, p. 129. For other views, cf. McKeating, 'Law of Homi-cide', p. 54. Milgrom ('Sancta Contagion', pp. 299-310) offers a detailed and persua-sive proposal concerning the much-discussed historical relationship between asylum altars and asylum cities.

7. Two recent studies examine whether the COR actually existed or merely com-prised a legal theory or abstract ideal; cf. Ludwig Schmidt, 'Leviten- und Asylstadte in Num. XXXV und Jos. XX; XXI 1-42', *VT* 51 (2002), pp. 103-121; Martin Staszak, *Die Asylstädte im Alten Testament: Realität und Fiktivität eines Rechtsinstituts* (Ägyp-ten und Altes Testament, 16; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

8. In other words, the execution of the death penalty for killing is the province of the family, not the state; cf. Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 652. Indeed, גאל 'restorer' is a technical legal term in Israelite family law; cf. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., 'גָּאַל', *New International Dictionary*

גאל הדם in hot pursuit after him—a temporary urban refuge from that threat of death.[9] Arrival of the accused inside a COR imposes a kind of 'cooling-off period' for both accused and avenger until some external social process decides the ultimate fate of the accused.[10] The sole matter to be decided is whether the killing was premeditated or accidental (Exod. 21.12-14; Num. 35.11, 15; Deut. 19.4-5, 11-12; Josh. 20.3, 5, 9)—in the language of Numbers 35, whether or not the killer is a רצח (a 'murderer').[11] A verdict of 'accidental' permits the accused to continue life in the city of refuge permanently and under its protection.[12] The priestly perspective of Numbers 35 and Joshua 20 permits the killer to leave the COR and resume a normal life without fear of reprisal upon the death of the high priest (Num. 35.25, 28, 32; Josh. 20.6).[13] But if the verdict is 'intentional', Deuteronomy 19 authorizes

of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, I (ed. W.A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 790-92.

9. According Josh. 20.4, upon arrival the refuge-seeker must present his case to the elders at the city gate before being granted admission and residence inside. Analogous to the pre-trial hearing in modern criminal legal processes, the role of this pre-hearing is to determine whether the refuge-seeker has at least a *prima facie* case that the killing which he did was not premeditated. It is the trial before 'the assembly' (vv. 6, 9) that finally decides the case (cf. Num. 35.12, 24, 25).

10. Following S.R. Driver, Barmash (*Homicide in the Biblical World*, p. 103) suggests that this interim period gives the blood-restorer time to come to his senses—i.e., to accept that the killing was an accident and to drop his pursuit of vengeance.

11. Note the repeated declaratory formula הוא רצח 'he is a murderer' (Num. 35.16, 17, 18, 21); cf. the noun רצח 'murderer' (Num. 35.19, 30, 31; cf. Deut. 19.3, 4, 6; Josh. 20.3, 5, 6); cf. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, XIII, pp. 632-634. A verb from the same root (רצח) forms the well-known prohibition 'You shall not murder' in the Decalogue (Exod. 20.13; Deut. 5.17).

12. The larger purpose of this period of isolation is uncertain. Of course, it certainly keeps the innocent killer alive and surrounded by human community. One possibility is that it constitutes a penalty (i.e., permanent exile from home as legal retribution for the taking of a life), but it may also serve to quarantine the blood-guilt pollution of the killer lest it spread contamination elsewhere (see below). Concerning confinement in exile, cf. Rofé, 'The History of Cities of Refuge', pp. 140-41.

13. The connection between that death and the killer's freedom is a matter of dispute. Noth assumes that the high priest has assumed the role formerly held by the king and suggests that the high priest's death occasions the declaration of a general amnesty as it does at the death of a king; see Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 254-56. Greenberg ('The Biblical Conception of Asylum', p. 127) critiques this view and proposes (pp. 127-30) instead that the high priest's death makes expiation for the entire community, thus removing the pollution caused by the original killing; so also Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, p. 103; cf. Ashley, *Numbers*, pp. 654, 656. Should the killer for any reason leave the COR, however, he leaves its legal protection behind and becomes fair game for killing by the גאל הדם should they meet (Num. 35.26-27).

the elders of the murderer's hometown—hometown also of the victim and the blood-restorer—to bring the murderer home from the protective COR and to hand him over to the גאל הדם for execution. A COR is not to provide any murderer protection from facing execution for an unjustified killing. What remains unclear, however, is the process which decides between premeditation and unplanned chance.[14] Deuteronomy 19 presumes a determination process but offers no procedural details, but Numbers 35 is more explicit: the accused is to stand trial before 'the (general) assembly' (העדה), apparently a kind of national governing board comprised of all free Israelite males (Num. 35.12, 24, 25; Josh. 20.6, 9).[15] Meeting somewhere other than the COR involved (Num. 35.25), they decide between the positions of the accused and the avenger, perhaps hearing witnesses to do so (Num. 35.24, 30). Notwithstanding the silence of the other texts, in my view their instructions also presume the verdict of a similar trial, probably one conducted at a local (not national) level.

2. *Restoration of Blood: Its Roots*

As Jeffrey Stackert notes, ancient Israel regarded the sending of a גאל הדם to kill someone thought to have killed a family member as 'a socially legitimated form of revenge'.[16] But from what roots does this bent toward killing an alleged killer spring? Clearly, the legal question of whether the action was premeditated or not is of little or no concern to the victim's clan or grieving family. The 'facts of the case' are clear to them: the corpse of a family member shows obvious signs of a violent death—and just about the time that a well-known neighbor or close friend suddenly disappears or is last seen hurrying along the road to the region's COR. Getting a head-start on the blood-restorer trying to overtake him is a matter of life and death for the suspect. So, from what roots does the desire to kill an alleged killer spring?

Decades ago, one of my teachers, Professor Edward John Carnell, proposed that humans have an internal moral faculty that he called the 'judicial sentiment'. It is aroused whenever the actions of others ignore or offend our dignity—that is, when they fail to respond to us in a way that our innate moral sense believes the situation demands.[17] Put differently, our

14. Rofé, 'The History of Cities of Refuge', pp. 138-40, provides a convenient summary of views concerning the process.

15. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, X, pp. 470, 472-73 (but cf. p. 480 for an alternative view).

16. Stackert, 'Why Does Deuteronomy Legislate Cities of Refuge?', p. 25 n. 3.

17. Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1957). For an assessment of his larger philosophical reflections from a Roman Catholic perspective, see Kern R. Trembath, 'Evangelical Subjectivism: Edward John Carnell and the Logic of God', *EQ* 60 (1988), pp. 317-42.

judicial sentiment recognizes that their response is out of sync with or disproportionate to the normally-expected reply. For example, when we give someone a gift and receive no 'thank you' in return, our judicial sentiment recognizes that non-response as out of sync with what the giver may normally expect. The psalmist's familiar complaints that enemies 'repay me evil for good' (Ps. 35.12; cf. Pss. 38.20; 109.5; Job 30.26) similarly articulate the speaker's aroused judicial sentiment. If so, the judicial sentiment of a grieving, outraged Israelite clan and family would be racing in high gear. What could be more unjust than for an intimate, a neighbor (רֵעַ), to repay years of friendship with violent death?[18] In short, the desire for revenge in part springs from a human intuitive sense that such killings mark a grievous injustice worthy of the highest of penalties.

   A second root for revenge is the economic and social turbulence that such deaths leave in their wake. Daily life in ancient Israel was labor-intensive, consistently requiring an adequate supply of workers. In part, that explains why Israelites tended to have large families: the sowing and reaping of fields and the upkeep of common, piled-stone structures (e.g., houses, fences, towers, etc.) demanded a large work-force. That would be especially true if a sudden need for repairs struck during the middle of a harvest. There was always something for family members to do regardless of age, so the permanent loss of any family member increased the work-load of the survivors and, in some cases, probably required the clan to augment the remaining family. Clans and their families particularly dreaded epidemics whose diseases could potentially decimate an entire community. The clan would keenly feel the loss of the head of a family; that loss might exert a significant financial strain on the clan's collective resources.[19]

   In short, any death(s) increased the burden already weighing heavily on family and clan, and any death thought to be avoidable and unjustified—for example, when one clan member kills another—would surely increase both the clan's agony and its outrage at such an injustice. Under the circumstances, there probably would be no lack of volunteers eager to accept the duty of גֹּאֵל הַדָּם to bring clan-justice to bear on the killer. My observation from human experience is that the desire to avenge some slight, however large or small, appeals to our judicial sentiment. It is, thus, no wonder that Deut. 19.6 pictures the blood-restorer as pursuing the fleeing killer 'in a

---

18. In the context, Heb. רֵעַ designates a fellow Israelite from the neighborhood, i.e., someone with whom one has regular, if not daily, contact and in whom one places significant trust; cf. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006), XIII, p. 527. The term suggests that the killing disrupts the most intimate arena of relations outside the family.

19. Ironically, the protective confinement of an inadvertent killer in a COR would also deprive the community of his labor and community participation for a long period.

rage' (יחם לבבו, lit. 'his heart is warm'). The high-octane mixture of grief, shame, injury, and righteous indignation would fuel his relentless pursuit of the (as he might put it) 'stupid good-for-nothing responsible for all this misery'. Fear of that eager vengeance is precisely why the wary refugee flees to find rest in a COR.

Finally, a metaphysical understanding of the relationship between humans and blood, and especially between humans and bloodshed, may drive the human bent toward killing a killer. In my view, brief reflection on the key term גאל הדם makes this clear. I concur with Levine's observation that the verb גאל means 'to restore', so the phrase גאל הדם is best translated as 'restorer of blood'—i.e., someone who, by killing the one responsible for bloodshed, somehow restores the blood that was, so to speak, 'taken' from the clan and the family through an unlawful death.[20] That the clan authorizes the blood-restorer to take action implies that the clan as a whole suffers the metaphysical disruption caused by the loss of life and moves to restore the loss on behalf of the whole community.[21]

The above semantic observation calls into question the common English rendering of גאל with the language of revenge, retaliation, or vengeance—words with negative connotations (e.g., the base human desire for 'a pound of flesh').[22] In my view, that language should give way to the more positive language of 'restoration', 'returning to equilibrium', or 'recovery of שלום' after a seriously disruptive event. Whatever impression moderns may have of the practice, the point is that, within its frame of reference, the clan's authorization of a גאל הדם marks a gesture toward its recovery of lost strength and wholeness. It represents a kind of justice rooted within the collective ethos of the clan that aims to right a wrong and, in so doing, to protect the clan's integrity. It is supremely an act of self-protection.

---

20. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36* (AB, 4A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 565. 'Blood' here probably connotes 'life' or 'vitality'; cf. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, IV, pp. 240-41. For Levine's view that in natural deaths human blood returns to a kind of reservoir in the planet's underworld from which it was drawn at creation (e.g., Gen. 2.7)—a process disrupted in violent deaths—see Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, pp. 561-65. For further discussion of the root גאל, see Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, pp. 98-99; Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, II, pp. 350-55; Hubbard, *NIDOTTE*, I, pp. 789-94.

21. Cf. David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua* (NAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1998), pp. 384-85; Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* (WBC, 7; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 216, who notes the tie between usage of the root גאל and the fact that through the blood-restorer families are taking care of their own members.

22. Similarly, Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 299; Ashley, *Numbers*, p. 651; Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua* (AB, 6; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 473-74, 476.

3. *The Cities of Refuge Practice: Its Roots*

The other side of the story is that the biblical texts seek to offset this intuitive blood-restoration system through the COR system.[23] From what roots did this modification spring? Ancient Near Eastern texts suggest that the wake-up call to modify the intuitive system of simple blood-restoration predates the Israelites by a good distance. Indeed, Israel likely was the beneficiary of prior legal history, although it did in some ways chart its own unique course.[24] First, common sense—my 'judicial sentiment' discussed above—probably recognized that the system was simply unfair. In treating cases of serious injury, the *lex talionis* recognizes that the judicial consequences of human actions must somehow correspond to those actions in kind and proportion: 'you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise' (Exod. 21.23-25 TNIV).[25] But the judicial sentiment also sees that not all killings are the same—that some arise from outright malice and careful planning, while others 'just happen' unintended and without malice. It intuits that the latter is a less serious action than the former and, hence, merits less severe consequences. Deuteronomy 19 clearly understands this distinction. Three times (vv. 4, 6, 11; cf. Josh. 20.5) it underscores that the person seeking asylum neither planned the event in advance (בבלי־דעת) nor at any time 'hated' the victim (לא שנא לו מתמל שלשום). So, to execute someone responsible for an accidental fatality is tantamount to overkill—the imposition of a penalty out of sync with or disproportionate to the crime.

   Second, harsh experiences probably show that, left unchecked, the blood-restoration system unleashed endless cycles of violence between families and clans. The COR institution marked one social attempt to break the cycles of violence that could too easily ensnare feuding families.[26] The logic of the clan ethos required that every killing be repaid by another killing. But

---

23. Jonathan Burnside, 'A "Missing Case" in the Biblical Laws of Homicide and Asylum?', *VT* 60 (2010), pp. 288-91, proposes that Israel's escape from Pharaoh to refuge in Sinai (Exod. 14–15) offers a narrative example of an asylum case not found elsewhere, that of the innocent asylum-seeker.

24. For example, unlike other ancient Near Eastern societies, Israel allows no negotiation of consequences between the family of the victim and that of the killer; cf. Willis, *Elders of the City*, p. 143.

25. Greenberg ('The Biblical Conception of Asylum', p. 129) observes that the severity of this strict equivalence principle is unparalleled in the ancient Near East. Extra-biblical legal codes permit the negotiation of monetary ransoms for killers, with the latters' social situation often playing a role. He notes that those legal systems (except for that of the Hittites) also permit the death penalty for property crimes, a provision without any counterpart in the Hebrew Bible.

26. Cf. Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 228.

one family's satisfying 'restoration' merely saddled another family with a grievous 'loss' to settle. This is a simple recipe for ongoing blood feuds that effectively undercut society's highest aim—the promotion and enjoyment of full, corporate שלום. Though probably fictitious, the case of the clever widow from Tekoa (2 Sam. 14) credibly illustrates the thoughtless extremes to which the blood-restoration system might go to recover a clan's lost 'balance'. Her only two sons, alone and away from the city, get into a fight for reasons unknown and one of them kills his brother (vv. 6-7). Now the clan is demanding that she hand him over for execution, and her appeal to King David is that this simply goes too far and is unjust. It would, she says, 'snuff out the one ember I have left' (v. 7 CEB)—her only living son—and leave her a childless widow. Worse, it would deny her husband the heir essential for him to continue his existence.

Subtly, her argument seems to imply two things: first, that the killing was unpremeditated and tantamount to accidental; and, second, that even if it were not, the legal consequences demanded for it far exceed the expected commensurate penalty.[27] Simple 'life for life', she implies, has escalated to 'life' plus childless widow plus extinct family line. Permit me to add one footnote on this case. In my view, the clan's motivation itself seems suspect and self-serving. Their stated aim is not just to fulfill 'life for life' but also (note the emphatic גם 'even, in addition') to 'get rid of the heir' (2 Sam 14.7 TNIV). They may mean that, with the heir out of the picture, the clan would come to own his ancestral property and share in its benefits. If so, their words would betray what one would call today a 'conflict-of-interest' and cast further doubt on the fairness of their demand.[28] In short, one function of the COR system was to give accused killers a safe place and a just process in which to defend their innocence of murder free of outside pressures.[29]

The final factor driving the implementation of the COR system is the prevention and removal of bloodguilt.[30] As is well known, the Old Testament

---

27. McKeating assumes that clan justice applies only to inter-clan (not intra-family) disputes. Thus, the widow's appeal may be that the proposed judgment is '*over*rigorous'—i.e., a departure from the law's normal course in such cases (italics, his); cf. McKeating, 'Law of Homicide', pp. 50, 51.

28. Similarly, McKeating, 'Law of Homicide', pp. 50-51.

29. Howard, *Joshua*, p. 385.

30. Excellent discussions of blood-guilt are available in Greenberg, 'The Biblical Conception of Asylum', pp. 127-30; Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, pp. 561-65; and Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, pp. 95-115 (with extra-biblical parallels). McKeating ('Law of Homicide', pp. 57-68) examines relevant texts with this motif and proposes the history of development that might underlie them. Willis (*Elders of the City*, p. 161) observes that, in the case of a victim of a violent death in an unpopulated area (Deut. 21), the anonymity of both victim and killer reduces the likelihood of blood-restoration efforts but does not eliminate the need for the nearest municipality to deal with the

assumes that all bloodshed, even accidental cases, defiles the one responsible and saddles him or her with bloodguilt (see Deut. 22.8).[31] It is also thought to afflict—indeed, ritually pollute—both the entire nation and the very ground itself.[32] Whether national or individual, that impurity offends Yahweh, himself residing in the land (Num. 35.34), and to ignore it runs the risk of divinely-sent dire consequences. That divine displeasure normally brings major disasters is itself a measure of just how serious God considers the 'guilt' in bloodguilt to be.[33] According to the deuteronomists (Deut. 19), the primary purpose of the COR institution is to prevent wrongful executions. By protecting people *not* found guilty of murder, the COR program lessens the shedding of דם (ה)נקי ('innocent blood'; Deut. 19.10, 13). In Deut. 19.13, the deuteronomists invoke strong rhetoric, harsh words that probably echo the harsh reality of their day that they aim to rectify. Apparently, wrongful deaths, if not ongoing cycles of violence, probably were scandalously all too common. Israel is to 'show [the revenge-takers] no pity' (לא־תחום עינך עליו); they are to 'completely remove' (ובערת) such guilt from among them. Only then will Israel realize the divine promise that 'it…go well with you' (וטוב לך)—that divine pleasure with their obedience to these commands will yield good consequences for Israel.[34]

bloodguilt of the larger community. The ceremony prescribed, therefore, is directed toward Yahweh and only secondarily refers to the inter-clan relationship typical of other homicides.

31. According to Barmash (*Homicide in the Biblical World*, p. 102), this assumption explains why, in two cases, killings of an accused person by a blood-restorer incurs no guilt (i.e., a killing enroute to a COR [Deut. 19.6] and the killing of any accused who ventures outside one [Num. 35.26-27]).

32. Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, pp. 105-106. Barmash (p. 105) even avers that the very term גאל הדם ('blood-restorer') reflects 'anxiety over the polluting effects of the blood itself'. If so, one purpose that the COR served was to isolate the killer and his contamination, lest its adverse effect pollute both the land and the larger community.

33. For example, stunning military defeats (Hos. 1.4-5; Amos 4.10-11) and/or endangered food production (e.g., Amos 4.6-9). Ashley (*Numbers*, p. 656) notes that excessive pollution might compel Yahweh to leave. For the Hebrew words and phrases that typically describe the guilt and resulting liability of one responsible for a homicide, see Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, pp. 97-98.

34. The concern in Num. 35, by contrast, is the identification and punishment of a legal 'murderer' (רצח, its chosen term) in order to remove any bloodguilt hanging over Israel. Behind this stands a concern with ridding the nation and the land of sacral pollution with its risk of divine displeasure. In its view, the COR simply provides the legal process for sorting out the actual 'murderer' from the non-murderer. One implication might be that the killing of a non-murderer is tantamount to 'murder' (i.e., unjustified, intentional violence) and, hence, would further pollute the land. The sorting process aims to avoid both that act and its terrible consequences.

4. *Conclusion*

My selection of this topic for this volume began with the general observa-
tion that behind the program for Cities of Refuge stand two competing legal
systems—one clan-based, the other community-wide—each with its own
approach to violence. To conclude, let us each imagine ourselves a wary
refuge-seeker at last safely inside a COR and now able to reflect back on
the long journey. My guiding question was, what shapes the understand-
ing of violence that drives the response of each legal system to it? I have
argued that the drivers shaping the clan-based system were a desire for
justice in line with what I'm calling the judicial sentiment, economic and
social hardships on a victim's family, and a presumed metaphysical con-
nection between humans and blood, especially *shed* blood. The shapers of
the community-wide alternative, the COR institution, included its desire to
restore lasting שלום to the community, to settle cases with true justice, and
to remove the ritual pollution with its threat of disastrous divine response. In
retrospect, several reflections with implications for the topic of this volume
catch my attention.

First, I am struck by how narrow is the line between normal, happy life in
community and the tragic, 'accidental' deaths that ordinary, healthy activi-
ties may unexpectedly cause. Consider the descriptions of the killings that
according to Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 qualify as 'accidental' and,
hence, qualify the killer for admission to a COR. For two neighbors to enter
a forest together to cut down trees for construction, cooking, or carving is
a good, if not an essential, thing. Alas, however, the standard, trusted tech-
nology of the day, the ordinary axe, may fail one of them: an upward swing
of the handle may suddenly launch an axehead airborne, striking and killing
the unsuspecting companion; and an innocent bystander is dead by accident
(Deut. 19.5). For a town-dweller to clear stones from his field to improve
its productivity is a good thing—indeed, a necessary thing, given the thor-
oughly rocky soil of Canaan. Alas, however, bad timing may tragically place
a passing neighbor in the path of one well-intentioned but fatal heave, and
another innocent bystander dies by accident (Num. 35.23). Good natured
horse-play with neighborhood friends is a good thing. Alas, however, the
fisticuffs-for-fun may suddenly escalate into serious competition and then
quickly into an outright brawl in which one combatant—perhaps in self-
defense—lands a fatal blow, and another innocent participant falls dead by
accident (Num. 35.22). In short, the COR institution warns us that harmful
risks lurk in ordinary activities and calls us to balance a carefree spirit with
a sober caution alert to possible harmful 'accidents'. In soberly reckoning
with life's sudden, tragic, mysterious turns, we do well not to emulate either
a furious גאל הדם out for the blood of an innocent friend or one of Job's
friends wagging fingers of blame at victims of unwitting misfortune.

Second, the COR program reminds us that, like the moon, some human beings have a 'dark side'. The descriptions of killers *dis*qualified for the protection of a COR put that side on display; they embody the classic form of extreme violence—cunningly premeditated and cruelly malevolent. 'Hatred' (root שנא [Num. 35.20; Deut. 19.11; cf. v. 6]) and 'enmity' (root איב [Num. 35.21]) drive them, and their favorite method is the surprise, fatal ambush sprung on an unsuspecting, innocent neighbor (יזד להרגו בערמה [Exod. 21.14]; בצדיה [Num. 35.20]; וקם עליו והכהו נפש וארב לו וכי [Deut. 19.11]). At other times, his death follows a forceful shove (יהדפנו), something thrown (השליך עליו [Num. 35.20]), including a thrown-fist (והכהו בידו [Num. 35.21]). Sometimes an impromptu weapon of iron, stone, or wood does the job (Num. 35.16-18, 20). Legally, Numbers 35 declares them to be a 'murderer' (רצח) worthy of death.

Alas, as Qoheleth would put it, 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Such people still populate our own world—but, thankfully, not among readers of this essay! A glimpse backward at the COR practice of ancient Israel serves to replace our occasional naiveté with a steady dose of realism. It confronts us with a sober reality we would rather ignore—to make us as wary of violence as were the COR-bound accused on ancient Israel's highways. It challenges us to ensure that, as much as is humanly possible, our societies deny murderers refuge from accountability and extend mercy and legal protection to those responsible for accidental deaths, especially when the grieving families of victims seek vengeance through some modern גאל הדם.

Finally, since God himself mandated the institution of COR, the latter calls us to reflect theologically about what kind of God its provisions imply? What kind of God accounts for the program's literary, if not historical, persistence—the fact that four texts (three in the Torah and one in the Former Prophets)—passionately promote it? What kind of God might want to discourage, if not eliminate, unending cycles of violence? What kind of God might intervene to restore his blessed, soothing שלום to communities at odds with themselves, overwhelmed with grief and outrage, and itching for blood revenge? What kind of God might mercifully befriend those misfortunate souls fleeing for their lives, an angry גאל הדם hot on their trail, after accidentally taking a neighbor's life? Clearly, the ultimate builder and maker of the Cities of Refuge is a tender-hearted God of both justice and mercy, eager that righteous indignation play its rightful social role but also that it not get out of hand; that blood-pollution from murder or wrongful execution not disrupt his covenant relationship with Israel; that his wonderful שלום flourish among us. The challenge for us, inhabitants of cities where cycles of violence are all too common, is to emulate in personal conduct and social policy the character of that God—to provide rest for the wary wherever we may reside.

As the clever Tekoa widow advised David,

> Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is not what God desires; rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished from him (2 Sam. 14.14 TNIV).

DIVINE VIOLENCE AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Årstein Justnes

Abstract

This article discusses the notion of violence in the Dead Sea Scrolls in dialogue with Alex P. Jassen's recent article 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination'. Jassen claims that the Qumran community had a violent worldview, and that violence was a central preoccupation of the community. In this study I will offer a critical evaluation of Jassen's study, and propose an alternative position by emphasizing the prominent role of divine violence in the Qumran texts and the literary and fictional character of many passages commonly described as violent.

Introduction[1]

The theme of this book, violence and ethics, is, as far as I know, a neglected topic in Qumran studies. Recently, Alex P. Jassen has, however, published a major contribution to the study of violence in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In his interesting article 'Violence and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination',[2] Jassen claims that the Qumran community had a violent worldview,[3] and that violence was one of their central preoccupations.[4] Throughout the sectarian literature he finds a legitimation of 'systematic violence to others',[5] and he also notes a 'pervasiveness of real and imagined violence' in the scrolls.[6]

---

1. I wish to thank Markus Zehnder, Morten Klepp Beckmann, Torleif Elgvin, Dana M. Harris, Tor Vegge, and Kristin Heskje for their contributions to this article.

2. Alex P. Jassen, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination', *BibInt* 17 (2009), pp. 12-44. This issue of *Biblical Interpretation* was also published as a book: R.S. Boustan, A.P. Jassen and C.J. Roetzel (eds.), *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010).

3. See Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', pp. 12-13.

4. See Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', pp. 12 and 15.

5. Cf. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 43: 'The construction of an exclusive understanding of the meaning of Scripture, the administration of sacred space, and the salvific privileges enjoyed only by the community members served to legitimize the systematic violence to others as outlined throughout sectarian literature… Other Jews and Romans were undoubtedly members of the Sons of Darkness, a status that had been pre-ordained by God from before they were even born. Thus, violence against such individuals is not only justified, but part of God's original plan'.

6. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 14. In another formulation he points

In the light of these claims, it may surprise the reader of the Qumran texts to note (as Jassen also does) that there are no examples in the scrolls of what we might call 'real' or 'contemporary' violence carried out by the *Yahad* Essenes.[7] The closest we come to it are reports or hints of violence performed by enemies in the recent past.[8] In essence, what we are dealing with is first and foremost textual, literary, and imagined violence.

In this article, I shall challenge Jassen's hypothesis that the 'Qumran Community' had a violent worldview, and propose an alternative view. I will discuss at length the notion of divine violence, and emphasize the literary and fictional character of many passages commonly described as violent.

1. *The Structure of the Argument*

I will take Jassen's study as my point of departure, and critically evaluate his methods and main presuppositions (ch. 3). On this background, I discuss the notion of divine violence in the Dead Sea Scrolls (ch. 5) and its function (chap. 6). Towards the end of the article I will briefly address the ethical implications of this material.

2. *A Critical Evaluation of Jassen's Study*

Although Jassen's study is appealing in many respects (above all, he manages to introduce a new theory, the so-called scarce resource theory,[9] and make a major synthesis of the material), there are also several points that

---

to 'the pervasiveness of violence and violent imagery in the writings of the Qumran community' (p. 42).

7. Raija Sollamo, 'War and Violence in the Ideology of the Qumran Community', in *Verbum et Calamus: Semitic and Related Studies in Honour of the Sixtieth Birthday of Professor Tapani Harviainen* (ed. H. Juusola, J. Laulainen and H. Palva; StudOr, 99; Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2004), pp. 341-52 (352): '…it was not active violence'. Cf. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', pp. 15-16: '…the Qumran evidence displays a unique phenomenon. Unlike related groups in Second Temple Judaism (e.g., the Zealots), for the Qumran community, ideological dissension never translated into real-time vengeance… Violence outside of the framework of the eschatological battle is not legitimized and presumably did not exist'. The point is well put, but needs to be modified: early Christianity, for instance, seems to provide an excellent parallel to this. The first Christians were a non-violent group, but soon developed a rather violent eschatology, for which the book of Revelation is a prime example.

8. The extent to which these incidents are real or imaginary, or somewhere in-between, is sometimes hard to tell. See 1QpHab 11.4-8; 10.9-12; cf., however, 4Q169 3-4.i.6-9.

9. For a presentation of the scarce resource theory, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005) pp. 93-112.

are somewhat problematic. Because of the limitations of space, I will have to focus on methodological issues:

  1. Recent developments in Qumran studies have made it difficult to subscribe to a theory that makes a neat division between sectarian texts (i.e. texts originating within the *Yahad* movement) and non-sectarian texts, and which makes exclusively the former the basis for a synthesis about the Qumran community.[10] In this matter I side with Eibert Tigchelaar, who suggests that it is time to abandon the old dichotomy between sectarian and non-sectarian texts and instead start looking for different clusters of texts among the Qumran texts.[11] Jassen's contribution is based on a selective synthesis of the sectarian Qumran texts, where the War Scroll (1QM) especially is used as a key text.[12] To a large extent the concept of war in 1QM provides an interpretative framework for other texts,[13] partly also for

  10. See Eibert Tigchelaar, 'Classifications of the Collection of Dead Sea Scrolls and the Case of *Apocryphon of Jeremiah C*', *JSJ* 43 (2012), pp. 519-50 (528-29): '…in what manner, if at all, can one correlate one or more groups of texts from the collection of Dead Sea Scrolls with one or more discrete sociological groups?'.

  11. Eibert Tigchelaar, 'Distinguishing Clusters of Texts in the Qumran Library: A Case Study: Jubilees–Animal Apocalypse–CD*-Apocryphon of Jeremiah C', Paper SBL International Meeting, Amsterdam (2012).

  12. To some extent, this might be compared to reconstructing early Christianity by using the Revelation of John as the key text. It is notable that the implications of the book of Revelation and the War Scroll are treated very differently by New Testament scholars and Qumran scholars respectively. Not many scholars believe that the first Christians were violent because of the Revelation of John, one of the most violent books in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but several scholars think that the *Yahad* Essenes were potentially violent because of the War Scroll. On violence in Revelation see D.M. Harris's study in the present volume.

  13. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 13: '[V]iolence is at the forefront of the [Qumran] community's vision of the end of days, which would witness the destruction of the Romans and wayward Jews in an eschatological war'; pp. 15-16: 'There is no evidence that the community members engaged in any military training in preparation for the eschatological battles'; p. 43: 'All violence is postponed until the future eschatological war'. See also Jassen's remark on p. 24: 'The community saw in the prophetic words the key to its own eschatological realization, in particular the battles that will be waged against the Sons of Darkness… Through pesher exegesis of the words of the anointed ones—that is, the classical prophets—the community ascertained the details of the eschatological battles and the identity of those worthy of destruction'. In their introduction to *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice*, Ra'anan S. Boustan, Alex P. Jassen and Calvin J. Roetzel state: 'Jassen argues…that the Qumran sectarians did not employ actual violent tactics against either the conquering Romans or the wider Jewish society, as did other Jewish groups in the period. Rather they situated this rhetoric within the framework of the eschatological final battle, thereby deferring violent confrontation until the end-time' (R.S. Boustan, A.P. Jassen and C.J. Roetzel, 'Introduction: Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice in Early Judaism and Christianity', in *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice*, pp. 1-11 [7]).

the interpretation of the archaeological site at Qumran.[14] Most of the texts Jassen draws on, however, do not presuppose an end-time war.[15]

2. Jassen's diachronic organizing of the Qumran 'sectarian' texts rests heavily on an early dating of 4QMMT.[16] The dating of this text is, however, contested.[17]

3. There is a strong tendency in Jassen's study to infer social reality directly from ('sectarian') texts without taking discussions of genre or function fully into account.[18] He finds a clear line of development within the community at Qumran, with several major shifts:

(i)   in sectarian identity (*from* true Israel and God's elect *to* the Sons of Light—with corresponding negative characterizations of other Jews);[19]

(ii) from polarizing language to graphic rhetoric of martial violence;[20]

(iii) from a conciliatory tone in 4QMMT to separatist and antagonistic sectarian ideology in 1QS (fully developed sectarianism, ca. late second century BCE).[21]

---

14. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 14: 'Presumably, the Qumran sectarians viewed the battle with the invading Roman army as the realization of the long awaited eschatological battle against the Sons of Darkness'.

15. An end-time war seems to be presupposed in 1QSa, 4Q285/11Q14, 4QpIsa, and 4Q471.

16. The arguments he provides for this early dating are not convincing. Cf. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 20: 'The absence of any reference to the Teacher of Righteousness or other well-known features of the sectarian community suggest that the document stems from a very early period in the sect's history, likely even before arriving at Qumran'. And further on pp. 20-21 n. 30: 'Other elements that point to an early composition include the overlap with several laws in the sources of the Temple Scroll and the earliest legal strata of the Damascus Document'.

17. Cf. for instance John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 21: 'The text states explicitly that the "we" party had already separated itself from the majority of the people…it [is not] necessary to assume that 4QMMT was written at or close to the point of separation, although this is possible. All the text requires is that the author thought that the high priest of the day might be sympathetic to the positions of the sect'.

18. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 41: 'The "Treatise on the Two Spirits" represents another example of the community's expectation of delayed punishment for pre-eschatological transgression. In the pre-eschatological age, the disempowered Sons of Light formulate a rhetoric of violence that empowers them in the end of days when the potent Sons of Darkness will suffer their ultimate fate'.

19. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 43: 'In further carving out for itself a sectarian identity … the community's self-perception as the true Israel and God's elect people intensified; they became the Sons of Light. Alongside this self-perception grew the characterization of all other Jews as illegitimate and evil—the Sons of Darkness'.

20. Boustan, Jassen, and Roetzel, 'Introduction', p. 7.

21. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 22.

On the basis mainly of a handful of texts he reconstructs 150-200 years of Qumran history and mentality, one paradigm firmly following another. Alternative ways of explaining these differences would be to treat them as variations—in content, due to genre, or deriving from different subgroups of the *Yahad*,[22] etc.

4. Despite all shifts and changes several elements remain, according to Jassen, basically the same throughout this period:

> (i)   the Qumran community's central thoughts, especially the expectation of a grand end-time war;
> (ii) their enemies, i.e. the Romans (!) and other Jews;
> (iii) the tension between the Qumran group's violent identity and non-violent practice.[23]

5. Two concepts are essential in Jassen's article: *defusion* and *infusion,* which he explains with the help of two narratives:

> This article analyzes two interconnected narratives of violence in the Dead Sea Scrolls… The first narrative of violence revolves around the origins of the community's violent worldview as embodied in its debates with its opponents. Early sectarian literature represents sectarian debates and polemics in terms of an exclusive understanding of the meaning of Scripture, the application of ritual and cultic law, and the identity of God's elect… By tracing the development of these debates in sectarian literature… I reveal how they are transformed from innocuous elements of disagreement into focal points for the emergence of violence as a central preoccupation of the Qumran community. The 'scarce resources' theory explains why these specific points of disagreement become *infused* with violence.
>
> The second narrative of violence involves the continued appearance of these debates within the community's eschatological literature as a rhetorical device to legitimize its violent expectations… By delaying all punishment until the eschaton, the community simultaneously *defused* its own

---

22. Cf. Torleif Elgvin, 'The Yahad is More Than Qumran', in *Enoch and Qumran Origins: New Light on a Forgotten Connection* (ed. G. Boccacini; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 273-79; Alison Schofield**,** *From Qumran to the Yahad: A New Paradigm of Textual Development for The Community Rule* (STDJ, 77; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009), pp. 47-51, 274-75.

23. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 43: 'The community recognized that it was no match for the military might of Rome or the power and authority of the priests in Jerusalem. Thus, it imagined a future time when all its enemies would be annihilated through the hand of God… [T]he discourse of violence against Romans and other Jews and their vilification as the Sons of Darkness served as a present-time rhetorical tool to empower the disempowered Qumran community. The description of future violence represents what the community would like to happen to its enemies—if it were in a position of power to be able to do so'.

violent worldview. The simultaneous *infusion* and *defusion* of violence is explained in the context of the sectarian structure of the community.[24]

If I understand Jassen correctly, disagreements with opponents lead (after a while) to a violent rhetoric (*infusion*).[25] And scarcity of four critical resources (inscripturation, sacred space, group privileging, and salvation) gradually generated the community's new violent worldview,[26] which in turn was *defused* by the postponing of punishment until the eschaton.

This explanation raises several questions: Is there really a need for *defusion* when we do not know of any instances of real violence? Does this explanation imply that the 'Qumran Community' went from being non-violent to potentially violent (*infusion*) and then back to being a non-violent (*defusion*) community with a violent worldview and violent eschatological expectations?

6. In some places Jassen operates with a distinction between a pre-eschatological and an eschatological era.[27] Since many of the texts from Qumran seem to reflect a *Naherwartung*, i.e. an expectation of imminent change, there is hardly a basis for such a clear-cut dichotomy (cf. for instance 1QpHab 2 and 7).

7. It lies as a premise in Jassen's study that the Qumran texts are more violent than other Jewish texts.[28] As I will show below, this is not necessarily the case. There is for instance nothing in the scrolls similar to Num. 21.2-3, where Israel is said to utterly destroy the Canaanites and their towns, or Deut. 7.1-5, where the Israelites are commanded to punish innocent people,

24. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 12.

25. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 19: '…presumed scarcity never actually becomes real violence. Rather, it emerges as the ideological basis for the community's rhetoric of eschatological violence against its opponents'. Cf. also p. 31: 'The bitter disagreement between the sectarians and their enemies never translated into real violence'. See further p. 44.

26. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 19. On p. 17 he says: 'The "scarce resources" theory…posits that violence erupts when critical resources—particularly ecological…and spatial…are in short supply'.

27. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 41: 'In the pre-eschatological age, Belial and the Sons of Darkness reign supreme, while the Sons of Light can only look forward to the awaited end of evil… Both 4QMMT and the Damascus Document recognize the ability for outsiders to make a deliberate choice to become insiders in the pre-eschatological era'. See also p. 32: 'The sectarian community is powerless against the present illegitimate stewards of the temple and therefore establishes the spiritualized temple (l. 6: the sanctuary of the human[s]) to function in the pre-eschatological age'.

28. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 42: 'This violent worldview is heavily indebted to the biblical and apocalyptic worlds to which the Qumran community was heir. Violence for the Qumran community, however, plays a much more significant and unique role in the origins, identity, and eschatological expectations of the community'.

including all women and children (cf. Deut. 2.33-35; Josh. 6.21; 1 Sam. 22.19).[29] In 1 Sam. 15.3, God explicitly demands of King Saul that he not spare anyone of the Amalekites: 'Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' (NRSV). In the so-called sectarian texts God, not humans, is the one who annihilates, and only evil-doers, not innocent people, are destroyed.

3. *Terminology, Definitions, and Textual Material*

Let me briefly address some terminological and methodological concerns. In this article, I use the term 'violence' in a general sense, corresponding to the wide definition of *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, where violence is defined as an 'action that injures or destroys that to which it is applied'.[30] We should note that the Hebrew word for 'violence', חמס, is much narrower and only applies to what I define as 'human violence' in the discussion below (neither God nor good people perform חמס).[31]

It seems useful to distinguish between at least three different types of violence in the Qumran texts: divine violence, sanctified violence, and human violence. By divine violence I refer to violence (thought to be / expected to be) performed by God (or angelic agents). By sanctified violence I mean 'violence that is believed to be sanctioned and/or required by God'[32] but performed by human agents. By human violence I refer to vio-

---

29. Cf. Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 28: 'The most chilling biblical war texts refer to ḥērem, the ban, under which all human beings among the defeated are "devoted to destruction"… In the majority of texts in Deuteronomy and Joshua, it is assumed that God demands total destruction of the enemy'. For a different view see M. Zehnder's study in the present volume. Note that the root חרם does not play a prominent role in the Qumran texts.

30. Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2008; online version 2012).

31. Craig A Evans, 'ḥāmās', in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zu den Qumrantexten* (ed. H.-J. Fabry and U. Dahmen; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011), I, pp. 1004-1007 (1004): 'Die Grundbedeutung des Nomens ist "Gewalt", die Bedeutung der Verbal-form entsprechend "Gewalt ausüben" oder "verletzen". Das Lexem kann auch "sich falsch verhalten" oder "eine Ungerechtigkeit begehen" bedeuten…חמס hat gewöhn-lich einen gesellschaftlichen Bezug und steht häufig in einem Kontext von Raub oder Mord, wo es Rechtlosigkeit und Mangel an Gerechtigkeit impliziert (vgl. Gen 49,5; Ri 9,24; Ez 7,23)'. The verb חמס is only exceptionally used with God as a subject, cf. Lam. 2.5-6. The root occurs 49 times in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is especially promi-nent in the Pesher of Habakkuk, where it occurs 11 times, half of them in quotes from the book of Habakkuk (see Evans, 'ḥāmās', p. 1004).

32. I use here Jassen's ('Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 15 note 7) definition

lence performed by humans that is not commissioned by God, i.e. violence performed by enemies.[33]

As I have mentioned, I will not categorize the Qumran texts according to the traditional divide between sectarian and non-sectarian texts (with its intermediate categories), nor presuppose, reproduce, or produce a big synthesis on the basis of a certain selection of texts. I consider the Qumran texts as (a) collection(s) of texts originating from different times and different milieus. However, since I will use Jassen as my main dialogue partner, I will mainly focus on works that he discusses in his article.

Since both human and sanctified violence—somewhat surprisingly—play a relatively minor role in the Qumran texts,[34] I will devote the main part of this article to discussing the use and function of divine violence.[35]

4. *Divine Violence in the Dead Sea Scrolls*

4.1. *The Prominent Role of Divine Violence in the Qumran Texts*

With the exception of violent acts performed by ungodly people or enemies, violence in the Qumran texts is mainly linked with God and performed by God. God never seems to commission violence explicitly, and there are seemingly no imperatives in the scrolls to carry out God's violence or vengeance. Only he himself has the right to perform violent actions. Both future and past forms of violence are described as if initiated by him and performed by him or by means of his agents.

Theologically, God's violent acts are considered as righteous, salvific acts that put an end to evil and unrighteousness. Accordingly, there is not

---

of 'religious/sanctified violence': 'violence that is believed to be sanctioned and/or required by God'.

33. Jassen does not explicitly distinguish between different kinds of violence, and he uses the terms 'religious violence' or 'sanctified violence' quite broadly, despite his more narrow definition (quoted in the previous note).

34. Human violence is rather prominent in the so-called *pesher* literature, especially in 1QpHab (*Kittim*: 3.7-12; 2.12-13; 3.1-2; 6.10-11; *Wicked Priest*: 11.4-8; cf. *Spreader of Lies* 1QpHab 10.9-12; cf. also 4Q169 fr. 3-4 i 5-9 and CD 1.19-20). The main function of these descriptions is to characterize the enemies as violent and ungodly, in contrast to the texts' implied audience. Elgvin discusses several of these texts in his contribution to this book.

35. John J. Collins (*Does the Bible Justify Violence?* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004], pp. 21-22), observes that '…most of the biblical endorsements of violent human action are set in the context of early Israel, even if they were written later'. He continues: 'In the literature of the Second Temple period…the focus is often on the future rather than on the past. The late prophetic and apocalyptic literature… has less emphasis on human action and more on the expectation of the eschatological judgment of God… In the apocalyptic literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the faithful people are to wait for this divine intervention'.

much interest in violence *per se* in these texts.[36] There also is little focus on injuries or loss, or other normal consequences of violence. Divine violence is rarely described as intensified or amplified human violence. In principle the two phenomena contrast with each other like righteousness and ungodliness.[37]

4.2. *The War Scroll and Divine Warfare*

In his article, Jassen paints the picture of a violent group that has postponed all violence to the eschaton.[38] They have a violent worldview, but do not carry out violence. They have a violent rhetoric and identity, but do not carry out any military training. Still, Jassen uses 'sanctified violence' as his main concept, even though sanctified violence only seems to play a minor role in the so-called sectarian texts. The phenomenon is mainly found in the War Scroll, a composition that might be described as a liturgy for 'holy war'.[39] But even in this text it is first and foremost God, not humans, who acts 'violently'.

The hymn preserved in 1QM 11 is illustrative, with its almost pacifistic tendencies. The acting party is God, who acts in harmony with the Scriptures.

> [1]Truly the battle is Yours, and by the strength of Your hand their corpses have been dashed to pieces so that no one can bury them. Indeed, Goliath the Gittite, a mighty warrior, [2]You delivered into the hand of David, Your servant, because he trusted in Your great name and not in sword and spear, for the battle is Yours. [3]He subdued the Philistines many times by Your holy name. Also by the hand of our kings You rescued us many times [4]because of Your mercy; not according to our works, for we have acted wickedly, nor for

36. I am not able to find indications of vicarious pleasures accompanying God's violent acts. The aspect of *Schadenfreude* is not prominent either. For these aspects in other texts, cf. Kimberly B. Stratton, 'The Eschatological Arena: Reinscribing Roman Violence in Fantasies of the End Times', in *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice*, pp. 45-76 (66-71).

37. Genesis 6.11-13 may serve to illustrate the fundamental difference between divine and human violence. The text plays on the verb שחת that is applied both to humans (vv. 11-12) and God (v. 13). The root חמס, however, is linked to human activity only. This term is not applicable to God, because he is righteous and acts righteously.

38. Cf. Jassen, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 44: 'When the opportunity for real violence actually presented itself…the community's rhetoric of violence was no match for the Romans' real violence'. Boustan, Jassen, and Roetzel state ('Introduction', p. 7): 'Jassen…shows that the very process by which a discourse of religious violence *infused* the ideology of the Qumran community simultaneously also *defused* the impetus to undertake concrete violent action'.

39. Gunnar Haaland, 'Krigsrullen', in *Dødehavsrullene* (ed. T. Elgvin; Oslo: De norske bokklubbene, 2004), pp. 303-333 (304).

the acts of our rebelliousness. The battle is Yours, the strength is from You, [5]it is not our own. Neither our power nor the strength of our hand have done valiantly, but by Your power and the strength of Your great valor…

[7]By the hand of Your anointed ones, [8]seers of things appointed, You have told us about the ti[mes] of the wars of Your hands in order that You may {fight} glorify Yourself among our enemies, to bring down the hordes of Belial, the seven [9]vainglorious nations, at the hand of the oppressed whom You have redeemed [with powe]r and by retribution (or: with peace); a wondrous strength. A heart that melts shall be as a door of hope. You will do to them as You did to Pharaoh [10]and the officers of his chariots in the Red Sea. You will ignite the humble of spirit like a fiery torch put to the sheaf, consuming the wicked. You shall not turn back until [11]the annihilation of the guilty (כלות אשמה). In time past You foretold [the app]ointed time for Your hand's powerful work against the Kittim, saying: 'And Assyria shall fall by a sword not of man, and a sword [12]not of men shall consume him' (Isa. 31.8).[40]

1QM 11.1-5, 7-12[41]

The global end-time war in the War Scroll is an apocalyptic war, where the pious and the righteous—and not experienced men of war—are predetermined to win. We see the same tendency in 1QM 9.4-9, a text that in fact gives us a rare example of sanctified violence[42] in a ritualistic context.

[4]Altogether, seven battle lines, twenty-eight thousand [5]soldiers, and six thousand horsemen. All these shall pursue in order to destroy the enemy in God's battle; a total annihilation (ירדופו להשמיד אויב במלחמת אל לכלת עולמים). [6]The priests shall blow for them the trumpets of pursuit, and they shall divide themselves for a pursuit of annihilation (לרדף כלה) against all the enemy. The cavalry [7]shall push the enemy back at the flanks of the battle until they are destroyed (עד החרם). When the slain (החללים) have fallen, the priests shall continue blowing from afar and shall not enter [8]into the midst of the slain so as to be defiled by their unclean blood, for they are holy. They shall not allow the oil of their priestly anointment to be profaned with the blood [9]of vainglorious nations. (*vacat*)

1QM 9.4-9

The violent acts of the army are characterized in the same way as divine violence, as an 'eternal annihilation' (cf. l. 5). Lines 7-9 seem to indicate that the enemies are considered as a sacrifice to God. This aspect is probably also in play in 1QM 18.1-6, where the great hand of the God of Israel is the acting party.[43] Both in columns 9 and 18 the root חרם plays a prominent

---

40. Cf. also 1QM 10.

41. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are cited from Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York, NY; HarperCollins, 2005).

42. Cf. also 1QM 6.4-6.

43'[1][and in the seven]th[lot,] when the great hand of God shall be lifted up

role. These texts seem to draw on 'biblical' notions of holy war, but also modify them significantly by downplaying the role of sanctified violence.[44] In a way it is striking that a war scroll does not contain more violence than we find in 1QM. The text clearly reflects a movement from sanctified violence to divine violence.

4.3. *'Literary' Violence*

The hypothetical end-time violence in the texts from Qumran is not described by experienced men of war, but by exegetes and scribes (cf. 1QM 11.7-8), and forms part of a larger stream of Jewish writings and traditions both broader and older than the 'movement' that owned the texts.

In their outlining of the ultimate hope and the events leading up to it, the Qumran texts often reflect typical apocalyptic features and scriptural imagery.[45] In scriptural expressions and metaphors the authors seem to have found resources to 'handle' their enemies and, in their texts, wrote them into a larger eschatological scheme. 'The violators of the covenant', for instance, become part of the non-Jewish nations in the War Scroll (1QM 1.2) and share their fate.[46]

In several passages in the Damascus Document, God carries out violence according to Scripture, so to speak. In CD 1 he punishes the elect of old by hiding his face, turning away (1.3), giving them up to the sword (1.4, 17), and by handing them over to the power of kings (1.6),[47] all typical 'scrip-

---

against Belial and against all the fo[rc]es of his dominion for an eternal slaughter (במגפת עולמים) [2][…] and the shout of the holy ones when they pursue Assyria. Then the sons of Japheth shall fall, never to rise again, and the Kittim shall be crushed without [3][remnant and survivor (שארית ופליטה] יכתו לאין). So] the God of Israel shall raise His hand against the whole multitude of Belial. At that time the priests shall sound a signal [4][on the six trumpet]s of remembrance, and all the battle formations shall be gathered to them and divide against all the ca[mps of the Ki]ttim [5]to completely destroy them (להחרימם). [And] when the sun hastens to set on that day, the Chief Priest shall stand, and the priests and the [Levites] who are [6]with him, and the chiefs [of the battle lines and the men] of the army. And they shall bless the God of Israel there' (1QM 18.1-6).

44. Sollamo, 'War and Violence', p. 348: 'The enemies were to be destroyed once and for all, as according to the traditions of the holy war they were a sacrifice (חרם) to God (1QM XVIII,4-5)'.

45. We should note that there are several eschatological texts from Qumran that do not reflect a violent hope, texts where the eschatology is impersonal, where evil is annihilated and righteousness wins (4Q215a; 4Q246; 4Q475, cf. *1 En.* 10.16–11.1). These texts reflect an ethical dualism, but not violence.

46. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 13 note 2: 'The immediate enemy in the eschatological war is the non-Jewish nations, though the Jewish "violators against the covenant"…are also included (1QM 1:2…)'.

47. '[1:3]For when Israel abandoned Him by being faithless, He turned away from

tural' covenant curses (see Deut. 31.16-18; cf. also 4Q390 fr. 1.9-11). In 2.1, however, he is said to annihilate the lot of them. It is notable that all the past violent actions are performed by mediators. With the possible exception of 2.1 there are no real encounters between God and his enemies. He uses enemies or angels when he punishes them.

The past violence in CD 1 functions as the backdrop to what will happen to all those who rebel against the proper way and despise the law. God will act in accordance with how he has acted earlier, but much more intensely.

> [5]But Strength, Might, and great Wrath in the flames of fire [6]with all the angels of destruction (כל מלאכי חבל) shall come against all who rebel against the proper way and who despise the law, until they are without remnant [7]or survivor, for God had not chosen them from ancient eternity.
>
> CD 2.5-7[48]

CD 7.21-8.3 may serve as another example of the same phenomenon. In this text God uses Belial as an instrument to punish the apostates:

> They escaped in the first period of God's judgment, [1]but those who held back were handed over to the sword (הסגירו לחרב). And such is the verdict on all members of the covenant who [2]do not hold firm to these laws: they are condemned to destruction by Belial (לפוקדם לכלה ביד בליעל). That is the day [3]on which God shall judge (יפקד)…[49]

Israel and from His sanctuary [4]and gave them up to the sword (ויתנם לחרב). But when He called to mind the covenant He made with their forefathers, He left a [5]remnant for Israel and did not allow them to be exterminated (ולא נתנם לכלה). In the era of wrath—three hundred [6]and ninety years at the time He handed them over (לתיתו אותם) to the power of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon— [7]He took care of them and caused to grow from Israel and from Aaron a root of planting to inherit [8]His land and to grow fat on the good produce of His soil … [13]They are the ones who depart from the proper way… [14]When the Man of Mockery appeared, who sprayed on Israel [15]lying waters, he led them to wander in the trackless wasteland. He brought down the lofty heights of old, turned aside [16]from paths of righteousness, and shifted the boundary marks that the forefathers had set up to mark their inheritance, so that [17]the curses of His covenant took hold on them. Because of this they were handed over to the sword (להסגירם לחרב) that avenges the breach of [18]His covenant. For they had sought flattery, choosing travesties of true religion; they looked for [19]gaps in the law; they favored the fine neck. They called the guilty innocent, and the innocent guilty. [20]They overstepped covenant, violated law; and they conspired together to kill the innocent, for all those who lived [21]pure lives they loathed from the bottom of their heart. So they persecuted them violently (וירדפום לחרב), and were happy to see the people quarrel. Because of all this God became very angry [2.1]with their company. He annihilated the lot of them (להשם את כל המונם), because all their deeds were uncleanness to Him'.

48. Cf. also CD 8.1-3/19.13-14 quoted above.

49. For related formulas with ביד, cf. CD 19.13-14 (= 8.2-3), 1QS 4.12, and 1QS 2.5-7.

In 1QS, 1QM and CD God's acts of eschatological violence are often described by the use of words and stylized phrases that repeat themselves in several texts:

עד כלותם לאין שרית ופליטה למו	until their utter destruction with neither remnant nor rescue (1QS 4.13-14)
לעשות בם משפטים גדולים לכלת עולם לאין שרית	He will bring against them weighty judgments, eternal destruction with none spared (1QS 5.12-13)[50]
...במגפת עולמים וכתיים יכתו לאין [שארית ופליטה]	… for an eternal slaughter … (1QM 18.1) and the Kittim shall be crushed without [remnant and survivor] (1QM 18.2-3)
וסרה ממשלת כתיים להכני[ע] רשעה לאין שארית ופלטה לוא תהיה ל[כול בנ]י חושך	and the supremacy of the Kittim shall cease, that wickedness be overco[me] without a remnant. There shall be no survivors of [all Sons] of Darkness. (1QM 1.6-7)
לאין שאירית ופליטה למו	until they are without remnant or survivor (CD 2.6-7)

What exactly God is expected to do is not described in these texts. The focus is solely on the outcome of his action.[51] It is not described *how* he punishes,

50. Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 24 seems to be pushing the interpretation of this text: 'The community's primary statement of the two-tiered approach to scriptural law—the revealed and the hidden—concludes with a resounding invective against the sectarian opponents for failure to adhere to both the hidden and revealed law (1QS 5:11-12)—even though they cannot know the hidden law! They thus arouse the anger of God, who "will execute great judgments resulting in eternal destruction without a remnant…" (ll. 12-13)'. Strictly speaking, the punishment only seems to be linked to the transgression of the revealed law. I am further not convinced by Jassen's identification of those who do not understand Scripture with the Sons of Deceit in the Treatise on the Two Spirits: 'The ultimate destruction that awaits those who do not understand Scripture is more fully articulated earlier in the document in the section known as the "Treatise on the Two Spirits" (1QS 3.13–4.26). A basic premise of this section is that all those among the Sons of Deceit (= Darkness) will be eradicated in the end of days. The identification of the Sons of Deceit with those who fail to understand and follow the revealed and hidden law is suggested by their identical final destiny: "…until they are destroyed. (There will be) no remnant nor rescue for them" 1QS 4:13-14)' (Jassen, 'Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', p. 24).

51. The formulas listed above are related to formulas that speak about the destruction of injustice or wickedness:

> In his mysterious insight and glorious wisdom God has countenanced an era in which perversity (עולה) triumphs, but at the time appointed for visitation He shall destroy such forever (ישמידנה לעד).
>
> 1QS 4.18-19

it is only stated that he does so (once and for all). His actions are either left uncharacterized or moderated in a somewhat pleonastic manner (cf. 'eternal destruction', 1QS 5.13; 'eternal slaughter', 1QM 18.2). This pleonastic character of the punishment is especially prominent in 1QS 4.11-14:

> [11]The judgment [12]of all who walk in such ways will be multiple afflictions at the hand of all the angels of perdition (לרוב נגיעים ביד כול מלאכי חבל), everlasting damnation in the wrath of God's furious vengeance (לשחת עולמים באף עברת אל נקמת), never-ending terror and reproach (לזעות נצח וחרפת) [13]for all eternity, with a shameful extinction in the fire of Hell's outer darkness (כלמת כלה באש מחשכים). For all their eras, generation by generation, they will know doleful sorrow, bitter evil, and dark happenstance, until [14]their utter destruction with neither remnant nor rescue.

5. *Function and Identity*

The function of the violent passages in the texts we have discussed is hardly to confront the ungodly with their destiny or to threaten them. Many of these texts seem to have had a limited circulation. The extent to which they functioned to comfort and empower the members of the 'Qumran Community' in their situation is somewhat difficult to decide,[52] as Stratton maintains:

> [F]antasies of eschatological revenge constitute a common feature of apocalyptic literature and have often been attributed to the projected wish fulfillment of persecuted minority groups. Anticipated reversals of the status quo, it has been argued, serve sociological functions by offering hope and comfort to persecuted communities as well as providing a way to manage cognitive dissonance—they present the current experience of abjection as meaningful and part of God's plan. Furthermore they promise retribution: the persecuted will eventually be rewarded and the unjust punished. Recently, scholars have pointed out that not all apocalyptic writings can be linked to persecution and, in fact, eschatological fantasies of reversal and

---

> All injustice [and wi]ckedness You destroy for ever (וכול עולה ורשע תשמיד לעד).
>
> 1QHa 6.26-27
>
> All those who despise His word, He shall destroy from upon the face of the earth' (ישמיד מתבל).
>
> 1QS 5.19

Judging from these texts, God deals with evil just as he deals with evil-doers. He destroys it/them.

52. Jassen ('Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence', pp. 16-17) states that '[t]he violent eschatological vision serves in the present primarily as a rhetorical tool to empower the disempowered community. Like other disempowered groups espousing millennial beliefs, the community articulated its opposition to the present world order in such a way that minimized the potential for present-time violent engagement, in which it recognized that it was overmatched'.

revenge constitute a literary genre that was appropriated for a variety of ideological purposes, including social critique.[53]

Most of the phenomena we have discussed in this chapter may perhaps be described as 'fictional' violence. The war in the War Scroll is not like other wars, and the punishment in some of the texts in 1QS is first and foremost literary. It is a rather long way from these descriptions to a social reality. It is also doubtful that they can serve as a basis for the reconstruction of a group's worldview.

Both in CD and 1QS we see that 'fictional' descriptions of violence are used in constructions of identity, and contribute both to mark and emphasize the sharp division between insiders and outsiders (1QS 4.11-14; 5.10-13). In 1QS 2.4-18, the terrible destiny of enemies and outsiders also functions as a warning to the addressees.[54] The imprecatory formulas are both directed at 'all those foreordained to Belial' (2.4-5) and 'anyone initiated with unrepentant heart, who enters this Covenant' (2.11-12):

> [4]The Levites in turn shall curse all those foreordained to [5]Belial. They shall respond, 'May you be damned in return for all your wicked, guilty deeds. May the [6]God of terror give you over to implacable avengers (יתנכה אל זעוה ביד כול נוקמי נקם); may He visit your offspring with destruction at the hands of those who recompense [7]evil with evil (ויפקוד אחריכה כלה ביד כול משלמי גמולים). May you be damned without mercy in return for your dark deeds, an object of wrath [8]licked by eternal flame (אש עולמים), surrounded by utter darkness. May God have no mercy upon you when you cry out, nor forgive so as to atone for your sins. [9]May He lift up His furious countenance upon you for vengeance (לנקמתכה). May you never find peace through the appeal of any intercessor'. [10]All the initiates into the Covenant shall respond to the blessers and cursers, 'Amen, amen'. [11]Then the priests and Levites shall go on to declare, 'Damned be anyone initiated with unrepentant heart, [12]who enters this Covenant, then sets up the stumbling block of his sin, so turning apostate. It shall come to pass, [13]when he hears the words of this Covenant, that he shall bless himself in his heart, saying "Peace be with me, [14]though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart" (Deut. 29.18-19). Surrounded by abundant water, his spirit shall nevertheless expire thirsty, without [15]forgiveness. God's anger and zeal for His commandments shall burn against him for eternal destruction (לכלת עולמים). All the [16]curses of this Covenant shall cleave to him, and God shall separate him out for a fate befitting his wickedness. He shall be cut off from all the Sons of Light because of his apostasy [17]from God, brought about by unrepentance and the stumbling block of sin. He shall cast his lot with those damned for all time'.
>
> 1QS 2.4-17[55]

---

53. Stratton, 'The Eschatological Arena', p. 47.

54. Stratton, 'The Eschatological Arena', p. 70: 'The punishment described in this text…serve as a stark warning to its audience, providing them with a vivid ekphrasis of their future torments if they do not conform to the author's moral agenda'.

55. Cf. also CD 19.6, 13-14.

In this text, the violent curses of the covenant do not concern a semi-distant future, but the present. This is probably also the case in 1QS 5.12: God's judgmental wrath and full vengeance (אף למשפט ולנקום נקם) is here closely tied to the curses of the Mosaic covenant. Both texts seem to confirm that the author of 1QS saw the divine (and fictional) violence they reflect as a present 'reality'.[56]

6. *Concluding Remarks*

As we have seen, divine violence plays a prominent role in the Dead Sea Scrolls, not only in descriptions of the past and in predictions of the eschaton, but also as a present 'reality'. This weakens Jassen's claim that the 'Qumran Community' postponed all violence until the eschatological war, and also serves to illustrate the literary and 'fictional' character of much of the violence reflected in the Qumran texts.

This, of course, raises new questions: To what extent is it unethical to have violent expectations to God? Is it unethical to have notions about God punishing the enemies and to cultivate a hope that they will be destroyed? For the first readers the answer would clearly have been 'no'. The violence reflected in the texts we have reviewed is not only divine and scripturally based, but also just in the sense that it only strikes evildoers, ungodly nations, and breakers of the covenant.

---

56. We find another instance of contemporary divine punishment in 1QpHab 9.9-12: '⁹This refers to the Wicked Priest. Because of the crime he committed against the Teacher of ¹⁰Righteousness and the members of his party, God handed him over to his enemies, humiliating him ¹¹with a consuming affliction with despair, because he had condemned ¹²his chosen'.

Human 'Dominion' and Being 'like God': An Exploration of Peace, Violence and Truth in the Old Testament

Gordon McConville

Abstract

The divine vision of a 'good' world in Genesis 1 is disturbed by the inclusion within it of the human being to whom 'dominion' is delegated. While the human vocation to do 'justice' is asserted in Noah and Abraham, the narrative of Genesis–Kings shows from the outset that human dominion is typically exercised in such a way as to lead to violence. Even the idea of 'god-likeness' postulated by the concept of the *imago Dei* is problematical, because the aspiration to be 'like god' tends to result in tyranny. The essay demonstrates the human misconstrual of god-likeness in Genesis 3, in the Pharaoh of the exodus, and in Assyria in Isaiah. The mimicry of divine power, together with the intention of violent domination, is particularly evident in the case of Assyria in Isaiah 10; 36–37. The ethical issue raised is how, if at all, human beings may exercise 'dominion' in truth, justice and peace, and whether there can be justification for any kinds of coercion. A response to this is offered in a consideration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea that the Church takes the form of Christ in the public arena, neither withdrawing from public life nor identifying with the prevailing political power.

1. *The Problem of Human Dominion*

There is a striking discordance in the first chapters of the Old Testament (Gen. 1–11) between the statement, repeated several times in Gen. 1.1–2.3, 'God saw that it was good', and the story of violence that ensues, initiated with potent symbolism by the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Gen. 4.8). The theme of violence runs through this 'primeval history', being the characteristic sin that precipitates the divine decision to bring the comprehensive destruction of the flood (Gen. 6.11, 13).[1] The narrative arc spanning

---

1.   Norbert Lohfink has argued that the P account of origins, from creation to Israel's settlement in the promised land, is entirely peaceful, with violent and warlike elements coming from other Pentateuchal sources; Norbert Lohfink, 'God the Creator and the Stability of Heaven and Earth', in his *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress; Edinburgh: T. & T.

the creation, flood and Noachide covenant ends with a reiteration of the divine mandate to human beings, to 'be fruitful and fill the earth' (Gen. 9.1, 7; cf. Gen. 1.28), but now with a concept of human dominion that reckons fully with the spilling of blood as a reality of life, both in the human consumption of animals, on which the dread of humanity has fallen, and in the ever-present possibility of murder (Gen. 9.2-6). The 'filling of the earth', bracketing this portrayal and regulation of death in the natural order, is thus newly predicated on it.

It appears, then, that the divine vision of a 'good' world is profoundly disturbed by this narrative of which it forms a part. One approach to the elucidation of this fundamental disturbance is to question whether the picture of a 'good' world is indeed free from violence.[2] Does it, for example, have latent within it indications of a Chaos not fully subdued in the divine act of ordering? Is the *Chaoskampf*, attested in non-biblical texts from the ancient Near East and reflected in several Old Testament texts outside Genesis, residually present in Genesis 1? Jon D. Levenson thinks that Genesis 1 is adumbrated by Psalm 104, in which the 'sea' is kept within bounds, but the 'forces of chaos' persist within the created order, and 'their persistence qualifies—and defines—[God's] world-mastery'.[3] J. Richard Middleton, in contrast, argues that 'Genesis 1 does not just relativize the creation-by-combat motif. Rather by its alternative depiction of God's nonviolent creative power at the start of the biblical canon, the text signals the creator's original intent for shalom and blessing at the outset of human history, prior to the rise of human (or divine) violence'.[4] It thus becomes a 'normative

Clark, 1994), pp. 116-35. Cf. William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: the Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 60, 64, 101. I agree rather with Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 306, who argued that P assimilated JE. The violence theme thus spans J and P. See also Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 33: '…Genesis 1–2 together constitute the only perspective on originating creation of which we can be certain'.

2. An aspect of this is the question whether Genesis 1, in its evocation of the living, procreating animal world (Gen. 1.20-25), intends to portray a world without natural death. The 'vegetarianism' implied in Gen. 1.29-30 might suggest that death by predation is not part of the picture. In any case, for the purposes of the present discussion, it seems to me that natural 'death' should be distinguished from 'violence'.

3. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: the Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 65. For Levenson the OT preserves texts in which the possible resurgence of Chaos lies closer to the surface, according to which God is neither continuously active in history as a warrior against evil, nor a *deus otiosus*, who has surrendered his power to other gods, but one who can at any time be roused again to keep the forces of Chaos subdued; *Creation*, p. 50.

4. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: the Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand

framework by which to judge all the violence that pervades the rest of the Bible', and indeed for judging violence in the contemporary world.[5]

There are problems with both these accounts. Levenson's thesis arguably depends too heavily on the language and imagery of the *Chaoskampf* as indicators of a theological assessment of the respective powers of God and Chaos.[6] Middleton's belief that Genesis 1 is a standard by which to judge violent behaviour in the rest of the Old Testament seems at first to account better for the stark contrast between its vision of a 'good' creation and its stories of conflict. The book as a whole can even be seen as an aspiration towards the recovery of a 'good' world-order, as exemplified by the 'Joseph narrative', with its contrast between the murderous plans of Joseph's brothers and the plans of God, who 'meant [the events reported] for good' (Gen. 50.20).[7] However, the problem with Middleton's account lies in the centrality of human dominion in the way in which Genesis 1 sets the scene for the subsequent narrative. This indeed would seem to be the 'hostage to fortune' in the divine vision of a non-violent, 'good' world-order, begging the question of how this new agent, with no track record, would take up the challenge.[8] The question stands, I think, even when it is recognized that there is a polemical, democratizing force in this embrace of all humanity within the mandate to rule, presumably intended to mitigate the effects of tyranny. What sort of 'good' world-order is conceivable that has delegated to the human being authority to rule over the creation?

One answer to this lies in the attribution of צדקה (*ṣĕdāqâ*) to Noah (Gen. 6.9), the 'righteous' man who is exempted from the general punishment of humanity in the flood. Thus the quality of 'righteousness' is set over against

---

Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 269. In what follows, I have avoided attributing 'violence' to God, on the grounds that the term implies a kind of corruption or transgression, and therefore pre-empts answers to a theological question that is in view. Neutral terms, such as 'force', have a part to play in the enquiry.

5.   Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p. 269. A mediating position is taken by Robin Routledge, 'Did God Create Chaos? Unresolved Tension in Genesis 1:1-2', *TB* 61.1 (2010), pp. 69-88. Routledge's *via media* lies between the notions of *creatio ex nihilo* in which creation contains no other power but God, and the *Chaoskampf*, which knows of a chaotic power that can break out again (pp. 85-88). This, I think, pays too little attention to the potential of human power itself to bring disruption.

6.   Fretheim rightly distinguishes between imagery and theology, when he points to the flood-narrative's assertion that there would never be a similar event again. For him, the flood is not a resurgence of Chaos, but is due to 'God's activity in mediating the effects of human sin'; *God and World in the Old Testament*, pp. 81-82.

7.   There is an echo in this text not only of the divine vision in Genesis 1, together with an intention to populate the earth, but also of the directly opposed human thinking and planning (חשב) that was 'only evil continually' (Gen. 6.5-7).

8.   I leave aside here the question of whether the terms כבש and רדה imply a sort of violence in the manner of the mandated rule.

the disorder that has manifested itself in human violence. The same quality is later both ascribed to Abraham (Gen. 15.6) and laid upon him as a charge (Gen. 18.19—in the phrase צדקה ומשפט). Abraham in turn invokes it in his intercession on behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18.23-33). Pursuing his divinely appointed responsibility for 'justice and righteousness', he appeals to God on the same basis, and repudiates a world-order in which no distinction is made between the righteous (צדיק) and the wicked (רשע) (Gen. 18.25). The God of all the earth is bound to judge aright (השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט). God and humans alike are held to the standard of righteousness in the governance of the world.

The scenario is one narrative development of the idea of the human as created in the divine 'image and likeness' (Gen. 1.26). But the ambivalence of 'god-likeness' is one of the outcomes of the (combined) creation-narratives of Genesis 1–3. The enticement of 'you shall be like gods' (Gen. 3.5) ironically echoes God's deliberation in Gen. 1.26 (are they not 'like God' already?), and at the same time posits the notion of god-likeness as a problem in human aspiration. The delegation of authority to humans entails their exercise of judgment (as the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong actions), but humans are prone to misjudgement, not just in the sense of making errors because of imperfect knowledge, but because of a more fundamental problem of moral capacity, manifest in the tendency to violence and oppression. There is an implication of this in the problem of Sodom and Gomorrah, where an 'outcry' about them (זעקה) has come to Yahweh, so that he resolves in his capacity as judge to investigate (Gen. 18.20-21).

This misuse of the divinely-ordained human vocation to use power aright is a problem that is played out in a variety of Old Testament texts. I have mentioned the Joseph narrative already as one case in point. Immediately following it, a Pharaoh arises 'who did not know Joseph' (Exod. 1.8), and so a new situation is introduced, in which there is no longer a mitigation of tyranny through a powerful individual who understands the mind of God. The first chapter of Exodus goes on to depict a pretension to world-ordering power, that sets the violent, oppressive regime of the Pharaoh in opposition to the alternative world-ordering concept, namely the service of God.[9] The challenge to divine power is expressed in part by the repeated use of the root עבד in Exod. 1.11-14, which is echoed contrastively in Yahweh's demand through Moses that Pharaoh let Israel go 'to serve/worship' him, Exod. 7.26. It is also conveyed ironically by the Pharaoh's intention to limit the growth of the people, in contrast to the creational intention of multiplication, especially as directed to Israel in the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 12.2; 15.5). The

---

9. See also the essay by Georg Fischer in this volume, on Pharaoh and 'Egypt' in Exodus as a 'symbolic power in opposition to God', pp. 96-109 (101).

Pharaoh may be said to take up the responsibility to be 'like God'—symbolized for example in the magicians' mimicry of Moses' signs as evidence of power equal to that of Moses' God (Exod. 7.10-12)—but his 'god-likeness' comes with the violence that has characterized humanity since before the flood. The depiction of human power in Genesis and Exodus is thus deeply ambivalent. The divine delegation of 'dominion' to humans as a responsibility is apparently inalienable, yet its exercise readily takes the form of violence, and this in a kind of rivalry with God.

2. *Assyria in Isaiah*

I want to pursue this line of argument with reference to the portrayal of Assyria in the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah treats the subject of divine and human rule in a variety of ways, including evocations of royal-Davidic rule, and the concept of Israel as 'servant' of Yahweh, together with the torah as a means of mediating peace to the nations (Isa. 2.2-4). The aspiration to 'peace' runs through these, as a function of the 'justice and righteousness' that characterizes good rule (Isa. 9.5-6; cf. 11.1-9 [and 48.22]).[10] It also exposes the limitations of actual human rule, not least in the characterizations of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The person of Yahweh is at the heart of this exposé. He alone is 'exalted' (Isa. 2.11, cf. 5.16; 6.1), in contrast to the false loftiness of human power scathingly portrayed in Isa. 2.9-21. The key text is Isa. 5.16, because there Yahweh's exaltation is closely paralleled by the notion of his holiness ('the Holy One of Israel shows himself holy by righteousness', נקדש בצדקה) , and brought into conjunction with 'justice and righteousness', and indeed with acts of judgment (vv. 14-15). In this context, therefore, צדקה is inextricably connected with the person of Yahweh (rather than an independent standard).[11]

The picture of Yahweh as judge is contrasted in the context with accusations of profound *mis*judgement: 'you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness…who are wise in your own eyes and shrewd in your own sight' (Isa. 5.20-21). Such misconstrual of reality is inseparable from acts of injustice: 'who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights' (v. 23). Isaiah thus sets up a

10. This is not always signified by the term שלום (*šālôm*), which is lacking in Isa. 2.2-4. In the 'Servant songs' it occurs only at Isa. 53.5, but several times in the wider context (Isa. 41.3; 45.7; 48.18; 52.7; 54.10, 13; 55.12). 'Peace' is evidently part of the pictures of justice and salvation found in this part of Isaiah.

11. This is in contrast to a 'natural law' reading of Old Testament ethics, in which the moral order is simply recognized by people, apart from whether it has been revealed by God or not. For this view, see John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1998), pp. 64-67; also John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 32-44.

contrast between Yahweh who has the right to judge by virtue of who he is (exalted, holy), and those who claim to judge better (Isa. 5.19), but whose judgment is a perversion of reality.

Assyria stands as the supreme symbol of this false self-understanding in Isaiah. It arrogates to itself attributes that belong to Yahweh, and Isaiah mocks its pretensions in parody. In Isaiah's vision of Yahweh enthroned, the seraphim testify to his holiness, and in parallel declare: 'the whole earth is full of his glory' (כבודו, Isa. 6.3). Glory belongs to Yahweh by right, as the one who is truly exalted. Glory is predicated of Assyria too, but ironically: 'under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire' (Isa. 10.16).

The false pretensions of Assyria are developed in two places in Isaiah, in the account of the siege of Jerusalem under Sennacherib (Isa. 36–37), and in Isaiah 10. In the former, the Assyrian commander, the Rabshakeh, taunts Hezekiah and the besieged city by claiming that their destiny lies in Assyrian hands; it is the king of Assyria who is the maker and breaker of cities and nations, and who has the power to give the means of life. The rhetorical ploy by which the Rabshakeh claims to be an instrument of Yahweh (Isa. 36.10) only thinly disguises his own intentions. The Assyrian voice mimics Yahweh's in a number of ways. It adopts Isaiah's own critique of misplaced trust in alliances, especially Egypt (Isa. 36.6, 9, cf. 30.1-7; 31.1-3). It takes up deuteronomic language in promises of land and plenty (Isa. 36.16-17); and it warns of the danger of trust in gods that are powerless (now including Yahweh) (Isa. 36.18-20; 37.10-13, cf. Deut. 32.17, 21, 37-38; Jer. 2.28; 11.12). The tenor of Isaiah 36–37 is precisely to demonstrate this false imagining by which the human power claims the rights of the divine.

The Assyrian self-deception is similarly exposed in Isaiah 10. Here Yahweh declares that Assyria is his instrument of punishment on his people (the proposition cynically adopted by the Rabshakeh in Isa. 36.10—self-deceived even when he utters a truth!). But this is the occasion of a demonstration of Assyria's self-deceiving pretensions, encapsulated in Isa 10.7: 'he does not so intend (ידמה) and his mind (ולבבו) does not so think (יחשב)' (RSV). Here the wrath of God (Isa. 10.5), arising from his righteous judgment, is contrasted with a kind of planning that is simply bent on self-serving violence (Isa. 10.7b). The verb חשב collocated with לב or לבב calls to mind the characterization of human wickedness in Gen. 6.5 (וכל־יצר מחשבת לבבו רק רע כל־היום). The parody of the divine purpose finds an echo too in the words 'for he thinks/says' (כי יאמר, Isa. 10.8), recalling 'and Yahweh said' (ואמר יהוה, Gen. 6.7).[12] The speaking, or thinking, of

---

12. There is additionally an echo of the murderous 'planning'—חשב—of Joseph's brothers, also contrasted with Yahweh's חשב in superintending the events for 'good', Gen. 50.20.

Assyria here recalls the divine deliberation that led to the judgment of the flood. In this way Assyria's actions are portrayed as a kind of judgment. The point is reinforced by his attribution to himself both of power and of wisdom and understanding, by which he has enforced his sovereignty over the nations of the earth (Isa. 10.13-14; note: בכח ידי עשיתי, and cf., ironically, Deut. 8.17: כחי ועצם ידי עשה; also Prov. 8.12-21). The ironic evocation in this self-portrayal of the judging rule of Yahweh in the world extends even to a parody of Yahweh's victorious march to Zion (Isa. 10.27c-32; cf. Ps. 68.8-11, 18-21; also Judg. 5; Hab. 3).[13]

Assyria's sustained misconception of itself and the order of the world is not only met by Yahweh's judgment against it (Isa. 10.15-19), but is also enveloped within pictures of true judgment and rule (Isa. 9–11). Alongside Yahweh's direct action are pictures of human rule delivering justice and righteousness and 'endless peace' (ולשלום אין־קץ) (Isa. 9.5-6; 11.1-9).[14] These belong within the wider depiction of good human rule in Isaiah, culminating in the Servant of Yahweh (Isa. 42.1-7 etc.).[15] He is also put in relation to another imperial conqueror, namely Cyrus, dubbed Yahweh's 'anointed' (Isa. 45.1), who is met everywhere by צדק (Isa. 41.2, where the noun is generally translated as 'victory', yet the term unavoidably echoes Isaianic 'justice'-language), and who marches victoriously against kingdoms (Isa. 41.2-7), yet is exempt from the kind of critique levelled at Assyria. Finally, the 'democratization' of the Davidic covenant in Isa. 55.3 belongs within the pattern.[16]

The effect of this panorama of human power is to display a quality of rule, rather than sustain any specific political programme. The striking contrast between Assyria's self-attribution of wisdom (Isa. 10.13), pretensions to irresistible power, and vacuous promises of peace (Isa. 36.16-17) with the wisdom, peace, justice and righteousness predicated of the ideal human

---

13. Note verbal echoes, e.g. 'trembling'—Ps. 68.9; Judg. 5.4; Hab. 3.7, 16, with different verbs.

14. The kingdom of 'endless peace' makes a neat contrast with Hezekiah's limited vision in Isa. 39.8!

15. The full range of portrayals of human rule in Isaiah is exceedingly variegated. The 'Servant' is famously hard to confine to a specific identity, having the full gamut of royal, priestly and prophetic overtones, and being capable of collective as well as individual interpretation. See Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, *Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), especially for his view that the figure in Isa. 61.1-3 is 'a composite character, a bringing together into one of all those whom God had earlier said he would use for the salvation of his people'; pp. 174-88 (188).

16. The pictures of human rule are traditionally read as 'messianic', not least because of the New Testament portrayals of Jesus as 'son of David'. Messianic hope has, of course, an indispensable aspect of beneficent and powerful human rule.

ruler (see, e.g., Isa. 9.6-7; 11.1-9) is a central feature of the portrayal of human rule in Isaiah.[17]

The book of Isaiah thus bears a complex witness to the problem of human power which we found to be articulated in Genesis 1–11. The pretensions of Assyria correspond vividly to the portrayal there of the human propensity to take to themselves a 'god-likeness' defined by self-aggrandizement and violence. Yet Assyria's false self-exaltation not only contrasts with the exalted Yahweh, but also with portrayals of just human rule, which too entail the forceful suppression of opposition (e.g. Isa. 11.4). Here is the dilemma for the interpreter. What lies in the space between the ruthless tyranny of Assyria and the righteous judgment of the Davidic scion, or even of Cyrus? How is the wise judgment of true rule, with all its entailed force, to be discerned?[18]

3. *Human Dominion, Coercion and Rationality*

We have been considering the problematical nature of human rule as displayed in Genesis and Isaiah. And the theme finds obvious echoes in history and experience. When Genesis entrusts dominion to humanity, in a radical 'democratic' move, this does not put an end to the question how power may be wielded. The exercise of power involves the rule of humans over humans, and entails conflict and coercion. Thomas Hobbes' analysis in his *Leviathan*[19] of the relationship between State and individual postulated a conflict between the individual's interests and the power of the State, in which the individual citizens sacrificed some of their freedom in return for the security that only the State could provide. Human dominion, on this view, has a certain ambivalence for the individual, being exercised both to their advantage and disadvantage. Hobbes' view conceived the individual's best interests too narrowly (as mere survival), but the issue as to how much power the individual should cede to governments remains a live one, variously answered within broadly democratic societies (in a range that runs from Marx to Nietzsche, according to Mary Midgley).[20]

---

17. This is heightened by the structure of Isa. 9–12, with its alternating pictures of true and false rule. Note also the failure to discern divine judgment (Isa. 9.7-11); judgment on a leadership that was founded on lies and folly (Isa. 9.12-16); 'iniquitous decrees' (Isa. 10.1-4).

18. The Old Testament does not necessarily speak with one voice on this. The case of Jehu illustrates the point, with his approbation in 2 Kings 10 and condemnation in Hosea 1! But see Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC, 31; Word Books: Waco, TX, 1987, p. 29, for a reconciliation of these texts.

19. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Dent, 1931; orig. 1651).

20. Mary Midgley shows how Hobbes' understanding was shaped by his concern to protect the individual against the kind of power that repeatedly dragooned them

Central to the question of power and the individual is the issue of language and persuasion. The close connection between language and forms of power is evident from modern European history, as illustrated in extreme forms by the appropriations of 'nationalism', 'socialism', and 'democracy' in Nazism and Stalinism, and their firm grasp of the power of propaganda. But all forms of power rest on the acceptance of narratives, which may exhibit varying degrees of 'truth'. Truth itself thus comes into play in the negotiation about power. The consent to be governed rests on some form of belief about what is ultimately good. Such beliefs and narratives have themes in common; narratives invariably postulate justice and peace. But those who have lived through conflicts know that what one perceives as a victory for justice and peace another will regard as a triumph of travesty and violence. The connection between truth and justice is indisputable (hence the South African Truth and Reconciliation process), yet the relationship between such a process and the concept of 'freedom *fighting*' (Mandela repeatedly styled himself a 'freedom fighter') remains unsettling, and demonstrates the contentious nature of the quest for truth in the political arena.[21]

This brings into focus the relationship between human rationality and power. The Enlightenment idea of the supremacy of reason is hardly sustainable in view of the uses to which we know that rationality can be put. Human rationality is habitually harnessed to fundamental commitments and attitudes.[22] The question then is whether it can be successfully unharnessed from these, or perhaps rather whether it can be re-connected to better ones.

4. *Truth, Justice and Peace*

The question of peace, then, is inseparable from the idea of truth. It is well recognized that the biblical concept of 'peace' is more profound than the mere absence of hostilities. A state of non-war, or the absence of overt violence, may only disguise kinds of violence that are inherent in political arrangements. One of the most telling illustrations of this consists in

into nominally religious wars in which they had no real interest, and losing their lives for trivial reasons; see Mary Midgley, *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), p. 118. In relation to how much power to cede to governments, democracies have tended either to the maximum orderliness (socialism, Marx), or the minimum (anarchy, Nietzsche); *The Solitary Self*, p. 126.

21. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 69-70, for some examples of political narratives. For Nelson Mandela as 'freedom-fighter' see his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), *passim*.

22. See again Midgley on the inextricable relationship between human reason and other aspects of the person, such as will, purpose and attitude; *The Solitary Self*, pp. 73-96.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's analysis of the deep antagonism to peace and justice in the Nazi state, and this was the peculiar background to his claim that 'There can only be a community of peace when it does not rest on lies and injustice'.[23] What he had in mind was nothing less than the truth of the Gospel, or 'the whole Christian truth'.[24] This was what was at stake in the Church's confrontation with Hitler. In Hitler, there was an identification between order and authority and the person of the leader (somewhat like the picture of Assyria in Isaiah), and this he believed was idolatrous.[25] Yet the Nazi state merely exposed a deeper reality, that the only true peace is the peace of God, and that it is the Christian's obligation to pursue this.[26]

This approach to the topic of peace and violence could sound like a recipe for withdrawal from the 'real' political world. But behind it lies a belief that truth in its profoundest sense is correspondence with God's reality. In that case, the pursuit and proclamation of truth cannot be confined to the private sphere, nor be irrelevant to the external world. Nor is 'truth-telling' a simple matter; rather 'it is something which must be learnt'.[27] The business of speaking the truth is of the essence of ethical action: 'The real is to be expressed in words… If one is to say how a thing really is, i.e., if one is to speak truthfully, one's gaze and one's thought must be directed towards the way in which the real exists in God and through God and for God'.[28] When this is recognized, truth in its deepest sense is not reducible to factual statements. Truthfulness is known by the extent to which it conforms to and upholds realities. Here Bonhoeffer has in mind the integrity of relationships such as between marriage partners. His argument sounds superficially like a 'situational ethics', but in fact is directed at the live possibility of fraudulence in communication which may have all the outward appearance of truthfulness:

> There is a truth which is of Satan. Its essence is that under the semblance of truth it denies everything that is real. It lives upon the hatred of the real and of the world which is created and loved by God. It pretends to be

23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (trans. J. Bowden; New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 168; cited in Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 13 (and repeatedly, see pp. 20, 40, 60). In the following discussion I largely follow Hauerwas's analysis of Bonhoeffer's thought. But I am also interested in Hauerwas's own contribution to the topic.

24. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, p. 160.

25. See Hauerwas's account of this, *Performing the Faith*, pp. 60-61.

26. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 60.

27. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (trans. from the 6th German edition by N.H. Smith; London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 327; cited by Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 64. The moral challenge of truth-telling is clear in the Psalms, with their keen awareness of the power of delusion; e.g. Pss. 4.3b; 12. See also the portrayal of a truth-less society in Jer. 9.1-8.

28. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 327-28.

executing the judgement of God upon the fall of the real. God's truth judges created things out of love, and Satan's truth judges them out of envy and hatred. God's truth has become flesh in the world and is alive in the real, but Satan's truth is the death of all reality.[29]

The real presence of truthfulness in the world is inseparable from the reality of Christ in the world. Bonhoeffer is concerned with the way in which 'the form of Christ takes form' in the world, and believes that 'the Church is the place where Jesus Christ's taking form is proclaimed and accomplished'.[30] As Hauerwas puts it, 'the church occupies a space in the world through her public worship, her parish life, and her organization'.[31] The Church, therefore, has a real and visible presence in the political world. This vision is not a Constantinian one, in which the Church endorses a political *status quo*, nor does it necessarily espouse every revolutionary cause. It rather depends entirely on the proposition that Christ is and defines true reality, and that the Church manifests this in the world. Moreover, there is a connection between this and the world becoming what it ought to be. There are, however, no direct lines from this vision to policy-making, or even to 'ethical principles'. With regard to planning for post-war Europe, he advocated, not detailed plans for reconstruction, but rather that nations should be reminded of 'abiding commandments and realities that must be taken seriously if the new order is to be a true order'.[32] These transcend individual states, and will therefore be embraced in distinctive ways.

The way in which the Church manifests truthfulness in the world is bound up with the life of the Church in itself, namely as a place in which its members learn the practice of truth-telling. The Church is 'the zone of truth in a world of mendacity'.[33] And this truth is radically centred on the person of Christ. Judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions, therefore, are about whether they are 'in accordance with reality', a reality that is defined by Christ. And what this means is not a given, but something that must be learned in the context of the Church's habitual speech. The capacity to make judgments about actions is nurtured in the morally arduous process, situated within the Christian eschatological narrative, of learning to speak the language of peaceableness,[34] a task that is never finished.[35]

29. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 329.
30. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 68.
31. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 45.
32. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, pp. 109-110, cited by Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 52.
33. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 45, referring to Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, p. 160.
34. Hauerwas considers peaceableness as the most defining trait of 'Christian rhetoric'; *Performing the Faith*, p. 85; cf. p. 91.
35. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 84.

5. *Human Dominion and Violence*

I began by pointing to the discrepancy between the divine vision of a 'good' and harmonious world, in Genesis 1, and the ensuing story (in Genesis and more widely in the Old Testament) that exhibits disharmony and violence. I suggested that the problem that the OT texts uncover lies, not in the persistence of the *Chaoskampf*, in which order is only partially imposed on a recalcitrantly chaotic reality, but rather in the twin concepts of human dominion over the creation and the 'god-likeness' expressed in the notion of the 'image of God'. These concepts immediately prove problematical, as illustrated not only by the story in Genesis 3, but also in the Pharaoh of Exodus and Assyria in Isaiah. Especially in the latter two cases, the exercise of human dominion brings god-likeness into the sphere of human competition with God. The hubris of Assyria found echoes in Bonhoeffer's analysis of state power, in which the chaotic violence of the Nazi state laid bare fundamental truths about the human condition.

The vision of human dominion in Genesis 1 can be understood as a critique of the kind of despotic power that sought self-aggrandizement through warfare. Yet even so, the best examples of human rule in the Old Testament are somehow flawed,[36] and the most ideal pictures of such rule consist in projected figures who stand over against the political realities (such as the Servant of Yahweh in Isa. 40–55). In Old Testament context, therefore, the vision in Genesis 1 is part of a narrative that displaces properly functioning human rule into an unrealized future. In terms of the Christian biblical canon, it is answered by the idea of Christ, God and human, as the ultimate reality.

6. *Conclusions*

In the light of this eschatological character of the biblical narrative, how should we, in the meantime, make judgments about right responses to violent acts, or about ways of resisting evil that entail forms of violence themselves? Is there such a thing as a 'just' violent act? An answer should reckon with the fact that judgment about such things is ultimately God's. This emerges from the story of God and Assyria in Isaiah: that forceful resistance

---

36. I am thinking of, for example, Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptians in the context of his wise restoration of Egypt's land to prosperity (Gen. 47.20-21). The cases of Hezekiah and Josiah in 2 Kings do not entirely escape the question mark that hangs over the institution of monarchy since 1 Samuel 8, nor their aftermath in the loss of land and institutions (2 Kgs 18–25). We may also note Josh. 18.1, in which the creation mandate to 'subdue the earth/land' is precisely evoked by the Israelites' possession of Canaan at the expense of its inhabitants.

to evil is the prerogative of God.[37] On the other hand, human aspirations to be 'like God' in the sense of using force in judgment readily become self-serving, and are apparently inextricable from profound deception (seen in the rhetoric that goes with it in the public arena). In view of this, is a 'just' forceful act only conceivable if or where there is perfect (divine) judgment? Or does the vocation to 'god-likeness' have an implication in terms of the use of force to resist evil?

From the foregoing, we may at least conclude that the question of violence is inseparable from that of *truth*. Hauerwas in his treatment of Bonhoeffer rightly stresses that the cultivation of truthfulness is a central task of the church, and also that this in itself is a public, political activity. *Speech* is therefore essential to its vocation, and 'peaceableness' its typical subject matter. For Hauerwas, the church is the place where truth and peaceableness are learnt and exhibited. The capacity to 'truth-tell' does not come ready made, but is the goal of a never-ending spiritual discipline. There is, moreover, no formula for this. Rather, the discipline of truth-telling requires time, and includes the Church's liturgical life.[38] It is in this way that the Church can be equipped to combat (in Bonhoeffer's words) 'the vices of *hubris*, power-worship, envy and humbug, as the roots of all evil'.[39]

It might just be added that peaceableness is not the only virtue that might be allied closely to truth-telling. In principle each of the virtues identified as 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5.22-23) may be so linked. Herein lie ethical dilemmas. May not the imperative of 'love' require action to restrain evil, and thus appear at least to militate against the imperative of peace? Speech and action are in principle inseparable in biblical ethics. The problem of how to judge when and how it is right to act is admittedly acute, and much suffering has resulted from misjudgements of these things. Yet the undoubted spiritual nature of the speaking of peace does not infallibly lead to pacifism as an unvarying policy. The ethical challenge to act rightly in relation to force and violence has a major component of discernment, judgment and wisdom. The intellectual and moral are indivisible in the bearing of all human responsibility, whether in the private or public sphere.

---

37. For all their problems, biblical narratives of divine warlike or wrathful acts serve at least this important theological purpose.

38. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, pp. 97-99.

39. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 383, cited by Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 54.

The Violent God of the Old Testament: Reading Strategies and Responsibility[1]

Kirsten Nielsen

Abstract

In his book *Taking Leave of Abraham. An Essay on Religion and Democracy,* Troels Nørager argues that the willingness to sacrifice one's own son symbolizes the violent potential of authoritarian religion that can be seen today in terror actions. And he argues that this kind of God-relation is not compatible with a modern liberal democracy. Troels Nørager's critique of the violent God of the Old Testament is relevant. The same must be said about Jan Assmann's thesis about the possibility of a link between exclusive *monotheism* and violence. Monotheism and violence are linked in some texts in the Old Testament, and we cannot change that. But we have the power to influence the Old Testament's *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Asmann argues that by placing the 'violent' texts in their historical context, we can limit their validity. I would like to add that we also have a responsibility to include the many other Old Testament images of God that speak against, and present alternatives to, a theology of violence (cf. for instance the book of Jonah and Hos. 2).

Introduction: The Violent Potential of Genesis 22

When the talk turns to the violent God of the Old Testament, there are many who point by way of example to the story of Abraham in Gen 22. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering to test whether Abraham is able to show total obedience at the expense of his son. Abraham passes the test, and God then dismisses Isaac as a sacrifice.

The story of God's trial of Abraham presents a problem for us nowadays, no less than it has for earlier generations of readers. For who can accept the idea of a God who, for no justification whatsoever, demands that a father should kill his son? The question was taken up in 2008 by Troels Nørager, Associate Professor in Systematic Theology at Aarhus University, in his book *Taking Leave of Abraham. An Essay on Religion and Democracy.*[2] On

---

1. Translated by Edward Broadbridge.
2. Troels Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham. An Essay on Religion and Democracy* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008).

the front cover we see Caravaggio's painting of the *Sacrificio di Isacco*, while the back cover carries the following question:

> Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son on God's command. This willingness symbolizes the violent potential of authoritarian religion and it can be seen today in suicide bombings and terror actions. The contemporary resurgence of radically conservative and fundamentalist religion raises the question whether this kind of God-relation is compatible with a commitment to liberal democracy?

Nørager's book gave rise to considerable debate. Many were outraged, assuming that he wished to remove the sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis and thereby censor the Bible itself, so that only those texts remained that met with our modern ideas of God.

This of course was not Nørager's intention. And had he settled for calling the book *An Essay on Religion and Democracy*, he would have met with greater understanding. For the book is first and foremost about the relation between religion and democracy. The major question that he raises is what part religious arguments can play in democratic debate. If readers only focus on the first part of the title, *Taking Leave of Abraham*, then inevitably God's demand for Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac comes to play a central role.

Nørager's argument is that precisely this particular Abraham narrative cannot be employed as an argument in a democratic debate; and in the worst case it can lead to fanaticism, to suicide bombings and terror actions. He therefore clearly distinguishes between religion and morality. Society employs moral laws that class the sacrifice of a son as a crime, one that cannot be justified by claiming that God has ordered it. In a democratic society there is no sanctuary called 'My conscience' or 'God's will'. If we break the law of the land, we must accept the responsibility and take our punishment.

The misunderstandings in the reception of Nørager's book must not blind us to the fact that he has raised a very important question: How are we to relate to these Old Testament images of an authoritarian God who demands total obedience of his subjects and does not shrink from inciting to violence?

1. *The God of War*

The Abraham–Isaac narrative is not the only account in the Old Testament where God is linked to violence. Nor is it the best example, since in this case God withdraws his demand as soon as Abraham has proved his obedience. A more compelling instance is the account of the conquest of the Promised Land. Here God commands attacks on certain cities and expects his people and their leader to obey him.[3] A good illustration is the conquest of the

---

3.   Cf. the contributions of Joshua Berman and Markus Zehnder in this volume.

city of Ai, where God commands Joshua to point his sword at the city which God will then deliver into his hand. The language of the conquest that follows is extremely violent. All the inhabitants are put to the sword—twelve thousand men and women all told according to the biblical report.[4] Even the captured King of Ai is killed and hanged from a tree (Josh. 8.18-29).

The line of thought is simple. God has chosen the Israelites as his people and has sealed a covenant with them at Sinai. If they keep the covenant, he will be their God. The people in turn promise, 'We will do everything the Lord has said' (Exod. 19.8). In order to give them a place to live, God grants them a land and ensures that all its inhabitants are driven out. It soon becomes clear that not only are they to be banished, they and all their places of worship are to be destroyed to prevent them from inducing the Israelites to worship foreign gods. If the Israelites fail to exterminate other peoples, God's anger will strike them and they themselves will be annihilated (Deut. 7.1-6). In this case both obedience and disobedience involve violence, justified in both cases by the special selection of Israel. It is out of love for his chosen people that God demands this obedience, partly inciting violence against other peoples and partly threatening violence to the Israelites themselves if they break the covenant. The line of thought is repeated throughout the deuteronomic historiography, with defection from Yahweh being severely punished and obedience being rewarded with victory over Israel's enemies. It is incontestable that in many places God in the Old Testament is linked to violence.

2. *Monotheism and Violence*

The many violent episodes in (among others) the Old Testament have led the egyptologist Jan Assmann to present the thesis that there is a link between monotheism and violence.[5] To gain an impression of the central elements in Assmann's thesis let me point to the 'Vienna Lectures' that he held in

---

4.   Whether 12,000 is the actual number the biblical author had in mind, is another question.

5.   See my treatment of Assmann's thesis in the volume in honour of Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson 2012: Kirsten Nielsen, '*Imago Dei* and the Many Images of God. A Contribution to the Debate on the Relation between Monotheism and Violence', in *Mótun menningar. Shaping Culture. Afmælisrit til heiðurs Gunnlaugi A. Jónssyni Sextugum, A Festschrift in Honor of Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson on his sixtieth Birthday 28.4.2012* (ed. Kristinn Ólason, Ólafur Egilsson and Stefán Stefánsson; Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska Bókmenntafélag, 2012), pp. 321-35. See also Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), and Jan Assmman, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003), where he deals with the criticism from a number of scholars whose articles are printed as appendices.

2004, published in 2006 under the title *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*.[6] The title is central. What interests Assmann is not so much the historical events that may or may not lie behind the Old Testament accounts of the history of the Israelite people. It is the violent *language* that is used to describe these events. How can it be that there are so many instances of divinely sanctioned violence precisely in the Old Testament?[7]

Moreover, God is described as an exclusive God, who tolerates no other gods by his side. This can be seen in the first of the Ten Commandments: 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20.3).[8] For Assmann it is significant that the violence is directed not only against other peoples but also strikes the chosen people when they desert *their* God. By way of example he quotes Deut. 13.13-19, where certain malevolent individuals among God's chosen people have worshiped foreign gods and even lured others into doing the same. The consequences are described in Deut. 13.15-17 (NIV 13.14-16) as follows:

> And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. Destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock. Gather all the plunder of the town into the middle of the public square and completely burn the town and all its plunder as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God.

Not until everyone and everything in the apostate city has been wiped out will God show mercy to his people.

Israel's God is an exclusive God, and this leads to the Old Testament differentiating between the one true God and all other, false, gods. The distinction is not just between true and false but also between friend and enemy, which in truth is a political distinction. However, the Old Testament interprets the distinction theologically, so that the political enemy becomes

---

6.   Jan Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt* (Wiener Vorlesungen im Rathaus, 116; Wien: Picus Verlag, 2006).

7.   Assmann formulates his question as follows in the Vienna Lectures: 'Warum beschreiben die biblischen Texte die Gründung und Durchsetzung der monotheistischen Religion in so gewaltsamen Bildern? Haftet der monotheistischen Idee, der ausschliesslichen Verehrung eines einzigen Gottes anstelle einer Götterwelt oder der Unterscheidung zwischen wahrer und falscher Religion, einem wahren Gott und den falschen Göttern etwas Gewaltsames an?' (Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, pp. 18-19) ('Why do the biblical texts describe the establishment and the implementation of the monotheistic religion in such violent imagery? Is there something violent linked to the monotheist idea, to the exclusive worship of the one God instead of a world of gods or to the distinction between a true and a false religion, a true god and the false gods?').

8.   Translations are taken from NIV.

God's enemy.[9] This theologising of the difference between us and the others is the real problem, says Assmann. For God is thereby made the guarantor of who is on the right side, and who are therefore his (and our) enemies. Violence is thus legitimised against both external and internal enemies.

As mentioned, Assmann does not ask about historical reality, only about the presentation of events. He is consequently interested not only in the textual meaning for the past but also in its historical effects. If our focus is on language, Assmann's argument is relevant to our current deliberations about the relation between violence and our conception of God. The main problem with the language of violence in the past is that texts such as the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an are performative writings. They serve as a canon, and continue to have practical influence and effect. Assmann points out that an extreme form of historical effect is found in the accounts of martyrdom as mentioned in the books of the Maccabees. Martyrdom means giving one's life for the Law. According to Assmann, both killing and dying for the Law are the extremes for the commandment not to have other gods than the one true God.[10]

3. *Possible Reading Strategies and Joint Responsibility for the Tradition*

Assmann is very conscious of the catastrophic consequences that texts on violence can produce if we read them as normative—as an incitement to go and do likewise. But in his view monotheism and violence are not *necessarily* linked. In some texts within the Old Testament, monotheism and violence are connected with one another, and we must accept that. We neither can nor should change the ancient texts, but we must *interpret* them. We can also influence their *Wirkungsgeschichte* through our choice of reading strategies. Assmann therefore thinks it important that we place such texts in their historical context and thereby limit their validity for the present day.[11]

As mentioned, Assmann's demonstration of the link between monotheism

---

9. See Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, pp. 31-42.

10. See Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, pp. 48-49.

11. 'Die Sprache der Gewalt wird als eine Ressource im politischen Machtkampf missbraucht, um Feindbilder aufzubauen und Angst und Bedrohungsbewusstsein zu schüren. Daher kommt es darauf an, diese Motive zu historisieren, indem man sie auf ihre Ursprungssituation zurückführt. Es gilt ihre Genese aufzudecken, um sie in ihrer Geltung einzuschränken' (Assmann, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, p. 57) ('The language of violence is misused as a resource in the political power struggle to create enemy images and to stir up fear and awareness of threats. For this reason it becomes relevant to historify these motives by setting them in their original historical contexts. It is a question of revealing their historical origins and thus limiting their validity for those of us living today'). It is of course the case that not all religious traditions allow for such historicising processes in the same way.

and violence in some of the Old Testament traditions cannot be refuted. But I should like to develop his observations on limiting the influence of the language of violence further. I agree with him on the importance of insisting that texts come into being under specific historical conditions and cannot just as a matter of course be transferred to another time. I shall cite as an example Psalm 137, which begins with the words 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept'. The historical background for the psalm, as well as its genre, are crucial to its understanding. It ends as follows (vv. 8-9):

> O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
> happy is he who repays you
> for what you have done to us—
> he who seizes your infants
> and dashes them against the rocks!

This is a cry of desperation. It follows directly on an appeal to God to remember the Edomites, who called for the destruction of Jerusalem. It is not merely an appeal to God to recall the events that led to the Israelites now experiencing exile in Babylon. It is a direct call for revenge against those who have wronged his chosen people. In deep desperation they react with the desire for revenge. They appeal to God who, for instance in Psalm 94, is addressed in the following way (Ps. 94.1-2):

> O Lord, the God who avenges,
> O God who avenges, shine forth.
> Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
> Pay back to the proud what they deserve.

Psalms such as these are not dogmatic tracts or part of the Law. They are rooted in concrete historical situations where the supplicants need a strong God to free them from their oppressors. Here again I agree with Assmann that contextualizing texts that incite to violence serves to limit their causative validity elsewhere.

My concern here is that the texts containing the language of violence should not be allowed to stand alone. It is our responsibility to balance the various traditions in the Bible. To this effect, I propose a reading strategy that does not isolate individual traditions and make *them* normative. According to Nørager, a modern democratic, secularised society must bid farewell to the concept of God as embodied in the Abraham–Isaac story in Genesis 22. And if that text is read solely as an example of a violent and unreasonable God, Nørager's rejection is understandable. But my point is that Isaac is *not* sacrificed. The text underlines that there is no *need* for Israelites to offer their first-born to the Lord (cf. Mic. 6.6-8). Genesis 22 forms part of a lengthy narrative the actual purpose of which is to speak of God's *blessings* and how they are spread wider and wider despite his people's disobedience.

Assmann is right to argue that monotheism does not necessarily lead to violence. A monotheism exists in which the concept of chosenness is not uphold at the expense of the exclusion of all others. It is a monotheism in which God's passion for humankind does not express itself only in jealousy, but also in lenience and forgiveness; cf. Mic. 7.18; Ps. 103.8-16 and Rom. 3.25.

4. *The God of Blessing and Forgiveness*

We meet this form of monotheism in both the Old and the New Testament. In both cases God is depicted as God and creator of all. The Old Testament begins with the creation and the proto-history of God for the whole world. Even the patriarchal narrative that zooms in on Abraham and the choice of him and his lineage has a universal perspective. It is in him that all the peoples on earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12.3). Even though Jesus as God incarnate in his earthly life finds himself in a particular place on earth and addresses himself to a single people for the most part, the New Testament is broader, as can be seen from the Great Commission in Mt. 28.18-20, where the proclamation applies to *all peoples*. Or we can turn to Jesus's reference to his own role as a shepherd in John's Gospel (Jn 10.16):

> I have other sheep that are not of this pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Thus, there are important traditions in the Bible where the idea of God is linked to blessing, and where the purpose is to either enlarge the boundaries or abolish the distinction between 'us' and 'the others'.[12]

One of the texts in which the view of 'the others' is illustrated in a surprising yet convincing way is the book of Jonah. Once Jonah has proclaimed the coming judgement on Nineveh, the Ninevites, great and small, as well as all their animals, repent and promise to mend their ways. And God recalls his plan to annihilate them. At this point poor Jonah's life falls apart. He has come to Nineveh against his will and at God's command has proclaimed death and destruction within 40 days. A God who regrets his decision to annihilate Nineveh is not to be reckoned with. The prophet would clearly have preferred God to have maintained the distinction between his chosen people and 'the others'. Jonah's problem is that God is actually 'a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love' (Jon. 4.2). The book even ends with God asking Jonah the following question (Jon. 4.11):

> Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?

12. In addition to the passages already mentioned see, e.g., Rom. 10.12 and Gal. 3.28-29.

We are faced here with a quite different tradition than the one that we meet in the narrative of the Promised Land, where the decisive criterion for the distinction between 'left and right' was precisely the differentiation between God and the other, *foreign* gods.

Another example of a significantly different image of God than the one of violence can be found in the book of Hosea, where God is portrayed in the opening chapters as a husband who despite his wife's infidelity chooses to take her back and to plight his troth to her 'in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion' (Hos. 2.21). Here mercy triumphs over the demand for obedience and loyalty. There is no attempt to hide the fact that God's first reaction to her infidelity is impending violence. He threatens to expose her before the eyes of her lovers and take everything back from her that he has given her. But then God changes his mind (Hos. 2.15-17 [NIV 2.13-15]):

> …but me she forgot,
> declares the Lord.
> Therefore I am now going to allure her;
> I will lead her into the desert
> and speak tenderly to her.
> There I will give her back her vineyards
> and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
> There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
> as in the day she came up out of Egypt.

5. *The Many Images of God*

The Old Testament together with the New Testament constitute the canon of the Christian church. It is precisely therefore that it is important to take the multiple images of God seriously. In my view, the misuse of biblical texts often consists of selecting a very narrow canon *within* that canon and making it the whole truth. Such misuse can reveal itself in different ways, one of the most obvious being the amplifying of violent texts into dogmatic statements that become the norm for what God is like and what he demands at any time of humankind—with potentially dangerous or even fatal consequences, as Troels Nørager has pointed out. If we read, for example, Genesis 22 solely as a call to unreflective obedience to what one perceives as the will of God, it can end in disaster. And if we read the depictions of violence in the conquest of the Promised Land as a norm for our own violent actions, we are misusing the narratives that were once produced in order to create identity and build up confidence that the God of Israel was powerful enough to protect his people.

The fact that such descriptions form part of the canon must not allow them to be employed as a legitimization of violence in God's name today. Nor must we tear them out of the Bible, for they serve to inform us how people still react in crisis situations where the clash between 'us' and 'the

others' is sharp. Such texts must form part of the dialogue with the many other texts in which images of God show a different side of the relationship between God and the world. And those of us who are theologians with the Old Testament as our special study object must not pretend that it stands alone. The canon comprises *both* testaments, and if we are to draw normative conclusions from the Bible, we must allow the *whole* Bible to be brought into play—both when we are speaking about the wrath of God and when we are speaking about God as the God of blessing and mercy.

LECTIO VEHEMENTIOR POTIOR:
SCRIBAL VIOLENCE ON VIOLENT TEXTS?

Tommy Wasserman

Abstract

This essay treats a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which scribes, translators and interpreters through history have perceived as difficult and offensive, as reflected in various attempts to soften the text and its interpretation. The passages under discussion, Judg. 11.39-40; 2 Sam. 6.7; Isa. 53.4, 10; Mt. 10.34-36 and Jn 2.14-15, are all related to divine or human violence.

The result of the analysis is discussed in relationship to the classic text-critical criterion *lectio difficilior potior* and a possible subcriterion which is here proposed, *lectio vehementior potior* ('prefer the more violent text'). However, this criterion, as any other, cannot be applied mechanically. There may be other more specific factors that explain the variation in a given passage.

In relation to hermeneutics, we may gain many insights from the various interpretative strategies of scribes and translators: How did they resist violent biblical texts? Can their interpretations or reinterpretations point to new ways to come to grip with theological and ethical dilemmas? Were they oversensitive in some respects? In any case, modern readers who struggle with what they perceive as difficulties in the ancient biblical text should be aware that ancient readers might have had completely different struggles.

Introduction: Evaluating the Textual History of the Bible

Many ancient works, including the Bible, have been transmitted and preserved as manuscripts, where the relationship between what authors and redactors once wrote and what later scribes subsequently copied may be unclear. Scholars of biblical textual criticism, therefore, review various kinds of evidence in order to examine and reconstruct the history of the text.

The dominant force in contemporary practice applies a combination of external and internal evidence in the historical reconstruction of the text. External evidence pertains to the physical textual witnesses, their date, source, and relationship to other textual witnesses, whereas internal evidence depends partly on considerations of the habits of scribes and various palaeographical features in the manuscripts (transcriptional evidence),

and, partly on considerations of what the author was likely to have written (intrinsic evidence).[1]

Correspondingly, the evaluation of competing variant readings in individual passages is based on some guiding rules or principles relating to these kinds of evidence. Such principles have a long history that reaches back in antiquity, but it was not until modern times that they were formulated in systematic fashion.[2]

1. *Lectio difficilior potior*

In 1711, Gerhard von Mastricht published the first formal list of 'canons of criticisms' in the preface to his edition of the Greek New Testament.[3] Mastricht's Canon XXIV claimed that, for the most part, a variant reading 'disappears', i.e., it can be dropped from consideration as a candidate for the original text, when the origin of that reading is discovered. This canon was soon adopted in subsequent canon lists. Constantin von Tischendorf reformulated it in a more familiar form: 'In discrepant readings, that should be preferred which may have given occasion to the rest, or which appears to comprise the elements of the others'.[4] Westcott and Hort regarded this principle as the very essence of transcriptional evidence, concerned as it is 'with the relative fitness of each [reading] for explaining the existence of others'.[5]

Today, this principle is widely regarded as the foundational or pre-eminent guideline for evaluating variant readings. All other criteria that are applied in the reconstruction of the genealogy of variant readings, whether related to external or internal evidence, are subordinate to this principle.[6]

---

1. See Tommy Wasserman, 'Criteria for Evaluating Readings in New Testament Textual Criticism', in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (ed. B.D. Ehrman and M.W. Holmes; NTTSD, 42; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2nd edn, 2012), pp. 579-612.

2. See Eldon J. Epp, 'The Eclectic Method in New Testament Textual Criticism: Solution or Symptom', *HTR* 69 (1976), pp. 216-42.

3. Gerhard von Mastricht, *Η ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ, Novum Testamentum* (Amsterdam: H. Wetstein, 1711), pp. 11-16, 48-68. For a summary of Mastricht's canons with English translations, see Epp, 'Eclectic Method', pp. 218-19.

4. The canon first appeared in the Latin introduction to Constantin von Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Leipzig: Winter, 2nd edn, 1849). The English translation is taken from Samuel P. Tregelles, *An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament* (London: S. Bagster, 1854), p. 121.

5. Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (2 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1881–1882), I, p. 22.

6. For current lists and discussion of criteria applied in biblical textual criticism, see Emanuel Tov, 'Criteria for Evaluating Textual Readings: The Limitations of Textual Rules', *HTR* 75 (1982), pp. 429-48; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 3rd edn, 2012), pp. 271-82; Bruce M. Metzger, *A*

For this reason, I prefer to reserve the term 'principle' for this fundamental guideline that dictates the whole method of evaluation, in distinction to a 'criterion' (derived from the Greek κριτήριον), which refers to 'a standard on which a judgment or decision may be based',[7] akin to an argument or a probability.[8]

Apart from the foundational principle, one of the most widely used criteria in textual criticism in general, including its application to biblical literature, is to prefer the more difficult reading, also known in its Latin form as *lectio difficilior potior* ('the more difficult reading [is] the stronger [= more probable]'), *lectio difficilior*, or other variants. It was Erasmus who, in his 1516 edition of the New Testament, first expressed this criterion, although he used other words to describe it.[9] In practice, however, it had been used for a very long time, as is reflected already in Augustine's discussion of Mt. 27.9.[10]

The criterion, relating to transcriptional evidence, suggests that it is more likely that a scribe who introduces a change in the text will make it smoother than more complicated. Sebastian Timpanaro refers to this process of clarification by the transcribers (or reciters) of texts as 'banalization', describing how it may affect different aspects of a word, or several words in a context.

> [A]nyone who has anything to do with the written or oral transmission of texts (including quotations learnt by heart) knows that they are exposed to the constant danger of banalization. Forms which have a more archaic, more high-flown, more unusual stylistic expression, and which are therefore more removed from the cultural-linguistic heritage of the person who

Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2nd edn, 1994), pp. 12*-14*. This list with minor modifications is also found in Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 2005), pp. 302-304. Eldon J. Epp, 'Traditional "Canons" of New Testament Textual Criticism: Their Value, Validity, and Viability—Or Lack Thereof', in *The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research* (ed. M.W. Holmes and K. Wachtel; SBL Text-Critical Studies, 8; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011), pp. 79-127; Wasserman, 'Criteria', pp. 579-612.

7. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 11th edn, 2003).

8. Epp chooses to refer to the foundational guideline as 'the preeminent criterion/ probability' or, less formally, a 'super criterion' ('Traditional "Canons"', pp. 93-96).

9. Epp ascribes the phrase itself to J.A. Bengel (1725) ('Traditional "Canons"', p.105). Emanuel Tov, who also refers it back to Bengel, points out that it is unclear when the rule was introduced into the scholarship of the Hebrew Bible (*Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible;* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2nd edn, 1992), p. 302 n. 28.

10. Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 202; Amy Donaldson, *Explicit References to New Testament Variant Readings Among Greek and Latin Church Fathers* (PhD dissertation; University of Notre Dame, 2009), pp. 177-78.

is transcribing or reciting, tend to be replaced by forms in more common use.[11]

Thus, the textual critic, when faced with two or more competing readings in a passage, should prefer the more difficult reading.

In practice, however, this, as every other criterion, has its problems and exceptions.[12] First, there is of course the matter of identifying what could have been difficult for scribes at certain times in the history of transmission. As Hort reminds us, 'we have to do with readings only as they are likely to have appeared to transcribers, not as they appear to us'.[13] Secondly, it may be hard to judge the difference between a difficult reading and a reading that results from an error in copying.[14] Hence, the criterion does not apply in cases where another more specific transcriptional factor better explains the origin of the difficulty. Finally, the criterion is difficult to apply in those cases when at least two competing readings present themselves as potentially the more difficult reading.[15]

In the end, every passage has to be analyzed on its own terms to see which of the criteria are applicable. Very often the critic will find that the criteria compete with one another in different ways so that decisions are based on a 'balance of probabilities'. In his classic essay on 'The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism', A.E. Housman rightly proposed that 'every problem which presents itself to the textual critic must be regarded as possibly unique'.[16] This sound view of textual criticism will exclude every mechanical application of a single canon of criticism to a passage.[17]

---

11. Sebastian Timpanaro, *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism* (trans. K. Soper; London: NLB; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976), p. 30.

12. Another well-known criterion, 'prefer the shorter reading', or *lectio brevior potior* has proven to have so many exceptions that it is practically unusable without further clarification and qualification. See the lengthy discussion in Epp, 'Traditional "Canons"', pp. 106-116.

13. Westcott and Hort, *New Testament*, I, p. 27.

14. Tov makes the same point stating that, 'by definition, often a scribal error creates a *lectio difficilior*' (*Textual Criticism*, p. 303); cf. Edward Hobbs, 'An Introduction to Methods of Textual Criticism', in W. Doniger O'Flaherty (ed.), *The Critical Study of sacred Texts* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1979), pp. 1-27 (19): 'If you follow the harder readings [consistently], you will end up with an unintelligible text'.

15. See Tov, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 303-304, and J.M. Ross, 'The "Harder Reading" in Textual Criticism', *BT* 33 (1982), pp. 138-39.

16. Alfred E. Housman, 'The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism', *Proceedings of the Classical Association* 18 (1921), pp. 67-84 (69).

17. For the same point in relation to *lectio difficilior*, see Bertil Albrektson, '"Difficilior Lectio Probabilior"—A Rule of Textual Criticism and its Use in Old Testament Studies', in B. Albrektson (ed.), *Remembering All the Way* (OtSt, 21; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), pp. 5-18; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An*

2. *Lectio vehementior potior?*

There are many reasons why textual readings may be perceived to be difficult by scribes. Apart from aspects of orthography, phonology, lexical character, syntax and style, there is, especially in relation to ideological and religious texts, a special area of textual difficulties relating to ideology, theology or ethics. It was Johann Jakob Wettstein who first formulated the criterion that 'of two readings that which seems more orthodox should not immediately be preferred'.[18] More recently, several other scholars have discussed the subject in the area of New Testament Textual Criticism.[19] The most comprehensive treatment appeared in 1993 with Bart Ehrman's monograph *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, in which he presented numerous examples of 'orthodox corruption' by the scribes of the New Testament.[20] The fact that such difficulties at times caused scribes to alter the biblical text seems to be accepted by most scholars today.[21] However, opinions diverge considerably as to the extent to which this happened.[22]

Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism (trans. E.F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2nd edn, 1989), pp. 280-81; Giorgio Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2nd edn, 1952), p. 122.

18. 'Inter duas variants lectiones ea, quae magis orthodoxa videtur, non est protinus alteri praeferenda' (J.J. Wettstein [ed.], *Novum Testamentum Graecum* [2 vols.; Amsterdam: Dommerian, 1751–1752], II, p. 864). The canon in question was formulated already in 1730 in his *Prolegomena ad Novi Testamenti graeci editionem accuratissimam*. For earlier discussions of textual alterations suspected to reflect orthodox views, see Epp, 'Traditional "Canons"', p. 123.

19. Kenneth W. Clark, 'Textual Criticism and Doctrine', in J. de Zwaan (ed.), *Studia Paulina: In Honorem Johannis de Zwaan* (Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, 1953), pp. 52-65; Kenneth W. Clark, 'The Theological Relevance of Textual Variation in Current Criticism of the Greek New Testament', *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 1-16; Eldon J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (SNTSMS, 3; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Howard Eshbaugh, 'Textual Variants and Theology: A Study of the Galatian Text of Papyrus 46', *JSNT* 3 (1979), pp. 60-72; Mikeal C. Parsons, 'A Christological Tendency in P75', *JBL* 105 (1986), pp. 463-79; Peter M. Head, 'Christology and Textual Transmission: Reverential Alterations in the Synoptic Gospels', *NovT* 35 (1993), pp. 105-129.

20. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2011).

21. The criterion is reflected also in the work of the UBS committee. See, e.g., the comments on Lk. 2.38; 11.4; 16.12; 24.51, 53; Acts 2.41; 5.32; 9.22; Rom. 9.4; 1 Pet. 1.22 in Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*.

22. Tommy Wasserman, 'Misquoting Manuscripts?—The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture Revisited', in *The Making of Christianity: Conflicts, Contacts, and Constructions: Essays in Honor of Bengt Holmberg* (ed. M. Zetterholm and S. Byrskog; ConBNT, 47; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 325-50.

    In the following I will focus specifically on some textual difficulties in the Bible relating to violence, in particular divine violence, which evidently caused offense on the part of the scribes as the text seems to conflict with the image of a good and loving God and, in the case of the New Testament, a peaceful Jesus. I will argue that in most of these examples we should prefer the more violent reading as original; it will be more or less apparent that subsequent scribes and translators have tried to remove the difficulty, often by way of clarification or by a 'safe interpretation' that softens the text. Thus, from these observations we could inductively formulate a sub-criterion of the *lectio difficilior potior*, namely *lectio vehementior potior*.

2.1. *Judges 11.39-40*

> At the end of two months, she [i.e. Jephthah's daughter] returned to her father, *who did with her according to the vow he had made*. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.[23]

This is the conclusion of an episode in the narrative of Jephthah in which he swears an oath, which leads to a fatal outcome; he is bound by his vow to sacrifice his own daughter. The terse Masoretic text states explicitly that Jephthah 'did *to her* (לה) according to his vow' (my italics). This terse statement is congruent with the laconic style that characterizes the narration as a whole. The text leaves little room to doubt that Jephthah went through with the drastic deed, which would then be the only human sacrifice in the Bible carried out by an Israelite.[24] At the same time, human sacrifices are strictly forbidden in the OT (Lev. 20.1-5; Deut. 12.31; 18.10). This, of course, creates a conflict for those readers, ancient and modern, who are looking for the ideology and morality of the story.[25]

    For example, the church father Theodoret of Cyrus asks the obvious question to the text: 'Why did the Lord permit the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter?', before he proceeds to answer it.[26] A modern commentator like Cheryl Exum realizes that there is no reason to speculate why God does not

---

23. All biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The words and phrases under discussion are italicized.

24. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19), also known as the *Akedah* ('the binding'), was never carried out.

25. For a critique of such a perspective, see Greger Andersson, *The Book and its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies of the Book of Judges* (PhD dissertation; Örebro University, 2001), pp. 95-101.

26. John F. Petruccione and Robert C. Hill (eds.), *Theodoret of Cyrus. The Questions on the Octateuch* (LEC; 2 vols.; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), II, pp. 343-47 (*Q*. 20 on Judges).

intervene at this point in the story, but she nevertheless confronts the same textual gap that results from the absence of God in the text: 'But in Judges 11, God neither requires nor rejects human sacrifice. Silent transcendence, if not a form of hostile transcendence, clearly raises questions about divine benevolence'.[27]

The textual tradition reflects two strategies of moderating the offensive content (or bridging the gap). One part of the LXX tradition, the B-text represented by Vaticanus reflects the terse Masoretic text: ἐποίησεν ἐν αὐτῇ τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτοῦ ἣν ηὔξατο, 'He did against her according to the vow that he had vowed'.[28] However, another part of the tradition, the A-text, represented by Alexandrinus, is less explicit on the matter, ἐπετέλεσεν Ιεφθαε τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτοῦ ἣν ηὔξατο, 'Jephthah fulfilled his vow that he had vowed'. This euphemistic version leaves open the question whether Jephthah found some other way to fulfill his vow, perhaps by giving his daughter to the tabernacle as a servant, which could explain why she would bewail her virginity for two months (11.37), if it was not because of her impending death. Regardless of the actual outcome, the less explicit wording circumscribes the difficulty.

The other strategy is reflected in *Targum Jonathan*, where a gloss added to v. 39 makes it clear that Jephthah's action was erroneous and indicates how it could have been prevented:

> (And it became a decree in Israel) that no one may offer up his son or his daughter for a burnt offering, as Jephthah the Gileadite did, who did not ask Phinehas the priest. For if he had asked Phinehas the priest, he would have rescued her with a monetary consecration.[29]

The Targumist apparently refers to the law in Leviticus 27, which makes provisions for the redemption of things, including human beings (vv. 1-8), vowed to God. These two strategies—Jephthah may not have gone through with the sacrifice, he might have found another way to fulfill his vow; or,

27. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 60.

28. Alfred Rahlfs identified and printed two main textual traditions of LXX Judges: An A-text mainly represented by Codex Alexandrinus, and a B-text represented by Codex Vaticanus, which he thought represented different recensions. Subsequent scholarship has refined his classifications, especially subdividing the A-text, and concluded that the two traditions probably derive from a single archetype.

29. Aramaic text with English translation in W. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 554-55. This tradition of the possibility that Jephtah's vow could be absolved is further reflected in a marginal gloss to 12.7 in *Codex Reuchlinianus* 3, which Smelik thinks may be contemporary with the view expressed in 11.39 (*Targum*, p. 557). For other traditions in the rabbinic discussion of the different solutions proposed concerning the problem of Jephthah's vow, see Smelik, *Targum*, pp. 556-57.

he did sacrifice his daughter but it was wrong and against God's will—can be observed from the earliest traceable history of interpretation until today, although the latter interpretation clearly dominated the earliest Jewish and Christian exegesis.[30] As Greger Andersson points out, 'In their [i.e. the pre-critical scholars'] interpretations, the tendency is to harmonize the text with the rest of the OT and to moderate its offensive content'.[31]

In sum, the terse Masoretic text, reflected in the B-text of LXX Judges is to be preferred as the *lectio difficilior* (or *lectio vehementior* to be more specific), whereas the Greek A-text and the Old Latin, as well as *Targum Jonathan* reflect various strategies to come to terms with a text that implies a divinely sanctioned act of human violence.

2.2. *2 Samuel 6.7*[32]

> The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there *because he reached out his hand to the ark*; and he died there beside the ark of God.

David had apparently decided to move the ark on a cart (v. 3; cf. 1 Chron. 13.7) instead of having Levites carry it on their shoulders according to God's command in the Torah (Num. 4.14-15; cf. 1 Chron. 15.11-15).[33] The Torah further makes it clear that not even the Levites were allowed to touch the holy object; if doing so they would die. As the two brothers Uzzah and Ahio drove or walked by the side of the ark, some kind of accident seems to have happened; the oxen stumbled / shook the ark and Uzzah, presumably acting on reflex and without intention of committing a sacrilege, caught hold of it and was struck by God and died on the spot.

The Masoretic text indicates a reason why God struck him, עַל־הַשַּׁל, 'because of (his) error', possibly derived from an Aramaic term, שׁלי meaning 'to err' or a Babylonian, *šullū*, 'treat with contempt' (cf. NIV, 'because of his irreverent act').[34] The Targum reads על דאשתלי, 'because he had erred'. The difficulty of the Masoretic text is most likely reflected in a variety of attempts to interpret it.[35]

30. For a history of exegesis with ample references, see David Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech Press, 1986), pp. 8-9.

31. Andersson, 'The Book and its Narratives', p. 93.

32. For a discussion of this passage see also Lennart Boström's study on 'Uzzah's Fate' in the present volume, pp. 23-39.

33. Alexander Rofé, 'Midrashic Traits in 4Q51', in *Archaeology of the Books of Samuel* (ed. P. Hugo and A. Schenker; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), pp. 75-88 (86), regards the account in 1 Chronicles 15 as a 'midrashic interpretation [of the original account in 2 Samuel 6] inspired by the Torah'.

34. A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC, 11; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989), p. 103.

35. For an extensive treatment of this textual problem, see Robert Rezetko, *Source*

In fact, the Talmudic tractate *Soṭah* 35 accounts for a dispute between Rabbi Johanan and Rabbi Eleazar over the difficult phrase. The former took it to mean 'on account of the act of error', whereas the latter drew the inference that Uzzah had 'relieved himself in its presence', connecting it to the root נשל, 'slip, drop off' (implying inattentiveness).[36] Although Johanan thought that Uzzah was punished by death, he still pointed out that he would share in the world to come, since the text states that he died there 'with' the ark and 'as the ark endures for ever, so Uzzah entered the World to Come'.[37]

In Codex Alexandrinus and other LXX witnesses it is rendered ἐπὶ (τῇ) προπέτεια, 'for (his) rashness' (cf. NEB, 'for his rash act').[38] This reading represents the Lucianic recension, marked in Origen's *Hexapla* as an addition. Aquila reads ἐπὶ (τῇ) ἐκνοία, 'on account of senselessness', wheras Codex Vaticanus and other LXX witnesses omit the phrase.[39] The Vulgate reads *super temeritate*, 'in the matter of recklessness', whereas Jerome reads *pro ignorantia*, '(as punishment) for ignorance' (*Pelag.* 1.38).[40]

Interestingly, the reconstructed text of 4QSamᵃ (4Q51) follows the Masoretic text of the parallel in 1 Chron. 13.10, על אשר־שלח ידו על־הארון, 'because he reached out his hand upon/against the ark' (cf. the Peshitta, which reflects 'because he stretched out his hand').[41] As most commentators, P. Kyle McCarter thinks it is likely that על־השל is simply a remnant of this longer addition present in 1 Chron. 13.10 and 4QSamᵃ (4Q51).[42] In fact, the NRSV emends the reading in 2 Sam. 6.7 on the basis of 1 Chron. 13.10 and 4QSamᵃ (4Q51), 'because he reached out his hand to the ark'. However, it is difficult to understand how this longer addition, were it original in 2 Sam. 6.7, could result in the unusual phrase in the MT, על־השל. As

and Revision in the Narratives of David's Transfer of the Ark. Text, Language, and Story in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13, 15-16 (LBH/OTS, 470; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 126-41.

36. BDF, s.v. נשל 1.

37. *Sotah* 35a (trans. A. Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1936), pp. 173-74.

38. The following LXX MSS read ἐπὶ τῇ προπέτεια: 19/b′, 52/e, 56/i, 82/o, 92/m, 93/e₂, 108/b, 127/c₂ (marked with obelus), 158/g, 243/jᵐᵍ (marked with obelus), 247/x, 314/w, 376/c, 489/f.

39. The following MSS omit the phrase: Vaticanus (B), Coislinianus (M), Venetus (N), 29/b₂, 55/h, 106/p, 107/d, 119/n, 120/q, 121/y, 130/s, 134/t, 243/jᵗˣᵗ, 245/v, 370/l, 372/u, 509/a₂, 554/z, 707/a. Sinaiticus is lacunose. The Coptic and Ethiopic versions also omit the phrase.

40. C. Moreschini, *S. Hieronymi Opera. Pars III, opera polemica. Dialogus adversus Pelagianos* (CCSL, vol. 80; Turnhout: Brepols, 1990).

41. Frank Moore Cross *et al*., *Qumran Cave 4.XII: 1-2 Samuel* (DJD XVII; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 127.

42. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB, 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 165; cf. Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), p. 232.

Robert Rezetko explains, 'it is impossible that the shorter reading is solely the result of parablepsis, since the difference between the received versions is more than simple subtraction'.[43]

In this connection, it is very important to note that the long form of the addition is not unequivocally attested in the textual tradition of 2 Samuel as such. First of all, 4QSam[a] is more likely a midrashic version of Samuel with influences from Chronicles than a primary witness to 1–2 Samuel.[44] Secondly, the addition in the Peshitta version of Samuel, 'because he stretched out his hand', most likely reflects an independent interpretation of על־השל on the basis of what is told in 2 Sam. 6.6 ('Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it'), rather than an abbreviation of the longer addition.[45]

In conclusion, there was clearly a need for an explanation of the incident, and most of the textual variants in the two parallel traditions in Samuel and Chronicles probably reflect various attempts to make sense of the unusual phrase in the Masoretic version of 2 Sam. 6.7, some of which betray influence from the previous verse. However, it is possible that the original version of the story lacked an explanation for Uzzah's violent death altogether as reflected in one part of the LXX tradition of 2 Samuel, and that the Masoretic text reflects the earliest attempt to supply one.[46]

In my opinion, the short version of 2 Sam. 6.7 – the *lectio vehementior* – is clearly the most difficult reading. The subsequent history of transmission and reception of this text reflects how ancient scribes and scholars have attempted to interpret and explain the fate of Uzzah.[47] Rezetko sums it up well:

43. Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, p. 132.

44. Rofé, 'Midrashic Traits', pp. 75-88 (esp. 86-87). From this perspective, Rezetko's tables of witnesses to Samuels and Chronicles, respectively, are misleading (*Source and Revision*, pp. 130-31).

45. So Craig Morrison, 'The Relationship of the Peshitta Text of Second Samuel with the Peshitta Text of First Chronicles', *ArSt* 3.1 (2005), pp. 59-81 (66-67). Morrison further concludes that the Peshitta texts of 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles manifest a high degree of independence and did not influence each other at the time of translation (p. 81).

46. It is difficult to give a general evaluation of the LXX text of 1–2 Samuel. According to Tov, some parts of the corpus reflect earlier editorial stages. See Tov, *Textual Criticism*, p. 137. In 2 Sam. 6.7, the addition in LXX of a prepositional phrase, ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ, at the end of the verse seems superfluous.

47. Interestingly, Josephus further softened the text by reversing the sequence of Uzzah's act and the violent divine reaction to it, thereby highlighting Uzzah's sin, and supplying an additional explanation of why he was struck by death, lest the reader should think that God's reaction was arbitrary: 'because he touched it though not a priest, God caused his death' (Ant. 7.78-89). See Christopher T. Begg, 'David's Transfer of the Ark', *BBR* 7 (1997), pp. 11-36 (18-19).

Ancient editors permitted the Uzzah episode to remain part of the Bible's portrayal of Israel's God, but not without their intervention. Modern scholars struggle to make sense of this narrative, as did medieval scholars and the ancients before them, but between us and them is the Bible's canonical text, which we can no longer change, but which early transmitters of the traditions adjusted freely when it proved advantageous to do so.[48]

2.3. *Isaiah 53.4, 10*

4b: …yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
10: Yet it was the will of the LORD *to crush him with pain*.

These verses form part of the fourth and final Servant Song in Isa. 52.13–53.12.[49] In this last example from the Old Testament, we will consider how the Septuagint translator has uniquely adapted the text. Regardless of the debate whether LXX-Isaiah is a 'contemporizing interpretation' (*Erfüllungsinterpretation*), by which the translator has sought to contemporize the ancient prophecies and apply them to his own historical situation, there is no doubt that the translator, on the whole, has taken great liberties with the text.[50] Whereas some renderings are very literal, and at times incomprehensible, others reflect great creativity both in terms of style and theology. Thus, David Baer characterizes the translation as 'ancient Jewish biblical interpretation':

Mistakes and a not quite victorious struggle with the book's difficult Hebrew appear to lie at the root of many of the LXX deviations. These coexist, however, with theological concerns and exegetical practice that produce a work that can only be fully appreciated when allowed *bona fide* status as ancient Jewish biblical interpretation.[51]

48. Rezetko, *Source and Revision*, p. 141.
49. The Servant Songs are found in Isa. 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; and 52.13–53.12. For a thorough survey of the literature, see Herbert Haag, *Der Gottesknecht bei Deuterojesaja* (ErFor, 233; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), and, more recently, Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, 'Neue Literatur zu Deuterojesaja (I-II)', *TRu* 65 (2000), pp. 414-30.
50. Ronald L. Troxel, *LXX-Isaiah as Translation and Interpretation: The Strategies of the Translator of the Septuagint of Isaiah* (JSJSup, 124; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008); David A. Baer points out that the freedom of the translator does not mean that he is 'free from commitment to the "*Vorlage*". On the contrary, his much-observed paraphrastic and even midrashic tendencies have almost entirely concealed from scholarly view a pronounced conservatism that binds him, first, to the immediate text of his own *Vorlage*…and then to other biblical texts in Isaiah and elsewhere.' See David A. Baer, *When We All Go Home: Translation and Theology in LXX Isaiah 56–66* (JSOTSup, 318; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 15-16.
51. Baer, *When We All Go Home*, p. 17; cf. Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 227, who characterize the work as 'a remarkable combination of creativity and confusion'.

The two verses of our example indeed reflect the theological concerns of the translator. His translation is completely different from the Masoretic text in that it consistently avoids statements that attribute the Servant's suffering to God.[52]

In the latter part of v. 4, the Masoretic text states that he (the Servant) was regarded as 'stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted', נגוע מכה אלהים ומענה. In contrast, the LXX simply says that he was 'in distress, calamity and oppression', ἐν πόνῳ καὶ ἐν πληγῇ καὶ ἐν κακώσει, thus making God passive rather than the agent of the Servant's suffering. In addition, the noun πόνος, 'distress', is far softer than the Masoretic passive participle, נגוע, 'stricken'.

In v. 10, the contrast is even greater. When the Masoretic version states that 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain', ויהוה חפץ דכאו החלי, the LXX instead has, 'The Lord desires to cleanse him of his plague', κύριος βούλεται καθαρίσαι αὐτὸν τῆς πληγῆς.[53] Some scholars suggest that the translator may have mixed up the Hebrew word דכאו, 'to strike him', either with זכה, which means 'to cleanse', or with the Aramaic term for 'pure' or 'innocent', דכא.[54] Jeremy Schipper, however, points out that a misunderstanding is unlikely, since the translator apparently recognized the pual form of the same verb in v. 5, מדכא, although there he translated it 'been weakened' rather than 'crushed'.[55] More likely, the translator again deliberately avoids the notion that the servant's suffering is divinely intended. More than that—according to this version, the Lord provides a physical healing of the servant.[56]

---

52. Cf. Baer who identifies a tendency 'to ameliorate the source text's least circumspect statements about God' (*When We All Go Home*, p. 18).

53. E.R. Ekblad points out that literal Greek equivalents for the Masoretic verb דכא were available, as reflected in Aquila's translation which reads καὶ κύριος ἐβουλήθη ἐπιτρίψαι αὐτοῦ τὸ ἀρρώστημα ('and the Lord wanted the sickness to crush him'); and Symmachus which has κύριος ἠθέλησεν ἀλοῆσαι αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ τραυματίσμῳ ('the Lord desired to beat him in the beating'). See Eugene Robert Ekblad, *Isaiah's Servant Poems According to the Septuagint: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), p. 242.

54. Richard Rusden Ottley, *The Book of Isaiah according to the Septuagint* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), II, p. 348; Isac L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah and Cognate Studies* (FAT, 40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 50; and Jobes and Silva, *Invitation*, p. 226.

55. Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 69.

56. Schipper emphasizes the disability imagery here and elsewhere in LXX-Isaiah 53: 'Rather than taking the servant's condition as a metaphor for sin, the LXX suggests that the servant undergoes a divine removal of disease when the LORD determines to cleanse him in v. 10' (*Disability*, p. 68).

In sum, the Septuagint version of Isaiah expresses theological perspectives that are at times distinct from the Masoretic text and the presumed *Vorlage*. The selected examples from Isaiah 53 reflect a tendency on the part of the translator to avoid implicating God's involvement in the physical violence against the Servant, and to emphasize instead his aid and healing.[57]

We now turn to some examples of textual difficulties in the New Testament, relating to violence in the portrayal of Jesus. Despite his sometimes violent rhetoric, especially against 'the scribes and the Pharisees' (cf. Mt. 23), the Gospels never explicitly mention Jesus committing physical violence against another person. The closest we come is the incident with the cleansing of the Jerusalem temple where people apparently fled under a threat of physical violence.

2.4. *John 2.14-15*

> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the
> money changers seated at their tables. Making *a whip of cords*, he drove all
> of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

There are both similarities and differences between the Gospel accounts of the temple cleansing (Jn 2.13-17; Mk 11.15-17; Mt. 21.12-13; Lk. 19.45-46). For example, the Synoptics concur with John that Jesus drove out those who were selling in the temple courts (Matthew, Mark and John include those who were buying); all evangelists except Luke state that he overturned the tables of the money changers; whereas Mark and Luke state that 'he began to drive out those who where selling (and buying)' (ἤρξατο ἐκβάλλειν τοὺς πωλοῦντας...), Luke and John place more emphasis on the completed action, 'he drove them all out' (Matthew: ἐξέβαλεν πάντας ... / πάντας ἐξέβαλεν); whereas the Synoptics appeal to a composite citation from Isa. 56.7 and Jer. 7.11 to explain Jesus's hostile action towards the merchants and their property, John has the disciples recalling a Messianic prophecy from Ps. 69.10 in retrospect, 'Zeal for your house will consume me'.

In this example, however, I would first like to focus on a unique detail that John mentions explaining how Jesus drove out the traders and their animals: He made 'a whip of cords', ποιήσας φραγέλλιον ἐκ σχοινίων. The context suggests that Jesus acted on the spur of the moment, and, after all,

---

57. Jobes and Silva, *Invitation*, pp. 223-24, point to other possible examples of this tendency: In v. 6, according to the Masoretic version, 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all', ויהוה הפגיע בו את עון כלנו. The strong Hebrew expression, literally 'the Lord has struck [הפגיע] him with the iniquity of us all', is softened by the translator, who uses the verb παραδίδωμι (hand over). Further, in the last clause of v. 8, the translator replaces נגע למו, literally 'he was stricken', with ἤχθη εἰς θάνατον, 'he was led to death'.

weapons were banned from the temple area.[58] Thus, 'the whip' (φραγέλλιον) he made there certainly did not have the metal tips of the Roman scourge, *flagellum* (Lat.), from which the Greek word is derived; a dreadful torture instrument used to inflict the severe punishment with the same name on slaves and provincials who had been sentenced to death.[59]

However, a number of textual witnesses including the two earliest, read ὡς φραγέλλιον, 'a kind of whip' (𝔓[66] 𝔓[75] L W[supp] X 0162 *f*1 33 565 it[a, aur, b, c, e, f, ff2, j, q] ac[2] sa *al*) as if emphasizing that it was not actually a whip Jesus used, but something that looked like a whip, made from whatever suitable material at hand.[60] Interestingly, the Sahidic (sa) and Lycopolitan Coptic (ac[2]) versions seem to reflect ὡς φραγέλλιον not by including the equivalent of the comparative particle ὡς, but by a deliberate word choice ⲙⲁⲥⲧⲓⲅⲝ and not ⲫⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗⲗⲓⲟⲛ, as in the Fayumic, Early Bohairic and Classical Bohairic.[61]

The early and wide attestation shows that the variant arose very early on. As Bruce Metzger explains, however, the UBS committee preferred the short reading because of transcriptional evidence: first, there is no good reason for the omission of ὡς had it been present in the original text; and secondly, the word was probably introduced by scribes 'in order to soften somewhat the bold statement that Jesus made a whip of cords'.[62]

Here I would like to add that the association of the word φραγέλλιον with the kind of torture that Jesus himself underwent before he was crucified (Mt. 27.26; Mk 15.15) could certainly have caused some early scribe to clarify that this reference was not to the horrible torture instrument (the word in its more technical and etymological sense). The addition of ὡς would further emphasize Jesus's improvisation, which is implied by the context already.

58. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), p. 106 n. 21.

59. Cf. Bauer-Danker Lexicon, φραγέλλιον, φραγελλόω.

60. Raymond Brown suggests that 'Jesus may have fashioned his whip from the rushes used as bedding for the animals'. See Raymond J. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 29; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 115. E. Haenchen boldly states that he used 'the cords with which the animals had been tethered'; see Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John. Chapters 1–6* (trans. Robert W. Funk; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 183.

61. Christian Askeland, *John's Gospel: The Coptic Translations of its Greek Text* (ANTF, 44; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 69-70. In this connection, Askeland points out (p. 70) that the Greek-Coptic verb ⲫⲣⲁⲅⲉⲗⲗⲟⲩ occurs elsewhere for φραγελλόω in the Coptic versions (Mt. 27.26; Mk 15.15).

62. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p. 173.

A related question adding to the complexity of the passage is whether Jesus used the whip to drive out both men and animals, or just animals. The Greek text is not very transparent, and the words in question, πάντας...τά τε πρόβατα καὶ τοὺς βόας, can either be rendered, 'all (men)...with both the sheep and cattle as well' (cf. ISV, ESV, NASB, KJV), or 'all...both the sheep and the cattle' (cf. NRSV, NIV, NLT).

Thus, the passage contains at least two difficulties; a text-critical problem and one related to translation. The exegete Ernst Haenchen is representative of a solution that 'disarms' Jesus:

> Since one cannot drive animals merely with one's hands, Jesus made 'a kind of whip' (read ὡς φραγέλλιον with 𝔓⁶⁶ and 𝔓⁷⁵) out of the cords with which the animals had been tethered. He did not use it against people, but drove the animals out with it.[63]

The point here is not to determine what kind of instrument Jesus used when he cleansed the temple, although transcriptional criteria—*lectio vehementior potior*—certainly speak in favor of a whip. Neither can we establish for certain whether Jesus drove out the traders as well as their animals; the author of the Fourth Gospel apparently created an ambiguous text;[64] a fact which may suggest that with 'all', the author did refer to men and property alike.[65] The story does not even tell us whether Jesus actually executed physical violence, or just threatened to do so, only that he was successful. Notwithstanding, the example highlights how scribes and scholars have struggled with a text that implies that Jesus used physical violence against fellow human beings.

2.5. *Matthew 10.34-36*

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but *a sword*. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

---

63. Haenchen, *John*, p. 183.

64. Some commentators have even suggested that the second half of the verse, 'both the sheep and the cattle', is a later addition (Haenchen, *John*, p. 183). The proposal lacks textual evidence, but it would nevertheless support the notion that 'all' originally included men and animals.

65. The argument that Jesus could not have driven out the merchants, since he *subsequently* turned over the tables of the money changers and told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here!' is inconclusive. It is unnecessary to demand a strict sequential order of events. These details of the narrative may instead serve to further clarify the main proposal that he drove them all out of the temple. Cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 159-60.

In this passage, Jesus, who would bring peace to earth (cf. Lk. 2.14; Jn 14.27), makes a dramatic apocalyptic announcement saying that he did not come to bring peace to the world, but a sword. Quoted out of context, it sounds like a proclamation of holy war. However, the Matthaean Jesus hardly speaks of a literal sword (cf. Mt. 26.52), although he has just predicted persecution and physical violence against his followers, even from their own family members (Mt. 10.16-33, esp. v. 21).

In the Lukan parallel, the metaphor in Matthew is interpreted as *division* (διαμερισμός) even among household members (Lk. 12.51-53):

> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Other versions of this saying are present in the *Gospel of Thomas* (L. 16.1-2) and in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 2.26 (and 2.28 and 6.4) with slight differences in Syriac and Greek.[66] Regardless of the complex source- and redaction-critical questions, and whether Matthew's text reflects the earliest stage of the written traditions, his wording is certainly the harsher and more violent.[67] Hence, Matthew Black states:

> Nor does one get rid entirely of the difficulty of Matthew's harsh term 'sword' by describing it as purely figurative, for while 'division' may imply 'conflict' but not necessarily 'violence', the 'sword' has all its associations with violent conflict and with the use of the armed hand. It is on the strength

---

66. In *Gos. Thom.* (L. 16.1-2) Jesus says, 'Perhaps people think it is peace that I have come to cast upon the world. And they do not know it is division that I have come to cast upon the earth—fire, sword, war!' (trans. A. DeConick). According to the Greek text of Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 2.26, 2.28, 6.4, Jesus says, 'I have not come to cast peace on earth, but a sword' (trans. A. DeConick). The Syriac substitutes 'war' for 'sword'. In my opinion, these traditions represent secondary developments. For English translations and further discussion, see April D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation, With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006), pp. 93-94. As for the relationship between Matthew and Luke, see William David Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997); they state that, 'Although one can hardly decide whether Matthew has increased the parallelism…or whether Luke has changed the sentence structure, Luke's 'division' for 'sword' does appear to be secondary' (II, p. 218).

67. This does not mean that Matthew (or the Matthean Jesus) promotes violence. For a general assessment of Matthew in this regard, see Robert R. Beck, *Banished Messiah: Violence and Nonviolence in Matthew's Story of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

of sayings like this that Jesus of Nazareth has, not infrequently, been cast in the role of political revolutionary.[68]

Black thinks that the parallel in Luke 'is possibly a deliberate softening of the harsher expression in Matthew', and points out that the original words spoken by Jesus have already been given a 'sufficiently cushioned connotation' since Matthew connects them to the persecution of Jesus's followers, whereas they may have had a wider reference.[69]

In any case, Matthew's somewhat enigmatic metaphor apparently caused the translator (or a subsequent scribe) to interpret it for the reader, bringing it in closer harmony with the Lukan parallel: the Curetonian Syriac version of Mt. 10.34 suggests that Jesus came to bring 'a division of mind(s)'.[70] Minuscule 28 retains the 'sword' but adds a gloss, reading μάχην καὶ μάχαιραν, 'strife and sword'; the inserted word, μάχη, occurs only in the plural elsewhere in the NT, where it invariably denotes battles fought without actual weapons (2 Cor. 7.5; 2 Tim. 2.23; Tit. 3.9; Jas 4.1).[71] A possible motivation behind these changes may have been to safeguard against a strict literal and more violent interpretation of the Jesus saying.

3. *Conclusion*

First I want to underscore again the point made by Housman that every textual problem must be regarded as possibly unique. Hence, the criterion discussed in this essay, *lectio vehementior potior*, cannot be applied mechanically. There may be other more specific factors that explain the variation in a given passage. For this reason I have omitted one of Bart Ehrman's favourite examples of 'orthodox corruption', to which he has appealed in many of his writings[72]—a difficult, and more violent, reading which has subsequently been adopted by many commentators and translations:[73] In Mk 1.41 virtually all textual witnesses agree that Jesus was 'moved with pity', but Codex Bezae and some Old Latin MSS state

---

68. Matthew Black, 'Uncomfortable Words: III. The Violent Word', *ExpT* 81 (1970), pp. 115-18 (116).

69. Black, 'Uncomfortable Words', p. 116.

70. διαμερισμὸν τῶν διάνοιων in retrotranslation to Greek.

71. Bauer-Danker Lexicon, μάχη.

72. See the collection of essays in Bart D. Ehrman, *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS, 33; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), pp. 94-97; 110 n. 35; 120-41; 263-64; 310-16; 330-31. His most extensive treatment is found in 'A Leper in the Hands of an Angry Jesus', in *New Testament Greek and Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Gerald F. Hawthorne* (ed. A.M. Donaldson and T.B. Sailors; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003)*,* pp. 77-98 (repr. in Ehrman, *Studies*, pp. 120-41).

73. See Peter J. Williams, 'An Examination of Ehrman's Case for ὀργισθείς in Mark 1:41', *NovT* 54 (2012), pp. 1-12 (1).

that Jesus 'became angry' (ὀργισθείς / *iratus*) with the leper who asked for help. Jeff Cate has recently offered a convincing proposal that the latter variant arose as Latin translators interpreted σπλαγχνισθείς differently, as either compassion (*misertus*) or anger (*iratus*). Subsequently, the Greek reading of Bezae (which is unique) originated as a retranslation from the Latin side (d) of this bilingual MS.[74]

As we consider our five examples of 'violent texts' from a hermeneutical viewpoint, they may hint at alternative interpretations and clarifications that potentially solve theological and ethical dilemmas. Perhaps Jephthah found a different way to fulfill his vow without killing his daughter? Was he really under obligation to fulfill a vow of such nature in the first place? If Jephthah went through with the sacrifice, after all, one can choose to see it through the Targumist's eyes, as a warning example of an individual who gravely misunderstood the will of God.

Almost the complete textual tradition of 2 Sam. 6.7 reflects various attempts to supply an explanation for what happened to Uzzah—why did God strike him down? Scribes, translators and other interpreters made additions that imply a more or less conscious moral failing on the part of Uzzah.

Another clarification entered the textual tradition of Jn 2.15 at an early stage, as reflected in the early papyri—some scribe(s) added a small word, 'like', as if emphasizing that Jesus did not use a whip in the literal sense when he cleansed the temple, but something that looked 'like' a whip. Similarly, some textual variants in the passage in Mt. 10.34 seem to have arisen to prevent a strict literal interpretation that would have implied that Jesus brought a sword to the earth. Such an interpretation of the metaphor may seem unnecessary and oversensitive in the eyes of readers, who can deduct from the Gospel story that Jesus could not have meant a literal sword.

The translator of Isaiah, on the other hand, rather than filling in missing gaps in the text of his Hebrew *Vorlage*, resisted the text completely at some points, insisting that the Lord was not involved in any physical violence against the Servant, but instead came to his aid and healing.

All of these examples demonstrate how readers throughout history have wrestled, negotiated, and sometimes resisted the biblical text. As modern readers we should be aware, however, that ancient readers, including scribes and translators, might have had completely different struggles. Thus, Augustine comments on a much cherished passage in the New Testament, the Pericope of the Adulteress (Jn 7.53–8.11), which is held by most modern critics to be a later addition:

74. Cf. David C. Parker, 'The Translation of OYN in the Old Latin Gospels', *NTS* 31 (1985), pp. 252-76 (274), 'Comparison with d [the Latin part of Bezae] reveals that D [Greek] agrees with it more than disagrees, when its Greek reading is singular. This partly reflects the measure of assimilation—of both sides—that has occurred'.

> However, the pagan mind obviously shrinks from this comparison, so that some men of slight faith, or rather, some hostile to true faith, fearing, as I believe, that liberty to sin with impunity is granted their wives, remove from their Scriptural texts the account of our Lord's pardon of the adulteress:—as though He who said, 'From now on, sin no more', granted permission to sin…[75]

<div align="right">(De coniugiis adulterinis 2.7.6)</div>

Did ancient scribes excise the passage because of an anxiety of what Jesus' leniency with the adulteress could lead to?[76] *Lectio lenior potior*?

75. *Sed hoc uidelicet infidelium sensus exhorret, ita ut nonnulli modicae fidei uel potius Inimici uerae fidei, credo, metuentes peccandi inpunitatem dari mulieribus suis, illud quod de adulterae indulgentia dominus fecit auferrent de codicibus suis, quasi permissionem peccandi tribuerit qui dixit:* iam deinceps noli peccare… (trans. C.T. Huegelmeyr: Fathers of the Church, 27, pp. 107-108).

76. Cf. Harald Riesenfeld, 'The Pericope *de adultera* in the Early Christian Tradition', in H. Riesenfeld (ed.), *The Gospel Tradition:Essays by Harald Riesenfeld* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 95-110.

Holy War, Divine War, Yhwh War—and Ethics: On a Central Issue in Recent Research on the Hebrew Bible

Karl William Weyde

Abstract

The article gives a survey of recent research on the interpretation of so-called holy war in the Hebrew Bible and in ancient Near Eastern material. A short presentation of Gerhard von Rad's book on holy war in ancient Israel (1951) and its critics is followed by a review of recent studies which focus on comparisons between the Hebrew Bible texts and material from the ancient Near East. In these studies, both similarities and peculiar features of the idea of holy war in the Hebrew Bible appear, such as the supremacy of divine law in war and a concern for the needy ones in the society. It is shown that many scholars after von Rad prefer to apply the phrase 'Yhwh war' to the war texts in the Hebrew Bible. As a part of these insights, the ethical aspects of holy war / Yhwh war attract more attention in recent studies than in earlier research. A central question today is whether and how the biblical passages on holy war / Yhwh war can produce a basis for promoting peace among the nations and for implementing universal human rights in a modern world.

Introduction

The phrase 'holy war' does not occur in the Hebrew Bible. However, other phrases are used, such as 'sanctify war' (Jer. 6.4; Joel 4.9; Mic. 3.5) and 'wars (or battles) of Yhwh' (1 Sam. 18.17; 25.28), and in Num. 21.14 we find a reference to the 'Book of the Wars of Yhwh'. Moreover, the idea of Yhwh as warrior who fights for Israel abounds in the historical narratives, such as Exod. 14.14; 17.16; Judg. 4.4-6, 23; 7.9, 14; 1 Sam. 11.13, and in poetry, such as Ps. 24.8, which speaks of Yhwh as 'mighty in battle', and further Exod. 15.1, 18; Judg. 5.2-11; Psalm 46. Is, then, 'holy war' an appropriate phrase that can be applied to the wars of Yhwh? The question includes asking: What was the purpose of these wars, and what kind of ethics is conveyed by the descriptions of them? These and closely related issues will be pursued in this article by paying special attention to the discussion in recent research.

1. *The Phrase 'Holy War' in Hebrew Bible Research*

The phrase 'holy war' was introduced into biblical scholarship by the German orientalist Friedrich Schwally[1] in his booklet *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (1901), which was a comparative ethnographic study intended as part of a series devoted to warfare in Semitic antiquity; it was actually the first single comprehensive treatment of the topic.[2] Schwally had studied Julius Wellhausen, who, in his *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (1894),[3] contended that the high-water marks of the history of Israel were indicated by the wars. In those days, war was the most prominent expression of the nation's life; war created the people. War was also seen as a holy enterprise. The name 'Israel' means 'El is battling' and Yhwh was the warrior El, after whom Israel was named. Ancient Israel was a military camp in which the nation was welded into a unity; the army camp was the cradle of the nation and also its oldest sanctuary.[4]

   Wellhausen did not develop this idea into a discussion of warfare in Israel. This, however, was done by Schwally, who associated warfare in Israel with the notion of Yhwh as a covenant God, who is also a warrior God who defends, in war, the covenant or federation (*Bund*). This understanding of God was the basis for a covenant theology in which Yhwh was worshiped as a warrior; the corporate worship was the context in which war was conducted and which made it a holy war. Because of some special obligations connected to it, war could be regarded as a kind of sacrificial service and as worship. Moreover, on the basis of his comparative studies, Schwally argued that every nation in antiquity claimed that their gods participated in war and were responsible for giving their warriors victory. But only Israel came to understand this claim to mean that it was unnecessary for warriors to fight. This understanding paved the way to emphasizing the importance of Yhwh's assistance and minimizing the role of human participation in war. Such development of belief in Yhwh as warrior was the result of later Jewish historiography.[5]

---

   1.   Friedrich Schwally, associate professor of Semitic languages in Strassburg from 1898, in Giessen from 1901, ordinary professor in Giessen from 1908, and finally in Königsberg from 1914 until his death in 1919, at the age of 55. See also Rüdiger Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg" im Pentateuch und im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk: Studien zur Forschungs-, Rezeptions- und Religionsgeschichte von Krieg und Bann im Alten Testament* (AOAT, 381; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), pp. 4-6.
   2.   Friedrich Schwally, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung. Theodor Weicher, 1901). Only this volume was published in the planned series named *Semitische Kriegsaltertümer*.
   3.   Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1894).
   4.   Wellhausen, *Geschichte*, pp. 23-24.
   5.   A brief presentation of Schwally's theories occurs in Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*,

Schwally's views were further developed by the sociologist Max Weber in a series of studies (1917–1919),[6] who especially pointed to the role of charismatic prophets, such as Deborah and Samuel, and the decline of their role after the emergence of the monarchy, when the prophets, as their heirs, preserved ideas of Yhwh himself as a war leader from pre-monarchic times, in opposition to the kings' conduct of war.

These scholars prepared the ground for studies of holy war produced by Bible scholars in years to come. Of particular interest are two Scandinavians, Johannes Pedersen and Henning Fredriksson. Pedersen, in his famous book on *Israel, its Life and Culture* (1940),[7] explained various phenomena in Israel's life and culture, including warfare, in the framework of notions of primitive psychology, that is, the strong feeling of corporate 'psychic' unity among ancient Israelites: the people are one great unity of the soul, especially in the case of war. War was a psychic contest, with each of the competing armies forming a psychic organism, and there were religious and cultic aspects of war which served to maintain increased psychic strength, which is necessary in war.[8]

Fredriksson (1945) had a different approach, focusing on the image of God in the Hebrew Bible's presentation of God as a warrior, and he found two aspects of this image: (1) Yhwh is the leader of Israel's armies; (2) Yhwh is a solitary warrior, fighting alone. Fredriksson anticipated later discussions when he also contended that Yhwh's battle against chaos represents a later development due to Babylonian influences of the exilic period. Thus, according to Fredriksson, the concepts of God as warrior changed significantly over time.[9] Fredriksson, however, did not go deeply into the historical and social factors that might explain this development; these issues take us to Gerhard von Rad's study published in 1951.

---

pp. 4-6, and Ben C. Ollenburger, 'Introduction: Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War', in G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (trans. M.J. Dawn; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 4-6. Ollenburger gives an excellent survey of research on holy war until the 1980s. Some of his observations are included in my presentation of some other scholars below.

6. The studies were collected by his wife and published as *Das antike Judentum: Religion und Gesellschaft. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie. Bd. 3* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1920–1921).

7. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, its Life and Culture* (Vols. III–IV; Oxford: Oxford University Press; Copenhagen: Branner og Koch, 1940). This is the English translation of the Danish original *Israel, Hellighed og Guddommelighed* (Bd. III–IV; København: Branner, 1934).

8. Pedersen, *Israel*, pp. 1-20. Cf. Ollenburger, 'Introduction', pp. 10-11.

9. Henning Fredriksson, *Jahwe als Krieger: Studien zum alttestamentlichen Gottesbild* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1945), pp. 3-4, 78, 109-10. Cf. Ollenburger, 'Introduction', pp. 11-12.

2. *Holy War as a Cultic Institution of the Amphictyony. Gerhard von Rad*

Von Rad's theory on holy war in the Hebrew Bible, which he presented in his small book *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (80 pages, 1951), became a classic in research.[10] An important aspect of it is that Israel, under certain circumstances, was accustomed to wage holy wars in addition to profane ones. Already in his short introduction, von Rad makes clear his methodological approach and its presupposition, which is based on Hermann Gunkel's epoch-making form-critical research, to which he explicitly refers.[11] Von Rad contends that Israel's ancient traditions, which contained the foundations of the people's belief, were preserved in institutions which had been inaugurated by Yhwh, such as the royal court, the cult, and the judicial life. Every concept of faith had its *Sitz im Leben* and von Rad claims that, although much research had been done in this field, one particular stream of traditions brought forth by one of the sacral institutions had been ignored—namely holy war. Drawing on the descriptions of war in the Hebrew Bible, he developed a theory of holy war based on three constitutive features: (1) the embedding of war in rituals that made it a cultic performance, (2) the decisive intervention of Yhwh in the human conflicts, (3) the defensive role of the Israelites in these conflicts. Holy war was thus a sacral institution.[12] It was created already by the pre-monarchic tribal confederation, the so-called amphictyony,[13] even though, according to von Rad, all the members' military forces were usually not involved. The war leader was a charismatic personality appointed by Yhwh at the time.

 However, the emergence of kingship and of mercenary armies serving the king meant the end of sacral warfare. But the tradition of holy war lived on in prophecy, especially among prophets who were in opposition to the monarchy and its conduct of war. Therefore, among these prophets holy war most often occurred as a negative factor (e.g., Amos 2.14-16). The holy

    10. Gerhard von Rad, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1951). In the following years, it appeared in revised editions, the third in 1958. The English translation *Holy War in Ancient Israel* is based on the third German edition of 1958. References in this paper are to the English edition.
    11. Von Rad, *Holy War*, pp. 39-40.
    12. Von Rad, *Holy War*, develops this theory on pages 41-51. Cf. also Manfred Weippert, 'Holy War I. Ancient Near East and Old Testament', *Religion Past and Present VI* (trans. of *RGG* [4th edn]; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009), pp. 223-24. Von Rad's theory has points of similarity with Schwally's views outlined above, but von Rad does not mention Schwally when he presents his theory. However, Schwally is referred to later in the book, on pages 69 and 119.
    13. Von Rad thus adopted Martin Noth's well-known theory of such confederation of the twelve tribes in pre-monarchic times; cf. Rudolf Smend, *Deutsche Alttestamentler in drei Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), p. 244.

war concept also survived in Deuteronomistic circles and even experienced a short revival in the reign of King Josiah. Finally, it found its way into postexilic and late postexilic material, such as Chronicles (e.g., 2 Chron. 20) and Psalms (e.g., Pss. 33; 147).[14]

3. *Criticism of von Rad and New Theories. R. Smend, M. Weippert, F. Stolz*

For several years, von Rad's theory found wide acceptance,[15] especially his view on prophecy and its relation to the holy war traditions. Scholars such as Peter Weimar (1976), Millard C. Lind (1980), and T. Raymond Hobbs (1989) emphasize that the prophets preserved the holy war traditions, but also that they were critical of the monarchy and its warfare practices and therefore applied these traditions negatively.[16]

Harsh criticism, however, was soon launched against von Rad's view on the origin and institutional context of holy war in ancient Israel. Its first severe critic was Rudolph Smend (1963), who argued that early Israel's war was not a function of any cultic institution. Moreover, he contended that one should not speak of holy war, but of 'Yhwh war' (*Jahwekrieg*).[17] A number of scholars agreed with him in these matters,[18] including Sa-Moon Kang (1989), who argues that 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible is not a *Glaubenskrieg* like for instance *jihad* in Islam, meaning a fight to spread a community's faith, but a war for the Israelites' existence as a people.[19] We add that von Rad did not at all discuss whether the phrase 'heiliger Krieg'

14. Von Rad, *Holy War*, pp. 39-40, 41-42, 65-69, 72-73, 108-114, 124-25, 129-33.

15. The importance of von Rad's theory occurs in J. Alberto Soggin, 'Krieg II. Altes Testament', *TRE* XX (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 19-25 (20), who maintains that it was Pedersen and von Rad who presented the theoretical-theological foundation of 'Yhwh war', as well as characteristic features of it, in the Hebrew Bible.

16. Peter Weimar, 'Die Jahwekriegserzählungen in Ex 14, Jos 10, Richter 4 und 1 Sam 7', *Bib* 57 (1976), pp. 38-73; Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); T. Raymond Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* (OTS, 3; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

17. Rudolf Smend, *Jahwekrieg und Stämmebund: Erwägungen zur ältesten Geschichte Israels* (FRLANT, 84; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn, 1966), pp. 20-21, 27-28.

18. See, e.g., the studies of Weippert and Stolz presented below. Cf. also Gwilym H. Jones, 'Holy War or Yhwh War?', *VT* 25 (1975), pp. 642-58; Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 48-50.

19. Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (BZAW, 177; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1989), p. 2. Kang's definition of *jihad* in Islam is, however, highly problematic, cf. the survey of the meaning(s) of *jihad* in Islamic religious tradition by Craigie, *The Problem of War*, pp. 22-26. For a further presentation of Kang's book, see 4.1 below.

was appropriate for warfare as it is described in the Hebrew Bible, which is somewhat surprising.[20]

Smend also dissociated this war from the amphictyony, because, prior to Samuel, this confederation was a cultic association and not primarily political or military. Incidents of warfare in early Israel, Smend contended, involved only individual tribes formed for war and then disbanded; they did not involve the entire amphictyony. Smend did not object to the notion of the amphictyony as such, but argued that originally it included only some of the tribes and it was the sons of Rachel—the tribes of Joseph and Benjamin—who later brought with them into the amphictyony an experience of 'Yhwh wars'.[21] These tribes carried the memory of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, which was the first war of Yhwh. Thus, the war of Yhwh preceded the tribal league, the amphictyony. Smend's arguments suggested adjustments to von Rad's views. Both scholars based their theories on detailed reconstructions of the early history of Israel and of warfare in that period, which differed sharply from later historical realities.

Later investigations called for more radical evaluation of von Rad, and in 1972, two studies appeared which took the discussion into new directions.[22] In an article on holy war in Israel and Assyria, Manfred Weippert argued that the motifs identified by von Rad also appear in other ancient Near Eastern war accounts.[23] With the help of cuneiform material from Mari, the Hittite and Neo-Assyrian kingdom, Weippert traced the so-called holy war to cultic actions which belonged to every ancient Near Eastern or classical war and to the portrayal of the intervention of gods on the side of their own party. There is, he claimed, no basis in these ancient texts for maintaining a distinction between holy and profane wars; the gods in the ancient Near East were involved in *all* wars. Such motifs were part of the practice and ideology of war common in the ancient Near East and not limited to any specific period or type of society. Weippert argued that the phrase '*Jahwekrieg*' can only be applied to the biblical material as suggested by Smend if it is not used exclusively but also makes it possible to speak about 'Assur wars', 'Ishtar wars', 'Ninurta wars', and so on. That the biblical traditions of the early history attribute their victories in war to Yhwh does not justify any talk of holy war or of an institution of holy war. Therefore we cannot speak of a distinctively Israelite special sacral institution of

---

20. Cf. Carsten Colpe, *Der 'Heilige Krieg': Benennung und Wirklichkeit; Begründung und Widerstreit* (Bodenheim: Hain, 1994), pp. 48-54.

21. Smend, *Jahwekrieg*, pp. 10-32, esp. pp. 26, 30 and 76-78. Cf. Ollenburger, 'Introduction', p. 23.

22. Cf. Ollenburger, 'Introduction', p. 24.

23. Manfred Weippert, '"Heiliger Krieg" in Israel und Assyrien: Kritische Anmerkungen zu Gerhard von Rads Konzept des "Heiligen Krieges im alten Israel"', *ZAW* 84 (1972), pp. 460-93.

the amphictyony. Moreover, in Israel there was in principle no distinction between the charismatic leadership of war in the time of the judges and its conduct under the monarchy.[24]

Weippert's argument that all wars in the ancient Near East involve the participation of gods—and thus have a religious profile—prepared the way for subsequent studies on ancient Near Eastern warfare, for instance by Sa-Moon Kang (1989), Carly L. Crouch (2009) and Walter Gross (2009).

However, before we present these contributions, we turn to the monograph by Fritz Stolz which was published in the same year as Weippert's article. Stolz's book offered the first comprehensive investigation of 'Yhwh wars' (*Jahwes Kriege*) since the publication of von Rad's study more than twenty years earlier.[25] It differs from Weippert's approach since it hardly has any references to the ancient Near Eastern material. However, also Stolz criticized von Rad's theory that holy war represented an ancient sacral institution. In the time of the judges, there was no amphictyony and the tribes did not share any common experience of war; there was only wide diversity. The schema of 'Yhwh war' in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges is the basis of Stolz's examination. This schema is preserved in only late, Deuteronomistic texts, as also von Rad contended, but Stolz argues that this schema, the very theory of Yhwh war, was first invented by Deuteronomistic theologians; it is a literary and theological fiction which was influenced by the cultic traditions of Jerusalem.

Stolz does not deny that Israel experienced Yhwh wars early in its history; on the contrary, the belief in Yhwh as a warrior who fights in defence of Israel goes back to the time of the Judges and is attested in the earliest traditions. But these experiences, he argues, were diverse and the development of a uniform holy war schema can be traced in the history of the biblical literature, and even in Deuteronomy itself.[26] Also in Num. 21.21-26 the (older) account of the attack of the Amorite king Sihon against Israel does not involve Yhwh in the conflict at all, whereas the (later) report in Deut. 2.26-37 emphasizes Yhwh's initiative and actions in the same fight.[27] Rather than preserving or recovering a holy war institution as von Rad argued, the Deuteronomists reworked earlier war traditions from their own theological perspective. In their view, the holy war concept expressed a basic principle. This principle, Stolz contends, was developed when the cultic traditions of Jerusalem and the historical narratives of the Israelites were conflated. Through this conflation the narratives of conquest and settlement were

24. Weippert, '"Heiliger Krieg" in Israel und Assyrien', pp. 490-92.

25. Fritz Stolz, *Jahwes und Israels Kriege: Kriegstheorien und Kriegserfahrungen im Glauben des alten Israels* (ATANT, 60; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972).

26. He claims that for example Deut. 1.30 and 3.22 reflect a later stage in the development of this schema than Deut. 7.21; 9.3.

27. Stolz, *Jahwes und Israels Kriege*, pp. 25, 73-74, 127-28.

connected with mythological and liturgical traditions at home in Jerusalem. This connection included an identification of Yhwh with *'el*, the defender of cosmos. The Jerusalem cult celebrated Yhwh's power over and conquest of historical and cosmic enemies. Thus, according to Stolz, the relation of holy war to cult ran opposite to the direction von Rad suggested.[28]

Stolz's book was characteristic of holy war studies in the 1970s. Other scholars in this decade emphasized and developed, in different ways, the mythological dimensions of Israel's concept of 'Yhwh war' by tracing their origin in old Canaanite mythology (e.g., Frank Moore Cross) or their parallels in Ugarit (e.g., Patrick D. Miller, Jr.), or—like Stolz did—by searching for their background and particular profile in the Jerusalemite cult tradition (e.g., Odil Hannes Steck; Hans Heinrich Schmid). These researchers share the view that the cosmic order of peace is common to the ancient Near East and also lies behind the view of holy war in the Hebrew Bible; however, the cult in Jerusalem developed its own characteristics of this idea: the function of 'Yhwh war' was to restore order that has been fractured.[29]

In what way does more recent research from the 1980s onwards develop the directions pointed out by the above-mentioned studies?

4. *The Ancient Near Eastern Material, the Hebrew Bible, and Ethics*

The last three or four decades have seen an increasing number of contributions to the debate on the issue in question, and we will present some of the studies that seem to be of particular importance to the discussion.

4.1. *The Divine Warrior and his Functions. Sa-Moon Kang (1989)*
Sa-Moon Kang, in the revised version of his doctoral dissertation published in 1989, provides a good example of the research situation in the 1980s.[30] In the first part, Kang analyses divine war in ancient Near Eastern texts: Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syro-Palestine, Egypt; in the second part, he examines biblical texts in the historical books beginning with the crossing of the Reed Sea in Exodus 14–15 and ending with the traditions of David's battles in the

---

28. Stolz, *Jahwes und Israels Kriege*, pp. 62-68, 117-18, 187-91. Cf. Ollenburger, 'Introduction', pp. 26-28.

29. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); Patrick D. Miller, Jr. *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (HSM, 5; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); Odil Hannes Steck, *Friedensvorstellungen im alten Jerusalem: Psalmen, Jesaja, Deuterojesaja* (Theologische Studien, 3; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972); Hans Heinrich Schmid, 'Heiliger Krieg und Gottesfrieden im Alten Testament', in H.H. Schmid, *Altorientalische Welt in der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), pp. 91-120.

30. Kang, *Divine War*. For full bibliographical references, see n. 19 above.

books of Samuel. The parallels Kang finds between ancient Near Eastern texts and the Hebrew Bible are as follows:

First, the motifs of divine war began to appear in the rising period of each empire or kingdom in the ancient Near East. Similarly, the idea of Yhwh's help and intervention in the battles began to appear during the rise of David's kingdom. Second, the wars of David were interpreted as a lawsuit of Yhwh; his intervention in battles was understood as Yhwh's command. This interpretation parallels the concept of divine war in the ancient Near East. Third, in the battles of David, the ark, the visible divine symbol, took part together with the priests. The participation of the ark parallels that of divine emblems or standards of war in the ancient Near East.

There are, however, also differences: In the Hebrew Bible, Yhwh alone was understood as the divine warrior. This can also be seen by warlike epithets applied to Yhwh, such as גבור, צבאות יהוה, and איש מלחמה. Accordingly, the victory after the battles was given to Yhwh, who was exalted as the supreme God. By comparison, in the ancient Near East there were *many* divine warriors who, after the victory, were praised for their supremacy. On these grounds, Kang concludes that the concept of Yhwh as warrior was formulated in the Davidic kingdom in the light of motifs of divine war in the ancient Near East.

Kang also comments on the historical reliability of the war traditions in the Hebrew Bible: In Judges, the presentation is 'much closer' to the realities of battles as the struggle for existence in given environmental conditions. On the other hand, the present 'canonical' traditions in Joshua and Judges are reflections of a later theological understanding composed in the light of the Yhwh war concept. These traditions were schematized by Deuteronomistic theology and called 'holy war' by modern scholars. In this theology, which includes the idea of utter destruction (חרם), Yhwh becomes an active participant in the war; Yhwh helps and intervenes in the battles. An even later theological development appears in the accounts of the crossing of the Reed Sea after the departure from Egypt (Exod. 14–15), and of the war of the Israelites against the Amalekites (Exod. 17.8-16). In the former, Yhwh is the only protagonist; in the latter, Moses is depicted as a divine man, who fights alone. In both traditions the human soldiers play no role, and this understanding is contrasted with the idea of cooperation, in which Yhwh helped his people and their king. These two traditions reflect a later interpretation of the saving acts of Yhwh, which was developed in the light of the victory of David by Yhwh over his enemies.

Finally, Kang agrees with the criticism of von Rad's idea of holy war as a reaction of the amphictyony, arguing that even at the end of the period of the Judges all the twelve tribes did not take part in battles. Thus, Kang gives the traditions of the early history a certain degree of historical credibility, but he also emphasizes the strong traces of later theological reflections on them,

for which the Deuteronomistic theologians in particular were responsible under the influence of divine war concepts from the ancient Near East.[31]

4.2. *War and Ethics, Cosmology and History. Carly C. Crouch (2009)*
Materials from the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible are also analysed in the Oxford dissertation *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* by Carly C. Crouch (2009).[32] Her methodological approach differs in two ways from what she finds to be the case in most other comparative studies on the subject.

First, Crouch maintains that ethical thought, including war ethics in the ancient Near East, must be contextualised with regard to the social background of the informants. Second, in addition to distinguishing between social backgrounds and ideologies in analysing ethical thinking, it is equally necessary to consider the influence of historical circumstances. Thus, 'the interaction between history, society and ideology provides the essential source material for ethical thought' and is fundamental in order to understand what warfare was all about.[33]

On this basis, Crouch finds both significant similarities and differences between Assyria and the one hand and Judah and Israel on the other.[34] In all three societies mythological creation traditions reflect a strong connection between war, kingship, and the establishment of order; the connections between the traditions' divine actors and the historical actions of the human king made the king's military activities part of a cosmic struggle against chaos. 'Military violence was thereby cast not only as morally tolerable but as morally imperative'.[35] The holy war traditions in the Hebrew Bible, however, display more variable social perspectives than the comparable material in Assyria presents. This distinctiveness of the biblical traditions is due to the circumstances of preservation: In the book of Amos, for instance, the king has been abandoned as Yhwh's agent in the struggle for maintaining order, whereas the Psalms and the books of Kings and Chronicles present other views. The kingless approach to war may reflect Amos's origins outside the royal circles or a deliberate abandonment of royal ideology. In the Psalms, however, Yhwh is frequently the agent of the enemies' destruction, though the role of the human king is not totally unmentioned, whereas Kings and Chronicles present military success as a result of divine-human

31. Kang, *Divine War*, pp. 223-24.
32. Carly C. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (BZAW 407; Berlin/New York: W. de Gruyter, 2009).
33. See Crouch, *War and Ethics*, pp. 5-11 (quotation on p. 6).
34. Crouch excludes Egypt in her study, in part due to the limitation of her project, in part because Israel and Judah according to her view tend to have closer relationships with other Semitic cultures than with Egypt, see *War and Ethics*, p. 8.
35. Crouch, *War and Ethics*, p. 194.

alignment in the service of cosmic order. This is similar to the basic prem-ise of Assyrian warfare morality. In the Assyrian sources there is no equiv-alent non-elite material to consider outside the kings' records, where the primary object of warfare is always a matter of resistance to Assyrian hege-mony. Also historical factors and changes are, Crouch contends, important to explain variations in both cultures.[36]

As the title of her dissertation indicates, Crouch focuses on ethics implied in the concept of war in the texts from the ancient Near East. More pre-cisely, she produces an analysis of military ethics in Judah, Assyria and Israel. The main argument, as mentioned, is that the war traditions should be interpreted as a concern for maintaining the cosmic order: Warfare was part of the cosmic battle against the threatening powers of chaos; the king represents the divine world and his actions as warrior belong to the context of cosmic order versus chaotic disorder. War violence was justified via liter-ary allusions to a creation myth in which the divine king defeated the waters of chaos in battle. It is in this context that the ethics of war in the Hebrew Bible should be evaluated.[37]

By putting her analysis of war texts into an ethical context, Crouch raises the question about war and morality. This has been discussed in earlier research, including Kang's monograph, but the issue seems to have become even more central in recent studies, above all in the monograph by Eckart Otto, published in 1999, which takes up hermeneutical questions of biblical war texts and therefore deserves special attention.

4.3. *Contributing to Peace in the Modern World. Eckart Otto (1999; 2006)*
Ethics is at the very core of Eckart Otto's studies. More precisely, he asks how ancient Near Eastern texts as well as the Hebrew Bible can contribute to peaceful human relationships in the modern world.[38] In the material he analyses, he finds that both conflicts and strategies to overcome them are recurrent elements in texts from Ugarit, Egypt, and Assyria, as well as from Israel and Judah; the answer to these questions is dependent on the under-standing of God (*das Gottesverständnis*): The deity is depicted as a trium-phant god who defeats the powers of chaos that symbolizes reduction and extermination of life, and through this triumph the deity becomes king. The

36. Crouch, *War and Ethics*, esp. the conclusions on pp. 79-80, 96, 115-16, 193-95.
37. See Crouch, *War and Ethics*, pp. 15-32, *et passim*.
38. Eckart Otto, *Krieg und Frieden in der Hebräischen Bibel und im Alten Orient: Aspekte für eine Friedensordnung in der Moderne* (Theologie und Frieden, 18; Stutt-gart: Kohlhammer, 1999); Eckart Otto, 'Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt: Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag-shaus, 2006), pp. 250-66.

king of the nation is the deity's agent, and in this capacity he participates in the chaos battle. The enemies are in principle all nations who do not accept the king and his deity as king. Not war contra peace, but peace contra chaos is at stake, and this legitimates the king's function as warrior.

It is only in Israel and Judah that the idea occurs, after the fall of Samaria at the hands of the Assyrians, of a God who suffers and 'defeats himself', and thus also breaks the relationship between violence and contra-violence (revenge): The triumphant divine chaos warrior is replaced by a God whose grace is stronger than his wrath (cf. the book of Hosea). This theology paved the way for solving conflicts without using violence. Evidence of such change occurs in Psalm 72 and Isa. 9.1-6, where characteristic features of Assyrian royal ideology have been transformed and are applied to the Davidic king, such as peace and justice, especially for the weakest ones in the community. These aspects, which are further developed in the New Testament, occur in a more radical form already in Deuteronomy, which replaces loyalty to the Assyrian king by absolute loyalty to Yhwh: Emphasis is not on the community and its dependence on a political leader but on the cultic community assembled at the holy place where all social differences are eliminated. This shift was a first step toward the idea of human rights and freedom in relation to the state authority. At the same time, the idea of a suffering, not triumphant God is further developed in the fourth 'Servant Song' (Isa. 52.13–53.12) and via the book of Jeremiah applied to the fate of Zion after her destruction by the Babylonians, when the postexilic prophets foresee a pilgrimage of all nations to Zion, the abolition of weapons, and a peaceful solution of international conflicts on the basis of universal human rights (Isa. 2.2-4; Ps. 46.9-12; Mic. 4.1-5). In fact, such an ethical vision occurs already in Deuteronomy, which Otto regards as the first treatise on political philosophy in antiquity (prior to Plato's *Politeia*).[39] Otto sees signs of applications of it in our days in the work of the United Nations, as well as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in other similar resolutions. In this way, biblical thought and ethics penetrate the modern world in different fields of society, and this process, he argues, testifies to an increasing presence of God in the world: New York is on the way to Jerusalem.[40]

4.4. *Other Studies on War and Ethics from the Last Decade*
The studies presented above reflect an increasing interest in war and ethics in antiquity, and the last years have seen a number of contributions to this subject. We shall end this survey by presenting the most important ones.

---

39. Otto, 'Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption', esp. pp. 253-54, 260-61. As for Deuteronomy as 'der erste Traktat politischer Philosophie in der Antike', see p. 254.
40. 'New York ist auf dem Weg nach Jerusalem'; Otto, *Krieg und Frieden*, pp. 152-56 (epilogue; quotation on p. 156).

In an article entitled 'Keine "Heiligen Kriege" in Israel' published in 2009, Walter Gross emphasizes that according to the Deuteronomistic view Israel was only allowed to exterminate foreign people because they worshiped other gods, and that this permission was limited to the conquest of the land in the early history. It was the threat to the belief in Yhwh that legitimated such actions, and the concept of divine war must be balanced with other views which foresee that peace will prevail over violence. These 'positive' views are found not only in the Prophets but also in texts referring to the return to the land from Exile which do not promote military strategies for Yhwh's people. Besides, Yhwh can also use foreign nations against the elected people for the purpose of punishment. The idea of holy war or 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible should therefore be viewed in the context of sin and punishment, and not as a *carte blanche* for any people to go to holy war.[41]

The article of Gross gives a good impression of the status of research during the last decade, for the issues he discusses seem to be at the core of the debate in these years, in addition to some other aspects which we will present in the following paragraphs.

The *eschatological dimensions* of Yhwh war were explored by Andreas Kunz-Lübcke, who not only discusses in detail how war and peace will dominate in the last days, and what the role of Yhwh's people will be according to the detailed description in Zechariah 9–14, but also how the Gog texts in Ezekiel 38–39 describe the severe punishment of foreigners. These traditions give a complex picture of the future events. The Gog texts are also examples of 'inner-biblical interpretation', since they interpret the Balaam traditions in Numbers 22–24: Agag (Num. 24.5-9) has become Gog of Magog (Ezek. 38.17-19), and the latter passage describes the destruction of the enemy of the former passage. In Zechariah, especially in chaps. 9–10, Yhwh is more active in the annihilation of hostile peoples and the protection of Israel than in the Ezekiel texts; and the description of the events 'at the time of the end' (Dan. 11.40) expresses the hope that Yhwh alone will bring peace to his people (Dan. 11.14, 34). Thus, these texts present different strategies of 'Yhwh war' in the last days.[42]

---

41. Walter Gross, 'Keine "Heiligen Kriege" in Israel: Zur Rolle Jhwh's in Kriegsdarstellungen der Bücher Jos bis 2Kön', in *Krieg und Christentum: Religiöse Gewalttheorien in der Kriegserfahrung des Westens* (ed. A. Holzem; Krieg in der Geschichte, 50; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009), pp. 107-127 (120-23). Cf. Soggin, 'Krieg II. Altes Testament', pp. 22-23.

42. Andreas Kunz-Lübcke, 'Eschatologisierung von Krieg und Frieden in der späten Überlieferung der Hebräischen Bibel', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt: Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.–22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 267-89.

The collection of articles in which Otto's and Kunz-Lübcke's contributions appear also contains studies by scholars who emphasize the *changes of war ethics* which were introduced by Deuteronomy as compared with the views in the ancient Near East. Jan Christian Gertz argues that two passages demonstrate the innovation. In Deuteronomy 20 we find, for the first time, that war is governed by legal principals, while the law of the king in Deut. 17.14-20 shows that the rights of the king were not dependent on the king's power but on rights legitimized by divine revelation. It is also clear, in light of a wider biblical context, that these rights, as well as the ethics of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, presuppose evil and sin, as does the development of culture and civilization (Gen. 4.17-22). The laws on war should be interpreted against this background.[43]

In line with this view, Frank Crüsemann gives examples of how the legislation in Deuteronomy presented correctives of earlier warfare practices, especially with regard to the idea of utter destruction (חרם) of the enemy.[44]

Aarnoud van der Deijl reaches similar conclusions in his huge 2008 monograph on war in the book of Kings and in contemporaneous texts from the ancient Near East: The latter material shows that those who hold the power (kings) would always claim that their actions, including wars, served the law, served truth and justice; criticism of wars was generally not of an ethical character. The special feature of the Hebrew Bible lies in the attempt to subdue power to law and in the fact that the enemies are not de-humanized in the book of Kings, which has a preference for the humanity of every person.[45] Similarly, Walter Dietrich, in his discussion of whether the Hebrew Bible permits 'legitimate violence', argues that it presents an ambivalent view on the matter: Violence happens; it is something evil which is taken seriously and never excused or justified, and the biblical historians emphasize the evilness of violence. On this basis, the

43. See Jan Christian Gertz, 'Regulierung von Gewalt in Gesellschaft und Politik im Alten Testament', in F. Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, pp. 310-23 (316-23).

44. Frank Crüsemann, 'Gewaltimagination als Teil der Ursprungsgeschichte: Banngebot und Rechtsordnung im Deuteronomium', in F. Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und* Gewalt, pp. 343-60. In this context, we also mention Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Using insights from anthropology, comparative literature and feminist studies, Niditch tries to identify a variety of war ideologies, altogether seven, in the Hebrew Bible, explaining in each case why and how these views might have made sense to the biblical authors. Her study thus also sheds light on the social and cultural history of Israel, as the war texts according to her opinion reflect the world views of biblical authors from various periods and settings.

45. Aarnoud van der Deijl, *Protest or Propaganda: War in the Old Testament Book of Kings and in Contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Studia semitica neerlandica, 51; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), pp. 685-86.

biblical texts justify counter-violence in order to resist the threat from evil violence.[46]

Since relationships to other peoples are essential in war descriptions, the view on foreigners in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible is of relevance in this survey. Markus Zehnder, in his detailed investigation of the subject, finds points of similarities, but also differences, such as the foreigners' rights of protection as well as their inclusion in the eschatological salvation of Israel, which has no parallels in Assyrian material. Also, the separation between chaos and cosmos, which follows the borders of the home country in that material, does not occur in the Hebrew Bible.[47] However, this positive view on the foreigners does, for religious reasons, not imply a confusion of the identity of Yhwh's people with that of the foreigners, which is the position taken in postexilic times, as clearly attested in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.[48]

In 2003, Hans-Peter Müller published an article on holy war in the Hebrew Bible, in which he not only summarizes the main points in current research but also presents some thoughts on the relevance of holy war in our time. He argues that many of the accounts in the book of Judges are historically more reliable than often presumed by scholars, but also that the idea of holy war changed in the course of time, and that the prophets launched severe criticism against it. Moreover, he maintains that conflicts of today are more often than earlier solved by actions which are similar to the holy war campaigns in ancient Israel, such as counter-actions carried out by some democratic states against fanatic groups. In a cross-cultural perspective, however, holy wars in ancient Israel were neither religious wars in the later sense of the phrase designating inner-Christian European wars in the 16th and 17th centuries or wars between Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain or other places, nor 'missionary' wars as those fought by the Caliphs against all sorts of 'infidels', but rather wars undertaken for the sake of survival in the conflict with neighbouring groups in a small land.[49]

---

46. Walter Dietrich, 'Legitime Gewalt? Alttestamentliche Perspektiven', in F. Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, pp. 292-309 (295-98, 307-309).

47. Markus Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien: Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie des »Fremden« im Licht antiker Quellen* (BWANT, 168; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005). In addition to the relevant chapters, see the summary pp. 542-54, esp. pp. 545, 550, 554.

48. Cf. Udo Rüterswörden, 'Das Bild des Fremden im Alten Orient und im Alten Israel', in F. Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, pp. 326-42.

49. Hans-Peter Müller, 'Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel', in *Krieg und Gewalt in den Weltreligionen: Fakten und Hintergründe* (ed. A.T. Khoury, E. Grundmann and H.-P. Müller; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2003), pp. 11-23. A fine Swedish discussion of the holy war texts in the Hebrew Bible, including reflections on some of the ethical and hermeneutical questions which are related to their application today,

The most recent contribution to the discussion is Rüdiger Schmitt's monograph on 'holy war' from 2011.[50] After presenting a rather extensive *Forschungsgeschichte*, Schmitt analyzes war texts from the *Enneateuch* under three general rubrics: Deuteronomistic traditions, Priestly traditions, other traditions—the last-mentioned covering Genesis 14; Exod. 15.1-21; Num. 21.21-23; 2 Chronicles 20. The titles of all three rubrics contain the phrase 'sacralisation of war' (*Sakralisierung des Krieges*), which points to Schmitt's main argument: The war laws in the Hebrew Bible were not rooted in actual practice but functioned to demonstrate the theological principle of obedience. Arguing in most cases for an exilic or postexilic dating of the Deuteronomistic texts, Schmitt contends that the war texts offer a hopeful perspective for the Exiles; they express a kind of utopian memory as a reaction to—and also in contrast to—the present situation of the addressees, when it was impossible to go to war. War serves to conceptualize the principle of absolute fidelity to the law. Thus, the many war speeches in Deuteronomy and Joshua 1, as well as the war narratives in Joshua 6–12, underline the importance of law obedience. It follows from this interpretation that the execution of חרם (utter destruction), which historically speaking was limited to the conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua, is a metaphor for the same principle. In the Priestly source (P), to which Exodus 14 and Numbers 31 belong, there are but few war texts and this paucity, according to Schmitt, is due to the priests' interest in cult and rituals; P presents a conceptualization of war that lays special emphasis on the role of the priests, as can be seen especially in Numbers 31.[51]

Schmitt's analysis of the holy war passage in 2 Chronicles 20 deserves attention because it focuses on a text which many scholars in recent research do not include in their discussions of holy war. He points to the many ritual features of the passage, its emphasis on the pious king who seeks Yhwh (v. 3), on Yhwh as the only warrior (vv. 15, 26-30), and on its connections to other texts, such as Exod. 14.13-14.[52] Schmitt's observa-

---

is given by Olof Edsinger, *Krigen i Gamla Testamentet: Ett försök att förstå* (Falun: Scandbook, 2007).

50. Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*. For full bibliographical references, see n. 1 above.

51. Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*, chaps. 2 through 4; cf. chap. 6. Closely related to Schmitt's approach is Norbert Lohfink's in 'Die Schichten des Pentateuch und der Krieg', in *Studien zum Pentateuch* (ed. N. Lohfink; Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände, 4; Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk, 1988), pp. 255-315. Lohfink argues that there is a development in the concept of war in the sources of the Pentateuch, from the oldest history writings (J), via the Deuteronomistic presentation of the conquest of the land, to the replacement of the war concept by the Priestly authors, who focus on guilt and punishment; however, in the later and final stages of redaction the Deuteronomistic view of war was again introduced into the Pentateuch.

52. Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*, pp. 165-69.

tions are by and large in line with the conclusions drawn by Andreas Ruffing in his 1992 study on the three holy war passages in 2 Chronicles 13, 14 and 20. Ruffing shows how these passages depict Yhwh as a saviour not only of Yhwh's people but of the world; the conquering of the land and the election of Israel, which are such prominent features of the Deuteronomistic History, are not so important in Chronicles; salvation is in focus and the holy war texts are paradigms which show how Yhwh will save the world and eliminate evil.[53]

Schmitt's study of 'holy war' raises questions that are at the core of current research on the Hebrew Bible, such as the relationship between ideology and history: To what degree do the texts reflect historical realities? More precisely, with regard to his book: Why were war and laws on war (in Deuteronomy) given such centrality, when Israel no longer had the possibility of engaging in its own wars.[54] Do these texts point to any historical reality at all and did they have ideological significance only for the exilic and postexilic generations?

As the subtitle indicates, Schmitt's book also presents the reception history of the biblical war texts from the Middle Ages until modern times, including examples of how such texts were used in the Second World War by some theologians in the Third Reich. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the details of this reception history. We only mention that Schmitt demonstrates that, in some cases, there is a short way from a scholar's exegetical scrutiny to the same scholar's application of the texts to the current historical situation—an application that unfortunately should rather be called a misuse of them in many cases.

Perhaps Schmitt's study, as well as some of the other recent contributions presented above, indicate new directions in research on 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible which will include not only a focus on the historical, literary, and ideological contexts of these war traditions, but also a renewed awareness of the dangers involved when these traditions are uncritically applied to situations in the world of today. Such studies would have the potential to build a bridge between biblical hermeneutics and modern politics.

5. *Summary*

The survey demonstrates that Bible scholars in the last decades have shown increasing interest in war texts from the ancient Near East, compared with how the situation was in the first years after Gerhard von Rad's

---

53. Andreas Ruffing, *Jahwekrieg als Weltmetapher: Studien zu Jahwekriegstexten des chronistischen Sondergutes* (SBB, 24; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), esp. 'Ergebnisse und Folgerungen', pp. 359-63.

54. Cf. Jacob L. Wright's review of *Der „Heilige Krieg"*, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 12 (2012).

epoch-making study (1951) that focused on the Hebrew Bible alone. In this regard, Manfred Weippert's article in 1972 introduced an important shift in research. By comparing material in the ancient Near East, especially from Assyria, with texts in the Hebrew Bible, scholars found that the latter display some unique features in the descriptions of 'Yhwh war', above all the idea that 'Yhwh war' did not primarily aim at conquering new territories but served to protect Yhwh's elected people, including their belief in Yhwh. Moreover, warfare itself as well as the war leader, the king, were under the authority of the law, as can be seen in Deuteronomy 17 and 20, which is unique compared with the views found in the surrounding cultures. Finally, the eschatological aspects of the 'Yhwh war', which are important in the prophetic traditions, add other characteristic features to the idea of 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible. In both legal and prophetic traditions the foreigners are included, not as hostiles but as human beings who have their rights. In the prophetic traditions, the nations are also described as taking part in the eschatological 'Yhwh war'; those who survive the battle in the last days will, together with Yhwh's people, experience peace, which is the final goal of the 'Yhwh wars'. The complex presentation of 'Yhwh war' in the Hebrew Bible reflects a theology and anthropology which in several respects are not paralleled in the ancient Near Eastern material.

Strategies for the Prevention of the Use of Legitimate Forms of Force in the Sermon on the Mount and the Problem of Violence

Peter Wick

Abstract

Jesus positively argues with the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount. He claims obedience to the commandments on every level. First of all, there is a halachic level that interprets the commandments and that is relevant for the jurisprudence and for courts. On a second, aggadic level, that exceeds the authority of the courts of justice, Jesus shares the Jewish tradition of tightening a commandment. But on a third level Jesus also aims at hearing the commandment of love in every other commandment and the whole Torah. In real life the justice of mercy and love stands in a strong opposition to the justice of the court. People shall try to solve this tension by practicing love, even if this entails suffering violence. The legal use of the Torah and the court protect from the violence of the evildoer with their legitimated force. The way of love abstains from this protection. The aim is to overcome every violence and ultimately every force with love.

1. *Legal Aspects in the Sermon on the Mount*

The interpretation of the role of violence and force in the Sermon on the Mount depends on the interpretation of the relation of Matthew 5–7 to the Hebrew Bible. Nobody denies that such a relation exists. But the question is: What kind of relation is it that connects the Sermon on the Mount especially with the Torah?

The Torah is a religious law of sorts. It is more than that, but the function of the Torah as a religious law was fundamental during the time of Jesus and the New Testament. The Torah is a real '*nomos*' in the understanding of Josephus, the Death Sea Scrolls, Philo, the New Testament and the later rabbinic sources.

The law establishes order, shows people how to live together in peace, and should protect them from the violence of others. The main institution to enforce the law is the law court. The court penalizes transgressors of the law. Such penalties could be viewed as official, institutionalized, controlled force.

I would like to distinguish between the terms 'force' as a legal act and 'unjust violence' in the way this distinction was developed by the Ecumenical Council of Churches during the 1980s.

There is a strong tendency, especially in the protestant tradition, to neglect the legal aspects of the Bible. Protestants do not want to be legalistic. But it may not be a good strategy to ignore the fundamental legal stratum of the Bible. It makes us blind to the dynamic relationship between justice and mercy. Many parts of the Sermon on the Mount discuss the Torah and interpret parts of it. Are these legal discussions? And if so, in what sense?

We can distinguish between two main lines of interpretation of the legal aspects of the Sermon on the Mount in the last decades. The anti-legal and anti-legalistic interpretation denies that Jesus shows any positive relation to the Torah and the law in this text. There is only a negative connection to the Torah. Jesus is the new Moses, who brings a new law, which is completely irrelevant for a court: the law of love. This line of interpretation was very popular up to the 1980s and can be found even today.[1]

The halachic interpretation, on the other hand, emphasizes that these teachings—especially the so-called antitheses (Mt. 5.21-48)—are interpretations of the Torah.[2] Interpretations of the Torah are not *against* but *with* Moses and his Torah.[3] Even Moses interprets the Torah in the Torah, as rabbinic scholars since long have pointed out. In more recent modern times, scholars of the Old Testament have emphasized the same point. In Lev. 10.3, after the fatal incident with the sons of Aaron, Moses interprets the Torah and Aaron silently agrees. At the end of the chapter also Aaron interprets the Torah, in tension to Moses, and he agrees.[4]

---

1. Cf. John Yueh-Han Yieh, *One Teacher. Jesus' Teaching Role in Matthew's Gospel Report* (BZNW, 124; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004) p. 34; Josef Schmidt, *Gesetzesfreie Heilsverkündigung im Evangelium nach Matthäus. Das Apostelkonzil (Apg 15) als historischer Bezugspunkt für die Theologie des Matthäusevangeliums* (FzB, 113; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2007).

2. Cf. Matthias Konradt, 'Die vollkommene Erfüllung der Tora und der Konflikt mit den Pharisäern im Matthäusevangelium', in *Das Gesetz im frühen Judentum und im Neuen Testament, Festschrift für Christoph Burchard zum 75. Geburtstag* (ed. D. Sänger and M. Konradt; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 129-52. On p. 128, he calls these two main lines of interpretation the '*torakritische*' and the '*auslegungskritische*' interpretation.

3. For example Gerd Theissen, 'Gesetz und Goldene Regel. Die Ethik des Matthäusevangeliums zwischen Regel- und Empathieorientierung', in *Neutestamentliche Exegese im Dialog. Hermeneutik—Wirkungsgeschichte—Matthäusevangelium. Festschrift für Ulrich Luz zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. P. Lampe *et al.*; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), pp. 237-54; and especially Christiana Koch, '"Wer diese Worte hört…". Die Bergpredigt im Spiegel der Tora', *ThGl* 101 (2011), pp. 165-82 (165-66), and Michael Bachmann, '"Antithesen gegenüber der Bibel"?, Zur halakhischen Argumentation innerhalb der Bergpredigt', in *Er stieg auf den Berg...und lehrte sie (Mt 5,1f.). Exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zur Bergpredigt* (ed. H.U. Weidemann; SBS, 226; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2012), pp. 71-96.

4. Cf. Christian Frevel, '"Und Mose hörte (es), und es war gut in seinen Augen" (Lev 10,20). Zum Verhältnis von Literargeschichte, Theologiegeschichte und

As a number of representatives of other groups beside him, Jesus presents his own halachic interpretation of the laws.[5] Jesus in Matthew brings forth his arguments in a direct positive relationship to the Torah and in a competitive relationship to other interpreters of the Torah.

According to a third line of interpretation, Jesus interprets the Torah in a way that transcends it and lifts it up on a higher, non-halachic level.[6] With his teaching he fulfills the deepest meaning of the Torah beyond the letter. Or he emphasizes that it must be fulfilled by the hearers from the innermost heart.[7] In this way Jesus proposes an internalization of the Torah. We could call that a fourth position. Many exegetes combine the two last positions.[8] If one stresses position three or four, one will end up in position one. If Jesus is seen in a perspective in which the internalization of the Torah or the fulfillment of the Torah beyond the letter is too dominant, Jesus in a way looses the relationship to the written Torah, and he is only understood as the one who brings his own spiritual law.

innerbiblischer Auslegung am Beispiel von Lev 10', in *Gottes Name(n). Zum Gedenken an Erich Zenger* (ed. I. Müllner, L. Schwinhorst-Schönberger and R. Scoralick; HBS, 71; Freiburg: Herder, 2012), pp. 104-136 (118-19, 125-27).

   5. Cf. Bachmann, 'Antithesen', pp. 71-96, 91-96.

   6. 'Nicht die Neuheit der Lehre Jesu im Gegensatz zur Tora oder ihrer nachfolgenden Auslegung kommt in den matthäischen Antithesen zur Sprache, sondern die Neuheit des eschatologisch-weisheitlichen Lehrers Jesus' (Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, 'Die Antithesen des Matthäus. Jesus als Toralehrer und die frühjüdische weisheitlich geprägte Torarezeption', in *Gedenkt an das Wort, Festschrift für Werner Vogler zum 65. Geburtstag* [ed. C. Kähler, M. Böhm and C. Böttrich; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999], pp. 175-200 [199]). Everything depends on the relationship to Jesus as the eschatological-sapiential teacher. His Torah-interpretation is not halachic anymore (cf. pp. 183, 189). For Hubert Frankemölle the content of the 'Tora-Verkündigung' in Matthew is not the Torah of Moses, but the will of God as a special interpretation of the Torah of God; see Hubert Frankemölle, 'Die Tora Gottes für Israel, die Jünger Jesu und die Völker. Zu einem Aspekt von Schrift und Tradition im Matthäusevangelium', in *Schrift und Tradition. Festschrift für Josef Ernst zum 70. Geburtstag* [ed. K. Backhaus; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996], pp. 85-118 [97-98, 114]).

   7. Cf. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn, 1997), pp. 324-25.

   8. Cf. Elian Cuvillier, 'Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel. Matthew and First-Century Judaism: A Contribution to the Debate', *NTS* 55 (2009), pp. 144-59. On the one hand he seems to follow the halachic interpretation: 'Indeed, the old interpretation must be assumed in order to receive the new one' (p. 148). On the other hand his conclusion comes close to the first position: 'Though the law remains at the heart of Matthew's religious world, it is no longer obedience to its commandments that regulates the life of the disciples, but rather Jesus' teaching which is characterized by the logic of excess' (pp. 158-59). Cf. p. 148: 'Jesus is superior to the law and the prophets'.

All the different positions just mentioned show that there is an interconnectedness between the Sermon on the Mount and the Hebrew Bible. But the question is how to determine this interconnectedness. To answer the question we have to consider carefully the background of the court with its ability to use force against the evildoers in the Sermon on the Mount. In this way we will come to the conclusion that the first position is wrong. Here in Matthew the law and even the just penalties for the transgressors are fundamental for Jesus. The second, the third and the fourth position have all their own partial value.

Jesus has come to fulfill the Torah as '*nomos*' with all of its commandments. He is not against the legal use of the Torah, but he wants more. With his support for the 'court-of-law-function' of the Torah, he is in agreement with the scribes and Pharisees. Halachic discussions and interpretations in the later rabbinic sources always refer to this court-level. This function could be viewed as a foundation of other functions. But the fulfillment of the Torah advocated by Jesus happens on a higher level. In Mt. 5.17-20,[9] we see clearly both aspects, the basic level, which is related to the court, and a higher level, which is of no interest for a judge or a court:[10]

> 17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

But what is this higher righteousness of the Torah that exceeds every court-function?

2. *Legitimate Force, Aggadic Interpretations and the Law of Love in Matthew 5.21-26*

The background of the court is obvious in the following verse of the first antithesis (Mt. 5.21):

> You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment'.

---

9.   Wolfgang Reinbold states that Jesus programmatically claims the Torah in these verses; see Wolfgang Reinbold, 'Das Matthäusevangelium, die Pharisäer und die Tora', *BZ* 50 (2006), pp. 51-73 (57).

10.   Translations are from the NRSV.

The court-function of the sixth commandment of the Decalogue limits violence among people by forbidding murder (Exod. 20.13; Deut. 5.17) and additionally through a threat of force. The penalty for murder is death (Exod. 21.14). This connection to Exod. 20 and 21 is halachic. Cruel, lethal violence is fought by institutionalized lethal force. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus obviously supports this legal function of the Jewish '*nomos*'; see Mt. 5.22:

> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Along with a broader Jewish tradition that we also find in the rabbinic sources, Jesus reinforces this commandment. Its penalty, the death penalty, also applies to insulting a brother or being angry with him. But this was never meant to be a halachic tradition, but an aggadic one. No earthly Jewish court would apply this law to an insult. But in this exaggeration even the highest court (*Synedrium*) and the heavenly court will intervene. We see here a second level of a commandment of the torah, which is well known in Jewish traditions.

Such interpretations that exceed the authority of the court of justice are known in the later rabbinic tradition as *li-fenim mi-shurat ha-din* (i.e., 'above the letter of the law').[11] Against the assumptions of most of those who interpret the Sermon on the Mount along halachic lines, the text itself exhibits a halachic interpretation of the law only in v. 21. Let us consider Mt. 5.23-24:

> 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

The example does not fit with the second aggadic level.[12] This is not an intensification of the prohibition of murder but an inversion of the case of anger.[13] You should leave your offer on the altar even if your brother is angry with you. Do not give anything to God as an offering in such circumstances,

---

11. See, e.g., *B. Meṣ* 30b, and later *Shulḥan arukh* (*Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 577.1).

12. A very creative and interesting solution is presented by Werner Grimm, who suggests that the background of the passage is to be found in the story of Kain and Abel (Gen. 4); the intertextual addressee of Mt. 5.22 is Kain, the addressee of 5.23-24 is Abel; see Werner Grimm, 'Kain und Abel in der Bergpredigt (Mt 5,21-24)', *BN* 153 (2012), pp. 113-25 (117). Cf. Peter Wick, 'Die erste Antithese (Mt 5,21-26): Eine Pilgerpredigt', *ThZ* 52 (1996), pp. 236-42.

13. And rhetorically of the case of murder. In Exod. 21.14 (cited in Mt. 5.21) the murderer shall be taken from the altar for execution. Rhetorically we can hear the following message: In such a case treat yourself as a murderer and remove yourself from the altar!

because the altar is in the house of God, and God is also the final judge. Do not approach God in a situation in which he could react as a judge.

The opening of v. 23, 'So when you are offering', is not an introduction to an example, but it could be a casuistic law argumentation (cf. Exod. 22.25-26).

We then turn to the next two verses, Mt. 5.25-26:

> 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Why should someone be on the way to court together with his accuser? We can easily answer this question, if we read these verses in the context of vv. 23-24, with its mention of the altar. People, even enemies, are on the way with one another during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We can understand these verses in the following sense: If you as a pilgrim are on the way to the house of God, do everything possible on your way, that you will not reach it as the godly court.

We may draw the following conclusion: Jesus interprets the commandment of the Torah 'You shall not murder'. He accepts its meaning for the court of law, that is, on the halachic level. On a second, aggadic, level he shares the Jewish tradition of tightening a commandment: Even insult and anger can be like a murder. But then he takes the question even further to a third level. In accordance with Mt. 22.34-40 he interprets this commandment in the light of the law of love. In Matthew 22 Jesus wants to interpret the whole Torah and the Prophets on the basis of two commandments: the commandment to love God (Deut. 6.5) and the commandment to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19.18). These two commandments are the hermeneutical key to every other commandment, even to Mt. 5.23-26. Because of Lev. 19.18, Jesus understands the Decalogue as enjoining reconciliation with one's brothers and even with one's enemies independent of the question of guilt.

The legal aspect of the commandment and its consequences of force against trespassers are accepted by Jesus. But the aim of his radical interpretation of the law seems to be the avoidance of the court. The reason seems to be that the rules of the court of law and the law of love are incompatible. There is a fundamental tension, and this tension does not only lie in every commandment of the Torah, but even in God himself, as can be seen in the Hebrew Bible. God himself acts in a different way as a judge as if he would do as the Loving One. In the Sermon on the Mount, we find God both as the merciful and as the judge. If people are not merciful, God will deal with them as a judge (cf. Mt. 18.23-35), even here in the present context in Mt. 5.26: 'Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the

last penny'. But the same God, as the merciful, as we also read in the same Sermon on the Mount, 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Mt. 5.45).

With this relation to the Old Testament, we see that the interconnected-ness of the Sermon on the Mount and the Hebrew Bible is multi-relational and very complex, and in fact needs further interdisciplinary examination.

3. *The Law of Love in the 'Antitheses'*

The following antitheses work in the same way. The third level of love is always present in all of these interpretations of the law.[14]

'You shall not commit adultery' (Mt. 5.27). Even a lustful eye is forbid-den, although no court would judge such a 'crime' (v. 28). 'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away' (v. 29). If you have sinned in this way, do not wait for the earthly or heavenly court to judge you, rather avoid them in becoming your own severe judge and punish yourself with all possible force. Even if this force should be cruel violence against you, it is still better to avoid any court. The call for avoidance of the court is one of the main rhetorical functions of these verses.

'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certifi-cate of divorce"' (Mt. 5. 31). The 'certificate of divorce' is a legal act. The prohibition of divorce makes every court dispensable for couples.

The prohibition of swearing oaths in the fourth antithesis also prevents court cases, because the oaths of witnesses are a very important element in their proceedings.

In the fifth antithesis we have a further radicalization; see Mt. 5.38-42:

> 38 You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

The love-aspect in this interpretation of the law is obvious. The talion is a legal act of penalty or more precisely, in the time of Jesus, of compensation. Jesus challenges his hearers not to claim legal force against the evildoer, but to accept his violence. This is very radical: The prize for abstaining from legal, institutionalized force can be the acceptance of unjust violence. The one who abstains from returning a strike on the right cheek can get a fur-ther strike on the other cheek, while in fact it is the perpetrator that should

---

14. Cf. Peter Wick, 'Die Antithesen der Bergpredigt als paränethische Rhetorik. Durch scheinbaren Widerspruch zu einem neuen Verständnis', *Judaica* 52 (1996), pp. 156-78.

receive the strike as a penalty. This is a radical avoidance of the court which comes with high costs. The costs are so high that nobody may claim this from another person other than from himself. This is the highest level of the law of love. Court and love are not compatible—but they are connected. The one who wants to follow love, does not insist on legal justice for himself but accepts the possibility of violence exerted against himself. The one who avoids legal force opens the door for unjust violence. Love is a risky way. A person can only choose such a way for himself. A society, even a Christian society or a church, would be foolish to choose this way, because it can provoke more violence, even violence against the weak. So it is obvious, that the antitheses are not antitheses *sensu stricto* but interpretations of the Torah and the tradition.

Similar comments can be made with respect to Mt. 5.43-48:

> 43 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This last section in the series of interpretations of the law takes up the topic of reward, which is a central element in Matthew 6. The commandment to love not only one's neighbor, but the enemy, together with the call for perfection, lift Jesus's words up to the third level of the law interpretation.

4. *Avoid Any Law Court! (Matthew 7)*

The last chapter of the Sermon on the Mount increases the challenge to avoid any law court. See Mt. 7.1-2:

> 1 Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Each one shall try not to judge someone else. If we accept the importance of the Torah in the background, we have to understand the word in the sense that nobody shall use the Torah as a guideline for judging the other, which exactly would be its halachic court-function. The avoidance of the court-function and the focus on the third-level-function of the law of love is a central stratum of argumentation in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Mt. 7.12 we find an *inclusio* with Mt. 5.17. The latter verse reads as follows:

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill'.

The emphasis is on keeping every little commandment. This also applies to the court level. At the same time, we can understand it as the basis for the second level: each commandment entails more than a legal aspect. There is also an impetus to take the commandments more strictly as it would be necessary for a court or a judge. On the third level, Mt. 7.12 presents a positive version of the Golden Rule as a summary of the meaning of the fulfillment of the Torah:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

But what will happen to people who are not willing to love in the deeper sense of the Torah in avoiding every court? Will they be finally brought to the divine court and will they be judged there? Will, then, not to avoid the court lead to the court? The end of the Sermon will give an answer. Mt. 7.21-27 states:

21 Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' 24 Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!

For those who have not done the will of God according to the words of Jesus and have not avoided, in love, every court, there will be no court anymore. God or Jesus will not take care of them, not even as a judge. They simply have to go away. This distance is their first punishment. The second is the destruction of their—metaphorically speaking—houses of life. This happens without legal, institutionalized, controlled force, but by accident through cruel violence as a consequence of their wrong way of life.

5. *Conclusion*

In the Sermon on the Mount we have a strong argument to avoid any court for the sake of love.

Courts of law and the legal interpretation of the Torah are not only allowed, but also acknowledged as a necessary basis of the use of the Torah.

A court is capable to use force against evildoers. Jesus also supports and strengthens a second use of the Torah: the intensification of a commandment beyond the letter of the law. But his own interpretation aims at hearing the commandment of love in every other commandment and the whole Torah.

In real life, however, this level of love is in conflict with the court-level. The justice of mercy and love stands in a strong tension to the justice of the court. This tension is based in the Torah itself and even in God who is both just and merciful. People shall try to solve this tension by moving in the direction of love, even if this entails suffering violence. The legal use of the Torah and the court protect from such violence with their legitimated force. The way of love abstains from this protection against the evildoer. The aim is to overcome every type of violence and ultimately every force by love.

But the way of love is also a way of the Torah (see Lev. 19). The interconnectedness of the Sermon on the Mount with the Torah and the Hebrew Bible is multi-faceted and subject to changes in the course of the argument presented by Jesus.

Everybody can choose the way of love for himself, but it would be a case of unjust violence to force someone else to go such a way, and it would be very dangerous for every society to do it as a whole. Love does not come easy and is obviously dangerous. It was love that led Jesus to the cross; there he suffered from both misused legal force and cruel violence. Jesus in his own person fulfilled the Sermon on the Mount on the cross, but he handed over its message also explicitly to his disciples and the people (cf. Mt. 5.1-2; 7.28-29), in order that they do it and try to imitate his example.

The Annihilation of the Canaanites
Reassessing the Brutality of the Biblical Witnesses

Markus Zehnder

Abstract

Whether one finds 'genocidal' traits in the scriptural material dealing with the conquest of the promised land depends on the definition of the term 'genocidal'. If the term is used in its more narrow and precise sense, it is not applicable to the material in question.

Nevertheless, lethal actions are *pre*scribed in Deuteronomy and *de*scribed in Joshua, related to the concept of the 'ban' (חרם). Lethal actions are directed primarily against the Canaanite cities and their rulers as the main representatives of the Canaanite religio-political system. In the book of Joshua, the execution of the ban is not depicted as a premeditated program of encompassing and systematic killing, but as part of ordinary warfare, with the initiative for the violent conflict generally lying on the side of the Canaanites.

Repeatedly within the book of Joshua, the execution of the ban is understood in a conditional way, and in some cases other procedures are chosen (e.g., Rahab and the Gibeonites). A conditional interpretation may be compatible with the pentateuchal texts themselves, based on the centrality of the snare-motif: If the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land do not pose a danger to the identity of God's people and their independence, the main reason to expel or kill them is gone.

The applicability of the ban to apostate Israelites in Deuteronomy 13 shows that the motivation for the ban does not lie in ethnic otherness per se; neither is the use of violence connected with a general denigration and dehumanization of the non-Israelite other, and any indulgence in the use of violence is absent.

All these observations suggest that the use of the term 'genocide' is inappropriate with regard to the biblical concepts of the conquest of the promised land.

Introduction

It is often taken for granted that the book of Joshua and some passages in the Pentateuch, especially parts of Deuteronomy 7, condone or command a 'genocidal' attitude towards the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised

land,[1] or a kind of 'ethnic cleansing', with both Yhwh and the Israelites under Joshua's leadership assuming an active role in the murderous plot. See the following examples from two authors representing completely different corners of the debate:[2]

1.   The pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land are called 'Canaanites' both in the title of this study and repeatedly in the remainder of the text. This is a shorthand for the different names given to these peoples in the biblical texts, with 'Canaanites' being in fact only one of several ethnical designations used in the various lists.

2.   Remarks to the same effect are found, e.g., in Ra'anan S. Boustan / Alex P. Jassen / Calvin J. Roetzel, 'Introduction—Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices in Early Judaism and Christianity', *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009), pp. 1-11 (4); Georg Braulik, 'Die Völkervernichtung und die Rückkehr Israels ins Verheissungs-land: Hermeneutische Bemerkungen zum Buch Deutereonomium', in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (ed. M. Vervenne and F. Lust; BEThL, 133; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), pp. 3-38 (10; for Braulik, the concept is not only historically fictional, but also, within Deuteronomy, 'theologisch metaphorisiert und pragmatisch umfunktionalisiert' ['Die Völkervernichtung und die Rückkehr Israels ins Verheissungsland', p. 37]); Walter Brueggemann, 'The God of Joshua… Give or Take the Land', *Interpretation* 66 (2012), pp. 164-75 (171, 173); John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 9; C.S. Cowles, 'The Case for Radical Discontinuity', in *Show Them No Mercy* (ed. C.S. Cowles *et al.*; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 11-44 (17, 28-29, 36, 40-41; for Cowles, it is not really God who stands behind these violent actions, but a misunderstanding on the side of Moses and Joshua of God's intentions); Frank Crüsemann, 'Gewaltimagination als Teil der Ursprungsgeschichte— Banngebot und Rechtsordnung im Deuteronomium', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt— Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesell-schaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 343-60 (347; without assuming any historical reality); L. Daniel Hawk, 'The Truth about Conquest: Joshua as History, Narrative, and Scripture', *Interpretation* 66 (2012), pp. 129-40 (135); Yair Hoffman, 'The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem', *ZAW* 111 (1999), pp. 196-210 (196); Wesley Morriston, 'Did God Command Genocide?—A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist', *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009), pp. 7-26 (for Morriston, it is not God who commanded the acts reported in the Hebrew Bible; they rather reflect 'the [comparatively low] level of moral development of the human authors' [p. 26]); Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 28; Randal Rauser, '"Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive"—On the Problem of Divinely Commanded Genocide', *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009), pp. 27-41; Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture—Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 34-35, 42, 95-109 (claiming not only that the violent conquest never happened historically, but also that the violent picture of God reflects only the text's view, not how God really is); Rannfrid I. Thelle, 'The Biblical Conquest Account and its Modern Hermeneutical Challenges', *Studia Theo-logica* 61 (2007), pp. 61-81 (61, 73).

The genocidal dimension is also asserted by authors who do not morally condemn the events; see, e.g., Daniel L. Gard, 'The Case for Eschatological Continuity', in *Show*

Richard Dawkins:
'The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody frui-
tion in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres
it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so'.[3]

'Joshua's action [i.e. the killing of the Canaanites] was a deed of barbaric
genocide'.[4]

Pekka Pitkänen:
'The genocide ideology…that the book of Joshua (and the books of Num-
bers and Deuteronomy) attests, suggests an early…date for the book'.[5]

It goes without saying that the term 'genocidal' is in itself problematic,
since its exact delimitation is disputed and many different definitions are
found both in the judicial, political, and scholarly arenas.[6]

A very broad definition is proposed by the UN. UN General Assembly
Resolution 260 III, Article 2 holds: 'Any of the following acts committed
with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or reli-
gious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily
or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group
conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole
or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
[and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'.

One of the most recent definitions proposed in the public debate on geno-
cide was formulated by Dovid Katz in 2009: 'Genocide is the mass murder of
as many people as possible on the basis of born national, ethnic, racial or reli-
gious identity as such; with intent to eliminate the targeted group entirely and
internationally; without allowing the victims any options to change views,
beliefs or allegiances to save themselves; and with large-scale accomplished
fulfilment of the goal. Genocide leaves in its wake an extinct or nearly extinct
group within the territory under the control of the perpetrators'.[7]

Them No Mercy (ed. C.S. Cowles *et al.*; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,
2003), pp. 111-41 (113-16); Tremper Longman III, 'The Case for Spiritual Continu-
ity', in *Show Them No Mercy* (ed. C.S. Cowles *et al.*; Counterpoints; Grand Rapids,
MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 159-87 (185); Eugene H. Merrill, 'The Case for Moderate
Discontinuity', in *Show Them No Mercy* (ed. C.S. Cowles *et al.*; Counterpoints; Grand
Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 61-94 (64-65, 74-75, 93); Christopher J.H. Wright,
The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith (Grand Rapids,
MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 92.
  3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007), p. 280.
  4. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 292.
  5. Pekka M.A. Pitkänen, *Joshua* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Notting-
ham: Apollos/Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 60; cf. also p. 88.
  6. For an overview over the most important definitions see, e.g., the Wikipedia
entry on 'Genocide Definitions'.
  7. See Wikipedia, 'Genocide Definitions'. For a brief discussion of the definition

Judging the UN definition as being too broad, covering many events and phenomena that are normally not labeled 'genocide', the present study uses a definition that comes close to the one proposed by Katz. Thus, 'genocide' will be understood as an attempt to the complete violent annihilation of all members of a defenseless religious or ethnic group, in a context that is in principle independent of a previous warlike conflict, fully initiated by the perpetrators, in a premeditated systematic manner, unprovoked by specific actions of the opponents targeted at the perpetrators, and directed at each individual of the opposing group disregarding his or her personal attitudes. The basic issue, however, is not dependent on an agreed understanding of the term 'genocide'. Rather, it has to do with the more general question of how brutal or violent the conquest should be or was according to the biblical sources, and how the character of this violence can be assessed in the context of these sources and the broader culture of the ancient Near East in general.

In an extended paragraph of my study on the dealing with foreigners in Assyria and Israel, I have investigated both the main passages collected in the context of the legal material of the Torah dealing with the treatment of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land, as well as those texts describing the first stages of the occupation of the land.[8] The present study aims at addressing the more specific question whether the view that the biblical texts can be understood in the framework of a genocidal interpretation is supported by the texts themselves.

Whether the commands dealing with the conquest and occupation of the promised land found in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were originally meant to be taken literally and in which historical circumstances they originated, are questions that lie beyond the horizon of this paper. To what degree, if at all, the descriptions of the occupation of the land in the books of Joshua and Judges reflect historical realities, is an issue that will not be taken up in the present study. Neither will questions about the origins of the conquest traditions and the literary integrity of the relevant texts.[9]

---

proposed by the UN see Pitkänen, *Joshua*, pp. 75-77. For a recent detailed study on genocide see Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2009). He argues that generally the term 'eliminationism' is preferable as opposed to the common 'genocide' (see *Worse than War*, pp. 3-32).

8. See Markus Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien* (BWANT, 168; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), pp. 388-401, 482-98.

9. This concerns especially the question whether Deut. 20.15-18 has to be detached from the preceding verses. In the case of a positive answer, one could reconstruct an antagonism between a milder expulsion approach and a harsher annihilation approach, an antagonism that could also be traced in the book of Joshua. It is also possible to detach all the ban-passages in Deuteronomy literarily from layers within that book that support a milder approach; again, the same would be true for the book of Joshua.

It is clear that these texts have played an important role in the history both of Judaism and Christianity, and to some degree and in various ways continue to play a role in these religious traditions. The analysis of this role is a topic that lies beyond the boundaries of the present investigation. Also questions about the ethical challenges these texts pose for present-day readers cannot be addressed directly in any developed fashion.[10]

10. For a discussion of such questions see, e.g., Braulik, 'Die Völkervernichtung'; Walter Brueggemann, *Divine Presence amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009 [with special reference to Joshua 11]); Brueggemann, 'The God of Joshua' (with popular, but poorly informed remarks on assumed Zionist aggression and Western brutality in general); Collins, *Does the Bible Justify* (with a short, critical reference to the particular theme of the conquest on pp. 13, 26-27); Cowles *et al.*, *Show Them No Mercy* (with several hints to the concept of *jihad* that, unfortunately, do not make sufficiently clear the differences between biblical and Qur'anic concepts of war or 'struggle'); William Lane Craig, 'Slaughter of the Canaanites' (http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites); Crüsemann, 'Gewaltimagination', pp. 358-60; Walter Dietrich, 'Legitime Gewalt? Alttestamentliche Perspektiven', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt—Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 292-309 (with specific reference to the conquest of the land on p. 305); Hawk, 'The Truth'; Cees Houtman, 'Zwei Sichtweisen von Israel als Minderheit inmitten der Bewohner Kanaans: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zum Verhältnis von J und Dtr(G)', in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (ed. M. Vervenne and F. Lust; BEThL, 133; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), pp. 213-31 (220-23, 231); Clay Jones, 'We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites—An Addendum to "Divine Genocide" Arguments', *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009), pp. 53-72; Morriston, 'Did God Command Genocide?'; Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (only incidentally discussing the question with specific reference to the motif of the conquest of Canaan); Pitkänen, *Joshua*, pp. 75-99 (his attempt to build a bridge to the establishment of the modern state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict is interesting, but flawed by a description of historical events that is mistaken in many instances and a lack of consideration of the broader religious and political context); Rauser, '"Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive"'; Eben Scheffler, 'War and Violence in the Old Testament World: Various Views', in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us* (ed. J.T. Fitzgerald *et al.*; SBL Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, 12; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2009), pp. 1-17, especially pp. 14-17 (on a more general level, defending a pacifist view in a rather aggressive way); Seibert, *The Violence* (demanding a 'nonviolent' reading of every biblical text); Lawson G. Stone, 'Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua', *CBQ* 53 (1991), pp. 25-36; Thelle, 'The Biblical Conquest Account', pp. 72-78; Rick Wade, 'Yahweh War and the Conquest of Canaan' (http://bible.org/print/19098, 2011). Perhaps the most helpful deliberations, in the view of the present author, are found in Hubbard, *Joshua*, pp. 44-48, 197-202, 309-313. Paul Copans provides an interesting discussion of broader aspects of Old Testament ethics in his article 'Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?—The New Atheists and Old Testaments Ethics', *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008), pp. 7-37; specific deliberations on the conquest of Canaan are found on pp. 24-26, 33.

1. *The Corpus of Relevant Texts*

The main relevant texts in the legal collections dealing with the Israelites' attitude towards the peoples living in the promised land are the following:

Exod. 23.20-33
Exod. 34.11-16, 24[11]
Num. 33.50-56
Deut. 7.1-5
Deut. 7.16-26[12]
Deut. 20.1-20, especially vv. 16-18

As far as reports of (the beginning of) the occupation of the promised land are concerned, the books of Joshua and Judges have to be taken into consideration.

2. *What Is Yhwh Expected to Do?*

2.1. *Lethal Violence?*

Exod. 23.23 announces in a first person singular speech that Yhwh will כחד (hi.) the peoples living in the promised land. The verb is used, among others, in Exod. 9.15 (ni.) to describe what Yhwh could have done to the Egyptians by sending a heavy pestilence, and in 2 Chron. 32.21 (hi.) to describe how the angel of the Lord struck the Assyrian army that beleaguered Jerusalem in the time of king Hezekiah. Against this background, the use of כחד may best be understood as hinting to some supernatural blow that Yhwh is going to strike against the Canaanites to break their resistance. This includes a clear element of violence, but not necessarily on a genocidal scale, since both in the case of the Egyptians (potentially) and of the Assyrians (actually, according to the extended reports) the act did not entail the complete annihilation of the group affected by it.[13]

---

11. For a brief but helpful discussion of the relationship between the passages in Exodus 23 and 34 see Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 308-309. The going up of the people to the promised land and the driving out of the Canaanites is also mentioned in Exod. 33.1-4, without any specific commandments given to the Israelites.

12. The Israelites' impending possession of the land is also mentioned in Deut. 9.1-6 and Deut. 11.22-25, but direct commandments concerning what the Israelites have to do are missing in these texts.

13. Cf. Benno Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1997), p. 739 ('Nicht auf ihre Vernichtung kommt es an, sondern die ihres Götzendienstes', with 'ihre' referring to the Canaanite peoples). Cornelis Houtman, on the other hand, translates כחד with 'annihilate' (see *Exodus*, *Volume 3* [Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 2000], p. 275). It may be assumed that the divine blow will cause the Canaanites to 'disappear' from the land.

2.2. *Non-Lethal Actions*

Exod. 23.27-31 contains a whole list of actions ascribed to Yhwh in the process of the Israelites' occupation of the promised land and the concomitant expulsion of the Canaanites. Both at the beginning and at the end of this passage the verb נתן ('give') occurs: Yhwh will make the enemies turn their backs to the Israelits (ונתתי...ערף, v. 27), and he will deliver the inhabitants of the land into the hands of the Israelites (אתן בידכם ישבי הארץ, v. 31). The list opens with the promise that Yhwh will send (שלח) his terror before the Israelites (v. 27); he will also send (שלח) the hornet which in turn will drive out the Canaanites (v. 28).[14] The second element in the opening verse 27 is the confusion into which he will throw the Canaanites (המם). Finally, the subsequent verses Exod. 23.29-30 deal with Yhwh's (deliberately slow) expelling (גרש) of the inhabitants of the promised land.

The topic of expulsion (גרש) which Yhwh promises to enact on Israel's behalf is also found at the beginning of the passage Exod. 34.11-16 (see v. 11).[15]

The passage of Num. 33.52-56 contains two phrases that point to actions on Yhwh's side. Num. 33.53 takes up the verb נתן, in this case with the land as the object of Yhwh's giving. Num. 33.56 warns that Yhwh will do to the Israelites as he had planned to do to the Canaanites if the Israelites fail to fulfill their obligations, without elaborating in any detail what these plans consisted of.

The verb נתן ('give') with Yhwh in the role of subject is also found in Deut. 7.2; in this case, the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land are the object of נתן (ונתנם יהוה אלהיך לפניך, 'Yhwh your God will deliver them before you'). In addition to נתן and preceding it, we find the promise that Yhwh will remove (נשל) many peoples before the Israelites (Deut. 7.1).

The same elements are also found in Deut. 7.16-26. This passage opens with the promise that Yhwh will 'give' the inhabitants of the promised land to the Israelites (העמים אשר יהוה אלהיך נתן לך). The promise is repeated in vv. 23 and 24, in the latter case with the kings of these peoples as the direct object of נתן. That Yhwh will remove (נשל) the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land is stated in Deut. 7.22. The attestation of the verb in 2 Kgs 16.6 proves that no notion of killing or extermination is part of its semantic range. In addition to the concepts expressed by the verbs נתן and נשל,

14. For additional interpretations of the term 'hornet', also mentioned in Deut. 7.20, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p. 90.

15. It is also attested in Exod. 33.2, with no action being mentioned on the side of the Israelites. This does not mean, however, that according to this text the balance between Yhwh's and the Israelites' activities has completely shifted to Yhwh's side. Rather, it seems that the passage is not interested in giving a detailed description of the process of the taking of the land.

we also find the notion of Yhwh 'confusing' the enemies of Israel, in Deut. 7.23 (והמם מהומה גדלה), similar to Exod. 23.27. Another element connecting Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 7 is the sending (שלח, pi.) of the hornet (צרעה); see Exod. 23.28 and Deut. 7.20. According to Deut. 7.19, Yhwh will also do 'signs' (אות) and 'wonders' (מופת) on behalf of the Israelites, an element not found in the other texts mentioned above.

The verb נתן ('give') with Yhwh as subject is also found in Deut. 20.16: Yhwh gives the cities of the Canaanites as an inheritance to the Israelites. In addition, Deuteronomy 20 contains the promise that Yhwh will be 'with' (עם) his people (see v. 1) and fight (לחם, ni.) for his people (see v. 4).

While ירש (hi., 'let inherit') with Yhwh in the role of the subject is absent from Deuteronomy 7 and 20, it is found in other deuteronomic passages, such as Deut. 11.23. Deut. 12.29 and 19.1 add the concept of Yhwh 'cutting off' (כרת) the peoples of the land.

Deut. 6.19 and 9.4 add yet another verb, הדף, which also expresses the expectation that Yhwh will expel the Canaanites.

Deut. 8.20 uses the verb אבד (hi., 'cause to perish') to describe the action that Yhwh will take against the Canaanites. In addition, Deut. 9.3 introduces the verbs שמד (hi., 'destroy') and כנע (hi., 'subdue'); the former is also found in Deut. 31.3-4.

2.3. *Yhwh's Main Activities*

The main role of Yhwh is described with the verb נתן, followed by different kinds of direct objects.[16] The respective texts expect Yhwh to be active in the process of the conquest and occupation of the promised land by delivering the Canaanites or their land into the hands of the Israelites, whatever the exact implications of this thought may be. All texts under scrutiny in some way or another agree that Yhwh's delivery of the enemy is the foundational act on which the Israelites will build. All subsequent actions wrought by the Israelites are based on Yhwh's preceding act of 'giving'. The conquest, therefore, in all its warlike ramifications, is ultimately not a project that is based on independent human decision making.

Clearly lethal actions of Yhwh's are rare, and they do not amount to a complete annihilation of the Canaanites. The main focus, besides the element of 'giving', lies on the expulsion of the pre-Israelite inhabitants from the promised land.

In Exod. 23.23-33 it is Yhwh and not Israel who plays the most important role in the occupation of the land. Elements of brutality are absent,

---

16. The use of the verb נתן in such contexts is part of a construction that is often called 'Übereignungsformel' or 'Übergabeformel'. Alternatively, it can be expressed by the phrase סגר + preposition *beth* + יד. For a more detailed description of this formula see, e.g., Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (BZAW, 177; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 130-32, 140-42.

and the whole stress lies on the expulsion of the Canaanites, not their extermination.

3. *What Are the Israelites Expected to Do?*

3.1. *Lethal Violence?*

a. *Outside Deuteronomy*. Outside the deuteronomic texts, there is only one verb that can possibly be assumed to have connotations of lethal violence, הרס (pi., 'destroy') in Exod. 23.24. The verb is used in the context of a command directed at the Israelites. It is not completely impossible that the Canaanites themselves are the object of הרס; but much more likely the object of הרס is not the Canaanites themselves, but their 'works' (מעשיהם), meaning the buildings the Canaanites erected for their deities or their images.[17] This interpretation is syntactically more natural. The same verb refers to the destruction or the tearing down of cult objects also in Judg. 6.25; 1 Kgs 18.30; 19.10, 14.

b. *Deuteronomy*. The picture is more violent in Deuteronomy:

Deut. 7.2 uses the verbs נכה (hi., 'strike') and חרם (hi., 'ban'), in both cases with the Israelites in the role of the agent. There is, however, a difference between the uses of the two verbs: The Israelites' action described by נכה is not cast in the form of a command; the verse simply states that this is what will happen once the Israelites enter the land. This is different in the case of חרם, where we are dealing with a command enjoined on the Israelites. In addition to this, it has to be noted that נכה is a very general term, used about 500 times in the Hebrew Bible in a wide range of contexts. It certainly implies the use of violence, but not necessarily of a lethal kind. Genocidal connotations or the nuance of 'extermination' are not a necessary part of the meaning of the verb. For these reasons, נכה cannot be used as a defining marker of what characterizes the Israelite conquest and occupation of the promised land, in contradistinction to ordinary acts of war.

As far as חרם ('ban')[17] is concerned, attestations of the root such as those present in Lev. 27.21, 28, 29, where the concept of violent annihilation is

---

17. See, e.g., Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 253; Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 276; Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus*, p. 739.

18. For explanations of the term and the concepts related to it see, e.g., Braulik, 'Die Völkervernichtung', pp. 4-5, 16; Collins, *Does the Bible Justify*, pp. 4-13, 38-42; Copan, 'Yahweh Wars', chap. 5; J.P.U. Lilley, 'Understanding the *Herem*', *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993), pp. 169-77; Hans-Peter Müller, 'Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel', in *Krieg und Gewalt in den Weltreligionen* (ed. A.T. Khoury, E. Grundmann and H.-P. Müller; Freiburg: Herder, 2003), pp. 11-23 (17); Richard D. Nelson, '*Herem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience' in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (ed. M. Vervenne and F. Lust; BEThL, 133; Leuven: Leuven University Press/

not found, show that its precise meaning must be determined based on an analysis of the respective context. It is, however, clear, that the combination of חרם with נכה and לא חנן makes a *prima facie* interpretation that points in the direction of extermination highly plausible.[19] The use of the term in the detailed reports of the conquest of the promised land also needs to be taken into account when attempting to reach a more precise understanding of its meaning. This, in turn, does not imply that the use of חרם in Joshua must by necessity be in full agreement with its use in Deuteronomy.[20]

Besides Deut. 7.2, the commandment to 'ban' (חרם, hi.) the inhabitants of Canaan is also found in Deut. 20.17. The preceding verse states that the Israelites must not leave alive anything that breathes (לא תחיה כל־נשמה) in the cities of the Canaanites. This phrase cannot be interpreted in any other way than as aiming at the annihilation of the inhabitants of the cities that are in view, together with their livestock. The parallelism between the formulation used in Deut. 20.16 and the commandment to 'ban' (חרם) the Canaanites in Deut. 20.17 must be taken as a clear indication of the fact that חרם in the context of the conquest of Canaan really does imply the killing of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land, whatever the exact nuances of the verb may be.[21] On the other hand, it is important to note that there is no general commandment in Deuteronomy 20 to go to war against the Canaanites in general or their cities in particular; rather, the chapter opens with a circumstantial phrase 'when you go to war' (כי־תצא למלחמה).[22]

Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), pp. 39-54; S. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 28-77; R. Rauser, '"Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive"', p. 32; Alexander Rofé, 'The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity', *JSOT* 32 (1985), pp. 23-44 (26); Rüdiger Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg" im Pentateuch und im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk* (AOAT, 381; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), pp. 56-60; Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical* Herem (BJS, 211; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991); Thelle, 'The Biblical Conquest Account', pp. 64-66, 212-13. Cf. also Crüsemann, 'Gewaltimagination'.

19. While J.P.U. Lilley holds that חרם linked to נכה may add either the dimension of complete destruction or introduce a sacral viewpoint, with the latter being more appropriate (see 'Understanding the *Herem*', p. 175), it may well be that both aspects are indicated at the same time.

20. This reservation applies of course to all terms and phrases investigated in this study.

21. For a similar interpretation see Lilley, 'Understanding the *Herem*', p. 174: 'In Deuteronomy 20:17 *herem* is used epexegetically to verse 16, "you shall not leave alive anything that breathes"'.

22. According to rabbinic exegesis, the only difference in the treatment of Canaanite cities and cities outside of the promised land is the extension of the command to kill to include also women, children and livestock, whereas in the case of non-Canaanite cities only men must be killed. This means that also in the case of Canaanite cities, first terms of peace have to be offered. Modern exegesis, however, has generally not

It goes generally unnoticed that the commandment found in Deut. 20.16-17 only concerns cities, not the land of Canaan and its population at large. If this is understood as a defining and limiting formulation that makes explicit what is assumed implicitly in Deut. 7.2, the juxtaposition of the command-ment to 'ban' the Canaanites and the prohibition not to enter in any type of relationship with them in Deut. 7.2-3 would make some sense: The ban relates to the inhabitants of the cities, while those with whom covenantal or marital relationships are prohibited are Canaanites who were not dwelling in the cities at the time of the Israelites' campaigns against them. Though it is far from clear that this is the most compelling interpretation of the text, it would fit well with the observation that all instances in the books of Joshua and Judges that speak about the Israelites' חרם of the Canaanites are related to cities, with the exception of the generalizing summary in Josh. 10.40 and the unspecific theological comment in Josh. 11.20.[23]

There are four additional terms in Deut. 7.16-26 that may point to the notion of violent extinction of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land:

(i) Deut. 7.24 contains a commandment to make the name of the Canaanites 'perish' from under the heavens (אבד, hi.). Though this phrase does not necessarily sound lethal on the surface, it is in fact most probably pointing to complete extinction.[24] This assumption is bolstered by a comparison with 1 Samuel 15: Samuel and/or the narrator expect Saul to kill all Amalekites, and this expectation may well be based on the commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven, found in Deut. 25.19,[25] formulated in terms reminiscent of Deut. 7.24.

agreed with this view; see Shalom Carmy, 'The Origin of Nations and the Shadow of Violence: Theological Perspectives on Canaan and Amalek', *Tradition* 39 (2006), pp. 57-88 (67); Hoffman, 'The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem', p. 197; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 472; Moshe Weinfeld, 'The Ban on the Canaanites in the Biblical Codes and its Historical Development', in *History and Traditions of Early Israel* (ed. A. Lemaire and B. Otzen; VTSup, 50; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 142-60 (154).

23. Cf. Wade, 'Yahweh War'. Another important observation concerning Deut. 20 in general is made by Jan Christian Gertz, who claims that in this text for the first time an attempt is made to subject war as such to judicial regulation (see 'Regulierung von Gewalt in Gesellschaft und Politik im Alten Testament', in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt—Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.-22. September 2005 in Berlin* [ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006], pp. 310-23 [322]).

24. See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 91. The same verb, with the Israelites as subject and the Canaanites as direct object, is also found in Deut. 9.3.

25. Thus also Kang, *Divine War*, pp. 125-26. For elaborate discussions of the war

(ii) Deut. 7.16 uses the verb אכל ('eat'). The phrase in which the verb appears is not a command, however, but a blessing. Moreover, the metaphorical use of the verb does not by necessity imply the complete violent extinction of the peoples in view. This can be seen from a comparison with Lev. 26.38, where the land of the enemies is said to 'eat' the Israelites that have been expelled from their country; since at least some of them or their descendants are said to experience a future reversal of their destiny, אכל does obviously not imply the complete extinction of the people. The use of the verb in Deut. 20.14 with respect to the spoil of a conquered city, including women and children, points in the same direction. On the other hand, the context of Deut. 7.16 does not exclude a stricter interpretation with a meaning that includes extermination. At any event, the verb אכל with עמים as direct object is—as opposed to חרם—not taken up in the reports of the occupation of the promised land, and therefore has no further relevance for the assessment of the question about the violent nature of the occupation.

(iii) Things are quite similar in Deut. 7.22 where the Israelites are said to 'finish off' (כלה, pi.) the inhabitants of the land. As in the case of אכל, we are not dealing with a command; rather, the verb is used in the context of a descriptive phrase that states that the Israelites will not be able to 'finish off' the Canaanites quickly. We also note that the formulation is not taken up in the reports concerning the occupation of the promised land. Even more than אכל, the verb כלה in itself does not necessarily imply violent annihilation; it can simply refer to a complete driving out from the land, as the closest parallel in the book of Deuteronomy, Deut. 28.21, shows.

(iv) Another verb that may potentially hint at a violent extermination is שמד (hi.), used in Deut. 7.24. As in the two previous cases, however, the verb is not used as part of a command; in the present instance, שמד is used in the context of a prepositional temporal construction (עד השמדך אתם). The use of the verb in other passages of Deuteronomy and in the book of Joshua may be instructive: In Josh. 11.14, 20, the verb is used to describe what the Israelites actually did to the Canaanites, in a way that certainly supports a violent interpretation, even with the aspect of extermination present. On the other hand, both Deut. 9.3 and Josh. 24.8 claim that it is Yhwh who is the agent of the action against the Canaanites

against the Amalekites see, e.g., Carmy, 'The Origin of Nations', pp. 72-74; Diana Edelman, 'Saul's Battle Against Amaleq (1 Sam 15)', *JSOT* 35 (1986), pp. 71-84; Kang, *Divine War*, pp. 125-27; Allan M. Langner, 'Remembering Amalek Twice', *JBQ* 36 (2008), pp. 251-53; Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*, pp. 129-30.

designated by שמד. Most frequently, Yhwh is the (potential) sub-
ject of שמד in passages where the verb refers to actions directed
against Israel: Deut. 4.3; 6.15; 7.4; 9.8, 14, 19, 20, 25; Josh. 23.15.
Since ultimately a complete extinction of Israel is not what is
expected, at least not in a broader context that takes into consid-
eration the whole of the book of Deuteronomy, these texts tend to
show that the notion of total annihilation is not necessarily present
in the use of שמד.[26] This assessment is further bolstered by the par-
allelism of שמד and גרש in Deut. 33.27.[27]

To summarize this paragraph: The most important example of a command
enjoined on the Israelites to use at least potentially lethal violence against the
Canaanites is the verb חרם as attested in Deut. 7.2 and 20.17, together with
the prohibition not to leave alive inhabitants of the cities that Yhwh gives as
an inheritance to the Israelites in Deut. 20.16. Other than חרם, hints at lethal
violence are rare and more indirect. One can, then, clearly not speak of a
broad current of (potentially) genocidal commandments in the Torah. Sta-
tistically, it is a peripheral element; it is, however, not totally absent either.[28]

3.2. *Non-Lethal Actions*

There are many additional actions described or prescribed in the penta-
teuchal passages dealing with the conquest and occupation of the prom-
ised land.

a. *Exodus 23*. Exod. 23.24 contains a series of regulations related to the Isra-
elites' behaviour in the religious area: They are not to bow before the gods
of the Canaanites (חוה, hisht.) and not to serve them (עבד, ho.);[29] they are
not to copy the religious installations of the Canaanites, but to tear them
down (הרס, pi.) and to break (שבר, pi.) their sacred pillars (מצבה).

   Exod. 23.31 speaks of the Israelites' expulsion (גרש, pi.) of the inhab-
itants of the land; it is, however, not clear whether this phrase is descrip-
tive or prescriptive. In vv. 29-30, it is Yhwh who is the subject of the action
described by גרש, in v. 28 the hornet.

---

26. In Josh. 9.24 the verb is taken up in a reference to what the Gibeonites know
about God's command to Moses concerning the conquest of the land. It is unclear in
this case whether the Israelites or Yhwh is the subject of שמד.

27. Braulik observes: 'Die Bedeutung von שמד ist so abstrakt, dass sie auch die Ver-
treibung als Möglichkeit einschliesst' ('Die Völkervernichtung', p. 21).

28. According to Glenn Miller ('Good Question' [http://christianthinktank.com/
qamorite.html]), 'dispossession' words are used three times more often than 'destruc-
tion' words.

29. An indirect warning against serving the gods of the Canaanites is also found in
Exod. 23.33.

Exod. 23.32 adds the prohibition not to make a covenant (כרת ברית) with the inhabitants of the land or their gods, complementing the religious admonitions found in v. 24.

b. *Exodus 34*. Exod. 34.11-16 repeats a good number of the elements found in Exod. 23.23-33: First, the prohibition not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land (Exod. 34.12, 15; cf. Exod. 23.32). This is followed, as in Exod. 23.24, by a series of commandements relating to the religious field in vv. 13-16. Some of the elements are parellel: the prohibition not to bow down (חוה, hisht.) before other gods (Exod. 34.14) and the command-ment to break (שבר, pi.) the sacred pillars (מצבה) of the Canaanites (Exod. 34.13). Exod. 34.13 adds the tearing down (נתץ) of the altars (מזבח) and the cutting down (כרת) of the Asherim. Exod. 34.15 complements this list with the prohibition not to sacrifice (זבח) to foreign gods. Exod. 34.15-16 repeatedly uses the verb זנה to warn against the involvement in foreign cults. This warning is combined with a prohibition not to intermarry with the Canaanites (ולקחת מבנתיו לבניך, v. 16). Both the concept of 'har-lotry' and the topic of intermarriage are new as compared to what one finds in Exod. 23.23-33. General commandments to expel the Canaanites are not found in Exod. 34.11-16.

c. *Numbers 33*. The main element in Num. 33.52-56 is the commandment to dispossess (ירש, hi.) the inhabitants of the land (vv. 52 and 55) or to take possession (ירש, hi.) of the land (v. 53). As in Exodus 23 and 34, there is also a series of commandments related to the destruction of the Canaanite cultic sites, listed in Num. 33.52: Destroy (אבד, pi.) their figured stones (משכית); destroy (אבד, pi.) their molten images (צלמי מסכות); and demolish (שמד, hi.) their high places (במה). There is, however, no terminological overlap between the commandments found in Num. 33.52 and those in Exodus.

d. *Deuteronomy 7.1-5*. Deut. 7.1-5 contains three main non-lethal com-mandments. The first one is the prohibition not to make a covenant with the peoples of the land (כרת ברית, Deut. 7.2), as in Exod. 34.12, 15 and simi-lar to Exod. 23.32. Deut. 7.3 adds a prohibition against intermarriage with the Canaanites, similar to Exod. 34.16 but in a much more detailed form. Finally, there is a list of commandments pertaining to the destruction of Canaanite cultic objects in Deut. 7.5: tear down (נתץ) their altars (מזבח), smash (שבר, pi.) their sacred pillars (מצבה), hew down (גדע, pi.) their Asherim, burn (שרף) their graven images (פסיל). The second element is parallel with Exod. 23.24 and Exod. 34.13. נתץ מזבח is also found in Exod. 34.13, as is the commandment to destroy the Asherim, though the verbs are different in this case. The closest parallel to the list of commandments in Deut. 7.5 is found in Deut. 12.3.

e. *Deuteronomy 7.16-26*. Deut. 7.16-26 repeats some of the elements mentioned above and adds a number of new ones. Deut. 7.16 warns the Israelites not to serve (עבד, qal) the gods of the Canaanites, much as in Exod. 23.24. The topic of dispossession, known from Num. 33.52-56, is mentioned in Deut. 7.17, though not in the form of a direct commandment. The commandment to burn (שׂרף) graven images (פסיל), found in v. 25, is known from Deut. 7.5. The list of new elements opens in Deut. 7.16: The Israelites' eyes shall not pity their enemies (לא־תחם עינך עליהם). The closest parallel to this command is found in Deut. 7.2. In Deut. 7.18 the Israelites are admonished not to be afraid (ירא) of the Canaanites, and in Deut. 7.21 not to dread (ערץ) them. A further regulation concerning the dealing with the cultic objects of the Canaanites is found in Deut. 7.25-26: The Israelites must not covet the silver or the gold that is on the graven images, nor take it for themselves; and no cultic object of the Canaanites must be brought into the Israelites' house, for it is an abomination (תועבה) that falls under the ban.

3.3. *The Israelites' Main Activities*

Expulsion of the Canaanites plays an important role in the description of the Israelites' activities related to the occupation of the promised land. The rhetoric of (potentially) lethal violence is limited to Deuteronomy, and with one possible exception (Deut. 7.2) limitied even within Deuteronomy to specific targets and therefore not of a genocidal scope.

The main responsibility of the Israelites is the abstinence from any covenant with the Canaanites and, especially, the destruction of all Canaanite cultic objects and installations; their violence must be directed first and foremost against these specific material targets, not against human beings.

The first element (abstinence from covenants) casts serious doubt on a rigid genocidal interpretation of the commandments, since a general, sweeping extermination of the Canaanites would render the admonition not to enter in any form of alliance with them, including marriage relations, redundant. The second aspect (destruction of cultic objects) shows that according to the view of all the relevant texts, the conquest of the land is to a considerable degree an act of purging of the land from the Canaanite religious practices. This means that the concept of חרם, independent of the question of the range of violence involved in it, is intimately bound to the sphere of cult also in the context of the conquest of the promised land.

4. *The Combination of Lethal and Non-Lethal Terms in Deuteronomy*

We have seen that in Deut. 20.16-17, the command to execute the 'ban' is clearly restricted to the cities of the Canaanites. As far as Deuteronomy 7 is concerned, it is important to note that phrases expressing extermination

and phrases expressing expulsion are mixed. The commandment to 'ban' the Canaanites in Deut. 7.2 is preceded by the phrase that Yhwh will expel (נשׁל) them (Deut. 7.1) and followed by the prohibition not to enter into covenant or marriage relationship with the Canaanites (Deut. 7.2-3), obviously presupposing the continued existence of some of them. Deut. 7.20 also presupposes the continued existence of some Canaanites in the land, and this expectation is not combined with a command to search them and hunt them down. Moreover, Deut. 7.24 singles out the 'kings' of the Canaanites as those whose name shall be blotted out, not the people at large.

We also observe that the language of expulsion is attested in other parts of Deuteronomy; see, e.g., Deut. 4.38; 6.19; 9.3-5; 11.23; 18.12; 33.27.[30]

This means that even the book of Deuteronomy, and within Deuteronomy even chapters 7 and 20, do not envision a complete and wholesale extermination of the Canaanites. What is in view is first and foremost the expulsion of the Canaanites. Commandments to execute the חרם are specifically directed at the leaders of the Canaanites and the Canaanite cities, that is, the defenders and strongholds of the Canaanite political and cultural identity. If the commandment in Deut. 7.2 goes beyond the scope of Deut. 7.24 and Deut. 20.16-17, it may indicate the extermination of those Canaanites who were not willing to either submit to the Israelites or leave the country. However, an active pursuit of such individuals is ruled out by Deut. 7.20.

Num. 21.21-25, 31-35, reporting the encounters with Amorites east of the Jordan, may be indicative of the pattern envisioned in Deuteronomy and Joshua: The Amorites living in the villages in the area lying between the territories controlled by Sihon and Og respectively were merely driven out, while the royal houses of Sihon and Og together with their armies were destroyed.[31]

5. *The Main Motivation: Prevention of Inducement to Apostasy*

Almost all the relevant passages under scrutiny from Exodus through Deuteronomy, as well as Joshua 23, point to the danger which a coexistence between Israelites and pagan Canaanites would pose to the formers' religious integrity:[32] Remaining pagan Canaanites would be a 'snare' for the

30. Weinfeld misses this by focusing only on one verb of expulsion, גרש (see 'The Ban', pp. 150-51).

31. Similarly Miller, 'Good Question'.

32. This is not explicit in Num. 33.52-56, but the mention of the destruction of the cult objects points in the same direction at least implicitly.

The connection between the ban and the prevention of syncretism and idolatry is also stressed by Collins, *Does the Bible Justify*, pp. 9, 11; Crüsemann, 'Gewaltimagination', pp. 344-45; Elmer A. Martens, 'Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence', in

Israelites by inducing them to abandon their exclusive loyalty to Yhwh and embrace Canaanite religion and serve other gods; see Exod. 23.33; 34.12; Num. 33.55; Deut. 7.16.[33] Life for Israel as Yhwh's people depends on the complete loyalty to Yhwh. It is also crucial for the character and 'mission' of Israel as Yhwh's special treasure and a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19.5-6; Deut. 7.6) to safeguard its identity by not compromising with any form of idolatry. Otherwise, the outsiders' view of Yhwh would be corrupted.[34] On the other hand, ethnic denigration of the Canaanites is not mentioned, nor is an insatiable lust for conquest for booty's sake or the like visible.[35]

   The weight given to the motif of integrity can be interpreted as carrying with it an implicit message: If the Canaanites do not pose a danger to the Israelites' loyalty to Yhwh, the main reason for their expulsion or destruction disappears, rendering the commandment to expel or destroy them in effect conditional:[36] Only if the Canaanites persist in their religious abominations must any form of coexistence with them be excluded.[37]

6. *The Conquest Reports*

6.1. *Yhwh's Activities*

As far as Yhwh's actions are concerned, the following picture emerges:

   The most important element of Yhwh's actions, the 'giving' (נתן) of the promised land or its inhabitants into the hands of the Israelites, mentioned

---

War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century (ed. R.S. Hess and E.A. Martens; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 33-57 (47); Nelson, '*Herem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience', p. 54; Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 64; Rofé, 'The Laws', p. 29; Weinfeld, 'The Ban', pp. 145-46.

   33. The same idea is expressed in Josh. 23.13. Cf. also Deut. 7.16. In this verse, however, not the Canaanites, but the serving of their deities is singled out as a potential snare.

   Longman ('The Case for Spiritual Continuity', pp. 164, 172) assumes that one of the main reasons for the חרם is the presence of God with the army of Israel, which does not tolerate unclean, unholy, non-worshipping people (see also Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* [Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995], p. 46). But this fails to explain why it is primarily the Canaanites that must be killed, and why almost exclusively in Deuteronomy as opposed to other legal texts.

   34. See Houtman, 'Zwei Sichtweisen', p. 219: 'Jhwh fordert die exklusive Hingabe der Seinen. Weil er nichts mit dem Götzendienst zu schaffen hat, darf Israel sich damit nicht kompromittieren. Sonst verstellt es als Priesterstaat den Blick auf ihn'.

   35. Thelle misses the point when she states: 'God commands Joshua and his army to annihilate the inhabitants of the Canaanite towns, because they are Canaanite' ('The Biblical Conquest Account', p. 72).

   36. Such a view is explicitly rejected by Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 470, 472.

   37. This corresponds with the rabbinic interpretation of the relevant texts; see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 472.

in all of the legal passages dealing with the conquest except for Exodus 34, appears repeatedly in the reports concerning the conquest. Josh. 2.9, 24; 18.3; 21.43; 23.13, 15, 16 state that Yhwh is giving the land or has given it into the hands of the Israelites, while Josh. 11.8; 21.44; 24.11; Judg. 1.4; 3.10, 28 speak about the delivery of the Canaanites into the hands of the Israelites. Other texts say that Yhwh has given a specific city into their hands (see Josh. 6.16; 8.7; 10.19, 30, 32). This positive correspondence is disrupted in Judg. 2.23 where it is stated that Yhwh had no longer given the Canaanites into the hands of Joshua.[38]

Remarkably, Yhwh's promise in Deut. 20.1 that he would be 'with' (עם) the Israelites when they go to war is not found in the reports of the conquest in Joshua.[39] But in the book of Judges, the phrase appears several times: Judges 1.22 says that Yhwh was with the house of Joseph as they went up against Bethel. Judges 2.18 notes that Yhwh repeatedly was with the judge whom he had raised up to save Israel. Lastly, Judg. 6.12, 13, 16 state that Yhwh was with Gideon.

The promise that Yhwh would expel (גרש; Exod. 23.30 and 34.11) the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land is also referred to in the reports of the conquest: Josh. 24.18 and Judg. 6.9 claim that Yhwh has indeed done so. As in the case of נתן, however, there is a reservation in Judges 2 (v. 3): Yhwh announces that he will not continue to expel the remainder of the Canaanites, because of the lack of obedience on the side of the Israelites.

Much the same applies to the use of the verb ירש (hi.) with Yhwh in the role of subject: The promise given in Exod. 34.24 is marked as fulfilled in Josh. 23.9. At the same time, Judg. 2.21 announces that he will not do it any more, and Judg. 2.23 notes that he has not done it any more.

The situation is different in the case of four more activities of Yhwh that are mentioned in the conquest reports. The promise of Deut. 20.4 that Yhwh will fight for his people (לחם, ni.) finds its correspondence in Josh. 10.14, 42; 23.3 where it is noted that this is what is happening or what has happened, without any reservation. Such is also the case with the sending of the hornet, promised in Exod. 23.28 and Deut. 7.20 and marked as fulfilled in Josh. 24.12. The promise that Yhwh will throw the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land into confusion, as found in Exod. 23.27 and Deut. 7.23, is reflected in Josh. 10.10 and Judg. 4.15, though in phrases that

---

38. It is not quite clear whether this is because of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites or whether Yhwh's decision not to deliver the Canaanites any more into the hands of the Israelites precedes their unfaithfulness. Most commentators favor the first option (see, e.g, Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges* [TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968], p. 70).

39. It is, however, found in promises given to Joshua before the onset of the conquest; see Josh. 1.5, 9; 3.7.

are not in full congruence with either of the two legal passages. Lastly, the promise of Deut. 9.3 that Yhwh will subdue (כנע, hi.) the Canaanites finds its positive correspondence in Judg. 4.23.

To sum up the observations adduced in this paragraph, one can see that all the important elements of the activities of Yhwh listed in the legal passages concerning the conquest of the land are also found in the reports of the conquest in Joshua and Judges, with *all* the different legal sources represented in the picture, not only the deuteronomic texts. There is, however, one major modification in several passages of the conquest reports: the statement that Yhwh will not continue to act any longer in the way he has acted in the first phases of the conquest on behalf of Israel. We also note that the one verb denoting a potentially genocidal activity on the side of Yhwh, כחד, is not taken up in the reports in Joshua and Judges.

Yhwh's activity consists mainly in his 'giving', his assistance in the Israelites' battles and in the expulsion of the Canaanites.

6.2. *The Israelites' Activities*

6.2.1. *The book of Joshua.* As far as the activities of the Israelites are concerned, the following picture emerges:

The combination of נכה (hi.) and חרם (hi.) that is characteristic of Deut. 7.2 can also be found in Josh. 10.28-40; 11.11-12; Judg. 1.17.

More frequently, one of the two verbs appears unrelated to the other. The following verses have נכה (hi.): Josh. 7.3; 8.21, 22, 24; 10.20, 26, 41; 11.8, 10, 14, 17; 12.1, 6, 7; 15.16; 19.47; Judg. 1.4, 5, 8, 10, 17, 25. In the case of חרם (hi.), a more elaborate discussion is needed, since the root חרם, as seen above, is the primary candidate to point to potentially genocidal concepts connected with the occupation of the promised land.

The first attestation of the verb חרם (hi.) in the book of Joshua is found in Josh. 2.10, with reference to Sihon's and Og's defeat at the hands of the Israelites.[40] The reports concerning Sihon and Og in Numbers 21 and Deut. 2.24–3.10, however, do not speak of an unconditional war of extermination, but rather of a conventional quarrel escalating into a war that was neither planned nor provoked by the Israelites themselves.

The root חרם is also found in Josh. 6.17, 18, 21, with respect to the conquest of Jericho. On the one hand, this incident is clearly associated with the notion of extermination, in the context of a war unprovoked by Israel's opponents; on the other hand, one cannot overlook that Rahab and her house, because of her pro-Israelite action and her confession of the God of Israel, are spared. It is also noteworthy that the report opens with the assurance from Yhwh's side that he has given the city into the hands of the

---

40. For further details on the wars against Sihon and Og see, e.g., Kang, *Divine War*, pp. 128-36.

Israelites (נתן, Josh. 6.2). That this verse is preceded by the hint at the clos-
ing of Jericho's gates in Josh. 6.1 may also be important: The inhabitants of
Jericho first decided not to submit to the Israelites, and only afterwards is
the city doomed to destruction. Josh. 24.11 explicitly points to the fight of
the men of Jericho against the Israelites, which implies a preceding decision
to choose this type of action as against the option of surrender. The men-
tion of a paralyzation of the Canaanites' hearts in Josh. 2.9, 11 (with respect
to Jericho) and in Josh 5.1 (with respect to Canaan as a whole) may point
in the same direction: The inhabitants of Jericho and of Canaan in general
could have chosen to acknowledge Yhwh's plans and submit to the Isra-
elites and Yhwh[41] or flee and leave the country of which they knew it to
be the Israelites' destination, but decided otherwise. This is different from
modern cases of genocide, where such a choice was not given: Jews could
not escape extermination by renouncing their Judaism under the Nazis, and
Tutsis could not escape extermination by denying their Tutsi-identity during
the Hutus' onslaught in 1994.

On the other hand, the military campaigns against Jericho and Ai are
clearly offensive wars, and there is no *explicit* mention of the possibility of
surrender in these cases.

The next occurence of the verb חרם (hi.) is found in Josh. 8.26, referring
to the inhabitants of Ai (see also Josh. 10.1). Again, the notion of extermi-
nation appears inescapable, and no one is spared in this case, in contradis-
tinction to the events in Jericho. Exactly as in the case of Jericho, however,
it is again the statement about Yhwh's delivery of the city into the hands
of the Israelites that opens the scene (נתן, Josh. 8.1). It is also important to
note that v. 14 refers to the military initiative taken by the king of Ai, though
clearly as a response to the preceding actions of the Israelites. Since there is
no mention of ban-intentions on the side of the Israelites before the king's
own action, it may well be that the text implies that the king and his sub-
jects would in fact have had other options, as the following example of the
Gibeonites shows right after the events at Ai.

The root חרם appears most frequently in Joshua 10 and 11. In order to
understand the implications of the term in these chapters, it is necessary to
take the broader context of events into consideration.

---

41. A similar view is taken by Stone, 'Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies', p. 34;
cf. also Seibert, *The Violence*, pp. 99-100. In her own way, Lori Rowlett supports this
point. Referring to the case of the Gibeonites, she states that 'they are spared the usual
punishment for otherness, which is death, because of their voluntary submission to
Joshua's and Yahweh's authority' ('Inclusion, Exclusion and Marginality in the Book
of Joshua', *JSOT* 55 [1992], pp. 15-23 [19; similarly p. 17]); she then puts Rahab in the
same category: 'By her voluntary submission to Joshua's authority and her acknowl-
edgment of Yahweh … , Rahab was transformed from the quintessential Other into an
insider deemed worthy of protection' ('Inclusion', p. 23).

Joshua 10 begins with the report of a campaign that Adoni-Zedeq, king of Jerusalem, initiates against Gibeon, together with four allies. In response to this campaign, the Gibeonites send a call for help to the Israelites. When the Israelites decide to heed the call, they are given Yhwh's assurance, as in Joshua 6 and 8, that he has given the enemies into their hands (נתן, Josh. 10.8). The text goes on to say that it is Yhwh himself who fights the enemies and strikes them down, killing many by large stones falling from heaven (Josh. 10.10-11). This is in fact the only instance in which God is said to be actively involved in a battle on behalf of Israel in a humanly visible way. Immediately after the first notice about Yhwh's involvement in Josh. 10.10, however, it is made clear that the Canaanites flee before the Israelites and that at least some of them are killed by the Israelites' swords (Josh. 10.11). After this clash, the Israelites return to their base in Gilgal (Josh. 10.15). Later, the pursuit goes on, and it is repeated that Yhwh has delivered the enemies into the hands of the Israelites (נתן, Josh. 10.19). Josh. 10.20 notes that the survivors among the Canaanites enter their fortified cities. In Josh. 10.26, the five kings that initiated the war against Gibeon are put to death by Joshua.

It is only in the passage Josh. 10.28-39 that we find the repeated mention of several cities that were banned (חרם, hi.). These cities are Makkedah (Josh. 10.28), Eglon (Josh. 10.35), Hebron (Josh. 10.37), and Debir (Josh. 10.39). Also mentioned are Libnah (Josh. 10.30), Lakhish (Josh. 10.32), and the king of Gezer (Josh. 10.33), but in these cases the root חרם is not used. It is clear, however, that all cities receive the same treatment, whether חרם is used or not. This shows that one cannot exclude that חרם-like actions can also be implied in passages that do not use the term חרם. We can further observe that some of the kings and their cities mentioned in Josh. 10.28-39 are included in the list of Adoni-Zedeq's coalition partners, while others are not. This may show that the execution of the ban was not strictly bound to the legal question of whether the victim in question was part of the original campaign or not. While there is no specific command to attack any of the places mentioned in the list, there are two cases in which Yhwh is said to have 'given' (נתן) the respective cities into the hands of the Israelites (Libnah, v. 30, and Lakhish, v. 32). Twice it is stated explicitly that there were no survivors, in the first case in connection with the verb חרם (hi.; Josh. 10.28), in the second without such a connection (Josh. 10.33). The first case makes clear that חרם can have connotations of wholesale extermination,[42] while the second shows again that such a policy may have been in view also in instances where חרם is not used.

The verb חרם (hi.) is also used in the summary description of the first series of campaigns against the kings of the south in Josh. 10.40-43 (see v.

---

42. *Pace* Lilley, 'Understanding the *Herem*', p. 174.

40). This summary underlines both that Yhwh had commanded the Israel-
ites' military actions and that he himself fought for Israel.

The situation in Joshua 11 is similar to the one in ch. 10. In Joshua 11, it
is a coalition of kings of the northern part of Canaan who take the initiative
to fight against the Israelites (see Josh. 11.5). Thus, even more clearly than
in Joshua 10, the fight of the Israelites against the Canaanites is a defensive
war.[43] After they have gathered at the waters of Merom, Joshua gets Yhwh's
assurance that he will deliver them slain before Israel (Josh. 11.6). Israel
then attacks the enemies, Yhwh delivers them into the hands of the Isra-
elites, and they strike them (Josh. 11.7-8). After this initial battle, the verb
חרם (hi.) is used twice, first with respect to the treatment of Hazor (Josh.
11.11), and then in a general reference to Joshua's victory over the kings
of the north and their cities. In the latter case it is explicitly stated that by
enacting the ban, Joshua followed the commandment given by Moses (Josh.
11.12), and ultimately, as Josh.11.15 makes clear, by Yhwh. That חרם has
to be understood in the sense of sparing no one's life is made clear in v.
14. The remarks in vv. 12 and 15 are important, since they show again that
חרם is nothing that can be imposed at will, but is fully dependent on God's
decree, as Josh. 10.40 also makes clear.[44]

As in the case of Joshua 10, Joshua 11 closes with some summary
remarks. While v. 18 states that Joshua waged war a long time with all these
kings, the next verse (Josh. 11.19) points out that there was not a single city
that made peace with Israel, implicitly holding that making peace would
obviously have been a possibility.[45] Josh. 11.20 goes on to state that Yhwh
hardened the heart of the Canaanites, so that they would be banned (חרם,
hi.) as Moses had commanded.[46]

---

43. Thus also Stone, 'Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies', p. 33. Richard S. Hess
underlines that both Yhwh's and hence Israel's wars are fundamentally defensive in
character; see Richard S. Hess, 'War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview', in *War in
the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. R.S. Hess and E.A. Martens;
Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 19-32 (22-23, 29).

44. Similarly Hubbard, *Joshua*, pp. 43, 199, 310.

45. Thus also Carmy, 'The Origin of Nations', p. 67.

46. The motif of the hardening of the heart of Israel's enemies is also found in Deut.
2.30, with respect to Sihon. Cf. the comments in Hubbard, *Joshua*, pp. 332, 337-39. It
is important to note that the hardening of the respective kings' hearts does not imply
that they took their decision against their own will. As John Goldingay puts it: Yhwh's
'decision stands as the background to what happens, yet it does not force people to take
a path they would not otherwise have taken' (*Israel's Gospel* [Old Testament Theology
1; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], p. 357). Hubbard's remark, on the
other hand, that the rhetoric of hardening refers to Yhwh's anticipation and not to his
causation (*Joshua*, p. 338), is not satisfying. On a more pertinent note, he adds: 'Rather
than manipulate or override each leader's will, God simply gives them good reasons to
follow their own inclinations' (*Joshua*, p. 339).

In the same way as Joshua 10, Joshua 11 depicts the execution of the ban as part of a conventional warfare, initiated by Israel's opponents, thus without real genocidal connotations. It is the inhabitants of specific hostile cities that are killed, not the whole population of Canaan.

Several authors have observed that the conquest reports in the book of Joshua contain hyperbolic phrases typical of ancient Near Eastern accounts of military campaigns.[47] This is certainly highly likely. Josh. 10.20 may even be taken as an explicit indication of this within the biblical text itself: While the first part gives the impression of a complete destruction of Israel's adversaries, the second part makes clear that there were in fact survivors among them. However, even if phrases containing hints of a wholesale slaughter of the Canaanite population, including women and children, have to be understood as hyperbolic, it can nevertheless not be excluded that the author wants to convey a picture according to which at least some women and children were in fact killed.[48]

If one takes all these observations together, one cannot speak of a genocidal assault on the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land. With the possible exception of Jericho and Ai, it is only those who take the initiative to go to war against the Israelites who experience the ban.[49] Even those peoples who are mentioned as victims of the ban—probably including the cases of Jericho and Ai—would have had other options than resisting God's plans and going to war against Israel and be exterminated, as the examples of Rahab and her family in Joshua 6, the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, and the theological explanation in Josh. 11.20 likely show; but, according to the latter text, they chose the wrong way under the direct influence of Yhwh. The broad picture that emerges is that the חרם-commands of Deuteronomy for the most part seem to be understood in Joshua not as a general

47. See, e.g., Copan, 'Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?', p. 25; Hess, 'War in the Hebrew Bible', pp. 29-30; Thelle, 'The Biblical Conquest Account', p. 69.

48. Hess underlines that the vast majority of those likely to be struck after the capture of a Canaanite fortified place would be men, since one could expect that there were only few noncombatants in these places and those who might have been there originally had fled to the countryside; see 'War in the Hebrew Bible', pp. 29-30 (similarly Copan, 'Yahweh Wars', ch. 6). While this is a likely scenario, it need not be taken as proof that in every instance there were no women and children at all that the author of Joshua imagined to be put to the sword by the Israelites. For example, numerous conquest reports in various types of Assyrian sources, including the depiction of the conquest of Lakhish in Sennacherib's palace, make it abundantly clear that noncombatants may be expected to be among the victims of the conquest of all kinds of fortified places.

49. This is also observed by Hubbard, *Joshua*, pp. 44, 201, 309. As far as Jericho and Ai are concerned, there are good arguments for the assumption that the author(s) of the book of Joshua need not have had more in mind than fortresses with only a minimal presence of noncombatants (see Hess, 'War in the Hebrew Bible', p. 30).

commandment to genocide, but as a conditional command to be applied in the context of ordinary warfare, grounded in a deep rejection of non-yahwistic cults.[50]

The ban, then, has not so much to do with the *ius ad bellum*, but with the *ius in bello*. It does not refer to a wholesale war of extermination, but pre-scribes the procedure to be followed after a battle has been won. From such a perspective, there is no dichotomy between the uses of חרם in Deuteron-omy and in the book of Joshua.

6.2.2. *The book of Judges*. We note that Judges 1 contains a long list of places spread over all parts of the promised land of which it is explicitly stated that the various Israelite tribes did not kill or drive out their Canaanite neighbours. Similarly, Judg. 3.5 claims that the Israelites were living among the various Canaanite peoples. Passages to the same effect are also found in the book of Joshua (see Josh. 16.10; 17.13).[51] These texts contradict any notion of a clear extermination policy.

Since the ban is mentioned in Judg. 1.17, one cannot argue that the author(s) of Judges 1 and 3, as opposed to the author(s) of Joshua, were not familiar with or did not support the concept of extermination as such. Rather, these texts may reflect a conscious choice on the side of the Israelites.

7. *The Use of the Term* חרם *in its Broader Context*

There are four additional observations that may help to understand the use of חרם in Deuteronomy 7 and 20 on the one hand and Joshua on the other. All these observations support a non-genocidal reading of the texts dealing with the conquest of Canaan.

a. The first attestation of the root חרם in the Hebrew Bible is found in Exod. 22.19 (in its verbal realization, ho.). The verse states that an Israel-ite who offers sacrifices to other gods must be punished by being 'banned'. This points again to the context of non-yahwistic cult practices that is also very important in Deuteronomy. Against this background, the ban must

---

50. This ground is almost not made visible in the battle reports. Whether the pos-sible diversity of views hinted at by the phrase 'for the most part' has to be connected with a diversity of authors, is a question that lies beyond the scope of this study.

In concordance with the interpretation presented here, Hubbard holds that the exam-ples of Rahab and the Gibeonites show that Yhwh is willing to grant exemption from the חרם-mandate; '[t]hose who acknowledge his greatness seem eligible for a waiver' (*Joshua*, p. 46; see also pp. 61, 201-202). This point is missed by Pitkänen, *Joshua*, p. 80.

51. Josh. 15.63 cannot without reservation be counted here, since in this instance the absence of expulsion or killing is explained by a lack of power of the Israelites to do so. It cannot be ruled out that this is also presupposed in Josh. 16.10 and 17.13. Cf. also Josh. 13.1-7.

primarily be understood as a punishment for serving other gods. This fits very well with the use of the term in Deuteronomy 7 and 20; on the other hand, we note that explicit connections between חרם and the Canaanites' idolatry are not made in Joshua.

b. In the first context in which the verb חרם appears in its hiphil form, the report on the clash with the Canaanite king of Arad in Numbers 21 (see Num. 21.2-3), one of the fundamental traits assumed for the conquest reports in Joshua is clearly extant: It is the Canaanite king who takes the initiative to go to war against Israel (see Num. 21.1). In this passage it is made explicitly clear that the ban is conditional, although the type of condition is of a different character than the one proposed for Joshua (and possibly Deuteronomy): If God gives the Canaanites of the region around Arad into their hands, then the Israelites will ban them.

c. In its first occurrence in the book of Deuteronomy, the root חרם (again in its verbal form) is used in the context of an ordinary battle (between Sihon—as the one who takes the initiative—and the Israelites, Deut. 2.34). This fits the observations made with respect to Joshua 10–11. Moreover, the passage relating the encounter with Sihon shows two additional parallels with the reports in Joshua: Sihon and his land are given (נתן) into the hands of the Israelites (Deut. 2.24); and Sihon's heart is hardened by Yhwh (Deut. 2.30). The next battle, with Og of Bashan (Deut. 3.1-7), follows the model of the preceding one, including the use of the term חרם in Deut. 3.6.[52] It is interesting to see that the encounter with Sihon begins with a peaceful message on the Israelites' side. It may be that this is imagined by the author to be a pattern followed by the Israelites also later, on the other side of the Jordan; Deut. 3.21 explicitly states that Yhwh will do to all the kings on the other side of the Jordan as he has done to Sihon and Og. Finally, we observe that both with respect to Sihon and Og, the execution of the חרם is restricted to the cities. This corresponds well with the restrictive nature of Deut. 20.16-17.

d. Deut. 13.16 speaks about the application of חרם to an Israelite city in a way that is reminiscent of Deut. 7.2. There are a number of additional lexical links between the two chapters. The close connections between Deuteronomy 13 and Deuteronomy 7 shed light on the concept of חרם in Deuteronomy 7: The context of cultic aberration by worshipping other gods is underlined. The parallels between the two texts may even be taken further: It is those who instigate the people of Yhwh to apostasy who must be annihilated, be they foreigners or Israelites.[53] This seems

---

52. The term does not appear in the parallel reports about the victories over Sihon and Og in Num. 21.21-31, 33-35. For a possible, though not compelling, explanation see Schmitt, *Der „Heilige Krieg"*, p. 94.

53. Similarly Merrill, 'The Case for Moderate Discontinuity', pp. 78, 83.

to imply that one of the main reasons why the Canaanites must be elim-
inated is the certainty of their vile intentions to lure the Israelites away
from their God.

It also becomes clear—in accordance with the events reported in Joshua
7—that the ban is not an institution directed at non-Israelites based on
ethnic discrimination, since it affects not only Canaanites, but indeed Isra-
elites as well.[54] The applicability of the חרם to fellow Israelites contributes
to render the label 'genocidal' problematic, since a genocide is usually not
directed at members of the in-group, even if their behaviour is at odds with
the expectations of the mainstream of the respective group.

8. *The Wider Context*

There are two points that need to be mentioned.

a. Lev. 18.28, according to which the Israelites will be vomited out by
the land as it happened to the Canaanites before them if they defile the
land as the Canaanites had done, in combination with the description of
the defeat of Israel and Judah with the ensuing deportation of more (in the
case of Israel) or less (in the case of Judah) large segments of the popu-
lation into exile as found particularly in the books of 2 Kings, Jeremiah
and Ezekiel, shows that mass expulsion and not annihilation is seen as the
fate that came down on the Canaanites. There are no clear reasons for the
assumption that Deuteronomy and Joshua differ substantially from this
view.

b. There is an important element of silence that connects the legal pas-
sages with the reports of the conquest: In neither case do we find a negation
of the human character of the opponents, a claim that the Canaanites are
only animals, demons, or the like, as is often the case in contexts of geno-
cide.[55] Nor is there any sign of God or the Israelites taking any pleasure in
the killing of the enemies.[56]

---

54. Thus also Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 189, 471; contra, e.g., Pitkänen, *Joshua*,
p. 84.

55. Similarly also Copan, 'Yahweh Wars', chap. 4. *Pace*, e.g., Hawk, 'The Truth',
pp. 130, 136; Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 77; Pitkänen, *Joshua*, pp. 79-80;
Rauser, '"Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive"', pp. 37-39; Seibert, *The Violence*,
p. 101. Positive evidence for the dehumanization of the enemy abounds in ancient
Assyria (see, e.g., Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, pp. 63-74) or in the case of the
Nazi-regime, to name just two outstanding examples.

56. This becomes particularly clear when the biblical texts are compared with, e.g.,
war descriptions in the annals of Middle- and Neo-Assyrian kings, where the brutal
treatment of the population of conquered cities is often given extensive space, with a
good number of details that are shocking to the modern reader.

9. *Conclusions*

Whether one finds 'genocidal' traits in the pentateuchal passages dealing with the occupation of the promised land or in the descriptions of the conquest in Joshua and Judges depends on the definition of the term 'genocidal'. Using a relatively narrow definition as proposed in the Introduction, one can hardly speak of a genocide. It is, however, clear, that lethal actions are *pre*scribed in Deuteronomy and *de*scribed in Joshua, related mainly to the concept of חרם.

All the pentateuchal passages under scrutiny point to the crucial importance of the notion of expulsion of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land; Yhwh promises to expel the Canaanites, and the Israelites are commanded to drive them out. The view that expulsion is more dominant than extermination is supported by the analogy of the threat found in Lev. 18.28, according to which the land will vomit out the Israelites should they behave as the Canaanites before them.

This expulsion takes on a concrete lethal character in Deuteronomy. The lethal dimension is related to the Israelites' actions, as opposed to God's own actions. Lethal actions are directed primarily against the rulers and the cities as the main representatives of the Canaanite religio-political system.

Lethal elements are widespread in the conquest reports in Joshua, and not fully absent from Judges. On only one occasion, however, is it Yhwh himself who is the direct cause of the enemies' death (Josh. 10.10-14). The execution of the ban is not depicted as a premeditated program of encompassing and systematic killing, but as part of ordinary warfare, with the initiative for the violent conflict generally lying on the side of the Canaanites. According to Josh. 11.20, the theological reason behind the Canaanites' choice to engage Israel in battle lies in Yhwh's hardening of their hearts.

The concept of חרם is firmly embedded in a cultic context. As far as the pentateuchal passages are concerned, it is connected with admonitions to abstain from non-yahwistic cults and to destroy non-yahwistic cult objects. This cultic dimension finds further support in Deuteronomy 13. The main goal of the expulsion and possible extermination of the Canaanites is the destruction of their cult, and the protection of the Israelites' identity and liberty. The harsh measures show that Canaanite idolatry is seen as extremely abominable. The חרם primarily serves to protect the Israelites from being insnared by the Canaanite cult and losing their independence; in addition, it also serves to exact punishment on the Canaanites for their abominations.

Both the pentateuchal texts and the reports in Joshua make it clear that the ban is nothing that can be used freely by the Israelites; it has its origin in God, and God retains the privilege to decide when it is applicable.

At several junctions within the book of Joshua, the execution of the ban is understood in a conditional way, and in some cases other procedures are chosen (Rahab, Gibeonites; Josh. 11.20; 16.10; 17.13). A conditional interpretation may be compatible with the legal texts themselves, based on the centrality of the snare-motif; if the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the promised land do not pose a danger to the identity of God's people and their independence, the main reason to expel or kill them is gone.

The applicability of the ban to apostate Israelites in Deuteronomy 13 shows that the motivation for the ban does not lie in ethnic otherness per se; neither is the use of violence connected with a general denigration and dehumanization of the non-Israelite other, and any indulgence in the use of violence is absent.

INDEX OF REFERENCES

OLD TESTAMENT

NEW TESTAMENT

Apocrypha

Pseudepigrapha

INDEX OF AUTHORS