

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF VIOLENCE IN OLD  
TESTAMENT NARRATIVE ART

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to offer a general analysis of the function of violence in Old Testament narrative art within a general discussion of violence. The reasons for this approach, rather than that of a focused analysis, are several.

Little has been written on the function of violence in literature. For example, Rollo May has devoted no more than three pages to the subject of violence in literature. His introduction is almost apologetic:

There must be something about some violence that meets a need in human beings, something that cannot be wholly "bad."-1-

Concerning violence in literature, May asks: "Is the violence ...inserted for shock value, horror, and titillation, or is it an integral part of the tragedy?" The matter is dropped, however, and May rushes on to his conclusion:

In tragedy we not only experience our own mortality but we also transcend it; the values that matter stand out more clearly.-2-

I believe May is correct, but how does this happen in biblical literature?

Secondly, practically nothing has been written on the function of violence in biblical literature. The field of biblical exegesis will prove to be an extremely disappointing place to search for material related to this topic. Either the topic is avoided altogether, is dealt with only tangentially, or, in the case of Christian theologians, is buried beneath a thick layer of Christology. The most popular books on Old Testament violence and warfare are decidedly Christocentric and nearly useless as far as the study of the literature is concerned.

Therefore, my approach to the topic will be first to look briefly at what I have found to be the most interesting reading on the subject of violence in order to define violence and to explore

how it functions in Old Testament literature. After surveying the topic and defining terms, I will briefly describe several violent scenes from the Old Testament, and attend to the violence in these stories by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. Does the text evaluate what the characters do?
2. Does the author or narrator offer any hints as to whether the characters' actions were right or wrong, i.e. does the author moralize?
3. Does the author provide information concerning what motivated the characters?
4. What are the limits of the violence contained in these passages?
5. What is the meaning of key violent words, phrases, and descriptions in these stories?

Finally I will offer reflections that may provide a background for further study of how violence functions in the literature of the Old Testament.

## I.

It is important to begin a discussion of violence in Old Testament literature with the understanding that Israel's distinctive view of everything contained in its sacred writings is derived from her historical experience. Whether the Israelite's pivotal historical event was the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, colonization, kingdom building or exile, is not a question of major concern here, for I will attempt to deal with the Old Testament as a whole and with the topic of the function of violence in the literature of the Old Testament in general.

If we assume that the sacred writings of Israel are derived from historical experience, then it is not logical to assume, as do Millard Lind and others, that the God of the Old Testament was more a god of miracle than a god of war, of spear and sword.-3-

Miracle does function in the literature, but its function is a minor one compared to the function of violence. For instance, in the story of Elijah and the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, the fact is that Elijah acts violently against everyone: against the prophets of Baal, against the state, and against his own people. Only later in the narrative does Elijah admit to himself (or shall we join in the rhetoric and say that God revealed it to him) that some of the people did in fact remain faithful. Elijah was not a military or political leader; he was a prophet at war with a violent world, with the hope of correcting the world situation. Strangely, there is little in the narrative to indicate that his motive was related to a desire for the attainment of any particular human good except the venting of his prophetic spleen. Violence is the key element here, not miracle. This particular violent act by Elijah happened at a particular time; that it followed a miracle indicates only that it is a specific act.

Another minor qualifier in the narrative is the Old Testament theological idea of promise. Idealistic promises of peace and prosperity for all in the Old Testament world, must be understood in the violent context in which they are found in the literature. As wonderful as such promises are, it is doubtful that such wishful thinking could have erased the memories of violence, which were a living memory and an ever present possibility to the people of Old Testament times.

One must be able to blend literary critical studies with historical findings. One historical finding is that Israel remained primarily in a position of military weakness throughout its history. Therefore, the idea of miracle provided an important metaphor when there was an occasional victory, but, as far as violence was concerned, the overwhelming experience of the Israelites in history was that of the defeated. We who live in the nuclear age (and now in the age of terrorism) would benefit greatly from such a clear understanding of the meaning of war to the defeated in our time.

The general point I wish to make is that the position one takes on the function of violence in Old Testament literature is primarily a matter of temperaments rather than theological differences. We live in a violent world. The writers of the Old Testament knew that and they made very few theological excuses for it. Their theological interests were in finding meaning in experiences and a measure of truth in a world of meaninglessness and lies. Their literature affirms a clear understanding of different kinds of violence. War stories are intermingled with the ragings of individuals, with deep psychological and spiritual violence against others, with sexual violence, with violence as a sign of incapacity and the inability to discern what one ought to do in a given situation. It is important to understand that violence is many things: it is hubris, it is fury, it is madness. However, as Jacques Ellul points out, "Violence is a single thing."-4- Violence is one thing, and yet it is complex.

With this in mind, it may be safe to say that the function of violence in literature is distinct from other literary devices.

In order to deal with violence in the real world we need to be realistic, not idealistic. To accept the fact that violence is real is to accept the fact that violence is natural and normal. If this seems scandalous then we are forced to admit a great mistake in our thinking; we have been mistaken in "thinking that what is 'natural' is 'good' and what is 'necessary' is 'legitimate'."-5-

What was natural and necessary in Israel is natural and necessary today: the fight for independence and for self worth is as real today as it ever was; it is too real to be dismissed as primarily a religious struggle. We will find this to be true in the literature under review and in the literature of the Bible in general.

## II.

What is violence? Rollo May claims that violence is understood, basically, as "an explosion of the drive to destroy that which is interpreted as a barrier to one' s self-esteem, movement, and growth."-6- He describes five varieties of violence. First is simple violence, which carries moral demands as it protests against impotent situations and seeks freedom from restrictions of conscience and responsibility.

Second is calculated violence such as it is found in revolutions where a situation is exploited and one capitalizes on the energy of others.

Third is fomented violence, the rabble rousing of the extreme right or left, which stimulates the feelings of impotence and frustration, felt by people at large.

The fourth is absentee violence, which each of us perpetuates by living in society and paying taxes.

Fifth is violence from above. The motive here is to protect or re-establish the status quo.-7-  
-8-

To May' s varieties of violence let us add Ellul' s laws of violence. "The first law of violence is continuity. Once you start using violence, you cannot get away from it. Violence expresses the habit of simplification of situations, political, social, or human." Once violence starts, rational dialogue is impossible.

"The second law of violence is reciprocity." ("All who take up the sword will die by the sword." - Matthew 26:52)

"The third law of violence is sameness." (See above.)

The fourth rule of violence is that "violence begets violence - nothing else."

"Finally the fifth rule of violence is this: the man who uses violence always tries to justify it and himself."-9-



### III.

Let us now, and very briefly, look at several extremely violent Old Testament texts.

#### JUDGES 6:1-8:35

Gideon is portrayed as a hero who responds to the cry of his people for help. At first Gideon renders violence to things (6:25), but violence renders violence. Later the Midianite chieftains are captured and executed and the men of Ephraim, who were motivated by Gideon to perpetrate this violence, parade around with the chieftains' severed heads. However, this story is not as matter-of-fact as those that follow. Gideon's motive is offered by the author.

For Gideon, victory in battle was not enough; revenge is described (8:16), and personal glimpses are offered of Gideon's psychological makeup, which clearly describe a personal, rather than religious or patriotic motive. Gideon was, in fact, avenging the death of his brothers (8: 18-19).

#### II. Samuel 13:1-20:26

The story of Absalom is an extremely complex story. Its complexity exceeds its violence. Its drama is greatly enhanced by both. The story involves domestic violence, political violence, war, psychological violence; you name it, it is in this story.

II. Samuel offers much more in the way of commentary than the other texts under consideration. This is not matter-of-fact reporting of violent events such as we will review in a moment. This is a great tragedy in the making in the midst of a truly violent world.

Absalom' s motives are included in the text; he has Amnon murdered not only because Amnon raped Tamar, but also for Absalom' s personal gain (sibling rivalry? 13:1-39). Included in the story is the suicide of Ahithophel (17:23) when his plan to defeat David is discovered.

David wants Absalom saved, but Joab kills Absalom in spite of David' s instruction. Joab is realistic and practical (19:1-8). He continues to strengthen his position by murdering Amasa (20:1-22) and soon gains complete command of the army and of the situation. But, as strong as David' s officials become, the cost of violence comes due. Violence begets violence. Soon the building of the Davidic Kingdom includes violence against the kingdom' s people themselves. The mention of forced labor along with the list of officials (20:24) hints at an insidious violence that will be judged in due time.

It is more than interesting that, with all the detailed study of events, very little is offered by the author in the way of hints as to whether the characters' actions are right or wrong. In this way, this court writer is much like other Old Testament writers. In the Absalom story we are invited to share in the motives of the characters in order to understand the characters, but we are not offered enough commentary to understand if the action of the character is right or wrong. There are moral questions raised by such events as the violence done to Tamar, but a greater violence involving more and more people is soon reported, which qualifies our feelings, even justifies them.

What are the limits of the violence in these passages? Apparently, none!

## I. Kings 22:1-53

This story follows what is described as three years of peace. It describes the death of Ahab in a masterful way. The king of Israel, Ahab, dislikes Micaiah because Micaiah never has anything nice to say about the king. This is understandable. Nevertheless, Ahab seeks Micaiah's advice. The king has to hammer the truth out of Micaiah, who, in turn, lies, doing great psychological violence to Ahab, who fears that Micaiah might be right with his bad news.

The double irony is that Jehoshaphat is spared and Ahab, the clever one, who set up Jehoshaphat to die, dies as a matter of coincidence (22:34). All this reporting leads to only a very brief credit to Jehoshaphat, who simply survives and rules. Ahab gets what he deserves, but without commentary. The reader is left with the feeling that he has read a great tale: too real to be fabricated, very captivating, but with all the conclusions left for the reader to construct on his or her own.

#### I. KINGS 17-II. KINGS 10 (Omitting I. Kings 20:1-34 & 22:1-53)

In the Elijah and Elisha narrative, which extends from I. Kings 17 to II. Kings 10, I have selected seven scenes that deal with different kinds of violence. The first is a scene that is filled with violence of different kinds. First would be the psychological violence and the threat of physical violence described when Jezebel turns on Elijah. Next, Elijah, motivated by fear rather than reason, becomes hostile toward himself. Next, we have the violent metaphors derived from the natural environment, which are present with the Lord, but which do not "contain" the Lord. Nevertheless, the Lord confronts Elijah with a violent message; the still small voice demands the slaughter of all the Lord's enemies.

This is an extremely violent passage, filled with both real and threatened violence. The miraculous is an integral part of the writer' s method in this text, and yet the impact of the narrative comes through the violence; the setting is violent and the narrative indicates that there is more violence to come.

The text does not evaluate the action; it only reports it. The author does not moralize. We do find a real reason for Elijah' s motivation; he fears for his life. Strangely, in spite of fear, which leads to flight from Jezebel, he manages to have enough fortitude for an encounter with the Lord, which is described with far more violence than the events that led to his flight from Jezebel. It is strange that Elijah' s fear is limited to a very real fear for his life as it is threatened by another human being, for Elijah displays another personality when he encounters the Lord in a natural setting. Perhaps this violence, the literal violence of theophany, is not quite so real and therefore not quite so threatening?

When this scene ends, the stage is set for more and greater violence to come.

## II. KINGS 3:1-27

This passage deals with a complex mixture of violences. First, there is the violence of war; the Israelites routinely slaughter the Moabites and continue raging as they violate the land, according to the Lord' s will as interpreted by Elijah. The king of Moab is distraught and chooses, in desperation, to do violence to his own son; he sacrifices his heir to the throne in order to win the favor of his god and win the battle. Ironically, the Israelites, who have, by now, learned that human sacrifice is wrong, react to this terrible event with shock that finds its expression in fear and flight. Violence is done to the collective conscience of the Israelites to the extent that they give up their

victory and return home. Violence has begotten more extreme violence and the ensuing senseless loss of life has disgusted all. The massive loss of life suddenly shows no clear advantage for anyone. The spiral of violence has climbed above all human reason to a point of no return.

The reader is left with the task of pondering such violence on his or her own. The scene is simply dropped and is followed by an interlude, without any commentary, as if the writer found himself bereft of tools to deal with the violence he had just described or reported. The featured motivation is that caused by the horror of human sacrifice, not the will of the Lord, nor the power of miracle. The human violence overpowers the text and the author drops the matter flat without any commentary.

## II. KINGS 8:1-6

In the midst of war and revolution we have a brief but interesting passage, which describes the natural violence of drought and famine. Indeed, the entire universe seems to be full of violence of every kind and the stage is set for Elisha to foment revolution that will fulfill the third command of the "still small voice."

## II. KINGS 8:7-15

Elisha foments violence against his own people by fomenting violence against the king of Syria. Elisha lies and drives Hazael to commit violence against his king who is already sick.

In this section, the will of God is clouded by excessive violence, which is simply reported with little commentary other than ambiguous references to the will of God. Indeed, the will of God

seems to be, simply, that which happened. The conclusion of this author is not that God, through any act of will, brought about these events, but rather, more simply, in retrospect, that experience determines the will of God. The will of God is perceived through experience and not through a "still small voice" in the present. The "still small voice" is an afterthought, realized after the outcome of violence is realized and reported.

## II. KINGS 9:30-37

Elisha foments revolution again and we learn of brutal assassinations; Joram is shot out of his chariot. Ahaziah is fatally injured in the same manner and Jezebel's demise is described in more vivid detail than even such a violent setting would justify. However, the reader may very well conclude his or her reading of this passage with a great sigh of relief. Jezebel gets what was coming to her. Sanity is temporarily restored by an interruption in the spiral of violence. Violence is far from ended, but this interruption does help imply that there is some justice going on in the midst of the violence. This alone seems to support the idea that the will of the Lord is operative somewhere in this violent world, but without commentary, leaving much for the reader to ponder.

## II. KINGS 10:1-36

The purge described in this scene exceeds in violence. Jehu wipes out the entire leadership of the land. A later prophet would condemn this butchery (Hosea 1:4-5), but, for now, it is reported as the will of the Lord, or shall we say, as fact, as reality, as so.

## REFLECTIONS

In ancient Israel, war and violence of every kind were a harsh reality. Written from the realistic position of underdog, however, the literature of the ancient Israelites offers interesting insights in the way of understanding the necessity and naturalness of violence. Because of the absence of moralizing and the absence of detailed commentary on what appears to our modern eyes as excessive violence in the literature of the Old Testament, we may conclude that an overall lesson to be learned from this literature of the underdog, is that we must consciously remember the facts of history. We must avoid the tragedy of forgetting. We must remember and know in the active present what it can mean to forget the lessons of war in particular and the experiences of violence in general. We are to remain consciously aware of these lessons and experiences; we are to remember and never forget. We who live in the nuclear age must seek ways to clarify this truth to our understanding. We must remember the lessons learned from the violence of the past, for humanity can no longer afford the luxury of learning these things anew.

The reality of violence makes it necessary to remember; remembering the violence of the past and of the present is one of the few ways in which we can humanize the fate of humankind. Such an understanding is not merely an intellectual exercise: it is part of life in a wholistic sense. Each of us has probably experienced violence as we matured and we continue to experience it and are effected by the lives of those around us who experience it: domestic violence, violence among schoolyard peers, violence in sports, violence in military service, violence in the work place, etc.

On a larger scale, there are lessons in violence that the entire human race must remember collectively. I clearly remember participating, during my undergraduate years as a musician, in a program concerning the Holocaust held at the new Madison Square Garden in New York City. A

cantata was commissioned and the scheduled premier performance was to be the highlight of the evening' s activities. The chorus and orchestra members waited and waited to go on stage. We waited for several hours past our scheduled time. At one point I asked a Jewish colleague why there was so much dwelling on gruesome films and speeches. He replied, "Because, if we ever forget, it could happen again."

In the age in which we live, the distinct mental exercises of remembering and forgetting often become confused. The saying, "forgive and forget," seems to have evolved from adage to state of mind, causing an extremely uneasy marriage of predications. Indeed, the advice is suspect. Its primary sources in literature are a demented fighter of windmills and a rash old king who went mad - Cervantes's Don Quixote and Shakespeare' s King Lear.

When practicing humankind' s most extraordinary acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is especially necessary to remember with accuracy and sensitivity. I recall how, years ago, President Ronald Reagan caused an uproar among Jewish leaders by insisting upon visiting a cemetery in Bitberg, Germany. The cemetery was, in the minds of a few presidential advisors, a place that represented war. A presidential visit to a former enemy' s cemetery would be, for those who crave simple solutions to complex problems, a gesture of reconciliation. However, in addition to regular soldiers and civilians, Nazi troops were buried at Bitberg. Therefore, the simple solution did not work. As one newspaper editor noted, the memories of Bitberg "still rant and hunt," because they are not limited to war.

Day after day, as underdogs, we experience things that must not be forgotten lest we be required to experience them again, if not directly then indirectly through their negative consequences.



It is, of course, extremely important to remember the good accomplishments of humankind in positive ways so that humanity may progress with an awareness of the grace of God. It is likewise important to remember the evil consequences of humankind's inhumanity in positive ways so that humanity may progress with direction and perspective, i.e. progress in a deliberate way toward good and away from evil. Without an acute awareness of the presence of evil as a given, it is difficult for the good of the future to be projected deliberately and with determination as a human possibility, for it is impossible to describe the starting place. Another way of reasoning may be to say that awareness, even awareness of good, without direction is merely opinion, and that opinion can be understood as something static that blocks human progress.

A second important assumption here is that humanity cannot fully understand what it means to overcome evil with good unless the two terms, good and evil, are equally well defined. Although, historically, good seems to have been as thoroughly defined theoretically in terms of hope as evil has been defined realistically in terms of human experience, it behooves enlightened humanity to make an effort toward equal methods of definition. Clearly, more good needs to be experienced in this world and in this life, and more theory needs to be developed concerning the causes and effects of the very real evil of this world.

Therefore, let us begin by accepting the possibility that violence may be natural and, perhaps, even necessary in the human condition as it has evolved thus far. Let us accept the fact that violence may benefit the winner of a struggle. But let us also accept the underlying theology of scripture, which has evolved not from the apparent victors but from the defeated who realized that violence is inevitable in the real world. Acceptance must be the first step; we must accept the obligation of realizing the existence of violence. This does not mean that we approve of violence or desire to understand it as good or legitimate.

Remarkably, this fact has little to do with faith. The lack of moralizing and the lack of commentary concerning the violent incidents described in Old Testament literature supports this position. The logic is simple. If I should fall into violence (if I am assaulted, if I am conscripted, if I am required by law to pay taxes a high percentage of which is used to purchase military weapons of destruction), if I should fall off a cliff, I am obeying certain natural laws; I am obeying the “givenness” of violence, the “givenness” of gravity. These have very little to do with my faith except as they are part of a theological understanding of an original falling. However, as Ellul has claimed, the better we understand that violence is a given - a part of the created order of things, that violence "is necessary, indispensable, inevitable, the better shall we be able to reject and oppose it."-10-

...exposing the reality of violence as an animal reaction, as a "necessity," is automatically to reduce the use of violence.-11-

This is exactly what scripture does. It explores and exposes violence by describing and reflecting upon violent historical events. Through its lack of moralizing and lack of commentary and exposition, lack of rationalizing and lack of supporting ideology, it provides the reader with the opportunity to reject and oppose the violence. Perhaps we can grin when Jezebel meets her long over-due demise, but is there not also pity upon reading of her violent death? We understand that David had to tolerate Joab; it was a matter of practicality and necessity. But the pain of reading, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! ... O Absalom, my son, my son!" strikes us to the very depths of our being.

Many have tried to explain the violence of the Old Testament, to apologize for it, to throw a Christological grid over it, and to misuse violent narratives of the Old Testament in clever ways in order to condone violence in this or that situation. But perhaps a simpler lesson is to be learned and

a basic truth is to be revealed through an inspired literature which transcends the limitations of intellectual understanding in general and theological understanding in particular, something the author of Job discovered and sought to communicate - the universal truth that there is a great mystery in the actions of God with God' s people.

However, if God created all, then God created the human emotions and instincts that produce the phenomenon called violence, just as God created the natural forces that produce violence in the natural world. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that even violence offers the opportunity to increase one' s understanding of the will of God, instead of continually decreasing it. Thus, the writers of the Old Testament included accounts of their very real experiences with violence! This was not inserted for shock value, for horror and titillation, but as an integral part of the drama of life:

The aesthetic ecstasy of the violence in great literature brings man face to face with his own mortality.-12-

Only upon realizing this can we deal realistically with such matters as human dignity and the integrity of human relationships which must be dealt with on two levels simultaneously. The brilliant and creative literature of the Old Testament does this with alarming clarity. Hopefully, further studies, especially in the area of literary critical analysis, will pave the way to more in-depth applications of the truths borne by biblical literature into the violent age in which we live and move and have our being.

For we move - each - in two worlds: the inward of our own awareness, and an outward of participation in the history of our time and place. The scientist and historian serve the latter: the world, that is to say, of things "out there," where people are interchangeable and language serves to communicate information and commands. Creative artists, on the other hand, are mankind' s wakeners to recollection: summoners of our outward mind to conscious contact with ourselves, not as participants in this or that morsel of history, but as spirit, in the consciousness of being. Their task, therefore, is to communicate directly from one

inward world to another, in such a way that an actual shock of experience will have been rendered: not a mere statement for the information or persuasion of a brain, but an effective communication across the void of space and time from one center of consciousness to another.-13-

## NOTES

1. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*, 170.
2. *ibid.*, 172.
3. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 23.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Violence*, 99.
5. *ibid.*, 127.
6. May, *op. cit.*, 182.
7. *ibid.*, 186.
8. Ellul states that the state is founded by violence and maintained only by violence. The fact is, however, that, as Ellul and May would agree, I am sure, violence will sustain all situations. Both living in anarchical situations and living in an established state offer the opportunity for experiencing violence. As Phyllis Tribble mentions in *Texts of Terror* on the story of betrayal, rape, torture, murder and dismemberment of an unnamed woman in Judges 19:1-30, the Deuteronomic excuse is: "In those days there was no king in Israel." The only clear law of violence is that violence begets violence in every situation.
9. Ellul, *op. cit.*, 94-100.
10. *ibid.*, 130.
11. *ibid.*, 142.
12. May, *op. cit.*, 171.
13. Joseph Campbell. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, Vol. 4. (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 92.

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