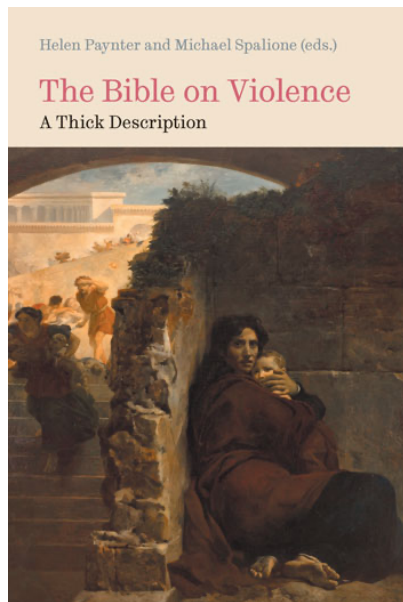


RBL 02/2022



Helen Paynter and Michael Spalione, eds.

The Bible on Violence: A Thick Description

Bible and the Modern World 73; Sheffield Institute for
Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies 1

Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2020. Pp. xv + 374. Hardcover.
£70.00. ISBN 9781910928707.

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The volume under review is a collection of papers presented at a symposium in 2019. One of the coeditors, Helen Paynter, provides an introduction to the collection under the title “Towards a Thick Description of Biblical Violence.” It contains a useful list of questions that can/need to be asked of biblical texts and of the various methodologies that can/need to be applied in order to address these questions.

The first essay, James Crossley’s “John Ball and the Bible on Violence in the 1381 English Uprising,” is a primarily historically oriented study that shows that some gospel passages, together with descriptions of the early church in Acts 2 and 4, were used by the insurrectionists.

The second essay, and the last in the section “Appropriation of the Bible for Violence,” is Matthew Rowley’s “On the Impossibility of Imitating Biblical Violence.” He points out that, while the Parliamentary forces in the context of the battle of Naseby in 1645 and its aftermath made direct connections between themselves and the victorious Israelites under Moses and Joshua, Roger Williams rejected such types of application. According to Williams, claims to be God’s new elected people are unsubstantiated: The accounts of killings in the Hebrew Bible are inimitable because the miracles with which they are intertwined would need to be present to justify imitation.

The third contribution, opening the section “Reading Biblical Violence,” is “The Midrash of Lilith: A Christian Adoption of Jewish Feminist Hermeneutical Response to Violence in Women’s

Narratives,” by Charlotte Trombin. Her essay is the first that is interested primarily in women’s issues. She posits that feminist interpretative methods must be applied to make the suppressed voices of women in the Bible (and the present) heard and to confront structural oppression of women. She sees the midrash of Lilith as an early example of this approach. Following the work of three Jewish feminists, she proposes a Christian version of this hermeneutics and develops her own midrash of the description of the Great Whore in Rev 17. She claims that God must be confronted where he appears to be condoning male oppression of women. Many of her assumptions are open to critique. It is, to name just one example, not the case that the biblical God allows violence to happen only when the victims are women.

In “Militance, Motherhood, and Masculinisation: How Is Gender Constructed in Judges 4 and 5?,” Will Moore argues that Deborah, as well as Jael, are complex characters that both conform and subvert traditional definitions of biblical women.

In Hannah Kate Capey’s “‘He Did Not Know When She Lay Down or When She Rose’: Lot’s Daughters as Resourceful Tricksters,” the topic of violence is only indirectly addressed, in the exegetical comments on the first part of Gen 19 and its counterpart in Judg 19. The main focus is on the passage in which Lot’s daughters trick their father into producing children for them. According to Capey, the actions of Lot’s daughters are depicted in a positive light and must be seen in parallel to Tamar’s in Gen 38 and Ruth’s. A moralistic reading of the incest account needs to be replaced by one that prioritizes the etiological and genealogical concerns of the text.

Rather tangential again to the topic of violence is Margaret Blakey’s “Redeeming Peninnah: Exploring Issues of Power, Privilege and Victimhood in 1 Samuel 1 and 2.” Her aim is to go beyond the viewpoint presented by the biblical narrator and to read the story of Hannah and Peninnah from the latter’s perspective. One of the fundamental presuppositions of this interpretative strategy is that God is not to be aligned with the narrator. While Hannah is to be commended for her willingness to act on her own initiative, she fails in the sense that her reversal of the tables creates a new victim, instead of improving the situation for Peninnah. The empathetic reader must recognize Peninnah’s victimhood and seek reparative justice for her. As in the case of Trombin, the core assumptions informing this essay are open to critique. If one departs from reading a text through the narrator’s lens, the question needs to be addressed as to who will function as a controlling authority against an interpreter’s inclination to follow his or her preconceptions or the zeitgeist.

In “Between the Song of Songs and Lamentations: Violence in the Divine-Human Relationship,” Deborah Kahn-Harris sees Song of Songs and Lamentations as flip sides of the same coin, portraying the extreme ends of the emotional range of relationships, from desire to violent destruction. The two texts are also related by the fact that both contain images of violent, humiliating control over women. A God who commits acts of violence because of his “lovesick

need for exclusivity ... is deeply unhealthy” (154). There is some overlap with the approaches of Trombin and Blakey, and accordingly the same types of questions can be raised.

In “No Condemnation? The Old Testament’s Puzzling Treatment of Persian Violence,” Peter Hatton argues that the Achaemenid Empire was no less cruel than its predecessors but that this reality is hardly acknowledged in the Hebrew Bible. Special attention is given to Esth 9, which is interpreted as an “apotropaic fable” (167).

The best study, in my view, is Steve Carter’s “A Charter for Domestic Violence? The Subordination of Slaves and Wives in 1 Peter.” Carter investigates the calls for subordination to slaves and wives and demonstrates through careful historical exegesis that the question posed in the title of his article must be answered in the negative. As opposed to other contributions, this essay focuses on an attempt to try to understand the ancient text from within its own historic parameters and refrains from evaluations based on modern assumptions of what is ethically acceptable.

In his “A Nonviolent Reading of Violent Texts: An Introduction into Three Recent Anabaptist Approaches,” Daniël Drost provides a brief introduction to the interpretative strategies of Howard Yoder, J. Denny Weaver, and Gregory Boyd in their dealing with violent biblical texts. He argues that only Yoder is able to avoid Marcionite tendencies.

Charlotte Moore’s “You Can Pull People Out of the Fire—But Why Did It Start in the First Place? Locating Grenfell between the Powers and the Cross” opens the section “The Bible in Conversation with Modern Violence.” Moore explains that the burning of a council-owned tower block in Grenfell in June 2017, which left seventy-two people dead, can be directly linked to austerity measures set in place by successive conservative governments. However, she also observes that scapegoating individuals does not shed sufficient light on the deeper dimensions of such an event. Rather, it is the concept of the Powers, viewed through the interpretative lenses of Walter Wink and René Girard, that points to the collective social and spiritual mechanisms that help provide a more comprehensive analysis of what Moore calls structural violence; at the same time, the cross is identified as the means by which these Powers have been and still are defeated. This essay is a rather intriguing combination of interesting social/spiritual explorations with interpretations of current events and social structures that look arbitrary.

Similar comments can be made in regard to Michael Spalione’s “‘I Will Hear Their Cry’: On Land and the Pilgrim Church,” whose topic is “the moral significance of human interaction with land” (218). Spalione stresses the importance of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants and the definition of the church as a community of pilgrims as foundations on which to build a responsible ethics (of the land). While his critique of supersessionism looks well-founded to me, his rejection of the modern nation-state seems to be based on a lack of apprehension of the various and complex dimensions of the issue; the same is true for his statements about immigration. It is not difficult to

imagine how the combination of the claim that the church is a political body with the denial of a positive creational function of nationhood may lead to problematic results when applied on the ground. On the other hand, some of his biblical readings and analyses of the current situation are insightful.

The last contribution in this section is Peter King's, "Sunday School Hero or Suicide Bomber? Reading Samson Responsibly." King opens by pointing to the twofold reception of the story of Samson's death, one positive, beginning in Heb 11 and dominating even into the modern era, the other more recent and negative. King advocates for a critical reading where the parallels between Samson's final act and the actions of modern suicide bombers are acknowledged; dangerous tendencies to put us versus them need to be overcome, by overcoming prejudice and celebrating diversity (see 255). Part of this new approach is to read the Bible through the lens of the victims, such as the Canaanites or the Philistines. While some important questions are raised in this essay, the answers provided are not satisfactory, in my estimation.

The last three contributions deal with the topic of sexual violence. They are all agreed that generally, in churches, sexual violence against women is not sufficiently exposed or denounced. While this point seems valid, a definition of what constitutes sexual violence would be needed to add precision to the debate. Monica Jones, in her "Re-identifying the Sexual Violence of the Bible: A Critical Reading of Past Commentary and its Support of Rape Myth within Christian Teaching," highlights the biblical texts that should be used to bring the topic of sexual violence against women to the forefront. Jayme R. Reaves and David Tombs, in "#MeToo Jesus: Naming Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse," support the argument that the passion narratives depict Jesus himself as a victim of sexual abuse and elaborate on the importance of this reading to address issues of sexual violence in the church. Lastly, Valerie Hobbs, in "Rape Culture in Sermons on Divorce," notes that in most cases rape culture is promoted rather than confronted in the sermons she has investigated.

Overall, the map presented in Paynter's introduction is covered in this volume in only limited ways. The book suffers from a lack of definition of "violence"; in many cases, connections to common understandings of violence are only tangential. At least a couple of the essays do, however, help one to understand the Bible better, and a good number are interesting in the sense that they open a window to comprehending the "winds of the time." In the majority of the contributions, especially those that deal with the ethical assessment of biblical texts, modern views are uncritically taken as arbiters to judge these texts. Readers who are interested in a more historically oriented analysis of the relevant biblical material may turn, for example, to *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, which I coedited with Hallvard Hagelia; for philosophical-apologetic questions, Paul Copan's works are still an important resource. Nevertheless, the editors and contributors of the volume under review deserve our thanks for bringing important questions to the table.