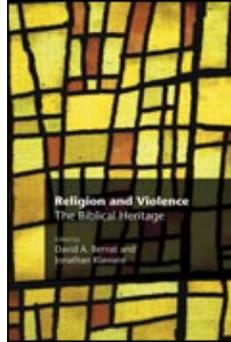


# ○ REVIEW OF DAVID A. BERNAT AND JONATHAN KLAWANS, EDS., *RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: THE BIBLICAL HERITAGE*

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The essays which make up this book began as papers to a conference held in Boston in 2006. In the preface, the editors declare that the theme at hand is ‘perhaps the most pressing issue facing biblical scholarship today’ (ix). Given this strong assertion, which many in the field would acknowledge is correct, this release is a timely response to the matter of violence, religion and its sacred texts.

There can be no question that the bible is a violent text. One does not need to read very far to find the first reported murder (Gen 4), quickly overshadowed by god’s annihilation of the created order (Gen 7). What follows is a catalogue of violent activity, often purely human in expression but also featuring from time to time, the exercise of divine violence. At other points we read of divine exhortation to violence (Num 25:16) and the conquest of Canaan features Yhwh fighting with and for Israel (the *herem*), leaving (ideally) nothing in their wake. The Psalms feature often graphic images of violence (e.g. Ps 137:9) and the prophetic corpus which closes the First Testament is punctuated by shockingly violent fantasy.

Dismissing all of this as a feature of the ancient world does nothing to explain the equally violent nature of the New Testament, with, amongst others, the gospel writers’ analogizing of the atonement paradigm for the crucifixion of Jesus, the supposed divine slaying of Ananais and Sapphira (Acts 5) and the continuing prophetic obsession with violence found in Revelation which couches Christian vindication in the most violent terms. There is no question; violence is a problem across the entirety of the biblical tradition.

A difficulty confronting this type of publication, bringing different thinkers into conversation around a theme, is a difference in definition of terms. At times there is some variance from chapter to chapter in regards to what exactly is covered under this term ‘violence’. Nonetheless, the writers identify a significant danger; that canonized violence, whether imaginary or real, has been and continues to be a prescription for violent activity (13). It is this distinction, between

imaginary and real, which is perhaps the greatest concern. What has been born in the world of fantasy has been, and continues to be manifested in the material world. Surprisingly, not all the writers take up the issue of the use of the bible as a tool or vindication of violence. Yet, given that the images of 9/11 and the religious rhetoric that surrounded it from all corners of the monotheistic world still burn in our minds, it emerges as a major theme.

In the opening essay, Ziony Zevit explores the Hebrew bible, searching for an ideology of violence expressed through vocabulary and symbol. He finds that while it is true that the historical Israel engaged in wars of great violence, there was no celebration of these acts in themselves and no great reverence for her heroes of war. This is not to say victory was not celebrated, but rather that violence itself was not esteemed as it was in other ancient cultures (36).

S. Tamar Kamionkowski begins by reminding us that the link between religion and violence is very much a part of social consciousness since the events of 9/11 (38). In doing so she reminds us of our social responsibility as scholars, to engage in this public discourse with both honesty and integrity as well as awareness to the fact that our work can influence the public debate. Key to this is to understand the relationship between the prophet's work (her area of examination) and the cultural violence embedded in the biblical world, but also our own relationship to our world with its own embedded cultural violence. Differentiating between these distinctly incongruous paradigms will open new understandings of the ancient text (46), rather than the persistent blaming of the (sacred) text for today's problems.

The third paper by Stephen A. Geller starts with the tragedy of 9/11 and the claims surrounding those events as 'religious violence'. Speaking of the imagery of violence in the Old Testament, Geller reminds us that it is too simplistic to conclude that the images of violence, particularly through the prophetic material creates the danger of literal violence. This distances him from some of the other writers contributing to the volume who do identify this as an area of concern. Nonetheless, he suggests that it is the case that literalists are more likely to become religiously violent. Martyrdom is seen as a way of bringing the world closer to the book, that is, an experience of the divine. (55). The events of 9/11, surrounded by the rhetoric of martyrdom was a betrayal of an ancient text because literalism fails to take texts seriously. The text is not a portal into the true reality of paradise as the terrorists may have dreamed; rather, the events were a window into a horrible 'anti-reality' of chaos (56).

The fourth contributor, David P. Wright studies similarities between the Covenant Code of Exodus 20-23 alongside the Laws of Hammurabi, particularly as they relate to Homicide, Talion, Vengeance and Psych-Economic satisfaction. While the similarities between these two law codes have long been recognized with an assumption that the Israelite code was based on the Mesopotamian code, Wright suggests that the Covenant Code represents not an attempt at legislation, but rather an ideological challenge to Assyrian hegemony (58). The presentation of material makes a strong case, solving inconsistencies and providing compensations for victims and their families. These 'improvements' serve an ideological purpose, and create a more coherent and consistent body of legislation.

Turning to the New Testament, Lawrence M. Wills reads the gospels alongside *Life of Aesop* and finds grounds to suggest the gospels as cult narratives presenting the story of the death of a hero. Greek and Roman traditions contain elements which are present in the gospel accounts; unjust death, the concept of sacrifice (often using the imagery of a sacrificed animal), the rejection or forsaking of the hero by their own people, continuing benefits for the living following the

death of the hero and so on (84). Willis then charts the life of significant Israelite figures and finds a Jewish hero tradition into which the Jesus story clearly fits and which a first century audience would recognize (99).

Jennifer Wright Knust examines Justin Martyr's *Dialogue* and the way in which Justin uses it to define 'real Christians' as opposed to heretics or Jews, itself an act of violence. The Jewish scriptures are wrenched away from Judaism and 'Christianized' for a new type of believer. (113) Justin's work defines two types of violence; violence against Jews was divine punishment for their guilt in the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus is viewed not as a shameful thing, but a sacrifice borne manfully as Christ's true followers now must follow. The violence which was suffered by 'real Christians' was a temporary lesson, endured with 'manliness' (in doing so, Justin feminizes Judaism as well). In doing so some deaths are irrelevant and deserved while others are condemned, to be overturned by a coming movement of God who will vindicate the 'true' believers (113).

David Frankfurter closes the presentations with an examination of sectarianism. Looking at 2 Thessalonians, 1 John and Revelation he identifies the key theme of identification of group boundaries on a cosmic scale, with the emphasis on the sanctity of the insiders pitted against the enmity of the rest of the world. These things are combated by isolation from the world and the imposition of high purity standards. Comrades who fall away are the ultimate enemy because of their potential influence on the enclave. The apocalyptic fantasy which results revolves around the demonization of the outsiders (including the label *anti-Christ*) followed by vision of their destruction (115). The use of such texts across history is apparent in enclave groups and other sectarian groups which have often acted out this fantasy to devastating personal effect. In carrying out acts of violence, enclave members see themselves as actors, initiating God's plan, being a part of God's vengeance and in doing so, distance themselves from the violence (128).

In some concluding reflections Stephen Marini suggests that the world may never be free from religious violence because violence is an integral part of religion (133). These are sobering words, particularly for those of us who approach the bible as 'our' religious text. Can it really be that our 'religion' is inherently, inescapably violent? Marini suggests a mass recasting of biblical religion that articulates the biblical notions of universal peace and justice (133), that peace be proclaimed (!) against those who would use claims of violence against each other, that metaphors of violence be utterly effaced from the teaching and worship of God's people (134). It is a time he suggests, to dream new dreams. It is this element, this challenge which points the way forward for biblical scholars.