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A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE? THE BIBLE ON VIOLENCE, SUFFERING, AND HOPE

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Abstract. The essay explores the troubling yet central role of violence in the Bible. First, it outlines how violence appears across biblical narratives – ranging from personal to mass violence, both physical and psychological, and often with divine involvement. Four analytical axes are proposed: the phenomenology of violence, its spatial dimensions (human, divine, satanic), the agents/victims involved (including divine actors), and its ethical justifications or theological explanations. Special attention is given to the Book of Revelation. Its interpretations vary – from metaphorical and redemptive readings to critical and feminist critiques that view its message as tyrannical or dangerous. Despite its disturbing elements, Revelation is ultimately framed within the Christian drama of Christ's sacrificial death, cosmic salvation, and eschatological hope.

Keywords: biblical violence, divine justice, theodicy, Revelation, apocalyptic literature, sacred texts and war, soteriology, eschatology.

It was in October 2006 that I first visited the Babeș-Bolyai University, the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology in Cluj. I had passed by the city long before, in 1979, when traveling by train to Bucharest from Vienna. In 2006 I had been invited to give a lecture and to get to know the Centre for Biblical Studies in Cluj that had opened not long before. As it happened, my visit coincided with that of another New Testament scholar. Ulrich Luz, of the University of Bern, received an honorary doctorate from the Babeș-Bolyai University at the proposal of the

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Faculty of Orthodox Theology. I was fortunate to attend the session without even dreaming that this honour would one day be bestowed upon me as well. Later on I returned to Cluj more than once for conferences and for meetings in the Centre for Biblical Studies. Some may consider the topic of my lecture perhaps rather inappropriate or at least unusual for this festive occasion. I do not think of myself as a violent man. The choice of my topic was inspired by that of the international colloquium that was held here in June which for health reasons I was forced to attend online.[2]

Books (like people) come with expectations. Sacred books come with high expectations about the message they bring and the characters that feature in it. It should then not be a surprise that so many – both faithful readers of such books who try to live by the rules and message they contain and those who are only vaguely familiar with their contents – are puzzled, or actually deeply troubled, by the fact that books considered to be sacred contain so many stories of utter violence. This is true for the Jewish and for the Christian Bible, but also for the Qur'an[3] and for the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two great epics in Hindu

2 *The Reception of Violent Biblical Texts Within and Beyond the Canon*, *26–28 June 2024*, (WUNT), edited by Tobias Nicklas – Dariya Syroid – Taras Tymo – Korinna Zamfir, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming.

3 See, by way of example, the famous Surat 47 ("Muhammad"), a most polemical text that is probably put together from different traditions. In Surat 47.4 scholars have read the call of the prophet mercilessly to massacre the unbelieving Meccans and in 47.35 a critique of those partisans of the prophet who looked for ways to appease the situation after the victory at Badr. For a short comment, see Paul Neukirchen, "Sourate 47 Muhammad (Muhammad)", in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi – Guillaume Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens. III. Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique. Sourates 27 à 114*, Paris: Cerf, 2019, 1499–1509. From a (mostly) socio-political perspective, Donald Holbrook, "Using the Qu'ran to Justify Terrorist Violence: Analysing Selective Applications of the Qu'ran in English-Language Militant Islamist Discourse", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4 (2010) 15–28; Shannon Dunn – Rosemary B. Kellison, "At the Intersection of Scripture and Law: Qu'ran 4:34 and Violence against Women", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2010) 11–36; Hakan Coruh, "Refuting the Extremist Interpretations of the Text and the Prophetic Traditions: The Case of Qu'ran 2:256", in Fethi Mansouri – Zuleyha Keskin (eds.), *Contesting the Theological Foundations of Islamism and Violent Extremism* (Middle East Today), London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 35–51; Marc-Antoine Pérosue de Montclos – Camille Noûs, "Écoles coraniques, djihad et violence 'terroriste' dans le nord du Nigeria", *Cultures & Conflits* 117 (2020) 97–114; Kübra Özcan, "Hermeneutical

tradition that both contain long sections about endless wars, in the former of the two a war between cousins.[4] The presence of violent scenes and characters in sacred books has led some to conclude that violence is inherit to such literature and can best be countered by simply excluding such passages from these books.[5] Limiting myself to the Christian Bible in what follows I will touch upon three aspects.

Defining violence

A complete library has been written on the topic of violence in the Bible, but only fairly recently biblical scholars have turned to other relevant disciplines to help define the notion of "violence". In surveying the biblical evidence one is, I think, on the one hand, entitled to stretch the range of what qualifies as violent actions as broad as possible, in order not to underestimate its role in the book, and on the other, compelled to distinguish between several axes or levels on which violence is played out, in order to bring some structure in the amount of evidence that can be cited. Four such axes and their interaction should be mentioned.

A first way to organise the evidence is to construct a phenomenology of violence. The Bible tells of all sorts of violence. It speaks of historically

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and Exegetical Approaches to the Concepts of Peace and Violence in the Qu'ran", in Nina Käsehage (ed.), *Keeping Peace in Troubled Times: Perspectives from Different Disciplines on War and Peace* (Contributions to International Relations), Cham: Springer, 2024, 87–98.

4 Cf. Tamar C. Reich, "Sacrificial Violence and Textual Battles: Intertextual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata", *History of Religions* 41 (2001) 142–169; Steven J. Rosen (ed.), *Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*, Hampton: Deepak, 2002; Raj Balkaran – Walter A. Dorn, "Violence in the 'Valmiki Ramayana': Just War Criteria in an Ancient Indian Epic", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012) 659–690; Simon Brodbeck, "Violence and Peace in the Mahabharata and Ramayana,", in Maria Power – Helen Paynter (eds.), *Violence and Peace in Sacred Texts: Interreligious Perspectives*, Cham: Springer, 2023, 9–28. Note also the connection with contemporary history in Roshni Sengupta, "Iconography of Violence in Televised Hinduism: The Politics of Images in the Mahabharata", *Continuum* 31 (2017) 150–161.

5 See the argument in Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Qu'ran*, London: Continuum, 2005. The book was received with mixed feelings, as one can imagine.

documented events,[6] (perceived) forms of violent acts,[7] and imagined or

6 Not necessarily as an historian would do. To mention just a few examples: The conquest of the Land of Israel did not happen in every respect as described in the Old Testament, but traces of the conflicts that it caused are met in the Mesha stone inscription (ca. 830 BCE) that begins with a reference by King Mesha (named in 2 Kings 3,4-5) on how he settled the power struggle with his Moabite kingdom in his favour; English translation in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ³1969, 320. The Assyrian king Sargon II (721–705) calls himself "conqueror of Samaria (*Sa-mir-i-na*) and of the entire (country) of Israel (*bit-hu-um-ri-a*)" (ibid., 284; cf. the reference to the conquest of Ashdod in Isa 20,1) and Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah is related in some detail in his so-called Annals (ibid., 287–288; 2 Kings 18,13-37). Critical scholarship generally takes Luke 21,20-24 as a clear reference to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem during the first Jewish War.

7 The difficulty often is how to evaluate ancient texts speaking of persecution or other forms of harassment. There obviously were tensions between Jews and Christians in the first decades (and later), but it is not necessary to take all such passages at face value. Christian authors certainly also exploited the tensions in their favour, using them polemically. This is true of later authors (think of the famous debate about fact and fiction in Christian martyrdom texts) and no doubt also of first- or second-generation ones. Passages such as Matt 5,10-12 or 23,31-36 document these tensions, but also have "coloured" them. On the earliest references to "persecution" of Christians, see, e.g., Douglas R.A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to Matthew* (SNTS MS, 6), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967; Schuyler Brown, *Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke* (AnBib 36), Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1969. On persecution and Christian martyrdom in the first centuries, see G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy*, eds. Joseph Streeter – Michael Whitby, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Min Seok Shin, *The Great Persecution: a Historical Re-examination* (Studia antiqua australiensia 8), Turnhout: Brepols, 2018; Daniel Philpott – Timothy Samuel Shah (eds.), *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; Aaltje Hidding, *The Era of the Martyrs: Remembering the Great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt* (Millennium-Studien 87), Berlin – Boston: de Gruyter, 2020. For a deconstructionalist approach to the persecutions, see Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2012; Ead., *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, New York: HarperOne, 2013. Later on, Christians themselves became persecutors of their own (dissident) members: one thinks above all of the "crusades" against the Cathars, but other groups were also targeted: see, e.g., Carl

"believed" ones.[8] It mentions physical and psychological suffering, lethal and remediable acts, intended or gratuitous and occasional or systemic forms of violence, premeditated actions and emotional outbursts causing harm, material and human losses, and mass violence and personal sorrow. And it speaks of all of these types of violence in literal and in metaphorical ways, using a plethora of images and highly rhetorical language, including verbal abuse, negative stereotyping and mere slander. It would lead too far to cite illustrations for all of these types, but a couple of well-chosen examples may perhaps give an idea of what is found in biblical texts.

Murder is no doubt the most cruel violent act. The Bible contains, in the very first chapters, one of the most infamous cases of fratricide – Cain killing his

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Dixon, *The Paulicians: Heresy, Persecution, and Warfare on the Byzantine Frontier, c. 750-880* (The Medieval Mediterranean 132), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2022. Persecution and the acts of violence that come with it is a phenomenon of all ages and is as present today as it was in earlier times. For a truly encompassing survey, see the old but in some respect still readable book by Samuel Chandler, *The History of Persecution from the Patriarchal Age to the Reign of George II*. New edition by Charles Atmore, Hull: [printed for the editor and J. Craggs], 1813. Cf. Christian Gerlach (ed.), *On the Social History of Persecution*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 2023. On current-day cases and situations, see, by way of example, Brian J. Grim – Roger Finke (eds.), *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Massimo Introvigne, *Inside the Church of the Almighty God: The Most Persecuted Religious Movement in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Needless to recall the many acts of violence against Christians in the Near East in recent years, not all of which reached the Western media.

8 Cf. Wolfram Brandes – Felicitas Schmieder – Rebekka Voss (eds.), *Peoples of the Apocalypse: Eschatological Beliefs and Political Scenarios* (Millennium-Studien 63), Berlin – Boston: de Gruyter, 2016; Emma Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2018. See also the sociologically informed approach of Andrew J. Weigert, *Religious and Secular Views on Endtime*, Lewiston: NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004. No doubt most powerful is the "myth" of the apocalyptic war between good and evil; see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1976; Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989; warlike and revolutionary dimensions are a core ingredient of such expectations in many a tradition: see Saïd Amir Arjomand, *Revolutions of the End of Time: Apocalypse, Revolution, and Reaction in the Persianate World*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2022.

brother Abel because God preferred the latter's sacrifice over his own (Gen 4,1-16).[9] On the level of the characters involved, the story is a warning and a moral instruction. On a broader level, it probably echoes in a most dramatic way the eternal battle between nomadic and sedentary societies. The same book of Genesis also mentions two cases of a father, both times Abraham, ready to kill or to have his sons killed by preparing to sacrifice the one (Isaac) and by sending the other (Ismael) as a baby with his mother into the desert.[10] Ultimately, both are saved by the Lord. Perhaps the most disturbing element in the former story, probably a critique of ancient practices of child sacrifice in neighbouring tribes, is that it was God who at first had ordered the sacrifice to test Abraham. The second story is an aetiology meant to explain the existence of the "Ishmaelites", later on sworn enemies of Israel, yet hailing from the same root. In 2 Kings, a case of parricide – the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who had threatened to capture Jerusalem, is killed by his two sons while praying in the Temple – is mentioned almost in passing, as if a mere trivia (2 Kings 19,37).[11] Again, God plays a role in the background, as the murder is implicitly meant as a punishment. Many more cases of murders can be added, murders involving individuals[12] and whole

9 In addition to the commentaries, see from a reception-historical perspective, Johanna Erzberger, *Kain, Abel und Israel: die Rezeption von Gen 4,1-16 in rabbinischen Midraschim* (BWANT 132), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011; John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry* (Themes in Biblical Narrative 14), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2011.

10 Cf. Ed Noort – Eibert Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac: the Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations* (Themes of Biblical Narrative 4), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2022; Albert van der Heide, *"Now I know": Five Centuries of Aqedah Exegesis*, Cham: Springer, 2017; J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: the Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021. Martin Goodman – George H. van Kooten – Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (Themes of Biblical Narrative 13), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2010; Thomas Römer, "Isaac et Ismaël, concurrent sou cohéritiers de la promesse? Une lecture de Genèse 16", *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 74 (1999) 161–172.

11 Cf. Isaac Kalimi – Seth Richardson (eds.), *Sennacherib at the Gates of Jerusalem: Story, History and Historiography* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 71), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2014.

12 David has the husband of his mistress sent into his death at the front (2 Sam 11–12), but also prophets – God's messengers – are killed (Isaiah, for one; see also Matt 23,37-39),

nations.[13] But there is much more than murder. The Bible also speaks of the cruelties and consequences of war: the mass maiming of victims, deportations of whole peoples to be sold into slavery; persecutions of minorities; the way justice is upheld by cruel executions; the list is endless.[14] In addition to these, there are countless instances of systemic violence that are perhaps not exclusively physical but also psychological. They have to do with social injustice (exploitation) in society as a whole, which is a constant topic of concern in many juridical texts but also in prophetic and Wisdom literature, in several gospel parables, and in Jesus' message as presented in the gospels, but they are also met in interhuman relations, not just slavery but also on the level of the family.[15]

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and so is Jesus, believed to be the son of God in Christian tradition (Matt 3,17 et al.). Cf. Andreas Käser, *Literaturwissenschaftliche Interpretation und historische Exegese: die Erzählung von David und Batseba als Fallbeispiel* (BWANT 122), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016; Eryl W. Davies, *Narrative Ethics in the Bible: Moral Dilemmas in the Story of King David* (LHB/OTS 715), London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022. Jonathan Knight, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; Jan Bremmer *et al.* (eds.), *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha 11), Leuven: Peeters, 2016. Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Sources and Sitz im Leben of Matthew 23* (JSNT SS 117), Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

13 See esp. the conquest of the land and the wars brought upon Israel and Judea by foreign kings. Cf. Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: an Historical and Archaeological Study*, Leiden: Brill, 1992; Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: the Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies*, 2 (Harvard Semitic Monographs 53), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994; Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005; Lester L. Grabbe (ed.), *Ahab Agonistes: the Rise and Fall of the Omri Dynasty* (LHB/OTS 421), London: T&T Clark, 2007. Old but still useful because of the double perspective, Theodore H. Robinson, *The Decline and Fall of the Hebrew Kingdoms: Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BC*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1930. For a "modern" take on the conquest history and the issues involved, see Leo G. Perdue – Warren Carter – Coleman A. Baker (ed.), *Israel and Empire: a Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

14 For a general approach that goes beyond the biblical sphere but stays focused on the connections between violence and global cruelty, see Sara E. Brown and Stephen D. Smith (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Mass Atrocity, and Genocide*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

15 Think of the position of women – wives and daughters – esp. in the middle and lower classes, but not only there. The Aqedah story has a most cruel counterpart in the story of

A second way to approach the question is through a spatial or spatiotemporal axis. Violence is met on earth, in heaven, and in the underworld/afterlife, – or, if you wish, on the human level, the divine, and the Satanic. If the first and third level probably need no further comment, it may be helpful to recall that the Bible also speaks of how Satan, the rebellious fallen angel, was expelled from heaven, which it regards as the start of an "eternal", apocalyptic war that is fought on all fronts, including on earth, and is believed to end with a cataclysmic victory of the good forces.[16]

A third way is to look at the agents and victims involved. In an ancient world view, evil forces (led by Satan) are thought to be eager to harm people for no reason. It was a proven explanation for some types of illness. The exorcism stories in the New Testament function according to that principle. But human beings also kill or have others suffer. It is a disturbing but in a sense also a commonly known experience of which the Bible contains many examples. More puzzling still is that some of this violence is said in the Bible to be divinely sanctioned. In both the Old and the New Testament, God is presented as being involved in acts of harm and violence – towards Israel's enemies, towards evil-doers, but once then also towards humankind as a whole.[17] The violence may be regarded as a punishment for human disobedience – a frequently met explanation, or the

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the sacrifice of Jephtah's daughter, itself the biblical parallel to the Iphigenia traditions. Cf. Thomas Römer, "Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephtah's Daughter?", *JSOT* 77 (1998) 27–38. On violence against children in general in the Old Testament, see Andreas Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (FAT 37), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.

16 See Isa 14,13-15; Ezek 28,16-28; Luke 10,18; Rev 12,7-9. Casting the devil in hell: Matt 25,41; 2 Pet 2,4. Cf. Hugh R. Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of its Reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (SupplVT 65), Leiden: Brill, 1996; Angela K. Harkins *et al*. (eds.), *The Fallen Angels Traditions: Second Temple Developments and Reception History* (CBQ MS 53), Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2014.

17 Most famous, of course, is the almost complete annihilation of humanity because of its sins as told in the Flood story, one of the most horrible stories in the whole of the Bible, one also in which God Himself is said to confess that this will never happen again. Cf. Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Flood Myth*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988; P.J. Harland, *The Value of Human Life: a Study of the Story of the Flood (Genesis 6–9)* (SupplVT, 64), Leiden – New York: Brill, 1996; Norman Cohn, *Noah's Flood: the Genesis Story in Western Thought*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1996.

reasons may remain hidden – the "terrible" theodicy question.[18] This brings me to the fourth axis.

The Bible lists many reasons and causes why people are committing or suffering violence. Some of these are in a way "explainable", but others just leave us appalled. On an ethical level, a whole range of human vices can explain, though certainly not justify, why people behave violently. Self-defence may be an obvious explanation for turning to violence, but things are often more complicated and the lines truly blurred. The Bible contains stories in which the use of violence is justified in order to protect a nation's honour or its sheer existence. Ancient Israel has fought several such wars, the Maccabean revolts being the most famous of these.[19] Here God and his people are said to fight for the same good cause. Who can blame them? But then also, how far is one allowed to go? Using violence for punishment is an even more complicated case. It may have a pedagogical purpose, but all depends on who decides on what is a justified action and then acts upon it. In some situations, using violence as punishment was in a sense almost a "natural" expectation in ancient societies. The Bible contains several stories of kings – Jewish and others – behaving cruelly towards victims after a war; it can be a sign of power – that is how a king is supposed to behave, or of weakness – a way to appease the army and the allies. Things are more complicated still if that war is not one of liberation from an occupying power but of conquest of a land God is said to have had promised to his people. It is a most delicate situation as the ones who say they had received this promise are also those acting upon it, making God their ally. The force of

18 Cf. Johannes C. de Moor, *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, Leiden: Brill, 2003; Peter Admirand, *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012; Beate Ego *et al.* (eds.), *Theodicy and Protest: Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018.

19 Cf. Elias J. Bickerman, *God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 32), Leiden: Brill, 1979; Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (SupplJSJ 57), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 1997; Id. (ed.), *The Books of the Maccabees: Literary, Historical, and Religious Perspectives* (BETL 328), Leuven: Peeters, 2022. Resistance and revolt are of course universal phenomena: see John J. Collins – J.G. Manning (eds.), *Revolt and Resistance in the Ancient Classical World and the Near East* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 85), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2016; Paul J. Kosmin – Ian S. Mayer (eds.), *Cultures of Resistance in the Hellenistic East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

such claims can never be overestimated. It raises the whole question of the right and even the duty to fight a justified war – jihad or crusades.[20] But no doubt most difficult to grasp is violence that is explained as the result of God testing innocent people. Job is the prototypical example.[21] It not only poses the immense problem of theodicy, mentioned above, with which humans have struggled since ever, but has us confront a potentially "evil" God. The solutions that have been proposed range from revolting and turning away from such a God to resignation and acceptance that God's ways are inaccessible to humans and that it all belongs to the divine plan. In the middle of the second century, Marcion tried to do the first by cutting out the "horrifying" God of the Old Testament from Christian tradition, thereby ignoring the more nuanced views on God and violence that can also be found in Jewish tradition.[22] At about the same time, other theologians as well as philosophers searched for ways to excuse God by assigning the creation of the world, and all it brought about in terms of human sinfulness and suffering, to a demiurge.[23]

20 Cf. Heath A. Thomas – Jeremy Evans – Paul Copan, *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013; Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: the Origin of Holy War in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Id., *Holy War in Judaism: the Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: the Crusades and their Impact on Today's World*, London: Macmillan, 1988; Christopher Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

21 Cf. Françoise Mies, *L'espérance de Job* (BETL 193), Leuven: Peeters, 2006; Ead., *Job ou sortir de la cendre: étude exégétique, littéraire, anthropologique et théologique de la mort dans le livre de Job* (BETL 324), Leuven: Peeters, 2022; Espen Dahl, *The Problem of Job and the Problem of Evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

22 See the classical study by Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (TU 45), Leipzig: Hinrichs, ²1924. Marcion has been the subject of a whole series of monographs and other studies, some of which are most disputed. Scholars have above all focused on his Bible and on how mainstream sources have shaped our largely negative view on Marcion: for the latter, see, e.g., Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (WUNT 250), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010; Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

23 Cf. Peter Koslowski, *Gnosis und Theodizee: eine Studie über den leidenden Gott* (Philosophische Theologie 1), Wien: Passagen, 1993; Carl S. O'Brien, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought: Secondary Gods and Divine Mediators*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Luc Brisson – Seamus J. O'Neill – Andrei Timotin (eds.), *Neoplatonic*

The definitely much more demanding attitude is to accept human limitations in understanding or giving meaning to such profoundly existential questions and make this a core element of what believing in God is about.

Coping with divine violence in the Bible: The case of Revelation

The Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse, the last book of the Bible, is particularly renowned for its many scenes of utter violence that involve divine action and affect human and apparently also supra-human beings ("the Beast"!). Critical scholarship has proposed several answers. A basic helpful distinction is between scholars who condemn the book as a morally highly problematic historical and cultural product and those who argue that the book and its author can nevertheless be salvaged by raising awareness that violence is not the book's only message and by putting things in the right perspective. Above all, it is important to realise that at least part of the violence that is talked about is said not to be caused by human beings.[24]

This initial basic distinction can perhaps be further diversified into four approaches. A number of scholars have argued that the violence scenes serve a purpose that goes beyond and indeed contradicts the impression that the author was a kind of sensationalist. Judgement scenes are meant to provoke repentance. God's loyal followers may suffer violence but take no active part in it. Much of the scenes are to be taken metaphorically, as evocations of God's fight against evil and of the latter's self-destructive nature. Long ago, G.B. Caird combined with it a reading method based on substitution.[25] Whatever is said of God's violent handling of enemies in the Old Testament is now rephrased and reshaped in terms of God conquering evil through Jesus' ("the Lamb") death on the cross. Richard Bauckham argues that the author of Revelation in part disconnects God from the violence

Demons and Angels (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 20), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2018; Christoph Markschies – Einar Thomassen (eds.), *Valentinianism: New Studies* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 96), Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2020.

24 The following section is inspired by Alexander Stewart who is currently finishing with me his PhD project entitled "The Rhetorical Use of Divine Threat in the Apocalypse of John and its Historical Context".

25 *The Revelation of St. John* (Black's New Testament Commentary 19), London: A&C Black, 1966; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999, 74–75.

by using divine passives in order to re-orientate the reader towards God's salvific plan with humanity.[26] The purpose of such readings is to subvert the passages containing violent terminology by reading them in a more positive way within the framework of the Christian message. Revelation is not a call to start a war.

A quite different approach is to contextualise and explain such scenes historically and theologically. This can be done in various ways. A most interesting one is to read Revelation against the background of the great myth about the cosmic battle between good and evil. Divine violence is said to serve the higher purpose of protecting creation and destroying the adversary. Another approach is to recognise the violent scenes and imagery for what they are and to withhold from any conclusions about the author's (lack of) ethics. It is not about mitigating the violence, nor about condemning it, but about making sense of it as it stands. Matthew Streett helpfully cautions against making abstraction of the author's context and argues for distinguishing between immoral (murder and assault) and morally sanctioned forms of violence (self-defence, court decisions).[27]

A perhaps more debatable, because potentially dangerous, approach consists of endorsing divine violence for the liberative power the proper use of a rhetoric of violence may produce. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza applies this (a bit too hastily) to the fight in support of oppressed minorities.[28] She reads Revelation as a call for action against abusive institutional powers. Largely making abstraction (too much, in my opinion) of the wording in Revelation, the systematic theologian Miroslav Volf explains divine violence as God's natural and expected reaction to all sorts of injustice and human violence.[29] God just cannot afford it not to be moved by the latter and to remain "neutral" or inactive. God's violence as presented in Revelation is not a call in turn to become violent, but a necessity in order to protect and save humanity. It is thought of as a "beneficial" type of violence.

The fourth approach is an open critique of the book itself and the way it is said to glorify violence for whatever purpose. Arguing for a resolutely feminist approach

26 "Judgment in the Book of Revelation", in Garrick V. Allen – Ian Paul – Simon P. Woodman (eds.), *The Book of Revelation: Currents in British Research on the Apocalypse* (WUNT 2.411), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015, 55–79.

27 *Here Comes the Judge: Violent Pacifism in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS 462), London: T&T Clark, 2012.

28 *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, ²1998.

29 *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Idnetity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.

that completely ignores the historical context of the book, Tina Pippin's strongly ideological reading leads her to conclude that the God of Revelation is above all a destructive factor.[30] Kimberly Stratton presents the author as a tyrant who forces his readers into submission with a flood of violent scenes and passages, in this way imitating imperial Rome's dictatorial grip on all inhabitants of the empire.[31] David Frankfurter takes a rather different turn when arguing, in a sort of Nietzschean logic, that Revelation expresses the frustration of a subdued group that calls or hopes for a violent breakdown of the empire.[32] Jan Willem van Henten, finally, remains a bit more down to earth and focuses on another aspect – the truth claims of the book, which he considers to be too absolute to be sound.[33]

A message of hope, after all

Time does not allow me to go into more detail, but two comments might perhaps help explain where I stand in this forest of opinions on Revelation. First of all, some of the authors reviewed here rightly emphasise the importance of not giving up on an historical-critical approach, if only to avoid falling into the trap of using void rhetoric or getting lost in too adventurous forms of hermeneutics. Second, from this historical-critical basis one is entitled to look for ways to make the book meaningful for Christian readers through the ages. In my opinion, the best way forward in this respect is to read the book in light of three core notions of the Christian message as it had been developed at the turn of the first and the second century. In all three, violence plays a crucial role. The three have to do with Christology, soteriology, and eschatology. All three are conceived as part of a drama that is being played on a double level – a human/earthly and a cosmic one. The Lamb is slaughtered but also appears victorious in heaven. The Christological dimension of the imagery cannot be ignored, and neither can the message it conveys. Christ was put to death

30 *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation), Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992.

31 "The Eschatological Arena: Reinscribing Roman Violence in Fantasies of the End Times", *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009) 45–76.

32 "The Legacy of Sectarian Rage: Vengeance Fantasies in the New Testament", in David A. Bernat – Jonathan Klawans (eds.), *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (Recent Research in Biblical Studies 2), Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007, 114–128.

33 "Violence in Revelation", in Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation* (BETL 291), Leuven: Peeters, 2017, 49–77.

and God allowed this to happen in order to conquer a greater evil. This brings me to the second aspect. Salvation comes at a price. Human beings cannot save themselves from their sinfulness. Divine intervention is needed and that process is said to be one of pain and suffering. Again, the drama that is played on earth also has a cosmic dimension. Saving humankind, liberating it from sin, means defeating the powers that had ruled over it. As John sees it, and this is the third aspect, that battle is still being fought, but those who believe in Christ know that its outcome is already decided on. That is where hope comes in sight. Ultimately, it is believed, good will conquer evil in a fierce war of apocalyptic grandeur. In the background stands the all-ancient idea of healing by simile. Suffering cannot be undone but by suffering. Salvation becomes possible through conquering death, as was the case with Jesus' death and his resurrection by God. This has opened a new era and ultimately will bring to completion the eternal war between good and evil. The imagery and language used in Revelation differs from that used by Paul and the gospels, but the essence of the message has not changed, and neither has the process by which the goal will be reached. Violence is a crucial ingredient of this story.

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