Religion and Violence, The Biblical Heritage:

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Introduction: Religion, Violence, and the Bible

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(with contributions by David A. Bernat)

1. *Religion, Violence, and the Bible in the Present Day*

The importance of considering the question of religion and violence need hardly be stated. Violence that is motivated by—and justified by—religious ideas, authorities, and texts is too ubiquitous to be ignored or denied. This observation was commonplace even before the events of September 11, 2001,[1] and needless to say, the conversation has only accelerated in the last few years.[2] But much about this relationship remains unclear. Some say that the origins of religion and human violence are intricately and inherently connected, such that the explanation for religious violence is to be found, in part, in 'a strain of violence that may be found at the deepest levels of religious imagination'.[3] Others say that human violence—like primate violence—was there long before religion ever came about, and can be understood as an unfortunate by-product of primate and human evolution.[4] Violence therefore would thrive in the presence or absence of distinctly religious ideas and motivations. Moving closer to the subject of this book, some claim that there is a telling relationship between

1. See, for example, Davíd Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 4-5.

2. For a thorough review of scholarship on the subject, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), pp. 37-90; for modern theories, see esp. pp. 75-90. Avalos also provides a general introduction to religion and violence (pp. 15-35).

3. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 3rd edn, 2003), p. 6. See also René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Juergensmeyer roots his observation in part on the work of Girard; see further below.

4. For a classic influential treatment, see Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966). For a more recent treatment, see Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). Compare the brief critique in Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 63-64.

religious violence and particular religious ideas such as monotheism or sacred space.[5] Still others claim that even if religion and violence are related in some intimate way, religion—or at least some forms of it—saves itself, as it were, by breaking the cycle of violence or by laying out non-violent visions of world peace.[6]

Reconsidering the biblical heritage as it relates to questions of religion and violence is a narrower—but nonetheless essential—endeavor. As the first paper in this volume states right up front, there is no dearth of violence in the Bible. On top of that, the Bible has also been used as a justification for crusades of various sorts, with painfully violent results.[7] Recognizing this, there has been and continues to be much discussion on this narrower endeavor, asking questions such as: is the Bible uniquely or at least especially violent? Has it played a particularly pernicious role in the history of human conflict? Can studies focused on the Bible prove to be distinctly revelatory with regard to the general problems of human violence and its origin?

Arguably, some general discussions of religion and violence focus too much on the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Surely the Israelites and Christians of biblical times—violent as they were—are not the most vicious societies (even religious ones) on record.[8] But judging from a number of recent books on these subjects, it seems that many scholars do view the Jewish and Christian scriptures as an important locus for discussion. Moreover, they are saying yes to one or more of the questions asked above, and they are doing so in works (and conferences) addressed to the general public. The dangerous and violent nature of the Bible is upheld by various writers, including Hector Avalos (author of *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*), R. Joseph Hoffmann (editor of *The Just War and Jihad: Violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*), Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer (author of *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran*), and Regina Schwartz (author of *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*). Many of the same writers also hold that the study of the scriptures proves revelatory with regard to the nature of religious violence. This point is also exemplified by the recently published four-volume series entitled *The Destructive Power of Religion,* edited by J. Harold Ellens. The title itself anticipates the *Tendenz* of the volumes, which understands the Abrahamic religious communities, along with

5. So Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Avalos, *Fighting Words*, follows suit.

6. So, for example, Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 100-24, 164-212; Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (New York: Continuum, 2003), esp. pp. 111-49, and Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 143-76.

7. For catalogues of charges against the Jewish and Christian scriptures, see Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 113-58, 175-214, and Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?*, pp. 27-71.

8. See Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, for the sordid details of traditional Aztec religious behavior.

their scriptures, traditions and structures, to be the driving forces behind many incidences of violence in history and contemporary society.[9] All these writers were preceded in this respect by René Girard, whose scholarship looms large over these questions, now for over three decades.

René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* is not rooted exclusively or even primarily in biblical texts. Yet his subsequent books[10] did focus on the Bible, and these works in turn have inspired something of a cottage industry of 'Girardian' readings of biblical texts.[11] Indeed, René Girard's efforts have been considered—not by all, but by many—to be uniquely insightful. *Violence and the Sacred* has inspired conferences, commentaries, dissertations and many footnotes. Even when Girard's ideas are questioned in part, respectful citations of his works are commonplace in biblical studies scholarship. Girard's theories have also been taken seriously beyond the realm of biblical studies. Girard is viewed as something of an authority by R. Joseph Hoffmann, whose recent collection mentioned above contains essays that build on Girard, and a distinct bibliography section entitled 'René Girard, his Followers and Critics'—the only theorist of violence so honored.[12] Similarly, Girard's theories figure prominently in Ellens's collection, *The Destructive Power of Religion*.[13] Girard's work also serves as one theoretical linchpin for Mark Juergenseyer's popular and well-regarded treatment of terrorism: *Terror in the Mind of God*: in his view, contemporary acts of religious terrorism

9. J. Harold Ellens (ed.), *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (4 vols.; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). Particularly revealing is the testimonial by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which appears in each volume of the series. Tutu labels the oppressive policies of South African apartheid as 'religiously driven' (Tutu, 'Ad Testimonium', in Ellens [ed.], *The Destructive Power of Religion*, pp. xv-xvi of each of the four volumes). No one would challenge the characterization of apartheid as evil. But whether the system and those who perpetuated it were motivated chiefly by religious doctrine—as opposed to racial, economic and nationalistic concerns—is certainly open to debate.

10. Girard, *The Scapegoat*; *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

11. See, e.g. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), and the articles collected in Andrew J. McKenna (ed.), *Semeia 33: Rene Girard and Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

12. R. Joseph Hoffmann (ed.), *The Just War and Jihad: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006); for praises of Girard, see essays by Hoffman (p. 59) and Charles K. Bellinger (pp. 69-70). For the bibliography compiled by Bellinger (and preceded by further praise), see pp. 291-93.

13. See especially, Ellens, 'Religious Metaphors Can Kill', in Ellens (ed.), *The Destructive Power of Religion*, I, pp. 255-72 (264-67); Mark C. Stirling, 'Violent Religion: René Girard's Theory of Culture', in Ellens (ed.), *The Destructive Power of Religion*, II, pp. 11-50, and Cheryl McGuire, 'Judaism, Christianity, and Girard: The Violent Messiahs', in Ellens (ed.), *The Destructive Power of Religion*, II, pp. 51-84.

(planned and committed by, in his words, 'militant religious activists') can be explained by geo-political factors on the one hand, and the violence in all religions on the other. In defense of the claim that violence is at the heart of religious origins, Juergensmeyer appeals to Girard.[14]

And yet, Girard's scheme has numerous methodological faults, many of which have been pointed out before.[15] His theory is thoroughly reductionist: the essence of all myth and ritual is sacrifice, and sacrificial ritual boils down to criminal violence. Girard's real interests are, moreover, suspiciously selective. After paying lip service to some anthropological work, he focuses on biblical narratives and Greek myths. The traditions of Arabia, India, and China play no role, and presumably contribute nothing to our understanding of how sacrifice and violence began. Moreover, Girard's reading of myth and ritual is in truth an elegant argument *ex silentio*. By claiming to reveal what pre-Christian myth and ritual seek to conceal, Girard can develop his own account that appears to find confirmation precisely in the fact that what he reveals is not actually articulated straightforwardly in these rituals and myths. In other words, his theory is entirely made up. Girard's reading is also distinctively Christian, and notably supersessionist, which can be seen when he turns to Christian narratives and finds *only* in them the revelation of what all earlier myths and rituals conceal. Thus, the Gospels out do and complete all previous mythology, the 'Old Testament' included.[16] And because he believes the Old Testament (like all sacrificial ritual) *conceals* the truth,[17] Girard's Christianity is notably Gnostic. Girard's frequent denunciations of anti-Semitism, while welcome, do not fully counter the fact that his approach to the sources is remarkably anti-Judaic.

But the biggest problems of all concern the very idea of his enterprise. A general theory of religion and violence—one that purports to explain how religion and violence began in the aftermath of murderous primitive behavior—is an odd anachronism at best. Even stranger is the supposition that such a general theory on the origins of all human violence could be based, even in part, on readings of the Jewish and Christian scriptures: Why should the Tanakh and the New Testament be treated by scholars as if they could tell us something about

14. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, pp. 6, 171-72.

15. For criticisms of Girard, see, e.g. Avalos, *Fighting Words,* pp. 75-78, 205; Ninian Smart, review of *Violence and the Sacred*, by René Girard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) in *Religious Studies Review* 6.3 (1980), pp. 173-77, and Ivan Strenski, *Religion in Relation: Method, Application, and Moral Location* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 202-16. See also Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 22-26, and further literature cited there.

16. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, pp. 101, 103, 147, 165, 205; *Things Hidden*, p. 158. Compare the critique offered by Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 327-28 n. 30.

17. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 5.

how religion and/or violence on the whole began? James Frazer, Sigmund Freud, and others who offered unbounded speculations on the hoary origins of religion and violence had their day. Their evolutionist assumptions and methodological shortcomings were lambasted long ago by the likes of E.E. Evans Pritchard and Mary Douglas. It is therefore altogether odd that Girard's resuscitation of the Freudian and Frazerian quest[18] for the origins of religion and violence was and is taken seriously at all.

But even as the Girardian lights begin to dim, another view seems to be taking hold. This approach is less elaborate in that it does not seek to account for the origin of religion or violence. This view simply and easily blames the Bible outright for whatever violence follows from it (and the 'from' is often understood loosely). The recent classic is Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*, the subtitle of which says it all: *The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. According to Schwartz, monotheism is inextricably linked with the exclusive, covenantal, land-based, kinship-rooted, national identity created by and remembered in the Hebrew Bible. In a nutshell, the demands of monotheistic exclusivity lead inevitably to ills such as land-possession and attention to kinship. The inescapable result of this is violence against Canaanites long ago, and violence against the enemies of Judaism and Christianity today.[19]

Curiously, Schwartz is, like Girard, a literary critic who turned to the Bible when troubled by questions of violence. And again like Girard, Schwartz finds much in the Bible to condemn, but some to redeem. Schwartz's salvation is to be found not in the Gospels, but in the subversive, pluralistic passages of the Old Testament such as the book of Ruth.[20] She even concludes by calling for the reopening of the canon to revised versions of Exodus, in order to include more inclusive texts.[21] So Schwartz too, like Girard, has been found to be 'propagating a theological agenda'.[22] Schwartz's approach is much less grandiose than Girard's,

18. See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 91.

19. In a similar vein is Carol Delaney's book, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of A Biblical Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1998). The work focuses on the *aqedah*, the tale of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham (Gen. 22; a narrative mentioned also in the paper in this volume by Ziony Zevit). Delaney treats the implications of the *aqedah* tradition for Bible-reading societies from antiquity until today. She argues that in large measure, assumptions built into the Genesis narrative, and by extension, the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Quran, account for violent structures in society that give rise to, or enable, child abuse, sexual abuse, poverty, and war. A 'revolution in values' entailed by an abandoning the *akedah* paradigms will give society 'new moral vision [and] a new myth to live by—one that will change the course of history' (p. 251). Delaney's work raises a question fundamental to the purpose of the present volume. Is there any less child or spousal abuse among atheists, or less poverty and subjugation of the vulnerable in the non-Abrahamic religious communities?

20. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 31-32, 90, 142.

21. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 175-76.

22. Brian K. Smith, 'Monotheism and Its Discontents: Religious Violence and the Bible' (review of Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*), *JAAR* 66 (1998), pp. 403-11 (410).

and has, perhaps for that reason, garnered less attention on the whole. But among recent scholarship on religion and violence, there is a turn away from Girard and toward Schwartz. Without referencing Girard once, Nelson-Pallmeyer's *Is Religion Killing Us* refers repeatedly to Schwartz. R. Joseph Hoffmann's selective collection includes an essay by Schwartz. We have noted already that Hector Avalos delivers (yet another) devastating critique of Girard; but he's full of praise for *The Curse of Cain*. Avalos praises her work on the very first page of his introduction, referring to it frequently thereafter, and along the way he concedes that his 'entire thesis is built on the conviction that Schwartz is on the right track'.[23]

So Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* (among other works) rests on Girard. Hector Avalos's *Fighting Words* (among others) rests on Schwartz. If scholars of religious studies are going to go about the important task of speaking about religious violence and even contemporary terrorism by appealing to René Girard or Regina Schwartz, scholars who work primarily with the Bible—on which these theories are (tenuously) based—should be certain to weigh in.

2. *Reconsidering Biblical Violence*

The present collection of papers responds in a number of meaningful ways to the approaches taken by Girard, Schwartz, and the other scholars whose approaches are discussed above. We will not reiterate the specific arguments of our authors here. We wish merely to intimate the ways in which the biblicists whose articles are presented in this volume address, in their own sophisticated fashion, a number of issues dealt with inadequately in other more generalized works on religious violence.

a. *Definitions*

Remarkable latitude is taken in a number of works with regard to the definition and scope of the violence being discussed. Girard, of course, equated violence with sacrifice, whether the victims were human or animal. While Avalos dismisses sacrifice from consideration as a secondary mechanism, he expands the concept of violence in a different direction, including body-marking rituals such as male circumcision.[24] Convinced that violence inevitably results once

23. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, esp. pp. 17, 82-86, 93 (82). There are to be sure other voices. John Collins is one ('The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence', *JBL* 122 [2003], pp. 3-21); the papers presented here constitute others.

24. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, p. 77 (sacrifice as a secondary mechanism); pp. 19-20, 149-50 (circumcision as violence). Avalos is not alone in viewing circumcision in this manner. See also Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press 1994), pp. 137-62 and Hugh S. Pyper, *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text* (The Bible in the Modern World, 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), pp. 113-34. This view finds a precedent among ancient Romans who did regard the rite, and those

an identity is formed, Schwartz avers that 'acts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence'.[25]

There is no objective definition of violence (readers should note the helpful discussions and references contained in the chapters by Kamionkowski and Zevit below). It must, however, be observed that the broader the definition, the easier it is to indict biblical texts and those who, guilty by association, deem them to be sacred. But the real problem is a lack of precision. If animal sacrifice is to be decried as violent, then so must all human consumption of animals (is the slaughterhouse less violent than the temple?). If body marking is to be decried as violent, then why not include tattooing, ear-piercing, and perhaps even certain forms of hair-cutting?[26] Granted that some view circumcision as barbaric, do we gain or loose by putting such rituals in the same hopper with rape and murder? Curiously, the threatened destruction of religious holy sites like Mecca—a shockingly irresponsible policy urged for consideration by Avalos[27]—is not viewed as inherently violent, because sacred sites can be evacuated prior to their destruction. If circumcision is included but the sudden destruction of forcibly-evacuated sacred property is excluded, have we really hit the nail on the head in defining violence? If identity formation is violent, who doesn't have an identity so as to be able to claim to be non-violent?

The broad definitions recall the rabbinic dictum: *tafasta merubah lo tafasta*, which can loosely be translated to say: 'if you grasp too much, you'll be left with nothing at all' (e.g. *b. Rosh ha-Shanah* 4b). We may do better to follow Ziony Zevit's example and restrict violence to the 'use of extreme, sudden force to injure somebody, usually by surprise'. And we may do well to follow Zevit further by immediately qualifying the definition (he is joined in this effort also by Kamionkowski), and offering sub-categories of violent activities beyond that: it matters whether the violence in question occurs in the context of war or not; it matters whether the violence in question is unnecessarily cruel or not; it matters whether the violence is perceived to be an act of self-defense or an act of aggression. Finally, it matters whether the violence in question is celebrated, legitimated, merely tolerated or even condemned.

b. *History*

A curious motif running through the recent works on biblical violence is a surprising willingness to accept certain violent biblical narratives as historically

who practiced it, as barbaric. Conversely, Jews of the same period construed circumcision not as mutilation or wounding, but as a healing practice, akin to removing an infection, or repairing a cleft palate. For a review of ancient Jewish and Roman constructions of circumcision, see David A. Bernat, 'Circumcision', in John J. Collins and Daniel Harlow (eds.), *Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans [forthcoming]).

25. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, p. 5.
26. Cf. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, p. 19.
27. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 375-76.

accurate. Thus writers such as Avalos, Hoffmann, Ellens, and even, at times, Schwartz appear to presume that there was a historical genocide of the Canaanites by land-grabbing Israelites at the time of Joshua.[28] Never mind that the book of Joshua is full of miraculous fantasy: the walls we are told came tumbling down as Israel marched around the city (Josh. 6.1-22). Even leaving the tumbled ramparts aside, archaeological evidence virtually precludes the historical accuracy of even any supposed historical kernel of the book of Joshua. Jericho, for instance, was unsettled at the time, and there is no evidence elsewhere for an organized genocidal conquest of Canaan by Israel.[29] To be sure, some grant that the book of Joshua is late fantasy.[30] Schwartz, moreover, certainly is correct in noting also that various political ideologies (e.g. Marxism) can be seen at work in the scholarly models (such as peasant revolt) that take the place once held by a more literal reading of the Joshua narrative.[31] But there is a remarkable indifference to the well-established a-historicity of the conquest accounts by those who make much of them.[32] Even while she recognizes that Joshua is a fantasy, Schwartz at the same notes, accusingly, 'that the historian's sleight of hand begs a question of ethical accountability'.[33] Nelson-Pallmeyer similarly speaks of the text's sordid afterlife.[34] After a brief discussion of the Deuteronomistic history and the Moabite Stele, Avalos concludes: 'even if the Joshua narratives are meant for in-house consumption, the rhetoric is still premised on principles and policies that were probably carried out against actual people'.[35] In Avalos's case, this all the more surprising since he frequently asserts that his empirico-rationalism allows him to believe only what he can verify.[36] Yet when it comes to doubting the historical validity of biblical texts describing violent genocide, the burden of proof shifts to the doubters—violent texts are historical until proven otherwise.[37]

What is curious—suspicious, in fact—is that these authors are all in the end wedded to the notion that there is a particularly close link, an almost exclusive one, between biblical documents and actual violence. The selective vision required to conjure this picture comes into focus when we consider even just

28. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 142-44, 162-63; R. Joseph Hoffmann, in Hoffmann (ed.), *The Just War*, p. 7; J. Harold Ellens, in Hoffmann (ed.), *The Just War*, pp. 39, 43; Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 57, 153-56.

29. See, e.g. Willam B. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2003).

30. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. x, 57; Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?*, p. 45.

31. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 60-62.

32. Compare Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas', pp. 10-12.

33. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, p. 61.

34. Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?*, p. 45.

35. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, p. 163.

36. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 27-29, 103-104, 216, 227.

37. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 114-16, 160; cf. p. 180.

for a moment the Joshua narrative in its likely historical context—the late first temple period, during Assyrian hegemony (cf. below both Wright and Zevit). While weakened (monotheistic) Judean authors were imagining the decimation of the Canaanites, Assyrian kings—all good unscriptured polytheists they—were decorating their palaces with graphic depictions of violent conquest and gratuitous torture. Now the siege of Lachish—recorded in 2 Kings and Assyrian annals, depicted on walls of Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, and supported by archaeological evidence uncovered at the site—can be accepted as an historical fact by any measure.[38] By those same measures, the slaughter of Canaanites at Jericho remains a complete fantasy.[39] The curious history is done not by those who accept this judgment; it's done by those who insist that genocide was in fact carried out against the Canaanites by the Israelites, while at the same time overlooking or downplaying other better-attested incidents of violence from the time-period—such as the Assyrian assaults on Israel and Judah—that are not justified by either monotheistic ideals or scriptural texts.

And what of the accusation—issued by Nelson-Pallmeyer and Schwartz, among others[40]—that a fantasy, once enshrined in scripture, can legitimate violence down the line? This may of course be true at times. But answers to and qualifications of this charge are offered throughout the present volume. Geller will alert us to the difference between a text's potential for violence and its eventual fulfillment. He will also point to the dissonances within the Bible that lead to subsequent confusions and disputes. Frankfurter will also identify another case (the book of Revelation) for which the best evidence suggests that the text's violent potential remained unfulfilled not only in its day, but for sometime thereafter as well. Is it then, he will ask, possible that violent fantasies can in some situations serve to vent the rage that could otherwise be carried out? Kamionkowski will remind us that if we are concerned with afterlives of biblical texts, then other texts (and not just the most violent) should matter as well. Wills reminds us that misunderstandings can sometimes arise very early, such that a text like Matthew 27.25 ('His blood be on us and our children…'—certainly a violent afterlife here) may have had a rather benign intent and meaning at origin. Both Frankfurter and Zevit will remind us that afterlives are afterlives; if we want to reach a full understanding of biblical societies, we can and must determine what these texts meant (and inspired) in their own day. Surprisingly, some evidence suggests that both ancient Israelites and early Christians were less likely to act upon visions of violence than some of their descendants were in the middle ages or are today.

38. David Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, The Institute of Archaeology, 1982).

39. Dever, *Who Were the Israelites?*, pp. 37-74.

40. Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?*, p. 45; Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 61-62; cf. Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas', pp. 10-11.

There can be no doubt, as one recent author put it mildly, that the narratives of Canaanite genocide in Joshua are 'morally dubious'.[41] But if history matters, then so does the difference between fact and fantasy. Indeed, if historical accuracy matters at all to the academy and the greater public at large, then to gloss over such differences is nothing other than scholarly malpractice. Fortunately, attentive readers of the present volume will note that the authors of the following chapters do not avoid differentiating—when it is academically plausible—literary fantasy from historical reality. They also insist on differentiating between potential implications in biblical texts and actualized implications, as evidenced in the historical record.

c. *Context*

Among the more substantive points raised in recent works on religious and biblical violence is the charge that academicians engage in apologetic activity when biblical and religious violence is explained away as an historical exigency, as having achieved a greater good, or, simply, as an unquestioned aspect of society at that time.[42] Equally apologetic is the effort to isolate and (selectively) elevate certain ostensibly non-violent aspects of the biblical tradition (e.g. Micah 4 or Matthew 5) over other more clearly violent traditions such as Joshua or Revelation. There is a substance to these charges. Indeed, on this very matter scholars from as different perspectives as Hector Avalos and Tamar Kamionkowski reach some similar conclusions: it is not sufficient to point to passages such as Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 and conclude with self-congratulation that the Hebrew Bible at its best provides the basis for world peace.[43] But as Kamionkowski would insist (against Avalos, apparently) it remains important to note that Isaiah 2 does not exhibit the same kind of violence as does, say, the book of Joshua. It also remains to be noted that if we are to be concerned with the negative afterlives of narratives concerning Jericho, should we not also be concerned with the more productive afterlives of texts such as Isaiah 2?

Granting that sometimes the critique of biblical studies can also come from within (see also, for example, Frankfurter's critique of recent works on Revelation), the accusation that biblical studies includes those who engage in apologies for the Hebrew Bible and/or New Testament cannot be safely ignored. Still, the charge of bias cuts in all directions. Surely there are biblical scholars who engage in apology. But we can equally be certain that self-acclaimed secular

41. So, e.g. Eryl W. Davies, 'The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions', *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2005), pp. 197-228; compare Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas', p. 20.

42. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 159-74, 215-38, 381-82. See also Avalos in Hoffmann, (ed.), *The Just War*, pp. 60-61; Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, pp. 60-61. With regard to Josh. 6–11 in particular, see Davies, 'Morally Dubious Passages'.

43. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, pp. 169-70, 220-30; cf. Kamionkowski in this collection.

humanists who wish to 'eliminate religion from human life altogether'[44] engage in selectively literal readings of violent texts in order to indict the religions and books they so despise. Indeed, in too many cases, the accusation of scholarly bias functions rhetorically: having accused biblical scholars of being biased, the writers are then free to proceed as if nothing remains in their way. Since appealing to historical context can be used apologetically, then historical context be damned. Surely it is easier to accuse the Bible of violence once select portions can be taken at their apparent face value, irrespective not only of the difference between fact and fantasy (see above) but also of the historical context in which the texts were composed.

It is the common conviction of the biblical scholars whose works are presented here that context does matter, just as much as history does. If the issues on the table include the role of religion in general and monotheism in particular in the perpetration and justification of violence, then it matters deeply whether the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are innovating or repeating. If biblical admonitions to annihilate the enemy (see Geller and Zevit), punitive Old Testament laws (see Wright), and New Testament myths (see Wills) all have their analogues and even inspirations in the broader ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic (polytheistic) contexts, then monotheism in particular—and perhaps religion in general—may have less historical (i.e. real) blame than others might think. Land-grabbing conquest did not begin with Joshua—and may or may not have occurred during Joshua's day, assuming he had one. Thus, the association of monotheism with land-possession can easily be called into question. In the ancient Near East, the great empires of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, along with the smaller nation states such as Israel, Judah, Moab, Edom, Aram and Phonecia, whether polytheistic or not, all fought over other peoples' lands.[45] Indeed, even the charge that religion (polytheism included) is responsible for this violence begins to look laughable: Would anyone be convinced by the claim that the great (and violent) ancient near eastern empires were driven to conquer primarily by their (polytheistic) religious beliefs alone?

That the Jewish and Christian scriptures are being misconstrued in the name of religion by apologetic biblical scholars is a charge too serious to be dismissed out of hand. To be sure, the appeal to historical context or peaceful texts can be used rhetorically or apologetically by biblical scholars wishing to whitewash the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. But that the Jewish and Christian scriptures are being attacked by those who wish to salvage only certain parts of them (including Girard, Nelson-Pallmeyer and Schwartz) or by those who wish to destroy religion altogether (including Avalos and Hoffmann) is also a distinct possibility. To those who hold such views, *any* counter-argument will be seen as apologetic. And here we find a curious

44. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, p. 371.

45. Compare Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas', pp. 3-4.

new form of fundamentalism: a literalist reading of select violent scriptures, divorced from both history and context, with a goal stated with surprising clarity: 'to end religion as we know it'.[46] The charge of apology remains, and it is incumbent upon our readers—scholars and laypeople alike—to look for apology and bias on both sides of the aisle. In the meantime, we might do well to 'neither to condemn nor condone, but to understand and elucidate' (Kamionkowski). Surely without recourse to historical context, elucidation and understanding will continue to elude us.

d. *Scripture and Interpretation*

Any careful consideration of historical context will of course bring us quickly to the irony at the heart of our project: The scriptures cannot be viewed as the cause of the violence they contain, simply because the scriptures were composed and canonized after the events they describe. Let's suppose for a moment there was a historical genocide of the Canaanites; the book of Joshua at most records this event and commends it after the fact. The approval of such behavior is morally problematic in its own right.[47] The problem is only worsened when we consider the potential for actualized violence down the line. But the difference between the various scenarios remains: the contemporary problem driving all the discussion is characterized by the dramatic flourishing of violence done by those who view barbarism as justified by their scriptures. Yes, searching the scriptures will yield many instances of violence, both imagined and real (Zevit). But in the times spoken about in the Bible, the perceived justification for the violence comes, as it must, from elsewhere: from prophets, from kings, from God.

This difference matters, and for more than one reason. For one, *any* significant difference in the reasons for the manifestation of religious violence is of consequence, if for no other reason than the fact that consideration of differences may lead to fuller understanding of this most troubling phenomenon. More to the point, however, is the fact that texts once canonized must be interpreted. And it just may in fact prove to be the case that certain styles of interpretation—particularly literalist ones—may lead to greater propensities for the actualization of the violent potential in scripture (Geller). We should also note again, for the record, that slavishly literal interpretation of violent texts are also, intriguingly, adopted by those who wish to indict the scriptures as inherently violent.

As anyone who has ever read a book knows, arriving at any general agreement on interpretation—literal or not—is by no means a simple process. Disputes over interpretation inevitably arise, and all too often (but not inevitably)

46. Avalos in Hoffmann (ed.), *The Just War*, p. 117; cf. Hoffmann in Hoffmann (ed.), *The Just War*, pp. 61-62.

47. Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas', pp. 10-11, 20; quoting, in both instances, Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

when the book in question is scripture, interpretive disputes are characterized by violence. A thread running through practically all of the papers presented here is the recognition that the Jewish and Christian scriptures emerged from and speak about varied groups and perspectives, resulting from and in turn yielding disparate interpretations of texts and events. As a result of this, it is incumbent upon modern scholarly interpreters to grasp and then grapple with scriptural diversities. As Frankfurter, Geller, Knust and Zevit point out in their papers, a great deal of the most violent rhetoric in the Jewish and Christian scriptures is aimed not so much at obvious but distant enemies who may strike from the outside, but at those closer to home who disagree over matters of interpretation. One resulting observation is summed up poignantly by Knust, who reminds us that 'the enemy within is always, in the end, the most dangerous enemy of all'.

e. *A Deadly Dynamic*

If disputes over interpretation are inevitable, and if the danger of violence lurks over such disputes, have we arrived back at an indictment of scriptures as inherently violent? (See Marini's comments below.) We think not. Even here, the all-important difference between potential and actualization emerges. The challenge that remains is to illuminate the deadly dynamic that can transform descriptions of violence past—many of them complete fantasies—into prescriptions for violence now and to come.

In the midst of violent events—or immediately thereafter—the religious person prone to interpret history as the gradual unfolding of God's will is faced with an interpretive dilemma: what is the reason for any particular manifestation of violence? Consider the suffering of the Jews in the late first and early second-century CE. Traditional Jews understood—and continue to understand—the destruction of the temple (70 CE) and the failed revolt led by Bar Kochva (132–135 CE) within the context of the scriptural covenant: the Jews are being punished for sinful behavior. Christians will interpret the events similarly, though the nature of the sins has now changed: in this view, the Romans' violent suppression of the revolts is to be explained as divine punishment for the Jews' rejection of Jesus (see Knust). The difference, though, is in the violent potential of Justin's view, over against the quietist, passive perspective (on this particular matter) adopted by traditional Judaism. To be sure, the Christians in Justin's day didn't act out the violence he describes—there was no need, for the Romans were efficient enough. But as Knust explains, Justin's violent rhetoric will eventually be actualized, disastrously.

What factors contribute to the actualization of the violent potential contained in the scriptures? Power, to be sure, is one important variable; it serves to explain to a large degree how Justin's interpretation of Roman violence can lead to its actualization, once Christians rule Rome. But not all religious violence is enacted by the powerful. Here the contributions by Frankfurter and Geller

prove to be strikingly significant (and rather surprisingly commensurate). Geller points to the dangers of apocalyptic literalism, a by-product of biblical prophecy itself. When the scriptures come into the hands of single-minded literalists hell-bent on war, the results are likely to be violent. Frankfurter allows that violent fantasies may have served originally to deflect or channel the rage that could otherwise lead to real violence. But once these fantasies are canonized, they may find their way into the hands of groups who accept without question their own self-righteousness and their enemies' evil nature. When such a group feels threatened on the one hand and empowered directly from God on the other, here too we find a deadly mix.

3. *From Origins to Analysis*

The origins of religious violence will remain elusive. The quests of Girard, Schwartz, and Avalos (among others) are doomed to fail because, simply put, the Jewish and Christian scriptures are neither universal enough nor old enough to shed light on various forms of violence—religious and otherwise—that preceded the composition of these documents, let alone their canonization. In this respect, these theories are not very different from the earlier grandiose (and failed) efforts aimed at explaining the origins of religion itself. Extravagant theorizing on the origins of religious violence will rarely stand up to scrutiny, for scrutiny after all requires evidence, and grandiose theorizing about such origins, by its nature, reaches beyond what the evidence can soundly support. The search for the origins of religious violence in particular may also be terribly misguided in its convenient disregard of the massive evidence that human violence precedes religion. Perhaps Wrangham and Peterson put it best:

> The mysterious history before history, the blank slate of knowledge about ourselves before Jericho, has licensed our collective imagination and authorized the creation of primitive Edens for some, forgotten matriarchies for others. It is good to dream, but a sober, waking rationality suggests that if we start with ancestors like chimpanzees and end up with modern humans building walls and fighting platforms, the 5-million-year-long trail to our modern selves was lined, along its full stretch, by male aggression that structures our ancestors' social lives and technology and minds.[48]

Reading a book like *Demonic Males* is a sobering experience. But one aspect of this book is reassuring in the present context: neither religion nor sacrifice plays significant roles in scientific studies of the origins of human violence.

But there is another mode of analysis, one that should prove to shed light on both the scriptures of old and the problems of today. We should for this purpose put aside the question of origins, and refrain from imagining a vision of early humanity divorced from both religion and violence. We should focus instead

48. Wrangham and Peterson, *Demonic Males*, p. 172.

on ways in which religion in general (and for our purposes biblical scriptures and beliefs in particular) serve to accentuate, exaggerate and otherwise bring about acts of human violence *in specific documented historical contexts*. This mode of analysis begins with clear (and meaningful) definitions. It proceeds to work with historical data, and considers context. It then comes to grips with the religious and social dynamics in play, attending to the variables that lead to the manifestation of scripturally-justified biblical violence. Among the recent works known to us that proceed helpfully in this direction with regard to religious violence in general are Mark Juergensmseyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* (once we ignore his occasional Girardian speculations about the origins of religious violence) and Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*.[49] A full treatment along these lines of the Jewish and Christian scriptures remains a desideratum, but we hope that the present volume, on the whole, represents an important step in the right direction.

49. Charles. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).