

INTRODUCTION: VIOLENCE AND BIBLICAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract: For at least a century biblical scholars have explored prescriptions and descriptions of holy wars, punishing plagues, infanticides, treaty violations and lethal loyalty tests, not to mention the emotional torments reflected in prophetic rants and in some of the tradition's most exquisite and excruciating biographies. Arguably, it is the Bible's varied treatments of violence, in all of its forms, which make the text a classical repository of sobering human experiences, at least as recognized in the West. The articles herein ponder some violent themes related to biblical literature. They ponder the shared legacy of ancient Near Eastern literary motifs showing jubilant dining at the death of a foe; the reception history of Psalm 137's last verses, which urge violence against children; contrasting family dynamics in narratives of martyrdom between Jews and Christians; depictions of children as victims and as cruel aggressors in the Christian didactic poems of Prudentius; and the biblical legacy of forceful parental authority and corporeal punishment embraced by some evangelical Christians. The four articles on childhood and violence derive from the 2015 AAR and SBL conference session on biblical violence and childhood, and are introduced and contextualized by Ra'anana Boustan and Kimberly Stratton, who moderated the session.

Key Words: Ancient Near Eastern shaming conventions, biblical childhood, Psalm 137, Jewish and Christian martyrdom, Prudentius, Focus on the Family

Violence in biblical imagination is not a new theme to scholarship. For at least a century we have explored prescriptions and descriptions of holy wars, punishing plagues, infanticides, treaty violations and lethal loyalty tests, not to mention the emotional torments reflected in prophetic rants and in some of the tradition's most exquisite and excruciating biographies. Arguably, it is the Bible's varied treatments of violence, in all of its forms, which make the text a classical repository of sobering human experiences, at least

as recognized in the West. Rather than simply a set of lofty paradigms for right behavior, then, the Bible offers sensitive readers occasions to examine human dilemmas such as we find in the *Iliad*, classical tragedy, and much ancient Near Eastern source literature. Violence—human, divine, feared or felt—is a persistent element in such classics.

As the articles herein illustrate, the themes of the Bible were not all born in it, and nor do they stop with the written text. Rather, themes are shared with written traditions from Mesopotamia to the Levant to Egypt and continue to shift with Christian developments up to the present day. This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* reflects this tremendous range. This summation of the 4.3 issue touches briefly on the gist of each article.

First, in “Corpses, Cannibals, and Commensality: A Literary and Artistic Shaming Convention in the Ancient Near East,” Scott Noegel argues for a pervasive and intentionally perverted association of feasting at the occasion of death across Near Eastern literature. In contrast to the typical ancient Near Eastern proscription of feasting for purposes of sympathetic mourning, these feasting scenes indicate a custom of derisive and deliberate abasement of the dead. This hitherto neglected shaming convention is well supported by literary evidence from fourteen biblical pericopes, two Ugaritic tales, and the Babylonian creation epic, along with visual evidence from the Sumerian Standard of Ur and three royal Assyrian bas-reliefs.

Next Ra’anan Boustan and Kimberly Stratton introduce the subsequent four papers on children and violence in Jewish and Christian traditions. This special section derives from the 2015 meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), from a panel offered jointly by the AAR’s Comparative Approaches to Religion and Violence and the SBL’s Violence and Representations of Violence in Antiquity. In contextualizing the papers, the authors show not only how many forms of violence against children are represented in the Bible and related traditions, but also how children often function metaphorically as blank canvasses on which adults project all manner of fears relating to, for instance, the limits of civilization and notions of the Other.

As the first of the papers on childhood, “Violence against Women and Girls in the Reception History of Psalm 137,” by Joel Lemon, explores the ending verses of the psalm first for the figurative and unequivocal youth and gender of the targeted victims. This is our only biblical psalm which advocates explicit violence against children—in particular, bashing their heads against the rock (v.9). Other verses depicting violence toward offspring (the sons of Edom and the daughter of Babylon) and the feminine engendering of cities figure prominently in the initial textual analysis. Tellingly, in the reception history of the song, the expression of retributive violence toward children and

women tends to be either muted or “spiritualized” as violence against sinful thoughts. While interpretations from Ambrose to Wesley have spiritualized the targets of violence, some other interpretations have truncated the psalm to suppress the concluding violence or have rearranged verses to melodiously overwhelm the psalm’s report of brutality.

Then, Paul Middleton traces the theme of corporate versus individual suffering in narratives of Jewish versus Christian martyrdom, in “Suffer Little Children: Child Sacrifice, Martyrdom, and Identity Formation in Judaism and Christianity.” While both traditions embrace the martyr’s virtue, Jewish narratives from the Maccabees to the Crusades continuously emphasize familial identities and a complicated desire to both harbor and instruct children facing lethal persecution. In contrast, some famous Christian martyr narratives explicitly disdain family ties and embrace individual suffering for the sake of personal salvation.

In “Instructive Violence: Educated Children as Victims and Aggressors in Late Ancient Latin Martyr Poetry,” Diane Fruchtman examines didactic strategies in two martyrological poems of Prudentius: one in which an exceptional child arouses spectators’ sympathy for the Christian victim of a pagan teacher, and another in which Christian children gleefully and fatally stab a pagan teacher with their sharp styli. While animosity between children and teachers is not an unusual theme in this early literature, Prudentius exploits this animosity to arouse discomfort with our presumptions about children’s innocence and to promote the disciplining work of Christian education.

Last and on a similar theme, Susan Ridgely reports on the ideology of spanking in “When Pain Becomes Symbolic of Commitment: The Practice of Spanking among Adults and Children and the Focus on the Family Child-rearing Literature.” Based on extensive interviews with followers of James Dobson’s Focus groups, Ridgely observes the ambivalent submission of mothers who follow Dobson and accept his literal readings of biblical passages which advocate forceful parental authority and corporeal punishment. Dobson’s Focus families manifest a tension between what is perceived as the onslaught of secular liberalism and a desire to preserve Christian control of family values.

This introduction presents the barest gist of the articles, but hopefully suggests a range of violent themes associated with biblical traditions.