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Introduction

Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices in Early Judaism and Christianity

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In recent decades, the relationship between "violence" and "religion" in contemporary social and political life has increasingly become a pressing subject of public discourse. The intensification of interest in the causes of "religious violence" has stimulated research into the ways that people operating within the horizons of one religious tradition or another have historically derived—and continue to derive—prescriptions for and models of "legitimate" violence from authoritative texts, practices, and institutions.[1] Yet, uncritical dependence on contemporary Western conceptions of such categories as "the religious," "the ethical," or "the political" too often obscures rather than illuminates the diversity and particularity of historical phenomena—both past and present—that might be classed under the rubric of "religious violence." Indeed, the dominant paradigms used both within and beyond the academy for understanding the causes behind and meanings of "religiously-motivated" violence in the modern world are themselves in large measure products of the highly particular history of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. For this reason, contemporary analyses of religious violence often merely recapitulate rather than clarify the dynamics of inter-communal competition and, at times, outright

[1] For an overview of recent scholarship, see Charles K. Bellinger, "Religion and Violence: A Bibliography," *The Hedgehog Review* 6 (2004), pp. 111-19.

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antagonism that characterized the emergence, between the second century BCE and the seventh century CE, of Judaism and Christianity in their various principal forms.

This special issue of *Biblical Interpretation* aims to contribute to a better understanding of the genealogy of "religious violence" by exploring, through a variety of disciplinary approaches, the diverse discourses and practices of violence that operated across the range of early Judaism and Christianity. This special issue of *Biblical Interpretation* includes papers that analyze the specific textual or hermeneutic practices used by various groups in early Judaism and Christianity for legitimating their own discourses of "religious violence." The nine papers collected here address both the presence of violence in scriptural traditions and the various ways in which early Jewish and Christian communities employ Scripture to imagine, represent, and legitimize violence. Several papers also explore the larger historical frameworks that informed these textual practices.

The present issue grows out of a conference held at the University of Minnesota on October 6–8, 2007, entitled "Sanctified Violence in Ancient Mediterranean Religions: Discourse, Ritual, Community." The conference was organized by Calvin J. Roetzel, Andrew B. Gallia, and Alex P. Jassen of the University of Minnesota and Raʿanan S. Boustan of the University of California, Los Angeles.[2] The twenty papers delivered at the conference ranged over the political and social contexts, textual traditions, rhetorical forms, and ritual idioms and practices that shaped ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern conceptions of the nexus between "religion" and "violence," with special attention to the Jewish, Roman, Roman-Christian, Persian, and early Islamic cultural spheres. Contributors considered a number of critical themes that bound these diverse materials together: the social horizons within which these discourses and practices of "sanctified violence" crystallized; the social, political, or ideological aims and effects of such discourses and practices; and the relationship of discursive and ritual forms of "sanctified violence" to community-formation and maintenance.

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[2] For a full description of the conference, including presenters, paper titles, and paper abstracts, see www.sanctifiedviolence.umn.edu.

Several of the conference papers will be published in a forthcoming focus issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* on the theme of "Sanctified Violence in History." The articles published here are drawn from the conference papers with a particular focus on Scripture and violence in early Judaism and Christianity. The article by Jan Willem van Henten was not originally presented at the conference, but provides a fitting complement to the eight conference papers.

Scripture and Violence

The specific focus in this issue is violence and Scripture. Violence can be found throughout the pages of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament.[3] The Israelite God is portrayed as a divine warrior (Exod. 15:3);[4] the Israelites themselves are commanded to obliterate the inhabitants of Canaan and are often presented as engaging in such holy wars;[5] Jesus speaks of a coming time when children will rise up against parents and have them put to death (Matt. 10:21, 34-37; Luke 12:51-53);[6] the apocalyptic vision of Revelation imagines one

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3) Bibliography on violence in the Bible is voluminous. For a synthetic statement on this theme, see especially the thoughtful recent essay by J.J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas, the Bible, and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 3-21; reprinted as *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Facets; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). See also the citations on specific themes in the following footnotes as well as in the individual essays in this issue.

4) Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (BZAW 177; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989); P.D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (HSM 5; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

5) See especially S. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); M. Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (trans. M.J. Dawn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991; originally published as *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, 1926).

6) On violent language and tactics in the New Testament and within the early Christian movement more broadly, see especially the essays collected in E.L. Gibson and S. Matthews (eds.), *Violence in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2005); also M. Desjardin, *Violence, Peace, and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); R.A. Horsley and J.S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).

third of the world's population being killed (Rev. 9:15).[7] Such examples could easily be multiplied. Perhaps more importantly, the Bible's narratives of exemplary acts of violence have become templates for subsequent discourses of religious violence, as individuals and communities are motivated and their actions justified (at least in their own eyes) through their engagement with the biblical text.[8] But, to paraphrase a common expression, the Bible doesn't kill people; people kill people. While it is impossible to discount the importance of the Bible's violent narratives, the Bible's continuing legacy of violence should also be located in the hermeneutic of violence that subsists, beyond the bounds of the text, in the textual practices and social worlds of specific communities.[9]

Instigators of religious violence believe that they are carrying out God's directive as articulated in the Bible. In reality, they are carrying out what they *believe* to be God's directive through their *reading* and *interpretation* of the Bible. For example, the Deuteronomic directive to destroy entirely (√*ḥrm*) the Canaanites (Deut. 20:15–18) is a thoroughly violent commandment—and in modern terms would be characterized as genocide. The later historical absence of any Canaanites, however, does not blunt this passage's violent legacy. Later readers of the Bible dramatically transformed this divine directive through the hermeneutic alignment of the Canaanites with the current detested "other." Thus, the Canaanites have been identified with the Irish Catholics (by Oliver Cromwell), Native Americans (by the New England

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7) On the violent imagery of the book of Revelation and its targets, see especially J.W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism/Études sur le christianisme et le judaïsme; Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 122-73; D. Frankfurter, "Jews or Not? Reconstructing the 'Other' in Rev. 2:9 and 3:9," *HTR* 94 (2001), pp. 403-25; A. Yarbro Collins, "Persecution and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation," in D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), pp. 729-49.

8) Collins terms this dialectical process the "effective history" of the Bible ("Zeal of Phinehas," esp. pp. 17-21).

9) See J. Bekkenkamp and Y. Sherwood (eds.), *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (JSOTSup 400; Bible in the Twenty-First Century 3; London: T. & T. Clark, 2003).

Puritans), Palestinians (by militant Zionists), and scores of other "enemies" of "Israel."[10] In doing so, the violence perpetrated against these groups is not only justified, but indeed, part and parcel of the original divine plan. The violent legacy of the Bible is a product of both its own violent narrative and the hermeneutics of violence applied to it.

This issue is thus about both violence in Jewish and Christian Scriptures and violence grounded in those Scriptures. Chronologically, the focal point of the nine papers collected here is from the last couple centuries before the Common Era through the first six centuries of the Common Era. Thus, the papers treat texts and ideas related to late Second Temple period Judaism, the New Testament and its later interpretations by the church fathers, rabbinic Judaism, and the cultural engagement of all these communities with the larger Roman world. In these ancient Jewish and Christian worlds, the production of Scripture and its ongoing interpretation represents a central medium for the expression of the theological, ideological, and cultural ethos of the community or individual.[11] For example, the exegetical engagement or disengagement with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in early Christian communities is a critical meeting point in shaping early Christian identity and framing the nature of its relationship to ancient Israel and contemporary Judaism. Similar dialogues with Scripture were taking place in late Second Temple period Judaism and the importance of the written word in rabbinic Judaism underscores the continued centrality of Scripture and tradition in later Judaism.[12] The varieties of Judaism and Christianity examined in this issue regularly evince similar textual practices. This is no doubt the result of their shared Scriptures and overlapping modes of exegesis.[13] At times, these shared textual practices give

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[10] On this hermeneutic technique, see Collins, "Zeal of Phinehas," pp. 13-14.

[11] For recent discussion of the formation of the Jewish and Christian scriptural canons, see the collection of papers in L.M. McDonald and J.A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson, 2002), and earlier literature cited therein.

[12] On the relationship between canon and community, see the papers in J.E. Bowley (ed.), *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

[13] A useful comparison of Jewish and Christian exegetical approaches can be found in J.L. Kugel and R.A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986). See also the papers in M.J. Mulder (ed.), *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading &*

rise to similar functions of Scripture, while at other times overlapping exegetical approaches are employed in the service of distinct social and ideological agendas.

The recognition of shared textual practices is directly related to significant scholarly conversations taking place regarding the relationships between or within various forms of early Christianity and Judaism. Recent scholarship is continually rethinking the once assumed sharp division between Judaism and Christianity from the second century onward. Rather, scholars are recognizing that in many cases the lines between Judaism and Christianity continued to be extraordinarily fluid beyond the presumed dating of the "parting of the ways."[14] And, even as (some) late antique Christians and Jews worked mightily to carve out distinct and at times opposing religious identities, these projects of differentiation invariably also reveal the profound cultural as well as social continuities that existed among a wide spectrum of Jewish and Christian communities.[15] A nuanced understanding of Jewish and Christian discourses of violence will, therefore, attend to both contiguity and divergence in the ongoing process of negotiation that took place between Jews and Christians over the course of Late Antiquity.

Aims and Contents

In ancient Judaism and Christianity, textual practices inscribe communal identity and ideology. The papers collected in this issue seek to decipher these ancient inscriptions and ascertain how they can inform our

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Interpretation in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity (CRINT 2,1; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

14) The best representatives of these new trends are A. Becker and A.Y. Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews And Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003; rev. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), and D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo–Christianity* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

15) See, for example, R.S. Boustan and A.Y. Reed, "Introduction to Theme-Issue: Blood and the Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Identities in Late Antiquity," *Henoch* 30 (2008), pp. 7-20, which explores the theme of "blood" as both a powerful marker of religious difference and as a charged site for discursive contact, ritual contestation, and exegetical competition.

understanding of religious violence in the social worlds that produced them. The papers focus on the unique contexts of Judaism and Christianity, while at the same time opening up the conversation to explore shared textual practices of violence. Several papers pay careful attention to locate these textual practices within their larger Roman cultural context. Throughout, the dynamic interplay between text, tradition, and violence is located within the broad landscape of Judaism and Christianity in the ancient world.

We have chosen to organize the issue chronologically rather than grouping together papers on Judaism versus Christianity. It is our hope that the historical trajectory represented by this otherwise straightforward temporal sequence will, in fact, highlight the dynamic and interdependent relationship between Jewish and Christian discourses of religious violence. In this way, areas of overlap in shared scriptural tradition as well as hermeneutic method will emerge just as often as do moments of inter-communal debate, conflict, and even violence.

The issue opens with Alex P. Jassen's "Violence and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination," which employs the model of "scarce resources" theory drawn from the social-sciences to analyze the historical formation of the discourse of religious violence within the Qumran community. Jassen shows that, while at its formative stage of growth, the sect applied polarizing language to various areas of contention within Second Temple Judaism in order to convince "outsiders" of the correctness of the sectarian way, with time this language was transformed into a graphic rhetoric of martial violence. Jassen argues, however, that the Qumran sectarians did not employ actual violent tactics against either the conquering Romans or the wider Jewish society, as did other Jewish groups in the period. Rather they situated this rhetoric within the framework of the eschatological final battle, thereby deferring violent confrontation until the end-time. Jassen thus shows that the very process by which a discourse of religious violence *infused* the ideology of the Qumran community simultaneously also *defused* the impetus to undertake concrete violent action.

In "The Eschatological Arena: Reinscribing Roman Violence in Fantasies of the End Times," Kimberly B. Stratton likewise emphasizes the central role played by eschatological imagery in the formation of religious identity. Stratton reads early Jewish and Christian rhetoric of

eschatological retribution against the background of the Roman culture of spectacle, highlighting the prominence of allusions to the Roman arena in these texts. She asks what it might mean that Jewish and Christian visions of the final judgment internalized the very language of domination that these texts were intended to critique. She argues that these allusions to and echoes of the Roman arena constitute a form of colonial mimicry, which both appropriates and subverts Roman symbols of power. She cautious, however, that the meaning of this rhetoric is not uniform, but serves different purposes in different texts and contexts as Jews and Christians fashioned their identities in conscious relation to Roman power.

With Calvin J. Roetzel's "The Language of War (2 Cor. 10:1-6) and the Language of Weakness (2 Cor. 11:21b-13:10)," we come face to face with that most famous and articulate of first-century Jewish eschatologists, the apostle Paul. The essay analyzes Paul's use of martial rhetoric in 2 Cor. 10:1-6 against the background of his wider interactions with the community at Corinth. Roetzel highlights both the disciplinary and emancipatory dimensions of this passage in order to explore the manifest tension that exists throughout Paul's writings between his continuing deployment of coercive forms of leadership and his attempts to formulate an alternative in which strength derives from weakness rather than force. Roetzel argues that Paul's experiment at subverting the prevailing ideology of manhood, while only ever partially realized in his writings, was destined to have a profound and lasting impact on early Christian culture.

In "Violence as Sign in the Fourth Gospel," Jennifer A. Glancy explores the narrative and spatial intersections of Jesus' body and the Jerusalem Temple. She argues that, in the Gospel of John, the violence directed against Jesus is set in motion by his own violent actions in the temple. In particular, Jesus' use of a whip to drive out his fellow Jews from the temple functions within the narrative as a moment of violent self-revelation. Glancy argues that, in encoding violence as a sign, the Gospel does more than merely narrate an event, but also contributes a central building-block to the history of religious violence.

In a paper that nicely complements that of Glancy, Shelly Matthews traces out the contested afterlife that the narrative of Jesus' life had within second-century Christian literature. Her "Clemency as Cruelty:

Forgiveness and Force in the Dying Prayers of Jesus and Stephen" juxtaposes the dying forgiveness prayers of Jesus and Stephen. She diagnoses in recent attempts to situate these prayers fully within Jewish scriptural traditions an apologetic tendency aimed at showing that Luke-Acts is not anti-Jewish. Instead, Matthews argues that the prayers in fact share in the narrative's larger project of constructing a definitive rupture between the *Ioudaioi* and the *Christianoi*. Matthews contends that, both for Luke and for some of his transmitters, the prayers were understood intransitively; they did not effect forgiveness toward their objects, the Jewish enemies of Jesus and Stephen, but were primarily intended to highlight the heroic clemency of the speaker. Matthews finds significant affinities between this notion of clemency and the Roman discourse on clemency, in which imperial domination is figured as beneficence toward the conquered. Matthews' analysis thus illuminates the potentially violent ramifications of early Christian expressions of forgiveness toward the Jews.

Beth A. Berkowitz's "Reconsidering the Book and the Sword: A Rhetoric of Passivity in Rabbinic Hermeneutics" likewise explores the often paradoxical relationship between the active and the passive in the history of religious violence. She focuses on the complex relationship between Torah-study and violence within rabbinic culture in order to trace the impact that the hermeneutical postures adopted by rabbis had on their embrace of or resistance to various forms of legally sanctioned violence. Her essay highlights the rabbis' selective adoption of a posture of interpretive passivity in a variety of legal contexts in which their audience's physical and social welfare is at stake. The essay proposes that the stereotyping of early rabbis as hermeneutically passive by Babylonian talmudic editors allows them to highlight their own exegetical and judicial activism as they bypassed or altered canonical precedents. Berkowitz thus discloses the dialectic relationship between the rabbis' rhetoric of passivity and the process of interpretative and legal innovation in rabbinic culture.

In "Christian Martyrdom and the 'Dialect of the Holy Scriptures': The Literal, the Allegorical, the Martyrological," Margaret M. Mitchell challenges the pervasive view that the ideology of religious martyrdom reflects a literal—or even hyper-literal—mode of scriptural interpretation. Through a close reading of Tertullian's *Scorpiace* and Origen's

Exhortatio ad martyrium, she demonstrates that the dichotomy between literal and allegorical interpretation fails to capture the many and ingenious ways in which Scripture could be understood by its readers to instruct Christians to embrace martyrdom. These two test-cases clearly show that the labels "literal" and "allegorical" function as apologetic or polemical devices to defend or discredit a given interpretation. These hermeneutical labels do not, however, actually describe the wide range of concrete interpretative practices in which these authors engaged as they crafted their powerful ideologies of religious martyrdom.

Ra'anan S. Boustan's "Immolating Emperors: Spectacles of Imperial Suffering and the Making of a Jewish Minority Culture in Late Antiquity" seeks to assess the impact that the Christianization of Roman imperial power had on late antique Judaism by tracing the historical development of Jewish fantasies of revenge against Rome. He argues that in the early Byzantine period (fifth to seventh century) Jewish writers expressed heightened animosity toward Rome in a series of vivid depictions of violent suffering directed specifically at the figure of the Roman Emperor. These visions of eschatological violence not only redeployed specific elements of Roman imperial ideology and practice, but also internalized the increasingly common stereotype of Jews as violent troublemakers found in contemporaneous Christian sources. Boustan argues that the creators of this vivid discourse of retributive justice thus colluded with their Christian counterparts in constructing the Jew as a member of an oppositional and even dangerous religious minority.

Jan Willem van Henten's "Martyrdom, Jesus' Passion and Barbarism" brings the special issue to a close with a comparative essay that demonstrates important patterns of similarity between the notion of martyrdom as it developed in early Jewish and Christian cultures and martyrdom in our contemporary world. He argues that Jewish and Christian accounts of martyrdom highlight the complex relations of power within which both martyrs and oppressors are caught. His essay focuses on one central theme in these accounts, namely, the failure of communication between martyr and oppressor. The essay views this theme through the lens of the concept of "barbarism," which van Henten characterizes as a process of miscommunication that simultaneously sustains and disrupts existing power-relations. The concept of

"barbarism," van Henten argues, also illuminates the cinematic representation of martyrdom in the 2006 movie *Paradise Now*, which follows the final days of two young Palestinian males recruited to carry out a "martyrdom operation" within Israel. This comparative concept thus offers a powerful analytical tool for studying the socio-cultural dynamics of religious violence in a variety of specific historical contexts, from ancient to modern.

We would suggest that the cumulative impact of these papers is to highlight the care needed in approaching the variety of discourses of violence that were produced by Jews and Christians in Antiquity. But we are also mindful that these studies have an important lesson for anyone—scholar or layperson—seeking to understand the relationship between religion and violence in the contemporary world. It is a happy fiction that we can study the ancient world disconnected from our own. These essays recognize that ancient Judaism and Christianity, like many other religious formations, have violent chapters. Moreover, they suggest that it is naïve to assume that violence in the name of religious allegiance or community can be attributed to a single source—and once removed will restore a pacified world. They recognize that the histories of all religious traditions are more complex than such simplistic condemnations—or valorizations—of religion would suggest. In so doing, this collection of essays demonstrates the many and varied ways in which the rhetorics of violence that are deeply rooted in a community's practices of reading and writing inform its internal structures as well as its posture toward others. It is our hope, then, that the reader will come away from this issue with a fuller understanding—and perhaps greater suspicion—of the mechanisms that enable individuals and groups to confer on themselves the right to define legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence and the boundary between the two.