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CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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Abstract: This introduction to the special section of the 4.3 issue on violence in the biblical imagination presents a brief overview of scholarship on the theme of children and violence in Jewish and Christian traditions before summarizing the four articles which follow. These four papers were originally presented at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, November 2015. Scholarly literature on children and violence falls into two main clusters: child sacrifice and corporal punishment. Using Sarah Iles Johnston's response to the panel as a starting point, this introduction proposes that children "are good to think with." Stories about children and violence carry weighty symbolic cargo: they demarcate the limits of civilization and define certain groups of people as Other; they signal social disruption and extraordinary crisis. Examples include: child sacrifice, parental cannibalism, child martyrdom, and corporal punishment. We conclude that scriptural accounts of divinely sanctioned violence always retain for their interpretative communities the potential to inspire and to legitimate newly emergent forms of violent speech and action.

Key Words: scripture, children, child sacrifice, cannibalism, martyrdom, corporal punishment

Four of the articles collected in this issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* derive from a panel on Children and Violence held at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia, in November 2015. The Violence and Representations of Violence in Antiquity unit (SBL) and the Comparative Approaches to Religious Violence Group (AAR) jointly sponsored this panel and selected papers that cover a broad range of history from ancient to modern. The papers explore a variety of ways that the two themes—children and violence—intersect within the "biblical tradition" shared by Jews

and Christians. While the topic of children and violence is potentially much broader, including pressing contemporary concerns such as child soldiers, sex trafficking, and the use of children for terrorist attacks, the papers on the panel all concentrated on religiously inflected violence involving children within Judaism and Christianity. Consequently, this introduction will mirror the panel and survey scholarship that most pertains to violence and children from a religious studies perspective.

While the topic of children and violence is largely under-explored from a religious studies perspective, a quick survey of scholarly literature reveals two main clusters of research: child sacrifice and corporal punishment, especially in the context of contemporary culture wars in the United States, where conservative Christian groups advocate for faith-based parenting that permits corporal punishment. The papers in this volume, therefore, constitute the vanguard in an emerging interdisciplinary field, which combines Violence Studies, History of Religions, and Child Studies. We anticipate that this volume will open the conversation and create more opportunities to explore the pressing topic from new and different vantage points.

The panel benefitted from a response by Sarah Iles Johnston of The Ohio State University, whose comments provided a useful framework for understanding the riveting horror of violence involving children. We begin with a summary of her comments before moving on to a brief survey of relevant scholarship on the topic as we have defined it. Johnston opened her response with a story about the untimely death of a boy due to his own childish foolishness—he went swimming in a polar bear enclosure at the zoo and was devoured by a bear. According to a secondhand account, at the boy’s funeral, the priest praised God for taking the youth early; knowing that the wayward child would turn out to be a criminal, God in his mercy prevented him from committing mistakes that would mar his chances for eternal salvation.

Johnston used this anecdote to highlight that children are incomplete; they represent unrealized potential and futures that are radically open-ended. Children are thus blank canvases onto which adult hopes and fears and “all manner of emotions and assumptions can be projected.” This ambivalence generates a profound tension: on the one hand, we fear *for* our children, that some harm may come to them, but on the other, we are afraid *of* them and their potential for cruelty, violence, or just plain stupidity, as in the case of the boy devoured by a bear.

Both types of fear often co-exist and the resulting tension frequently forms the basis for horror stories. In *Rosemary’s Baby*, Johnston points out, Rosemary’s initial fear that the coven wants to harm her baby is transformed into a fear of her baby itself once she realizes his demonic parentage. Similarly, in *The Exorcist*, viewers fear Regan, grotesquely out of control and

possessed by Satan, while simultaneously fearing for her well-being as possession contorts and distorts her adolescent body. It is children's perceived purity and openness that make them such likely channels for supernatural powers in many cultures. Furthermore, children are not autonomous agents, but passive and subject to greater authority, which enables them to become vessels or portals through which dangerous powers can gain access to the more guarded adults in their vicinity.

Johnston concluded her comments with a reference to Levi-Stauss's famous dictum that "animals are good to think with." But if animals are good to think with, human children must be even better, she conjectures: "They share a certain passivity with animals, a passivity that allows us to write upon them whatever we want to. We 'create' them in more ways than just the biological. But they are so much closer to us than animals—and here of course the biological act of creation is very important—that whatever it is we choose for them to represent cuts so much closer to our quick than any animal symbol ever could."

Johnston's insight, that "children are good to think with," finds corroboration in the scholarly literature on violence and children. Stories of violence against children, or of violent children, often demarcate the boundaries between civilized and uncivilized or between religious communities. They identify depravity in one's Other or, in some cases, in one's own society, highlighting situations of social or ideological crisis. In other cases, violence against children is justified on religious grounds and understood to signify extreme piety. In all these cases, the intersection of violence and children is freighted with significant symbolic cargo.

Scholars have long been fascinated by the theme of child sacrifice, especially in a biblical context, where child sacrifice is presented as an abhorrent Canaanite custom and one of the abominations for which God expels both the indigenous populations and apostasizing Israelites from the "promised land." Castigating Israelites for child sacrifice constitutes a recurring theme among the biblical prophets of the seventh and sixth centuries, demonstrating the endurance of this practice until late in Israelite history. In his classic study of the "death of the beloved son," Jon Levenson investigated the way this practice continued in a transmuted form: as redemption of the first born in Judaism and as the linchpin in Christian conceptions of Jesus as the sacrificed Son of God. Thus, child sacrifice stands at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity, illuminating the compelling nature of this religious act.¹ Maternal cannibalism also occurs in the bible at the hands of Israelite women, although in these cases the act is indicative of the dire crisis at the

¹Levenson 1993.

time (siege) and vividly presents the impossible suffering, emotional as well as physical, of God's people during difficult times; it graphically represents the total breakdown of social and familial relations under the intense pressures of war.² In Lamentations, vivid descriptions of dying children function to critique God for ruthlessly afflicting innocents.³

Like the biblical authors, Greek and Roman writers are also often at pains to denounce child sacrifice as the barbaric practice of uncivilized foreign nations. James Rives notes the imperialist value of such claims, since they justified Roman conquest and domination as a civilizing act that morally improves the conquered people.⁴ But the ritual killing of children was not unknown to the Romans. Celia Schultz has demonstrated the double standard Romans employed when they ritually killed hermaphrodite babies by drowning them in boxes at sea. Romans distinguished this ritual killing from barbaric "sacrifices" to the gods; they constituted ritual extirpation of prodigies, which signaled divine displeasure and violated the natural order.⁵ Thus, both in Rome and in biblical Israel, child sacrifice indicates the boundary of civilization; those who practice it are depraved and worthy of conquest. If child murder occurs at one's own hands, however, it is an act of extreme desperation and indicates the unfortunate breakdown of social and religious norms.

If child killing as sacrifice, expiation, or cannibalism signals a breakdown of social order and civilization, marking either one's own society as critically in danger or another society as immorally barbaric, child martyrdom functions very differently in religious sources. Tessa Rajak describes how the book, 4 Maccabees, uses the death of a mother's seven children, to highlight her own piety and stoic self-control.⁶ Similarly, in the medieval sources that chronicle the violence experienced by Jewish communities at the hands of the Crusaders many Jews are described as piously killing their children to prevent them from being converted to Christianity. In these stories, parental killing or encouragement to die is likewise a sign of profound faith. While crisis and persecution constitute the context of these deaths, the parental choice to advocate death over apostasy is presented in wholly positive terms as a paradigm of piety. These martyrological sources do not treat these actions as signs of maternal depravity or of social dissolution. Rather, the parent's love

²E.g., 2 Kings 6.24–33; Lam 4.10. See Lasine 1991, 29–33. Parental cannibalism also appears in prophecies of divine punishment: Deut 28.53–57; Lev 26.27; Jer 19.19; Ezek 5.10.

³Linafelt 1995, 50.

⁴Rives 1995, 68–69.

⁵Schultz 2010.

⁶Rajak 2014.

of God is held up as an ideal precisely because it is stronger than parental love.⁷ And, at the same time, familial love finds ultimate expression in love of God. The children's bravery and willingness to die, in these accounts, confirms the rectitude of this course of action.

As this brief summary shows, the topic of violence and children, because it is so central to the dynamics of identity-formation and boundary-drawing, has been of great interest to modern scholars. The four papers collected in this special issue continue these lines of inquiry, but also address a number of themes that have received relatively little attention in the study of children and violence in the biblical tradition. Because violent encounters are so often the proving grounds on which membership in a given group is put on display, it is hardly surprising that in these studies the use of violence against children serves as a means of delineating between groups. But what is striking is just how often the use of violence is not treated as a negative feature of the demonized Other, but is proudly claimed by the in-group. In particular, readiness to use corporal punishment to correct improper behavior or attitudes in children can represent a positive marker of identity. Unlike more extreme forms of violence against children, corporal punishment most often appears to mark divisions internally among groups within a given society. We should not be surprised, then, that in our own time the use of violent force against children continues to function discursively to demarcate groups and identities. Thus, for example, while many liberals denounce corporal punishment as child abuse, some conservative Christians advocate spanking as a way to inculcate obedience and self-control and perceive the unwillingness to discipline children physically as a sign of a permissive secular culture.

A closely-related theme that looms large in these essays is the pedagogical function of violence, which can serve as a "corrective" or even "constructive" force in the formation of children as competent ethical subjects. In Roman antiquity corporal punishment was widely used on slaves and was regarded as the only way to control inferior beings who lacked reason.⁸ Indeed, if freeborn Romans tended to eschew corporal discipline of their children, it was precisely because they regarded it as servile. In late antiquity, however, under the influence of scripture, attitudes toward corporal punishment began to change. Early monastic rules indicate the wide acceptance of physical discipline for children when they extend the metaphor of the patriarchal household to the monastic setting; with regard to both children and monks the proverb, "spare the rod and spoil the child" (cf. Proverbs 13:24), affirmed that corporal discipline led to

⁷Cohen 2004.

⁸Hillner 2009, 775–776.

salvation.⁹ In fact, failure to use violent force when it is called for has the potential to render children immoral or amoral monsters. It is precisely the threat of legitimate disciplinary violence that is responsible for instilling proper values in children. In some contexts, the pedagogical aims of violence—even when brutally or spectacularly applied—take precedence over its punitive function.

Each of the four papers also highlight how the family (or the closely-related setting of the school) may be the site of violence, rather than a refuge from it. This insight stands in marked contrast to the dominant tendency in studies of biblical violence, which most often concern macro-level violence against the enemies of God's people. Yet the Bible itself is no stranger to familial strife. And we are accustomed by now to thinking of the home as a space of contention in which interests clash—between spouses, between parent and child, and across generations. Violence that strikes at the heart of the family unit can undermine the integrity of the family and thus call into question broader social norms (as in the case of parental cannibalism). But in many settings the familial unit is not conceived of as a physical refuge, but rather as a “moral refuge” where children are inculcated, often through corporal punishment, with proper values in the face of a sinful society. In Jewish and Christian martyrological discourse, parents may even be lauded for saving their children from religious or ethical corruption by encouraging them to seek death or by killing them themselves.

A final theme that can be gleaned from these papers is that, once violent discourse has been enshrined in sacred texts, it resists attempts at sanitization or elimination. Violent images, ideas, or stories that became incorporated into the biblical text tend to transcend their immediate literary or historical contexts and to assume normative significance. By their very presence within scriptural canon, biblical accounts of divinely sanctioned violence always have the latent potential to inspire and to validate newly emergent forms of violent speech or action. We are familiar with this phenomenon from the uses to which some Jews and Christians have put such famously incendiary portions of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as Israel's conquests of the Promised Land in the book of Joshua or the graphic descriptions of eschatological vengeance in the book of Revelation.¹⁰ But, as we learn from the papers assembled here, this principle also holds true for texts that explore in more complex and subtle ways the phenomenon of human brutality—both suffered and inflicted.

This special section opens with Joel LeMon's essay, which addresses each of the themes we have highlighted. LeMon traces the Christian reception of

⁹Ibid., 774–775.

¹⁰Collins 2003.

Psalm 137:9: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock” (NRSV). LeMon concludes that the two most common exegetical strategies for dealing with the unsettling violence against children in this verse have been either to spiritualize its content or to omit it from the psalm altogether. While the former option might strike many as unsatisfactory, preserving as it does such violent imagery, the latter proves no less troubling, opening the psalm up to a much more specific charge of violence against girls since it retains, and as a result highlights, the violence invoked against the Daughters of Babylon of verse 8.

The most pervasive Christian strategy for sanitizing the violent imagery of Psalm 37:9 has been to spiritualize its message by understanding the “little ones,” ostensibly the children of the Babylonians, to refer to little sins or disordered desires that must be checked before they grow into larger vices that consume a person with overwhelming strength. To dash these “children” against the rock is to dash them against the “Rock of Christ.” LeMon traces the lineage of this exegetical strategy from the church fathers (Ambrose and Augustine) to modern Christian writers and thinkers (C. S. Lewis and Charles Wesley).

Since this interpretation fails to alleviate the brutality of the psalmic imagery, it has struck many as unsatisfactory. During the Reformation, emphasis on the “plain sense” of scripture prompted figures such as John Calvin to reevaluate Psalm 137 in light of its literal meaning. This focus on the apparent cruelty of the psalm (acknowledged by Calvin) eventually led to a rejection of it altogether by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. He opted to omit Psalm 137 completely, along with others deemed too violent to recite, from the *Sunday Service of the Methodists of North America*, the psalter Wesley commissioned for his Methodist congregations.

An alternative strategy that came to be developed among liturgical, metrical, and musical interpreters was to retain Psalm 137 in psalters but to eliminate the last three verses. Franz Liszt’s 1864 musical version of the psalm ends at verse 6, altering the theme of the text from one of retribution to a cry for help. “By the Babylonian Rivers,” a 1964 musical version of this psalm widely used in Anglophone Protestant and Catholic churches, follows suit.

Another approach taken by interpreters has been to omit only verse 9. But, as LeMon argues, this has the unintended consequence of strengthening the psalm’s violent rhetoric against young girls in verse 8. Most of these versions render the beginning of verse 8 as “daughter of Babylon” instead of “Daughter Babylon,” the former conjuring up a more concrete image of a Babylonian girl, the latter a more abstract symbolization of the city itself. Moreover, the musical versions of Psalm 137 that have omitted verse 9 further heightened this condemnation of the female figure through gendered antiphony, with

deep male voices often singing this verse in particular. The consequence is that the gritty particularity of the violent rhetoric that troubled opponents of verse 9 so much is replicated and even intensified in verse 8.

Paul Middleton's paper investigates the differing ways in which familial ties are represented in Jewish and Christian martyrological texts by examining their attitudes toward the sacrifice of children. Several early Jewish martyrologies celebrate the martyrdoms of entire families, which serve as a defense against forced conversion or humiliating actions that would defile the group's honor. In Christian texts, by contrast, obligations to family, and especially children, present barriers to a noble death by martyrdom that must be overcome.

Middleton locates the roots of Jewish attitudes in early writings such as Josephus and the Maccabean literature. In the story of the seven brothers recorded in 2 and 4 Maccabees, a mother urges her own children to enthusiastically embrace death rather than transgress Torah. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis in these accounts on ancestral ties: the brothers give up their lives to honor "the laws of our fathers." In his account of the Roman siege of Masada, Josephus positively portrays the collective suicide of the inhabitants of the fortress, which included the slaughtering of children by their parents, as an honorable undertaking. As the only way to protect innocent children from the desecration of their Jewish identity at the hands of the Romans, the slaughter of these children is the means by which the integrity of the group is preserved. This attitude appears to have influenced Jewish martyrological discourse into the medieval period when, according to both Jewish and Christian accounts of the First Crusade, Jewish parents killed their own children rather than risk their baptism at the hands of the mob. Middleton concludes that a focus on familial ties is central to being a faithful Jewish martyr, and that Jewish identity is maintained when all members of a biological family group (all descendants of Abraham) participate in the act of martyrdom.

Early Christian martyr texts, by contrast, often display an indifference, or even hostility, to biological family. Middleton locates the roots of this in the repeated Gospel passages demanding the abandonment of familial ties in order to follow Jesus. These ties act as hindrances to a successful martyrdom but might also be themselves the *cause* of it (e.g., Matthew 10:21). One of the most frequent stumbling blocks to a martyr's noble death, in direct opposition to Jewish martyr texts, is the biological relationship between child and mother, a view found in Christian martyrologies like *The Passion of Perpetua*, and the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice*. In these stories, Christian identity is only realized at the moment the martyrs cast off their identities as mother or child. But while biological family is spurned in Christian martyrologies, a new kind of familial bond becomes central to the

martyr's identity. It is in this form of "fictive kinship" that the martyrs see themselves as brothers and sisters in Christ, creating a new kind of group solidarity in death that echoes Jewish martyr texts.

Diane Shane Fruchtman's paper investigates the topic of child-centered violence in two martyrological poems of the Latin Christian poet Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 9 and 10. Both poems, which parallel each other in imagery, vocabulary, and narrative elements, aim to evoke in the reader sympathy for the children they portray. In the former, which recounts the martyrdom of the Christian teacher Cassian at the hands of his students, the reader's sympathy is made to lie with children as *perpetrators* of violence; in the latter, which tells of the brutal martyrdom of an infant for verbally defending the Christian orator Romanus, the reader sympathizes with the child as *sufferer* of violence.

In relating these stories, Prudentius uses the emotional reactions of the reader as tools to illustrate a larger point about the nature of education. In the case of *Peristephanon* 9, Prudentius crafts his narrative so that the immoral cause of the students will seem just, while the virtue of the Christian martyr is heavily downplayed. Cassian's students are shown to harbor legitimate grievances against the oppressive disciplinary measures of Roman schoolteachers, including Cassian. The poem thus reveals the flaws of the traditional educational model in which Cassian and his students are engaged, a model that associates youth with innocence and holds that education *per se* inculcates moral virtue. For upon further reflection, the reader recognizes that, despite their education, they have been subjected to emotional manipulation that has blinded them to the true justice of the martyr's cause and the injustice of his murderers. Just like these children, reared on traditional Roman pedagogy, their education has left them open to the whims of emotional disorder, unable to discern right from wrong.

By contrast, *Peristephanon* 10 directs the reader's emotional sympathy toward what Prudentius considers to be good ends, the justice of the Christian martyr, whose story in and of itself serves as an education in moral virtue. Here, too, the pedagogical process parallels the narrative of the poem, which has been purposely crafted to prompt the reader to identify with the innocent child against the wicked prefect. Although too young to be formally educated in Roman society, the infant martyr, who defends Romanus, has been taught biblical stories by his mother about models of Christian virtue, which allow him to face his executioners with steadfast courage. Thus, like the reader whose emotions are properly oriented, he has been given a truly moral education.

Violence in both of these poems activates an emotional reaction and in turn serves a didactic purpose. Through the discourse of violence, Prudentius aims to teach his reader that a value-neutral instrumentalist education is not

sufficient to foster truly moral citizens and, without an accompanying moral education, will actually leave its recipients vulnerable to the innate human tendency toward sinfulness.

Susan B. Ridgely's article examines the dynamics behind supportive attitudes toward corporal punishment among conservative Christian followers of the psychologist James Dobson. She presents a close reading of a selection of the fifty interviews she conducted with parents who implemented Dobson's parenting method, against the background Dobson's own writings over the course of his career. Dobson grounded his support of corporal punishment in what he saw as a "biblical morality." But, over time, Dobson and his followers came to see corporal punishment more as a symbolic act meant to defend against the assaults of a "hostile" secular liberal culture. In fact, Dobson himself always took a "middle-ground" approach, stressing that corporal punishment must be tempered by the cultivations of a child's own self-discipline. In his later writings, Dobson increasingly distanced himself from such methods, though never officially denying their legitimacy. Moreover, his followers rarely utilized disciplinary tools such as spanking, even though they vehemently defended such practices in principle. This attachment to the right to use corporal discipline reveals the discursive power of the theme of children to draw boundaries between communities locked in contemporary culture wars as much as it did in ancient or biblical times.

Ridgely first investigates the rise to popularity in the late 1970s of Dobson and his radio program, *Focus on the Family*, which she views as a response to the sweeping cultural changes of the 1960s. Like Dr. Spock, whose lenient approach to parenting Dobson perceived as undermining America's moral fabric, Dobson claimed for his work a scientific basis. But, unlike Dr. Spock, he combined his academic learning with a deep respect for "traditional biblical values," all the while incorporating the most popular of Dr. Spock's insights. Thus, Dobson was seen as the only prominent alternative for religious parents to the secular parenting strategies that dominated the field of psychology. Ridgely demonstrates how Dobson's writings and radio program sought to authorize his approach to corporal punishment through literal interpretation of scriptural passages like Proverbs 13:24 and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. This exegetical strategy was bolstered by a strong emphasis on the doctrine of original sin and by the complementary notion that God would punish children for their sins later in life if they did not learn about the punishment that sin brought along with it while still in their youth.

Nevertheless, Dobson's insistence on the legitimacy of corporal punishment was always combined with an appeal for parents to share God's love and forgiveness with their children by confessing and even apologizing to them regarding their own wrongdoings. Moreover, based on her interviews,

Ridgely concludes that among most of Dobson's followers spanking itself was a rare event. Through an examination of Dobson's corpus of work from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Ridgely points out a significant change in attitude; corporal punishment came to be portrayed less in positive terms and more in reactive ones, as a bulwark against a secular assault on discipline, order, and authority rather than a biblically mandated form of punishment. This stance fostered his followers' anxiety that they were a dwindling minority fighting against the overwhelming consensus of a larger liberal culture, even if the majority of American parents were, statistically speaking, just as likely to use corporal punishment to discipline their children as conservative Christians. Part of Dobson's shift away from advocating corporal punishment also came from competition with other psychologists and the threat of a loss of relevance: as a new generation of parents became more concerned with pressing issues like depression, suicide, and violence, Dobson's emphasis on establishing hard authoritarian discipline, seemed to miss the mark and was ineffective as a tool to confront contemporary parenting issues.

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