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Review of David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans, Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage

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Collected Essays

DAVID A. BERNAT and JONATHAN KLAWANS (eds.), *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (Recent Research in Biblical Studies 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007). Pp. xiv + 157. \$70.

This collection of seven essays (excluding the introduction and conclusion) is the published part of a conference held on the campus of Wellesley College and Boston University February 19-20, 2006. The resulting papers indicate that it must have been an interesting—and obviously productive—gathering.

After a helpful introduction by the editors that surveys a few of the controversies surrounding the general question of the Bible and violence (pp. 1-15), the book includes the following featured essays: Ziony Zevit, “The Search for Violence in Israelite Culture and in the Bible” (pp. 16-37); S. Tamar Kamionkowski, “The ‘Problem’ of Violence in Prophetic Literature” (pp. 38-46); Stephen Geller, “The Prophetic Roots of Religious Violence in Western Religions” (pp. 47-56); David P. Wright, “Homicide, Talion, Vengeance, and Psycho-Economic Satisfaction in the Covenant Code” (pp. 57-78); Lawrence M. Wills, “The Death of the Hero and the Violent Death of Jesus” (pp. 79-99); Jennifer Wright Knust, “Roasting the Lamb: Sacrifice and Sacred Text in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho” (pp. 100-113); and David Frankfurter, “The Legacy of Sectarian Rage: Vengeance Fantasies in the New Testament” (pp. 114-28). There follows a conclusion entitled “Concluding Reflections on Religion and Violence: Conflict, Subversion, and Sacrifice,” by Stephen Marini (pp. 129-34). An extended bibliography for all the essays, a scriptural index, and an index of modern authors are provided.

Recent events and recent writings make this an even more (depressingly!) relevant subject than is normally the case. As the editors indicate in their interesting introduction, we have gone through a number of academic “trends” in recent decades on the subject of religion and violence—especially in terms of Christianity and Judaism. The work of Regina Schwartz and René Girard is helpfully critiqued in this introduction, as well as the more incendiary notions of Hector Avalos. As the editors state, “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” (p. 8). Suspicious indeed! Many of these essays successfully challenge a run-of-the-mill “biblical analysis” that concludes that any appeal to biblical notions of peace or peacemaking is the result of “special pleading,” while arguments that often merely bludgeon the reader with a series of violent-sounding ancient texts is passed off as responsible historiography or analysis. If for no other reason than its challenging of this disturbingly frequent practice, this collection is worth time spent carefully reading the interesting contributions.

Zevit’s essay is a helpful overview of some of the more problematic issues dealing with Hebrew Scriptures. He seems interested in asking whether ancient Israel was particularly violent—by ancient standards and, I would add, by modern standards as well. Zevit properly points out that a Western bias (a bias that suggests that there are “proper ways” to conduct warfare, essentially hiding the terror behind chivalry—or at least chivalrous rhetoric in the historical sources about warfare) has rendered the reading of ancient Hebrew texts on warfare particularly problematic. Although I may quibble with some of his observations (which differ, at times, from key arguments in Susan Niditch’s study *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]) and with his omission, for example, of Hosea’s taking issue with Jehu’s slaughter (p. 23), which illustrates internal debate on issues of violence, I think his conclusion is basically both sound and important, including the insight that “[h]istorical Israel . . . did not evolve an ideology of violence that esteemed war itself or the killing of enemies.” The accounts of war in the Hebrew Bible stand in stark contrast to those in the literature of classical civilizations.

Kamionkowski discusses the debate surrounding the “procession of the nations” in the interpretation of Isaiah 2/Micah 4. Like many others, Kamionkowski wants to problematize this classic “peace passage” by locating it in a proposed tradition of Israel (or God’s) dominance over all—a kind of “Pax Israelitica.” I am not sure that these texts are inevitably texts of dominance over enemies. Not all “procession” texts are processions of defeated enemies. Zechariah 8, for example, portrays Gentiles wanting—indeed actively seeking—to go to Zion, not forced to go as in the iconic Persian-style portrayals of processions of tribute that are still visible on the existing walls of the ruins of Persepolis, for example. Although this is a helpful study, I would suggest that more attention be given to the possibility of differing prophetic views, rather than shared views across a variety of texts and times that are all, nevertheless, considered “prophetic.”

Geller’s essay is a helpful corrective to the inability of many readers of biblical texts to appreciate the nuances of rhetoric when translated into text. The problem of the use of violent rhetoric in the service of ends other than informing strategies of military policy seems a particularly important problem to work out, and Geller’s essay is a good introduction to the topic. Why many critical readers seem to insist that all violent rhetoric be taken literally is an important question to raise, especially in a day when Western powers seem perplexed (and enraged) by the rhetoric of their Islamic-informed opponents. That such rhetoric can be manipulated is clear—all the more reason to subject violent imagery to serious analysis.

Wright’s contribution is a technical analysis of the laws of killing and retaliation in the Covenant Code. He helpfully lays out, in a series of charts, the various contexts within which these laws in the Bible ought to be read, including extrabiblical legal examples.

Wright is especially interested in “reading” the Covenant Code in dialogue with the Code of Hammurabi, and in seeing the biblical material as an ancient Hebrew attempt to correct perceived injustices in the ancient Babylonian system.

Wills writes from his larger body of scholarly work comparing classical literary and biblical storytelling traditions, and he makes a helpful contribution to this collection by reading the traditions surrounding Jesus’ death in the context of the “death of the hero” traditions in classical lore. He is especially interested in how the Gospel traditions have taken up, and modified, the influences of the hero story (such as those he examines from the Life of Aesop, among others) in the case of the crucifixion narratives in the Gospels. The literary influences on how violence, or violent acts, are portrayed is the larger idea behind Wills’s essay, and it provides a helpful and interesting case study that could inform other approaches to biblical rhetoric such as Geller’s essay.

Knust’s essay examines early Jewish–Christian debates with regard to sacrifice, violence, and Jewish–Christian relations by analyzing the important work of the famous early convert Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*. Irrespective of the debates about the actual existence of Trypho, Knust provides an interesting contribution to the wider question of early Christian debate on violence in the Roman world (and beyond), although it moves in a direction rather significantly different from the biblical analysis of the previous essays—and as such is somewhat beyond an informed comment from me.

Among the texts I have more comfort in discussing, Frankfurter’s essay extends the discussion about violent rhetoric from 2 Thessalonians, 1 John, and Revelation, and even into the important world of noncanonical and “sectarian” literature. Although there have been classic attempts to read selections from noncanonical literature on the subject of violence (one thinks of the famous essay by Krister Stendahl reading the Dead Sea Scrolls to interpret Paul calling for apocalyptic vengeance in Rom 12:19–20), Frankfurter once again raises the problem of reading violent rhetoric—and even engaging violent fantasies of the destruction of enemies—as literature that may or may not actually inform literal acts of violence. There are scores of examples of this kind of interesting irony, not the least of which was the Quaker founder George Fox’s infamous “Book of Miracles” (suppressed in early editions of his journal by later Quakers who were rightfully embarrassed by some of Brother Fox’s eccentricities), which carefully documented the deaths and destructions of Fox’s opponents! The sociological value of angry and violent rhetoric has been recognized in NT scholarship for some time, and Frankfurter’s essay is an interesting reminder that we are nowhere near finishing this analysis.

If there is an overall theme to these essays, it is the importance of sociologically informed rhetorical analysis of biblical texts dealing with violence, war, and death. In this light, these essays represent an important suggestion that the issues need more discussion. If I had a general criticism, it would only be that the essays tend toward neglecting internal dialogue within biblical texts on these issues, choosing to read texts as representative of a consistent line—a consistency that I am rather convinced does not exist. In conclusion, I find these essays important, provocative, and suggestive of ideas for further work—precisely what a collection of conference papers should achieve. I express my gratitude to both the writers and the editors for making this collection available.

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