

CHAPTER EIGHT (pp. 169-180)
SANCTIONING SAMSON: DO OLD TESTAMENT
STORIES ABOUT VIOLENCE MAKE SENSE TODAY?
SOME ANSWERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
REDACTION CRITICISM AND HISTORY OF RESEARCH

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Introduction

Some of the most difficult elements of the bible for application today are the many texts more or less sanctioning violence (Lohfink 1983; Lüdemann 1997; Collins 2003). Why do we read these bible texts, which were written in days and for people long gone by and expect or hope that they are relevant for us today? They are handed to us by tradition, but when we look at the way biblical texts have functioned in the history of the church we may find ourselves extremely discouraged. The bible was often misused to legitimise doubtful actions. Is it therefore possible to learn from faults in the past? What position do I have to take as an exegete? Can I function as an intermediate, passing through what originally inspired the holy writers? How can I avoid mixing it up with my own judgements? Is there a way not only to do justice to the text, but also to make it possible that the text can criticise me and help me to find my way as a believer in the world I am living in? What does it mean that I am part of Western culture and as an exegete educated in the tradition of the historical critical approach to the text? I am well aware of the fact that my present position does make me suspect in the eyes of many who are disappointed by the meagre contribution of Western exegetes in their attempts to make the biblical texts relevant today, especially in the less privileged parts of our world.

I should add that commenting on texts about violence is for me a serious problem. Indeed, I am happy not to have experienced extreme violence myself. As a pastor, I am familiar with stories of older people about the Second World War and I am impressed by learning how much impact the things they did or what was done to them can still

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have on their lives. War came closer to the Netherlands when in the 1990s the Balkan peoples began their violent ethnic conflicts. War came more or less to our country when we received our share of (the fear of) terrorist attacks. However, I still feel like an outsider when it comes to violence, only guessing what difference personal experience of such things make when you deal with biblical stories full of violence. This realisation makes it all the more important for me to learn from the history of interpretation: how were these texts read in different situations? Did these texts help their readers to get a better view about themselves and upon the God who is or can

be related to these matters? Or were these texts used merely as an illustration of a standpoint already taken? Which criteria were used for choosing these texts to be read in a specific situation and for interpreting them?

In this essay, I would like to begin with a personal attempt to relate the historical-critical approach of the biblical text to a biblical theology that takes seriously the issues of today. I will do so by first looking at some of the most violent texts of the Old Testament: the stories about Samson. What do we have to think of this judge of Israel? Can he still be regarded as an example for those who want to live and act out of faith, as he is presented in the letter to the Hebrews 11:21–33? Does Samson foreshadow Jesus, as is maintained not only in early Christian interpretation but also in modern ‘serious’ readings of the story in Judges 13–16 seeing in Samson a “forerunner of the greatest Saviour of all” (Webb 1995:120). In my opinion this has become very difficult, especially as I cannot put out of my head the obvious parallels between Samson’s violent death described in Judges 16 and that of the terrorist suicide attacks on the World Trade Centre, New York, September 11, 2001: the ‘hero(es)’ giving their lives attacking the enemy in the heart of their territory, destroying the symbol of their power and killing nearly 3000 people.

In order to focus on the problem and on the way it has been dealt with in the tradition of which I am part, I will first describe some aspects of the history of interpretation of this section of the book of Judges (Houtman and Spronk 2004; Gunn 2005:170–230). I will then try to find my own way in the continuously changing field of redaction critical theories about the book of Judges as part of the Former Prophets, hoping to show that the latter can be of help in letting the biblical texts speak today, while avoiding the less appealing examples we come across in the former.

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Traditions of Christian Interpretation

A radical solution to the problem of ‘violent texts’ was proposed by Marcion in the second century CE and by many others over the course of time, following him in one way or another. According to Marcion, the church should leave these and other disputed texts out of the biblical canon. He suggested skipping the entire Old Testament and parts of the New Testament and keeping to the texts which in his opinion best describe the great things that have come into this world with Jesus Christ. The Christian believer should read about and listen to texts about the god of mercy and not be distracted by superseded books about the whimsical and often violent creator of this miserable world.

Although Marcion has always had his supporters, the early Christian church soon condemned him as a heretic. The church kept to the Old Testament as part of its holy scriptures, just as Jesus and the apostles used it as the basis for their message of salvation. In the early church, exegetes carried further the way of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the life and words of Jesus Christ. Many Old Testament stories and prophecies were interpreted as pointing to Jesus. In this way, a number of ‘violent texts’ received a new, and to the Christian believer, fully acceptable meaning. This can be best illustrated by the place taken by Samson in the so-called ‘Biblia Pauperum’ (Henry

1987). These books, printed in the fifteenth century, are based on traditions that go back many centuries. They received their name, 'books of the poor' in the nineteenth century. This name is misleading, because the librarian who gave it mistakenly assumed that such books, primarily consisting of pictures, were meant for the illiterate poor. Beautifully illustrated, these books must however have been expensive to buy and could only be fully understood by those who were able to read the added explanations. The pictures contained therein represented important stages in the life of Jesus. They were combined with pictures referring to stories in the Old Testament. The message is clear: in the Old Testament one can already see indicated and predicted what was going to happen with Jesus. Within this framework, the story of Samson killing the lion is related to Jesus defeating death. Furthermore, the story of Samson removing the gates of Gaza is related to Jesus opening the gates of the realm of death at the moment of his resurrection (Houtman and Spronk 2004:68–77).

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'Violent texts' can also be used to provide moral statements. In this way they can become acceptable as lessons. This can be illustrated by the way the story of Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. 11) has often been interpreted (Houtman and Spronk 1999). Modern readers usually have problems with the father keeping to his rashly made vow to God in order to gain victory on the battlefield, even at the price of the life of this only daughter. Nowadays, it is hard to accept that his daughter gives in and even supports her father in keeping his promise. In many older commentaries, however, one comes across the opinion that Jephthah is to be complimented ('a man a man, a word a word') and is rightly mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 among the heroes of faith. His daughter is called an example to all daughters in being obedient to her father and to God. The stories about Samson have been interpreted and applied to the present situation in a similar way. The lesson for all times is that it is important to pray to God, not only in times of utter distress. It also supports the struggle against the dangerous, powerful, and in the case of Samson, fatal feelings of lust.

Another way of coping with 'violent texts' is to emphasise the wickedness of the evil-doers and the innocence of their victims. This means that there can be no doubt about the wicked being punished even though it may be violent: they receive what they deserve. With regard to the story of Samson this is not difficult and seems to be in line with the way the biblical writer pictured the Philistines as deceitful and mocking God. A remarkable example of sympathising with Samson is a painting by Lovis Corinth in 1912: *der geblendete Samson* (Exum 1998; Spronk 2002). Corinth pictured Samson as a tragic person, blindfolded, in chains, grimacing with pain. The artist may have felt some kind of relation to Samson. He was one of the famous painters of his time, known as a tall and handsome man enjoying the good things in life. In 1911, however, he suffered a severe stroke, from which he never fully recovered. The painting of Samson was the first great work after this crisis and can be regarded as a way of coping with his change in health.

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Modern Exegesis and Modifying the Violence of Biblical Texts

Another possibility of coping with the problem of 'violent texts' without rejecting them like Marcion or spiritualising or moralising them as in traditional Christian interpretation, was offered by the new approach of biblical texts since the Aufklärung. The biblical texts were read more and more as literature, the product of humans and therefore influenced by the situation of the people who wrote the texts. Biblical texts can and should be compared to related texts from the same Ancient Near Eastern world (Rowlett 1996). In this way it became clear that the violence described in biblical texts was in a sense part of a wider common framework. By comparing the texts it was possible to indicate what is specific to the Old Testament in this regard. Some scholars concluded that the Old Testament shows a relatively restrained use of violence. The stories about the conquest of Canaan with the execution of the ban, killing everything alive in the conquered cities, could be compared to ancient Near Eastern royal texts describing the devastating victories of kings in the name of their gods. In many ways the Israelites and their views on history were not different from, for example, what we learn of King Mesha of Moab, from Sennacherib of Assur, or from Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Another modern way of modifying 'violent texts' is based on the results of the historical-critical approach to the text. According to a commonly accepted view many 'violent texts' can be dated in or after the period of the Babylonian Exile. This means that they were written or collected and redacted in a period in which Israel/Judah had no military power at all. In this situation stories about a violent conquest could hardly be read as a call to use violence against the enemies of the nation. Readers were primarily called upon to look at themselves: how was it possible that the land given by God was taken away again? The texts were not meant to invite the taking-up of arms, but rather to put on the penitential robe.

In a number of recently published commentaries one sees some kind of return to the view of Marcion. Some interpreters simply suggest laying aside a number of texts as being no longer relevant or severely criticising them as being opposed to the central (peaceful) message of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In a feminist commentary on the story about Jephthah and his daughter, God is criticised for not intervening

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in the foolish doings of Jephthah (Trible 1984:107–9). The many references to sexual abuse of women are by feminist exegetes primarily interpreted as a warning: this should happen no more! On the other hand, other feminist scholars suggest looking at Delilah in a positive light, seeing her as a woman who achieved the bringing down of a brutal masculine power (Smith 1999:115).

What are the criteria for rejecting these 'violent texts', or at least their message? Apparently, modern interpreters assume to have higher moral standards. Is this a matter of common sense, of generally accepted human rights, of new insights about equal rights for both rich and poor, male and female? Are our modern standards and views on equality not also based upon, or rooted in, the Judaeo-Christian tradition?

When interpreting and criticising 'violent texts' in the bible, it is possible to take the criteria more explicitly from the bible itself. Many modern exegetes assume some kind of development in Old Testament ideas about God and violence in God's name. 'Violent texts' about

violence in the name of God against other nations are regarded as belonging to a primitive stage of ancient Israel's religion. Later writers, especially the prophets, would have criticised these older views. Sometimes, this criticism can be found in prophetic texts against the leaders of Israel; at others, one finds traces of a more moderate view being expressed, especially in the way older texts seem to be edited during later periods. We have already come across this solution to the problem in the description given above of the historical-critical interpretation of the texts dating this reworking of the older studies in the period in or after the Exile.

In another, more positive approach to 'violent texts', it is stated that we should be more reluctant in applying our assumed higher moral standards to their interpretation. Rather, we should take the message of the bible more seriously and understand that many 'violent texts' have to do with the central biblical themes of the election of Israel and of the fight against idolatry. Without violence, the people of God would not have acquired or kept their place in history. Within this framework it is inevitable and justified that God or people acting in God's name used their power against others. That it was necessary to use violence often says more of the opponents and their abuse of power than of the Israelites being forced to take up arms. The same holds true for the difficult, but necessary fight against idolatry. Indeed, it would be naïve to suggest that the forces of evil and misguidance would disappear without being forced through such violent action.

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Placing trust in a God who avenges evil can be seen as a comfort to the oppressed and in certain situations can also stimulate the start or even continuance of hostilities in God's name.

These relatively positive views on 'violent texts' are sometimes related to the views of René Girard on violence (Schwager 1987). According to Girard, violence can be seen as a means for societies to restore the balance between conflicting parties. When two groups come into conflict, the tension can be taken away by projecting it onto a third party. This third party functions as a scapegoat. Through controlled violence, only the scapegoat is victimised and the opposing parties can live on in peace. Girard notes a development in the bible in which this mechanism of violence, which is in fact a never-ending circle of violence, will eventually be broken.

Can Redaction Criticism be of Help?

A first look at the results of recent historical-critical research on the book of Judges as part of the Former Prophets is not very promising. For a long period of time it has been understood as the work of a single author describing the conquest and loss of the Promised Land, using different sources, but arranging and framing them from a clear-cut Deuteronomist view of the reasons for the downfall. When Martin Noth presented this theory in the middle of the twentieth century, it was welcomed as a brilliant new insight which was much more compelling than the many contradictory attempts to find traces of the sources that seem to have been used in the Pentateuch (Kratz 2000:219). Nowadays, however, history seems to repeat itself. After the initial success, came the refinement of the theory with a growing number of assumed Deuteronomistic redactors. Consequently,

this turned into an “unsettling wide array of conflicting options that encourage scepticism of past attempts to sort out discrete redactional layers in the Dtr history” (Meier 2003:160). The many detailed analyses can no longer be held together in one coherent view. The Deuteronomist(s) who was or were held responsible for large parts of the historical books of the Old Testament became “elusive” (Schaering 1999). The situation with regard to the book of Judges is well illustrated by the recent publication of two monographs in the classic tradition of redaction critical studies, but with entirely different conclusions. In the first, Philippe Guillaume challenges Noth’s theory

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about a Deuteronomistic writer/redactor and presents a new reconstruction of the growth of the text (Guillaume 2004). In the second, Andreas Scherer, who calls Guillaume’s ideas ‘*ebenso verblüffend wie befremdlich*’ (Scherer 2005:9), presents his own conclusions as a confirmation of Noth’s view, albeit that he found a ‘polyphony of Deuteronomistic voices’.

Be this as it may, what remains is the insight that the stories in the book of Judges should be read as part of the written history of Israel which explains its eventual downfall and Exile as a just punishment for the sins of its people and its leaders. Within this framework, the book of Judges illustrates the growing need for good leadership, with Samson as an example of a still-imperfect leader who is unable to use his God-given powers in the right way: “So zeigen also auch die Simsongeschichten das Scheitern eines Charismatikers und das Bild einer vertanen Gotteskraft” (Von Rad 1962:346). Such a verdict could hardly have been given on the basis of Judges 13–16 alone, because the story of Samson ends with a reference to his success as a provider of peace to his people for a period of no less than twenty years. Despite the many differences of opinion among its users, historical criticism can still be of help here to get a clearer view on how the story of an ancient Israelite hero, which at first sight appears positive, seems to have received a new meaning in a new context. Understanding this process can possibly be of help in expanding this interpretative process when we try to apply the biblical text to our own situation. Here is not the place to go into detail. I will merely sketch some headlines of a promising new approach. Not only can it be practised at the academic level of redactional critical research, but it may also prove to be of help for the ‘ordinary’ reader because the clue for the right interpretation lies in ‘simply’ reading the wider context and comparing the stories of the judges with the stories of the kings.

According to the classic Deuteronomistic theory, which for that matter does not much differ from previous historical-critical exegesis, nor from modern views such as those of Guillaume, the book of Judges consists primarily of old folk stories about local heroes. They were rewritten or redacted from the perspective of a single state of Israel and used to fill the time-gap between the story of the Conquest of the Promised Land and the stories of Samuel and the kings. Things become even more complicated and debated when one tries to identify these later writers or redactors and to define their motives. In

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recent research, there is a growing tendency to look at this from a new angle: not—like Noth—from the book of Deuteronomy looking forward, but rather looking back from the book of Kings (Würthwein 1994; Auld 1998; 1999; 2000; Kratz 2000:160). First, the stories of Samuel would have been added as an introduction, then those about the judges, and finally the story about Joshua.

Although I am still convinced of the close relation of the book of Joshua to the book of Deuteronomy, as theory put into practice (Spronk 1994:13), I am also impressed by the argument that we find so many stories preceding the book of Kings that seem to “anticipate or pre-play elements of the royal story” (Auld 2000:355). With regard to the book of Judges this idea is not new. The judges have been called “protokings” before (Brettler 1989:407). It was worked out recently by Piet van Midden, who notices in this connection the parallel between Samson as the last judge and the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, both of whom were bound and blinded (Midden 2001:84–85). He presents his findings as the results of a purely synchronic approach. It appears possible, however, to relate it to some of the outcomes of the diachronic analysis of Judges 13–16. These can be summarised as follows (Jonker 1996:166): the oldest part of the story about Samson consists of chapters 14–15; to this was added chapter 16, which is clearly a parallel account of the previous chapters, providing a climactic development of the story; chapter 13 was added as an introduction explaining the reference to the Nazirite in 16:17; by means of the formula in 13:1; 15:20; and 16:31 the stories were tied to the rest of the book of Judges. It is interesting to note that chapter 13, which appears to represent one of the final stages in the composition, is clearly linked to both Samuel and Kings. As with 1 Samuel 1 it begins with presenting the problem of a woman having no children. Moreover, the text introduces her husband with exactly the same words (Judg. 13:2 // 1 Sam. 1:1). Then there is in Judges 13:5 an indirect reference to David, when the messenger says to the wife that her son will make a beginning with the liberation from the Philistines, because it was only under the reign of king David that the Philistines were defeated definitively. It seems plausible, then, that in its present form the stories about Samson were meant as an introduction to the history as recounted in the books of Samuel and Kings. Once the reader is put on this track he may notice a number of common elements. Next to the parallels with David and Zedekiah mentioned before, one can refer to Samson being driven by the spirit

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of the Lord like King Saul, to Samson inventing unsolvable riddles and in this way showing to be wise like Solomon, and to Samson getting involved with foreign women, which is reminiscent of the risky marriage policy of King Solomon and of King Ahab. All these possible associations turn these stories—which at first sight appear to be rather banal stories about a violent hero—into an ominous parable. The message is that although you may have received the spirit of the Lord, like Saul, and may be strong as a lion, like David, and may be wise, like Solomon, this is no guarantee of lasting success. There are many arguments—among others, the clear parallels with ancient Greek legends—supporting the assumption that both the stories about Samson and their insertion in this place in the story of Israel should be dated in the Hellenistic period (Bommel 2004:299–308).

Does this admittedly hypothetical analysis help us to get a better understanding of the stories of Samson and to find a way to give new meaning to this text in our situation where we are wrestling again with the problem of religiously legitimised violence? I think it does; but of course, I can only speak for myself. This new look, based on the new approach in studying the Former Prophets by Auld and others, turns an old and obsolete text into a living tradition. That is precisely what one should expect from a biblical text. I can now sense something of the inspiration that moved the ancient writer or redactor to use these legendary tales: not to glorify the heroic past of the nation, but to help the reader focus on the (theologically speaking) much more relevant issues of the use and abuse of power, of human weakness and might, and of the relation between human power and obedience to God. In Judges 13–16 and in the book of Judges as a whole, the writer also proves to be inspired at the literary level. The stories are “literary gem(s) . . . continually subverting our expectations and making us ‘judge’ ” (Auld 2000:366).

Conclusion

Redaction critical studies can be of help—at least they help me—to discover layers below, laid down through ages of interpretation and misinterpretation, continually recovering and reconstituting the beauty and relevance of these old ‘violent’ stories. They help me to appreciate them as inspired witnesses of God’s call to look critically at myself and my situation. I cannot speak for those readers who are

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living in situations of extreme violence, but I do think reading these ‘violent’ stories can be helpful for them as well. When these stories are read within the wider context of Israel’s history, from the conquest through to the loss of the Promised Land, they not only reflect modern situations of violence and the misuse of power, but also stimulate a critical view on violence even when it is practised in the name of God.

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AN UNENDING PROCESS

A Response to Klaas Spronk

Dear Klaas,

I regard it a privilege to be writing this letter to you. Not only is the topic of your essay of particular interest to me as a woman biblical reader, but I have valued your work ever since my exposure to your fine commentary on Nahum (1997) while undertaking research on the imagery of violence against the 'woman-city' of Nineveh. I guess therefore that we have some interests in common.

Your paper, "*Sanctioning Samson: Do Old Testament Stories about Violence make Sense today? Some Answers from the Perspective of Redaction Criticism and the History of Research*", focuses on an important and unwieldy topic. The questions you raise live in the minds of many bible readers and exegetes, namely, how to interpret biblical texts to be of relevance for us today, in which violence is seemingly sanctioned. Admitting to not having personally been on the receiving end of violence, you turn to the history of interpretation for insights on how these texts were and still are being read in various contexts and circumstances. The violent Samson stories in Judges 13–16 serve as your working text. You point out that exegetes in the course of history tried to cope with such violent texts by either rejecting them (such as Marcion), spiritualising and/or moralising on them, (such as the early Christian church), or with the advent of the historical-critical method, modifying them by taking into consideration their origin in history, the ideology of their authors and their relation to other Near-Eastern texts.

You go on to provide a convincing argument based upon redaction criticism whereby you assert that the Samson stories may have originally formed an introduction to the history related in the Books of Samuel and Kings. Many elements of Samson's life can be linked to those of the kings of Judah and Israel. Although the reader has to judge your argument for her/himself, your conclusion for me was a real eye-opener. Your reference to the "banal stories about a violent hero" being read as a parable, calling the reader to concentrate upon

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human issues such as the use and abuse of power, human weakness and lust, rather than to "glorify our heroic past", was of particular interest. The more I read your interpretation, the more it appealed to me and the more I concurred with you that ancient texts can speak from the past to address present-day problems.

Having said this however, I want to make a comment about violence with which I trust you will find agreement. Violence as a concept has many faces and should perhaps therefore have been more clearly defined. Violence is not simply about killing people and destroying nations. Whereas you regard the Samson stories as being the most violent in the Hebrew bible, as a woman reader, I see the story of the gang rape of the Levite's wife in Judges 19 as the most violent of biblical texts. For me, its effect on bible readers is potentially devastating. I cannot help but wonder where this violent story fits into

your framework with regard to the position of the Book of Judges and its relationship to the Books of Samuel and Kings. But this is a discussion for another time. Feminist commentators regard this tale, recounted during the exile, simply as an attempt to explain what had become of Israelite women at that particular juncture of their history. In linking this to the Samson story, I think that the ancient authors realised the power of self-critique and of righting the wrongs of one's own society in bringing hope for a better future. For me, herein lays the appeal of such accounts.

I want to close by saying I thoroughly enjoyed your paper. I have learnt afresh the importance and value of the history of biblical interpretation. It reminded me that exegesis is an unending process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Past interpretations determine our present understandings, so that understanding and meaning can never be final. In my context (and to which, I refer in my own paper elsewhere in this collection), this means that a South African feminist methodological debate which takes on a character of exclusivity is futile as long as in our interpretive task we do not overlook violence. I wish you all the best in your future involvement with unlocking these old texts.

With kind regards,

Frances Klopper