

The Transformative Power of Old Testament Texts about Violence

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Introduction

There can be no doubt about it: the Bible preaches and promises peace. Nearly all believers will be convinced of it: God blesses those who search for peace. Then why is the Bible so full of violence and why do believers so often commit acts of violence in the name of God? The answer that this is caused by sin and that violence is necessary to eradicate sin from God's creation, is too simple. History shows that violence sanctioned by holy texts usually brought and will probably also bring about more violence instead of ending it. The problem of violent texts in the Bible cannot be easily solved (Lohfink 1983; Lüdemann 1997; Collins 2003; Spronk 2009C)). One could ask the question why do people continue to read these texts, which were written in days and for people long gone by and expect or hope that they are relevant for us today? When one looks at the way biblical texts have functioned in history one may become discouraged. The bible was often misused to legitimize doubtful actions.

It is a common and frustrating experience that, although the Bible is accepted by many as normative, in situations of stress and violence biblical texts are usually not used to open up discussions but to close them by using specific texts to defend one's own views and convictions. It appears to be very difficult to avoid that Biblical texts are used primarily to support an already taken standpoint. So when we want to take the Bible seriously we should begin with asking ourselves whether we are aware of the criteria that we use and that are used by others in selecting the biblical text one decided to listen to or to preach from in a specific situation. Very often the application of biblical texts appears to say more about the user than about the texts (mis)used. Therefore, Collins in his excellent survey of the issues at stake here, rightly call for honesty of the biblical interpreter and also for the acknowledgment that the Bible is "no infallible guide to ethical matters" and that the stories it tells are no "paradigms for human action in all times and places" (Collins 2003:20).

In this essay I hope to show that biblical texts about violence also can have transformative power, in the way that they can help to open up a discussion about violence and to find new perspectives. To begin with, stories about violence in the name of God and even stories about violence commanded by God can help to take seriously the problem of violence. In the canonical context they function as the call for justice and for protection of the weak. As part of the sacred texts they can invite the reader not to look away from similar atrocities in their own situation, to take courage to analyze and to fight them. Biblical stories about violence can also be read as meant to mirror the life and thought of the reader. Is it right to use violence in the name of God in a specific situation? Or should it be condemned as an act of blasphemy?

Many people have read and are reading the Bible as sanctioning violence against those who oppose God. In my opinion it is also possible and even more appropriate to look for help in the Bible to find new perspectives on the problem of violence and inspiration to deal with this problem. To illustrate this I will shortly discuss a number of relevant texts. I shall focus on some of the texts that are usually seen as the most problematic in this regard. I will start with the books of Joshua and Judges recounting the merciless killing of Canaanites. Attention will also be paid to the book of Nahum with its threefold praise of YHWH as an avenger.

The Book of Joshua – the Case of Rahab and Achan

The Book of Joshua has the reputation of being one of the most violent of the Bible. It is known for the stories in which it is told without further comment how all inhabitants of the cities of Canaan are killed by the invading Israelites. It is a measure called "putting them under the ban" (Hebrew *cherem*), that is: complete destroy them in the name of YHWH. It seems to indicate that when a war is initiated

and motivated by a divine command any restraint is abandoned. The victor does not have to show mercy for his human opponent but only has to listen to his severe god. A closer look at the stories, as I have tried to demonstrate in my commentary on the book of Joshua (Spronk 1994), can show that this is a simplification and that the way the stories are told even contain a critique against a too simple use of violence in the name of YHWH.

Those who start reading the book of Joshua with the expectation of being confronted with this violence may be surprised or perhaps disappointed because of the fact that there is very little violence in the first chapters. It begins with a long introduction in which Joshua is told how he can follow in the footsteps of his famous predecessor Moses. He is strongly advised to study and put his heart and soul into following the Torah. Only then he will succeed. It is interesting to note that in Joshua 1:1 Moses is called "the servant of YHWH" and that only at the end of the book Joshua receives the same title, in the report about his death (Joshua 24:29). One could say that the stories in between prove that Joshua had taken the task given to him in chapter 1 seriously. The obvious message that can be derived from this for the reader of the book is that he should do the same. One cannot really understand the book of Joshua without having knowledge of the commands given to Moses, especially in the book of Deuteronomy with its indications, for instance, about how to go into battle in chapter 20.

In Joshua 2 the first steps into the promised land are made. Joshua sends out two men to spy out the land. From a military point of view their expedition is a failure. They get no further than the house of a whore called Rahab on the walls of Jericho, the first city they try to enter. When they return to Joshua they can only report about what they heard from this woman. According to her everyone in the land is afraid of the God of Israel. It is remarkable that the spies do not receive any blame at all. Apparently this message out of the mouth of this Canaanite woman is enough. This is also telling for what is important in the following actions: it is not the military power or the tactical cunning but the power of JHWH and its impact on the Israelites and on other peoples.

This is underlined in the next chapters. First they give a very detailed description of the crossing of the Jordan. In itself this is not something extraordinary, because there were fords in this river. More important turns out to be the comparison with the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds described in Exodus 14, when YHWH led his people out of Egypt. After the crossing of the river Jordan we still have to wait for the first military actions, because now it is decided that first the religious duties must be fulfilled as they are commanded in the book of Deuteronomy: the men have to be circumcised to confirm the covenant with YHWH and then they celebrate Passover commemorating the exodus. Again, these actions cannot be seen as normal preparations for battle. Circumcision is about the worst to do to someone who is on the brink of a battle, as is illustrated by the story of Genesis 34.

When, finally, in Joshua 6 the siege of Jericho begins, this proves to be no normal human military action. It is clear that this will not be the work of soldiers but of believers. As in a religious procession they go around the city. Joshua does not "fit a battle", it is God who lets the walls tumble down on the seventh day. He then leaves it to the Israelites to finish his work by killing Jericho's inhabitants. Having read the story thus far it becomes clear that the emphasis is not on this violence at the end against the Canaanites, but upon God who acts. This has important consequences for the application of the text. It calls in the first place for obedience to God and for confidence that he will keep to his promise.

It is told that during the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 the crusaders led by Godfrey of Bouillon were inspired by a priest called Peter Desiderius to follow the example of Joshua standing before Jericho. They fasted for three days and then marched in a barefoot procession around the city walls, with the clergy blowing trumpets and singing psalms. This did not bring about the desired result. Eventually the city was taken a week later by more conventional means and with similar bloodshed.

When one wants to take a meaningful message from the story of Jericho that can be applied to human behavior, it is good not to look in the first place to the role God plays but to the role of humans. For this reason one should also take into account Joshua 7 which tells about the aftermath of the destruction of Jericho. The continuation of the conquest of the land is stopped by someone who had violated the ban over Jericho. It had been forbidden to the people to take anything of the spoil, because it was declared to belong to YHWH. One man had not been able to resist the temptation to take something of the treasures of the city. It turned out to be Achan, a member of the tribe of Judah. Within the story in the book of Joshua he can be regarded as the counterpart of Rahab. They are the

only people who next to Joshua are mentioned by name in this story. She was just a whore, a despised Canaanite woman, but she became a symbol of YHWH's power reaching further than expected. Her example shows how faith in YHWH crosses borders. Achan on the other hand belongs to the most important tribe of Israel, but he becomes a symbol of disobedience, being inspired by greed and not by faith. His example shows that being an insider does not automatically mean that you are on the right side.

It can be concluded that this story at the beginning of the conquest can help to get a good perspective on the things described in the book of Joshua. It cannot be denied that there is much violence and that much of it is exercised in the name of JHWH. It also warns the reader against easy judgments about who is wrong and who is right. The difference between good and bad is not as simple as it seems to be at first sight. One could say that Israel like most peoples in this world had its own nationalistic stories. The stories about the conquest of Canaan has many parallels in the literary heritage of other cultures. What appears to be characteristic of the story of Israel's beginnings as an independent state is that it invites the reader also to look critically at one self and to look further than the borders separating different peoples. The story of Rahab and Achan shows that fixed images of enemies can be broken.

The Book of Judges – the Case of Samson

To the most violent texts of the Old Testament certainly also belong 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 life attacking the enemy in the heart of their territory, destroying the symbol of their power and killing nearly 3000 people.

One of the fruits of modern historical-critical research, especially the discussions concerning the theory of a Deuteronomistic History, is the insight that the stories in the book of Judges should be read within the framework of a written history encompassing the whole period of Israel and Judah as independent state. Characteristic of the way the history of Israel and Judah is described here is its explanation of its downfall as a divine 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 Samsongeschichten 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 concerning the precise reconstruction of the process of growth of the individual texts, historical criticism can be of help 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. Not only can it be practiced 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 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 more complicated and debated when one tries to identify these later writers or redactors and to define their motives. In recent research, there is a growing tendency to look at this from a new angle: not—like Martin Noth—from the book of Deuteronomy looking forward, but rather looking back from the book of Kings (Auld 2000). 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 convinced that the book of Joshua is related 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 summarized 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 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. There are good reasons to assume that this holds true for the final redaction of the book of Judges as a whole (Spronk 2009A).

Does this literary-critical 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 legitimized violence? I think it does, because it 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).

Redaction critical studies can be of help to discover layers below the surface of the text, laid down through ages of interpretation and misinterpretation, continually recovering and reconstituting the beauty and relevance of these old “violent” stories. They help to appreciate them as inspired witnesses of God’s call to look critically at myself and my situation. 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 practiced in the name of God.

The Book of Nahum – the Case of YHWH as an Avenger

In modern research the book of Nahum is very often criticized because of its dubious theology. For instance, in the beginning of the twentieth century a German scholar wrote : “Aus Haß und wilder Schadenfreude ist die ganze Dichtung, in der wir ein charakteristisches Zeugnis des von Jeremja so scharf bekämpften nationalen Prophetentums haben, geboren” (Staerk 1908:179-180). Eighty years later it was remarked in a review: “Will any of us ever have the courage to admit in a popular commentary that the book really is rather a disgrace to the two religious communities of whose canonical Scriptures it forms so unwelcome a part?” (Mason 1988:54). This judgment overlooks the fact that within the Old Testament this prophecy describing the dreadful end of Israel’s enemies is not unique. There are clear relations with other canonical prophecies. There is little difference between the prophecy of Nahum and the oracles against the nations found with Isaiah and Jeremiah. Many sayings of Nahum can be regarded as reinterpretations of words of (the first) Isaiah. Some of the original listeners of Isaiah may have had their doubts about the words spoken by this Jerusalem prophet at the end of the eighth century against Assyria, but now they are reinforced. Instead of accusing Nahum of being a false prophet, as is done by some modern interpreters, we have to assume that in the later prophetic tradition the book of Nahum was accepted as a perfect example of true prophecy. Did not the downfall of Nineveh in 612 prove that these words written down some fifty years earlier (Spronk 1997:12-13) were divinely inspired? There can be no doubt at all that the words of Nahum fit the criterion formulated in the book of Deuteronomy that played a central role in the reformation of Josiah in 622: a prophet has rightly spoken in the name of YHWH when his word comes true (Deut. 18:21f.). The opening hymn is the key to the understanding of the book. The theological tone set at the beginning rings through in the complete book. YHWH is praised as the almighty creator. His power is also apparent in history and is used to fight the forces of evil opposing him, and to protect those who seek refuge with him. Nineveh is pictured as an opponent of YHWH. The military forces besieging Nineveh are described in such a way that they can be associated with heavenly armies. Although the book of Nahum begins with a threefold “YHWH is an avenger,” revenge is not the leading theme. It is no more than an aspect of YHWH as a judge. His anger is aroused at the sight of injustice and the message of his severe judgment is a comfort to those oppressed by evil powers and a source of hope for those who might fear that these powers are invincible. For this reason it has been rightly remarked shortly after the Second World War that “if the critics of Nahum had lived in the last decade and witnessed the brutality that had been visited upon the helpless people in the European and Asiatic concentration camps, that they would rather have joined their voices with Nahum in his joy over the fall of the ‘bloody city’, than have condemned his righteous indignation in the comfort and the security of their ivory towers’ (Mihelič 1948:199-200). Unfortunately, more than half a century later it is not difficult to add many new examples of atrocities; many of which are, regrettably, still unavenged.

In Nahum 1:2-3 we find a quotation of the famous confession from the book of Exodus 34:6-7: “YHWH, YHWH, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining kindness to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” Not the whole text about YHWH is taken over, however: only the negative side of YHWH who “does not leave the guilty unpunished”. Surprisingly, one finds the missing first part of Exodus 34:6-7 with the emphasis on the positive side of YHWH as a merciful god quoted in the verses which in the book of the Twelve Prophets precede the prophecy of Nahum. Here, in the final verses of the book of Micah, the first part of the confession from Exodus 34 is quoted to give hope to the people after it was criticized severely and after the announcement of a heavy judgment. There may be hope, but this is totally dependent upon God’s mercy: “Who is a God like you, forgiving wickedness and passing over the rebellion of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing kindness” (Micah 7:18).

These two quotations so close to each other, precisely in the middle of the book of the Twelve, of the same central text about YHWH show how this text could be applied in different ways, depending on the situation. In the book of Micah it is used to comfort people, indicating that the severe judgment is

not YHWH's final word. In the book of Nahum the emphasis not on the mercy of YHWH but on his aversion to sin: there should be no doubt about it that YHWH avenges evil. In this situation of oppression by the Assyrians there is no room for abounding kindness and faithfulness for the oppressors.

In its turn the book of Jonah can be read as a reaction to the book of Nahum (Spronk 2009B). Instead of the nationalistic view of Nahum the story of Jonah offers a more universal perspective. It shows again another side of YHWH as having sympathy with all human beings, even when they are the citizens of the hated city of Niniveh. Again this new viewpoint is indicated by a different use of the traditional words from Exodus 34. When Jonah realizes that Niniveh is spared he reacts by referring to the well known confession: "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to YHWH and said, 'O YHWH! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious god and merciful, slow to anger, and full of kindness, and ready to relent from punishing'" (Jon. 4:1-2).

The book of Jonah can be seen as a reaction to a one-sided negative theological view on foreign peoples, as is found in the book of Nahum and also in a text like Joel 4:2 which states that all nations shall be judged because of their enmity against Israel. The writer of the book of Jonah builds his case upon the authoritative text from Exodus 34 as it is cited in Joel 2:13. He also took his inspiration, both in form and contents, from the book of Nahum. For this he had two reasons. First, like the book of Joel the confession from Exodus 34 also takes a central place in the book of Nahum. Secondly, it is the best illustration among the prophetic texts of a purely negative oracle against a foreign nation. The book of Nahum perhaps even made him decide to use the notorious city of Niniveh as a fitting symbol for all hated foreign nations. It shows that already within the Bible the image of the enemy can be changed.

Concluding remarks

At first sight this discussion of a number of violent texts in the Old Testament seems to indicate that the Bible contains different viewpoints in this matter. A closer look at the texts indicates that our problem with divinely sanctified violence is as old as the Bible itself and that the Bible also contains indications how to handle this problem. The stories about the conquest of Canaan do not only legitimize violence against the enemy but can also question all too simple distinctions between good and bad. The story of Samson is more than just the glorification of God given power. It also poses questions to those who have power about the way they use it. It was demonstrated that the central confession of Exodus 34:6-7 about the character of YHWH has been applied differently depending on the situation. It is also important to note that YHWH is pictured in Exodus 34 both as merciful and as violent. One of the basic things in the belief in one god is that this indicates that there is a balance between these two sides. This can be regarded as a basis for trust for believers who experience that their life suffers from a constant disturbing of the balance. What also can be learned from this survey is that biblical texts which seem to picture a violent image of God should be read against their historical background. Within this framework it can be noted that there is not much difference between referring to Old Testament texts and New Testament texts. For instance, what Paul writes in Romans 13 about the governing authorities and their right given by God to use the sword can only be fully understood when seen within the circumstances he was living.

The Biblical texts can help to open up discussions and to look critically from different perspectives to the situation of the reader. As it is broadly accepted as sacred text the Bible can function as an agent of change, provided that the reader engages him/herself in a dynamic reading process which asks of him/her to constantly reevaluate the image of one self and the enemy, in relation to God.

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