


Jacques van Ruiten – Koert van Bekkum (eds.), *Violence in the Hebrew Bible. Between Text and Reception* (Oudtestamentische Studiën 79; Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill 2020). Pp. 438. ISBN 9789004434677

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Violence in the Hebrew Bible. Between Text and Reception – a collective work edited by Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bekkum is the 79 volume of the Brill’s series Oudtestamentische Studiën. The publication is a record of methodological reflection on texts of violence in the Hebrew Bible. The texts included in the volume were delivered during a joint meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study in the Netherlands and Belgium, the British Society for Old Testament Study and the Old Testament Society of South Africa. The meeting was held on 22–24 August 2018 in Groningen. The publication includes an introduction preceded by a list of contributors and five main chapters followed by indexes.

Main editors indicate in the introduction that biblical texts of violence have often been subject of change which, through the rewriting process, adapts the message to new socio-historical conditions. Thus, their theological and ideological potential is revealed. The general premise of the volume is therefore to read the biblical texts in close connection with their reception history which allows to observe the internal dynamics of biblical message.

The first part contains contributions regarding the Hebrew Bible in general. The opening text by Jacques van Ruiten “Religious Violence and the Hebrew Bible” introduces the methodological challenges related to the topic of the volume and points out hermeneutical strategies to address biblical texts of violence. Historical-critical exegesis is listed as the most important because it helps examine historical setting through in-depth contextual study. David Clines in the text titled “The Ubiquitous Language of Violence in the Hebrew Bible” tries to study linguistic field of violence preserved in the Hebrew biblical tradition. The list of terms for violence contains 235 items with 5400 occurrences in the Bible (1.8% of the Bible as a whole). They are placed in several semantic categories: to destroy, to kill, to strike, to break, to crush, to cut. The author highlights the most common words for violence (e.g. “strike,” “army,” “sword,” “war,” “enemy”). A separate list of the most common terms for violence attributed to the deity is provided too. The third text of the first chapter by Heather McKay “Violence with Humour: Is This Possible in

the Hebrew Bible?” explores the purposes behind the combination of humor and violence although the conjunction itself is rather infrequent in the Bible with the humor being mostly black or wry.

The second section of the volume focuses on texts of violence in the Torah and opens with an article by Koert van Bekkum “Violence in the Flood Narrative: Text and Reception”. The story of elimination of humankind by the flood belongs to one of the most violent chapters of the whole Bible. The author, referring to parallel Mesopotamian sources, presents the biblical narrative from the perspective of the dichotomies which are essential to understand the text: blessing and curse, order and chaos, God and humankind against the background of divine violence. The contribution deals also with reception history referring to the intertestamental literature (*Enoch*, *Jubilees*). Christo Lombaard in his article: “The Murderous God of Genesis 22 (*the Akedah*) in Three Recent Public Discourses: a Popular British Anti-Religious Book, a US Television Series, and a South African Poem Or: Criteria for Godhood and Faith in Secular Media” broadens the interpretative perspective of the narrative about Abraham’s sacrifice to include modern communication media. Examining a book by Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*, a crime series *Bones* and a poem by Lina Spies *Sacrificium* where the problem of the murderous God is treated, the author indicates implicit criteria for godhood and a legitimate faith. The next contribution by Miracle Ajah “Narratives of Violence in Numbers 25: Between Text and Reception” underlines the complex literary and canonical context of the violent passages based on the injunction of Numbers 25:17: “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them.” In theological and ethical considerations, the author includes a series of contrasting interpretations regarding the concept of enemy and friend, divine judgment and violence as commendation or condemnation. The last part of the second chapter “The Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7 and the Book of Jubilees” by Jacques van Ruiten deals with the impact which Deuteronomy’s violent passages concerning extermination of the people of the land in relation to the Israel’s election had on the book of Jubilees. One can observe several strategies to treat the command to annihilate the Canaanites of which figurative interpretation plays a major role. Jubilees emphasize a curse Canaan has called down upon himself instead of direct extermination summons.

The third section on violence in the Former Prophets opens with a chapter “Violence in the Book of Joshua” by J. Cornelis de Vos. The author argues that violent passages are subject to the message concerning God’s gift of the land to the people of Israel. Irony is an interesting narrative strategy in the book (story of Rahab in chapter 2, Gibeonites deceiving the Israelites in chapter 9). One should notice that not all the inhabitants of the land are annihilated – against the Deuteronomy’s demand. “Two Poles of the Exodus: Conquest as the Oppressive Pole in Joshua 6:21” by Ntozakhe Simon Cezula shows that the exodus narrative can be understood in the context of an antithesis: liberation and oppression (liberation from the Egyptians, oppression of the Canaanites). The author examines elaboration of liberation theology against the background of the exodus biblical paradigm suggesting that the model can be fruitful in promoting a process of reconstruction in newly liberated

nations. June F. Dickie's contribution "Jael: Mighty Hero or Slippery Man–Slayer? Perspectives on the Interpretation of Judges 4–5, Then and Now" deals with the figure of Jael in all its complexity: from a courageous hero to a deceitful murderer. The goal is to explore different interpretations of Jael's actions and evaluate them in the light of the Hebrew text. The study is extended to include an analysis of the impact of the text on contemporary South African society. "Benjamin's Brides: Different Forms of Violence in Judges 21" by Klaas Spronk provides the reader with a survey of the interpretation history of the passage in question. The following structural and literary analysis shows that the horrific aspect of the story takes priority over probably more original humorous and ironic character of the second part. The consideration is based on the study of tradition and redaction history of the book. Paul Sanders in "God Appeased by Homicide? 2 Samuel 21:1–14 in View of Some Hittite and Assyrian Parallels" underlines that the present reader feels shocked by the account of execution of seven Saul's descendants. The elimination is read not only in the context of David's election history but is explained also against the background of ancient Near East texts. The analysis demonstrates that the biblical episode is shaped according to a pattern known in Middle Eastern literary tradition which describes the conduct of a prudent king in times of misery. This fact allows a broader view of the text in the context of ancient religious and literary tradition. The last contribution of the third part titled "Yhwh's War with Whom? Foreign Deities and the Biblical Portrayal of Kings" by Izaak de Hulster deals with the problem of absence of foreign deities in several stories of military confrontation recorded in the books of Kings. The author mentions two examples: 1 Kings 20 and 2 Kings 18–19 and tries to examine whether two foreign kings may be considered as direct God's enemies since their deities are not recalled. This analysis opens up a wider field for considerations on the biblical perception of foreign kings and deities.

The fourth part of the volume examines texts of violence in the books of the Latter Prophets. The first contribution "Divine Tears Over Divine Violence: God's Lament in the Oracle Against Moab in Jeremiah 48" by Eric Peels shows the radicalism of divine judgment recorded in the oracle of Jeremiah. It is of particular interest because of alternation of punishment and lament. The author notes that both divine anger and divine regret are part of the oracle. The most significant theological point of the text is the fact that God is most likely the subject of weeping in several passages which is not to be understood in figurative sense but as a sign of divine *pathos*. In "Reading the Book of Micah as Mediation between Two Perspectives on the Enemy" Wim de Bruin examines the positioning of the book of Micah between Jonah and Nahum in the Masoretic text. The author indicates different perspectives on the enemy in the prophetic tradition along with their theological motivations. In the book of Micah one can observe "multiperspectivity" on the enemy which is a sign of a complicated theological and hermeneutical process at the editing stage. In Wilhelm J. Wessels's contribution "A Critical Reflection on the Presentation and Reception of Yahweh as a Violent Deity in the Book of Nahum" one encounters three different readings of the prophetic message: theological, contextual and a reader-response. This diversity provides interesting insights into the question of Yahweh presented as a violent god. Nahum's

message includes ancient traditions and is examined critically in the light of social and ideological contexts playing a decisive role in the reception process.

The last fifth part of the volume focuses on violence in the Writings. Matthew J. Lynch in “Scheming Violence in the Psalms” explores a new approach which has not been brought up in the critical study – relation between scheming (deceitful and hidden violence) and violence experienced by the psalmist “in public.” The author underlines the psalmist’s perspective on scheming – its formal and literary constituent elements. Violence emerging from the biblical texts is a broad enough phenomenon that it includes also an attitude of scheming. In theological terms, it is therefore subject to divine retribution that puts an end to violence and restores justice. Next article of the volume “Knock the Little Bastards’ Brains Out: Reception History and Theological Interpretation of Psalm 137:9” by Arie Versluis mentions some hermeneutical strategies in reception history of this text which evokes feeling of disgust among modern readers. The author deals with the question whether it is possible to find an acceptable interpretation without application of allegorical exegesis. Investigating literary and theological context of the psalm he points out the symbolic value of the contrast between Babylon and Zion and a zealous stand for justice. The two factors influence the dramatic language of the examined text which is first and foremost an individual lamentation of a victim to God. The last contribution “Esther 9 Through the Lens of Diaspora: The Exegetical and Ethical Dilemmas of the Massacres in Susa and Beyond” by Tsaurayi K. Mapfeka indicates that an awareness of the diaspora provenance of Esther plays an important role in reading the violent passages in chapter 9 of the book. The concept of diaspora is crucial to understand the reality of violence described in Esther. It sheds light both on the form of the message and its origin. Modern comparative studies help to establish the nature of social processes characteristic of the diaspora, which may facilitate a more adequate reading of the biblical text.

Looking more generally at the volume introduced here, one should note that its great advantage is the wide range of analyzed texts. For this reason, the reader can see examples of texts of violence present in different traditions of the Hebrew Bible: from the Pentateuch to the Writings. The variety of studied passages emphasizes a plurality of meanings both when it comes to reception history and classical biblical exegesis. Contributions collected in the volume allow two general remarks to be made. Biblical texts of violence have been the subject of rewriting process (noticeable in an analysis based on the tradition and redaction history) and hence the subject of multiple reinterpretations which can be examined both through text-oriented as well as reader-response approaches. Another essential remark is the fact of strict relation between the new interpretation and the social and religious worldviews conditioning a new meaning. Development of the reception history is based on constructive ideological critique of the text itself and its social context. This original and broad approach seems to be the main advantage of the volume.

Contributions which compose this study quite clearly show how important it is for the hermeneutic process to consider the relation between the text, its historical context and the life context of the reader. On the other hand, there are some methodological

inconsistencies resulting, as it seems, from the volume of the book and the scope of the covered topics. Despite the clear assumptions of the editors regarding the adopted methods of examining biblical texts of violence, critical exegesis based on literary analysis is not always the starting point. It seems that some studies violate the balance that should exist between the study of the text in its context and the history and present of its reception. The reference to the experience of a modern reader is a particularly valuable contribution to the study of the continuity of the reception history of the analyzed passages. However, it should not be the primary element in the process of interpreting the biblical text. One notices also that the chapter on violence in the Former Prophets may be seen as too complex and extensive in relation to the others. It seems that too much attention was given to the traditions of conquest of the Promised Land.

The above-mentioned imbalances occurring here and there are not so serious as to rule out the positive contribution of the volume to the exegetical-hermeneutic discussion on texts of violence. The contributions included in the volume allow for a certain synthesis about the traces of violence in the Bible. This synthesis is both phraseological-exegetical and historical-theological in nature. Thanks to the thematic diversity, the authors managed to show that the biblical text – especially the one difficult to interpret, is a dynamic reality which has continuous potential to inspire the reader, in our time too.

