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BOOK REVIEW

M. Daniel Carroll R. and J. Blair Wilgus, eds. *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament*. Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 10. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015. v + 178 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-57506-828-2. \$37.50

Wrestling with the Violence of God is divided into seven main chapters, which address the issue of divine violence by examining texts from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Joshua, the Psalms, Lamentations, Amos, and Jeremiah. In the introductory chapter, entitled “What Do We Do with the God of the Old Testament?” Daniel Carroll and Blair Wilgus discuss the challenges related to society’s accusations and its rejection of the Old Testament, and in particular, God, who is perceived by critics as violent. The authors outline five areas of study, which can contribute to understanding the violent aspects of scripture: (1) comparative studies, (2) history of reception, (3) theological foundations, (4) textual readings, and (5) virtuous sensitivity. *Wrestling with the Violence of God* primarily focuses on textual readings as its method of study, that is, the interpretation of selected texts from the Old Testament.

In chapter 2, entitled “The Near-Sacrifice of Isaac: Monstrous Morality or Richly Textured Theology?” Paul Kissling provides a close reading of the narrative, which begins in Gen 22:1 with God testing Abraham. The author argues that the test provides the key to interpreting the story in that God never intended for Abraham to actually sacrifice his son, and the readers of Genesis were aware of this. Kissling offers insights into the narrative, which may be easily overlooked, such as the order of the procedures required for a sacrifice with regards to Isaac, the repetition of Abraham’s name in vv. 7–8, and the age of Isaac.

He also notes the absence of questions voiced at critical points in the narrative by Abraham when God instructs him to sacrifice his son, and by Isaac who does not question his father when he is bound.

In chapter 3, entitled, “How Can We Bless YHWH? Wrestling with Divine Violence in Deuteronomy,” Daniel Block examines three aspects of violence which include types of divine violence (physical, emotional, psychological), targets of divine violence (both Israelites and Canaanites), and the motivation for divine violence (judgment of sin). In Block’s section on God’s motivation for violence against the Canaanites, he provides a good analysis of the concept of *ḥērem*, which, in Hebrew, means to devote something or someone to God for exclusive use by God; he notes that the *ḥērem* is limited in its application to the Canaanites until the conquest of the land was completed.

After the conclusion to the chapter, a postscript is included which begins with the statement, “[H]aving wrestled with the theme of divine violence in Deuteronomy, it strikes me that such a study should always be preceded by a study of divine grace in the book, not to evade or deny the painful reality, but to provide context for it” (50). Though the postscript is only a paragraph, it reads awkwardly in light of the content in the chapter and seems tacked on at the end. It would have been beneficial to place this paragraph in the introductory comments of the chapter, not only for ease of reading, but more importantly, to set the context in which to understand God’s violence in Deuteronomy.

In chapter 4, entitled, “Taking the Land by Force: Divine Violence in Joshua,” Hélène Dallaire provides a brief overview of some ancient interpretations of the conquest narrative by Irenaeus, Origen, Epiphanius, and Calvin, along with modern misinterpretations, which have justified the conquest of Native Americans. Dallaire presents and refutes scholarly views that attempt to justify the conquest narrative as a means to support Josiah’s religious reforms that created a separation between the Israelites and the other nations. Dallaire then examines the concept of God as a divine warrior followed by the *ḥērem* in the last section of her chapter. She demonstrates how the concept of the *ḥērem* is present in the Moabite Stone, and selected passages

from the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy. In this same section, Dallaire examines Jewish interpretations of the *ḥērem*, and briefly discusses the story of Rahab, which demonstrates that God did not intend to destroy all the Canaanites given that she was spared.

The last section in Dallaire's chapter is entitled "The Rhetoric of Violence in Joshua: The *Ḥērem*." One would expect that more content would be included from Joshua, but this section spans approximately one page and only focuses on Rahab and the spies. This section could have been expanded and have addressed important issues in the conquest narrative, such as Achan's disobedience with regards to the application of the *ḥērem* in the fall of Jericho and his family's subsequent destruction, the various applications of the *ḥērem* to Jericho and Ai, Hazor, other cities, and the cities of refuge which provide physical safety for people who unintentionally committed violence against others.

In Dallaire's concluding remarks on Joshua, she notes, "God cannot be understood solely through the narrative of scripture. The 'actual God' who transcends the pages of scripture must be encountered personally in order for one to think responsibly and rightly about God, and develop a sound theology" (73). For Christians, scripture is the primary means through which to learn about God's character and his actions in history. Since God's character does not change, we still encounter the same God today as revealed in scripture. Scripture is the basis upon which we can test various aspects of life, such as teachings about God and our spiritual experiences to determine if they are consistent with God's word. Dallaire's above statement may be construed as calling into question God's unchanging nature and diminishing the value of God's word by giving primacy to our experiences of God over and above Scripture's revelation. She is correct that we must "develop a sound theology" (73) that involves a careful and informed examination and interpretation of both the Old and the New Testament.

In chapter 5, entitled, "Cries of the Oppressed: Prayer and Violence in the Psalms," David Firth examines three aspects of violence in the Psalms: (1) violence in the context where the

psalmist experiences physical, emotional and/or psychological violence at the hands of others, or structural violence which entails injustice towards the poor; (2) divine violence which is warranted in order to restore justice; and (3) divine violence which the psalmists request from God against their enemies. Firth examines individual and communal psalms and concludes that God's justice in the form of punishment is not uncontrolled but suitable for the crimes committed. The psalmists do not seek to implement violence themselves, but instead, request that God act in this manner on their behalf in the cause of justice.

In chapter 6, entitled, "Suffering Has Its Voice: Divine Violence, Pain, and Prayer in Lamentations," Heath Thomas identifies three forms of violence in Lamentations: (1) God is passive and does not intervene as Zion experiences violence from the enemy, (2) God is separated by distance from Jerusalem during a time when divine comfort is needed, and (3) God is present and actively involved in the violence which Jerusalem experiences. Thomas then examines how God's people respond to divine violence in Lamentations, specifically through prayer, which entails repentance and complaint. In some instances, the people's repentance leads to a reversal of God's judgment to salvation. However, in other instances, repentance does not lead to this change and results in prayers of complaints that are directed toward God.

In chapter 7, entitled, "'I Will Send Fire': Reflections on the Violence of God in Amos," Daniel Carroll offers four main suggestions for how to understand the various types of violence in Amos: (1) the oracles against the nations may have been reflective of how war was depicted in the culture and not necessarily how actual events occurred; (2) God responds to human violence with violence, but this violence is reflective of the crimes committed, and its purpose is to stop sin which was prevalent throughout Israel; (3) God's pathos is comprised of both mercy and wrath in that God is a judge who must judge sin, but at the same time, God does not receive enjoyment from the judgment he imposes upon people; and (4) God's judgment, though necessary, is not the final word as its purpose is restorative and salvific.

In chapter 8, entitled, “Toward an End to Violence: Hearing Jeremiah,” Elmer Martens focuses on demonstrating that though there are violent depictions in Jeremiah, the book also presents a future which is characterized by peace. Martens illustrates that God’s anger occurs within the context of a relationship with his people who have broken the covenant and caused God pain and suffering. God must punish sin due to his nature, and though judgment is enacted through violence, the end result is reconciliation, which in Jeremiah is reflective of the new covenant. God is gracious and compassionate and desires intimacy with his people, which in the future will entail physical and spiritual restoration of the people. The chapter concludes by demonstrating that the depiction of God’s love, and future peace and restoration, which occurs in the Book of Comfort in Jeremiah, is picked up in the New Testament where God is fully revealed through Christ.

In a section within Martens’s chapter, entitled, “Portrayal of a God Who Loves: A Challenge to a Violent and Solely Retributive God,” he argues that the book of Jeremiah is chiasmic in structure and presents his outline which culminates in the middle (E) with the Book of Consolation. Martens only briefly describes two aspects of his chiasm, B and B’, which focus on God’s violence, and E, which focuses on God’s love. He does not address the other aspects of the chiasm which include A, C, D, D’, C’, and A’. Martens argues that the chiasmic structure of the book demonstrates that God’s love outweighs his violence. Not only is the foundation of Martens argument based on the chiasm, which can be construed as circular in nature, but it is also weakened because his descriptions of each of the sections of the chiasm do not match each other, and he does not adequately defend his chiasmic structure. Even though he footnotes one of his previous writings on this topic, it would have been helpful to provide further explanation for the reader.

Since *Wrestling with the Violence of God* is an edited volume, observations will be offered about the content and structure of the book to reveal some of its weaknesses. First, chapters written by Paul Kissling, Daniel Block, Hélène Dallaire, and Daniel Carroll engage to varying extents with ancient and/or modern

interpretations of their respective biblical books while David Firth, Heath Thomas, and Elmer Martens do not engage with these voices. These differences may be reflective of each individual scholar's interest, but as a reader, the diversity appears as a lack of uniformity in the volume.

Second, since the preface to the volume suggests that it is geared towards a wider audience than biblical scholars, some of the chapters that focus more on interpretations from the past may lose non-academic readers who may have more interest in the biblical texts themselves.

Third, with the exception of chapter 2, which focuses on the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, the remaining chapters focus on divine violence within the context of a biblical book. To maintain uniformity or consistency, a better approach may have been to have a chapter on divine violence in Genesis, which could include the story of Isaac.

Lastly, while this edited volume presents an array of views with regards to the violence of God, which may not be problematic for students and scholars, the diversity may not be as well suited for non-academic audiences. For example, in Carroll's examination of God's pathos in the book of Amos, he states, "the paradoxes within the person of God in the prophets are better understood not by pitting his mercy so starkly against his wrath, but by locating the mystery of the conjunction of Yahweh's compassion and anger of Yahweh in his *pathos*" (127). However, in the adjacent chapter, Martens offers a seemingly contradictory statement "[B]oth love and anger within God are realities. Of the two, love is the stronger and more defining" (144). A reader may potentially observe the diversity of scholarly opinions, such as these two noted above, leading to confusion and questioning which view to adopt, that is, does God's love trump his judgment or should they be held together equally?

Two observations are in order with regards to the structure of the book. First, the organization of the essays partially follows the Protestant canonical order of the books, that is, Genesis, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and the Psalms, respectively, but the remainder of the volume is not in chronological order, that is,

Lamentations, Amos, and Jeremiah, respectively. From a reader's perspective, it may have been better to place Lamentations after Jeremiah and conclude with Amos, so that the biblical books are addressed in the order they occur within the canon. Second, this book has an introductory chapter that introduces the reader to the topic of divine violence and provides an overview of its purpose and each of the chapters included within it. However, the book does not have a concluding chapter, which is not always necessary for edited volumes, but in this case it would have been beneficial, since the topic of divine violence is challenging and the volume's contributors have raised a number of important issues in their respective essays. A concluding chapter could draw together the various views, particularly those which may conflict with each other, as well as summarize the main points, and pave a way forward for the reader to digest this challenging topic.

Despite some of the weaknesses of the individual chapters and the volume as a whole, *Wrestling with the Violence of God* is an insightful, challenging, and thought-provoking book that presents a balanced view of God and the Scriptures, and does not shy away from the difficulties and ethical implications of violence in the Old Testament. This volume is a well-informed scholarly work that aptly counters and provides a corrective to skewed perspectives on God as vengeful, merciless, and acting with uncontrolled anger. Each chapter in this volume is a manageable read with the average length ranging from 15–20 pages, which makes it accessible for various audiences. This volume will also whet the appetite of scholars who seek to learn more about the violence of God in the Old Testament and offers an extensive 16-page bibliography for those interested in further research. Overall, this edited volume is an excellent scholarly work and a worthwhile read which will help its audience to further understand and wrestle with the violence of God in the Old Testament.

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