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3 November 2012

Violence in the Hebrew Bible

Violence is a recurring theme throughout the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, and one of its purposes is to establish Yahweh, the god of Israel, as the supreme god among his many competitors in the ancient world. Indeed, as Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer asserts in his book *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and Qu’ran*, the principal character trait of the composite God that emerged was violence, and that it was through this violence that God proved to be God through superiority of might compared to his competitors (42 Nelson-Pallmeyer). Upon examination of various Biblical stories, such as Judges 19, it becomes apparent that there exist two primary forms of evidence as it relates to God’s supremacy: violence that is wrought by God himself, as a form of punishment or retribution which establishes his primacy among the gods, and violence between peoples supported by God, which establishes the reign of his chosen people and thereby indirectly proves himself to be the supreme god. Together, these two types of violence are the primary conduits through which Yahweh himself is revealed to the people of ancient Israel.

Though scholars have argued that the prevalence of violence is more of an expression of God’s benevolence and status as “the judge and preserver of his wayward people,” such as in Barry Webb’s critical commentary upon the Book of Judges, it remains undeniable that, to some nontrivial extent, the use of what may at times seem like excessive violence is an establishment of Yahweh’s total supremacy and not merely a fulfillment of a role as a divine protector and guardian (Webb 101). That is to say, violence and war are not merely tools through which God enacts judgment and redemption, as argued by Peter C. Craigie in his commentary on the Old Testament, but more importantly serves to emphasize the primacy of Yahweh over all others. Through the varying types of violence to which Yahweh is related, his nature as a supreme deity is explicated and characterized; indeed, close examination of the violence in the Hebrew Bible, such as in the well-known but surprisingly nuanced narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, reveals nuances to Yahweh’s behavior that serve to even further reinforce the primacy of his very existence.

A thorough examination of the story of the Battle of Gibeah, as set forth in Judges 19-21, seems to suggest that the battle, which was sanctioned by Yahweh, in many ways affirms the primacy of Yahweh as the supreme god among gods. When the “children of Israel” ask Yahweh whether or not they must wage war against the Benjaminites, he gives them his express approval, promising that he “will deliver them into thine hand” – and that he does, with twenty five thousand of the Benjaminites falling in battle but only “about thirty” of the Israelites described as having died (Judges 20:25-29). The overwhelming victory of Israel over the people of Benjamin affirms the power of Yahweh’s blessing, not only in the pure fact that their victory was in accordance with his promise of such but more importantly in that God’s chosen people were both promised and received total victory in their military endeavors. Indeed, though Webb argues of this very battle that Yahweh was acting only in the capacity of a “judge and preserver”, the total annihilation suffered by the Benjaminites as well as the fact that the judgment was handed down through immediate violent warfare seems to be in direct contradiction of this interpretation; after all, the Benjaminites were themselves one of the many tribes of Israel who had merely erred in their ways, rather than some band of outsiders (Webb 101). Were Yahweh merely a preserver, certainly different methods could have been used to bring some of his chosen people back from sin and wrongdoing; rather, war is the method of choice, and it is a method which inherently glorifies the victors and, by extension, Yahweh himself, as he is ascribed to be the source of that victory. Susan Niditch notes in her *War in the Hebrew Bible* that the violence of the scriptures has “inspired violence [and] served as a model of and model for persecution, subjugation, and extermination,” essentially, that the scope of the violence in texts such as the Book of Judges to be at times almost seemingly gratuitous; certainly, it would be difficult to ascribe violence of such a nature entirely to Yahweh’s protectionism or guardianship (Niditch 4). By showing that his people, with his blessing, reign supreme amongst all other tribes, Yahweh by himself is shown, by extension, to reign supreme amongst the pantheon of gods in the world of ancient Israel.

In Judges 19, one is presented with an example of Yahweh supporting violence between peoples. However, that is hardly the only form of violence, with regard to Yahweh’s participation, that is found in the Hebrew Bible; rather, the second type of violence which is prevalent is violence in which Yahweh directly participates, primarily in the form of some sort of divine punishment. Rather than indirectly glorifying Yahweh through his people and the demonstration of the realization of Yahweh’s promises, this violence is a far more direct demonstration of his divine power and subsequently his supremacy over humanity, which itself implies his primacy among the gods of ancient Israel through his great ability to directly influence human proceedings.

Certainly, the most notable and most characteristic of the stories of divine punishment would be that of Sodom and Gomorrah, as explicated primarily in the first book of the Tanakh, the Book of Genesis. Yahweh, unable to find even 10 good men in Sodom, decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, cities infested with sin and wrongdoing, with fire and brimstone. Moreover, he prohibits Lot and his wife from looking back as they leave the cities, yet as Lot’s wife disobeys the command and turns to see the destruction behind them, he turns her into a “pillar of salt” (Genesis 12:23-36). Here, we see violence not only in the form of punishment handed down by Yahweh—exceptionally brutal and violent destructions of two cities marked for retribution, but also the violent killing of a woman who disobeyed Yahweh’s order. Both accounts of divine punishment are fascinating in the context of violence in the Bible as a whole; the former on account of how it characterizes the nature of divine punishment of sin in general, showing the wrathful nature of Yahweh against those who sin, and the latter because it exemplifies the total and arbitrary power of Yahweh to strike down, often with what may seem to be excessive force or severity, not merely those who are evil or those who sin but all those who disobey him in even minor ways. The final element of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah which reveals the nature of Yahweh is what may initially appear to be a sidenote to the primary narrative: that is, the implied pardoning of the town of Zoar purely on account of Yahweh’s liking of Lot, which, being an act of violence averted, is even greater testament to the power of Yahweh and therefore his divine primacy. All considered, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an exceptional demonstration of the fundamental nature of the violence exhibited by Yahweh against humans, serving, as always, to further glorify him.

To begin with, consider the violent punishment handed down to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. For their sins, Yahweh rained down upon them fire and brimstone, destroying them utterly. This is perhaps one of the simplest forms of violence found in the Hebrew Bible (but hardly an unimportant one)—those who oppose Yahweh are struck down by overwhelming, unstoppable, and completely inescapable force. Indeed, the punishment of the two cities is simply a demonstration of the great power of Yahweh and thereby a glorification of his strength—strength that further emphasizes his position as the supreme god among gods. As Yahweh possesses the power to destroy and kill, as shown in this narrative, he therefore holds all of human life in his very hands, and it is by his grace that men live and die—and that total, absolute power over life and death, especially in an age where life was painfully short and death often capricious and random, only further serves to reinforce the idea that Yahweh is completely supreme.

The transformation of Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, though, cannot be overlooked, though this punishment is of a much smaller scale than the previous one. Her disregard of what seems to be a relatively unimportant command results, instantly, in death handed down by Yahweh, and as J.A. Loader notes, it is on account of her “own, individual transgression of the express command given in verse 17” (Loader 41). Although initially it seems that this punishment is merely rather excessive when compared to the nature of the transgression, it serves to emphasize an even more important nuance to the violence of Yahweh’s punishment; that is, it emphasizes that the punishment is handed down for individual actions, and that the violent punishment incurred by any one person will be solely on account for their own sins and transgressions. In a sense, the fate of Lot’s wife is a testament to the fairness and impartiality of Yahweh—even more so, since she was the wife of Lot, a man greatly favored by Yahweh, and for whom an entire city was pardoned—and through its implicit explication of Yahweh’s fairness, it glorifies Yahweh as being a god which not only *commands* respect and prayer but one who *rightfully deserves* devotion and adulation above all others, unlike the other gods that existed in the culture of ancient Israel. Again, through an explicit act of violence, the greatness of Yahweh is shown—this time, not the raw power and omnipotence which he commands, but rather the rightfulness and fairness of the manner in which he exercises the incredible power which he possesses.

Finally, the supremacy of Yahweh is yet again affirmed in an act not of violence, but of violence averted; that is, the active and conscious decision to pardon an entire village. Lot, when fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah, asks the Lord for permission to flee to Zoar, a small nearby village, instead of the faraway mountains, and this request is granted by Yahweh, who favored Lot “also in this matter”. In his treatise upon the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, J.A. Loader believes this to refer to “the favour of being saved from Sodom … [implying] that the people of Zoar were to have been destroyed but are now to be saved on account of Lot, an individual” (Loader 40). That is to say, although Yahweh had previously decided to destroy Zoar, upon hearing Lot’s request, he decides to extend his mercy to all the people of Zoar for the convenience of Lot, averting a planned act of violence on what was essentially a whim. By showing Yahweh’s ability to totally control the fates of people and to either kill or pardon entire cities on the smallest of inclinations, the great extent of his power is demonstrated. Moreover, the extension of his grace to the people of Zoar through Lot is starkly juxtaposed upon what was previously a scene of punishment and destruction, and through this contrast of mercy and violence, Yahweh’s primacy in *both* the domains of destruction and benevolence are implicitly emphasized, and by extension his total supremacy over mankind and his primacy among all other gods.

It is argued by some Biblical scholars, such as Peter C. Craigie, that the divine punishment in the stories of the Hebrew Bible are nothing more than tools of Yahweh; for instance, regarding the curses in Chapters 27-28 of the Book of Deuteronomy, Craigie writes that the curses “function as a solemn warning” but do not further develop their implications with regards to what they imply about the nature or primacy of Yahweh (Craigie 43). In essence, Craigie treats the punishments of Yahweh as disconnected, in a sense, from the identity of Yahweh himself. It seems more reasonable to argue, as does Deborah L. Ellens in her Biblical commentary *God’s Word for Our World*, that the punishment of Yahweh cannot be so disconnected or “separated” from his being, as they, after all, fundamentally stem from Yahweh himself, who is the “punishing person through whom even the effectiveness of the sphere of an action is constituted, activated, and maintained” (Ellens 229). Surely, the actions of Yahweh—both the punishment which he directly doles out and the conflicts which he sanctions and supports—reveal the nature of his character, particularly when considered in the context of the Euthyphro dilemma in theistic thought: that is, that which is right being right on account of being commanded by Yahweh implies that Yahweh himself dictates, to some extent, that which is right or wrong, and his choices in doing so fundamentally reveal and expose his nature.

Ultimately, violence plays a fundamental role in the overall narrative of the Hebrew Bible. Although it is true that violence, in either the form of human-human conflict or divine punishment handed down by Yahweh, serves as the crux of the vast majority of the stories in Hebrew Bible, they do not merely serve as a simple narrative construct; no, rather, they are the primary method through which Yahweh is glorified as the supreme god above all other gods. Indeed, violence in the Bible, in all its varied and complex forms, speaks to all the superior traits which Yahweh possesses.

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