

**The Troubling Violence of the LORD:
Engaging the Curses of Deuteronomy**

Rob Barrett

**Dr. R. W. L. Moberly
Department of Theology and Religion
University of Durham**

25 Mar 2005

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Lectionary Choices and the Wrath of the LORD..... | 2 |
| Cultural Rejection of Anger and Violence | 4 |
| Thomas Mann: Engaging the Divine Wrath in Deuteronomy | 8 |
| Justifying the LORD’s Wrath | 8 |
| Difficulties with Divine Curses..... | 9 |
| Natural Consequences | 10 |
| Ancient Near Eastern Culture | 12 |
| Resulting ‘Theology’ | 13 |
| Method: Premise Engagement Criticism..... | 14 |
| Mann as Case Study | 16 |
| Conclusion..... | 19 |
| Bibliography..... | 21 |

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I take beginning steps in two directions simultaneously (always a risky operation). First, I introduce the difficult theological topic of the LORD’s use of violence against his people when they rebel against him in the Old Testament, with primary focus on the curses of Deut. 28.¹ Second, I begin to describe a critical method for dealing with topics such as these where the biblical material appears to present the LORD in a way that crosses important moral boundaries for the interpreter. In such an encounter, the scrupulous interpreter of scripture² is faced with the dilemma of squaring two competing authorities: prior moral commitments (that are to some degree based on scripture, though undoubtedly influenced by culture along with other influences) and scriptural revelation.

LECTIONARY CHOICES AND THE WRATH OF THE LORD

It happened again recently. The lector announced a reading from Psalm 95:

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
 Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the LORD is a great God,
 And a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 The heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,

¹ The terms “violence” and “rebel” will need to be clearly defined in order to be useful. As a starting point, I define violence as an act where a superior power wields that power to threaten or actually cause the suffering of a weaker party. Closely related to violence is “anger,” which I provisionally define as an emotional state, often resulting from circumstances not meeting one’s desires, which has the possibility of leading to violence. Finally, I define “rebel” (for my purposes here, synonymous with “disobey”) as the weaker party acting in a manner mutually understood to be against the desires of the stronger party. When violence is a result of rebellion, I also refer to it as “punishment.” The term “wrath” often combines anger and violence.

² In using the term “scripture,” I mean that the interpreter has a faith commitment that includes attributing some measure of authority to the biblical text as divine revelation.

And the dry land, which his hands have formed.
 O come, let us worship and bow down,
 Let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
 For he is our God,
 And we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:1-7b)³

Somewhat curious about why the reading stopped in mid-verse, I allowed my eye to continue to the next line as the liturgy continued around me:

O that today you would listen to his voice!
 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
 As on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
 When your ancestors tested me,
 And put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
 For forty years I loathed that generation
 And said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
 And they do not regard my ways."
 Therefore in my anger I swore,
 "They shall not enter my rest." (Ps. 95:7c-11)

Although the end of this Psalm is not as violent as the closing line of Psalm 137, it is still stark and even offensive to the modern ear. The LORD is "the rock of our salvation" and the one to be praised with "joyful noise." He is the Great Shepherd and his people rest peacefully in being "the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." These portrayals reassure the church of a cozy security that comes from being the people of God. So it is unsurprising when the lectionary choice excises vv. 7c-11 from the psalm, for it seems alien and out-of-place with the scene depicted earlier. How is it that the people of the LORD can be "loathed" by that same God? And how can the worshipping community rest in the arms of a God who once raged with anger and swore, "They shall not enter my rest"?

One of the more striking examples of editing the presentation of scripture to remove the wrath of the LORD is this popular praise chorus, taken directly from Lam. 3:22-23 (RSV):

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases.
 His mercies never come to an end.
 They are new every morning.
 Great is Thy faithfulness, O LORD.⁴

How few singers of this encouraging chorus realize the context of the Lamenters' creedal assertion of the LORD's love and faithfulness, namely his horrifying destruction of Jerusalem.⁵ These comforting verses have a markedly different substance when restored to the context of the lament, which begins:

I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his [i.e., the LORD's] wrath;
 He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light;
 Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long.
 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones;
 He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;
 He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.

³ All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

⁴ ©1974, 1975 Celebration Music, words and music by Robert Davidson.

⁵ Though the actual destruction is at the hand of the Babylonians, the author looks beyond the human enemy and ascribes the devastation to the LORD.

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me;
 Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer;
 He has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked.
 He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding;
 He led me off my way and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate;
 He bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.
 He drove into my heart the arrows of his quiver;
 I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the burden of their songs all day long.
 He has filled me with bitterness, he has sated me with wormwood.
 He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;
 My soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is;
 So I say, "Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the LORD."
 Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall!
 My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. (Lam. 3:1-20)

Needless to say, any song based on the more complete text probably lacks the popularity of the comforting praise chorus "The Steadfast Love"! The images of the LORD breaking his prophet's bones, laying chains upon him, tearing him to pieces, and firing arrows into his heart are seemingly incongruous with many popular Christian notions of intimacy with God. But in the canonical text, verse 21 connects the author's images of the wrathful and loving God: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases..." (Lam. 3:21-22a). It is exactly the apparently irreconcilable presently-experienced wrath of the LORD and the creedal assurance of his love that the author juxtaposes as he wrestles with the sight of his bloodied city. The rest of the lament reveals the fruit of that struggle, though it cannot be explored further here. But my point is that the LORD's violent anger is routinely avoided (or downplayed, perhaps rationalized or even denied?) through the selective use of scripture within certain elements of the church.

Selection from the canon is not a new technique for responding to unpalatable portrayals of the divine. Marcion found the creator God of the Old Testament to be fundamentally distinct from the loving God of the New Testament and severed the one from the other. The modern neo-Marcionite Adolf von Harnack did likewise. In a different vein, Thomas Jefferson famously produced a reduced gospel story that retained Jesus' ethical teaching while removing references to the miraculous and divine. This approach of assigning greater weight to portrayals of God that fit one's prior notions and downgrading or denying objectionable portrayals is a theological move with a considerable history.⁶

CULTURAL REJECTION OF ANGER AND VIOLENCE

Our world is tired of violence, having witnessed far too much of it via news broadcasts, and sadly even personally. Consider three cultural artifacts that illustrate something of our rejection of violence: a

⁶ From a methodological point of view, such unequal weighting of canonical texts may be completely necessary. However, when the line is crossed between lighter weighting and complete refusal of objectionable texts (whether in principle or in practice), then violence has been done to the canon. The Westminster Confession, for example, holds together the integrity of the canon and unequal weighting of different portions within it (cf. Chapter 1, *Of the Holy Scripture*, paragraphs 2, 7 and 9).

Vietnam War protest song, the nuclear policy of mutually-assured destruction, and laws restricting the use of corporal punishment against children.

Bruce Springsteen reprises Edwin Starr's message for post-Vietnam American youth, who may have forgotten the terrible waste that many understand that conflict to have been:

War—what is it good for?
 Absolutely nothing...Say it again!
 War—what is it good for?
 Absolutely nothing!

War is something that I despise,
 For it means destruction of innocent lives,
 For it means tears in thousands of mothers' eyes,
 When their sons go out to fight to give their lives.

War is the enemy of all mankind.
 The thought of war blows my mind.
 Handed down from generation to generation—
 Induction, destruction—who wants to die?

War has shattered many young men's dreams,
 Made them disabled bitter and mean.
 Life is too precious to be fighting wars each day.
 War can't give life it can only take it away.

War—it's nothing but a heartbreaker.
 War—friend only to the undertaker.
 Peace, love and understanding:
 There must be some place for these things today.
 They say we must fight to keep our freedom,
 But Lord there's got to be a better way,
 That's better than... War.⁷

The message is clear: the violence of war should never be the path to a better future. It should not be the last option, but no option at all. The corollary is that the one who advocates the violence of war is immoral. The implication for the evaluation of the LORD's morality as he commands warfare (both on behalf of and against Israel) is obvious.

On another front, the reality of the world-destroying power of modern nuclear weapons seems linked to a cultural rejection of actual violence (though not the threat of violence) as a means for positive results. In the pre-nuclear age, national security was largely a result of having superior military strength (either one's own, or among one's allies) over potential enemies. However, the 'progress' of the nuclear age meant that both sides of the East-West struggle gained overwhelming destructive potential, so a new doctrine of national security needed to be developed. The burden of developing war strategy shifted from military leaders to academics, who employed game theory to ensure that nuclear weapons would never be used. "If you do A, we will do B" became a careful 'game' of publicly announced war strategies that sought to prevent all-out war at all costs. 'Mutually-

⁷ © 1986 Bruce Springsteen, words by Barrett Strong and Norman Whitfield.

Assured Destruction' (MAD) was the watchword for impressing upon everyone that war was madness. In this most dangerous game, the outbreak of war was the mutually-agreed criterion for both sides being losers. War meant failure. Furthermore, anger and other passionate emotions were seen as dangerous influences for the continued existence of humanity. The game theorists coolly worked out the strategy, and the politicians and military officials understood the importance of carefully following the pre-established strategies when faced with international crises. Deviating from the calculated plan on an emotional whim could spell irretrievable disaster. The conclusion: an emotional or uncalculated power is a foolish and destructive power.

Finally, I turn to the current debate in the United Kingdom surrounding the legality of corporeal chastisement ("smacking") of children, which has strong parallels to the LORD's violent punishment of his people. In one case a parent must decide how to respond to a child who has done something against the parent's desires, possibly even dangerous for the child or others. In the other, the situation involves, *mutatis mutandis*, the LORD and his people. The smacking of children is debated worldwide with the UK being one of a number of nations, signatories to the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of the Child," who have come under political pressure to make all forms of corporeal punishment of children illegal. Typical is this series of online comments on a proposed change in such laws in Tasmania, Australia:⁸

Smacking is criminal. In Sweden we have a law against smacking. It's a very good law. I can't see how anyone is able to smack a little child. That person must be psychically sick. I work as a teacher and I can get respect from the teenagers without smacking or caning them. They are human beings. Is wife smacking allowed in U.K.? What about dog smacking?

This more 'high minded' comment was then offered:

There is no place for smacking as a punishment for children in our society. There are other effective forms of discipline. I think the act of hitting children demeans the parent and victimises the child - it is more a reflection on a parent's limited knowledge/skills with management of children than meaningful discipline. It is an act of physical violence and I find it offensive to see. I believe it damages the relationship between parent and child.

A contributor on the other side of the issue wrote:

I don't believe the law should be changed, but I do think the situation should be clarified as to what constitutes 'reasonable force'. I have very rarely smacked my children, but there have been occasions in the past, mostly to do with safety, where it has been necessary to quickly stop them from doing something and reinforce a message, without a long drawn out ethical discussion. Apparently, from some of the examples given, some parents cannot cope with or understand the concept of reasonable force. They need help, but outlawing smacking would cause more harm than good.

UK legislation entitled "Children Act 2004" has recently come into effect and states, "Battery of a child causing actual bodily harm to the child cannot be justified in any civil proceedings on the ground that it constituted reasonable punishment."⁹ "Bodily harm" includes any lasting effect on the child,

⁸ <http://www.2b.abc.net.au/hobart/issues/newposts/0/topic285.shtm>.

⁹ <http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2004/40031--f.htm#58>.

such as a cut or a bruise, punishable by up to five years in prison.¹⁰ The UK charity the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which has Christian roots in its 1884 founding and current statutory powers to safeguard children, offers the following advice to parents:

Why smacking is never a good idea

Parents may believe there are occasions when only a smack will do. For example, your child is really cheeky and disobedient; your toddler runs into the road; one of your children bites a playmate. It can be tempting to think a smack sorts out these incidents quickly, but it does nothing to teach your child how you want him to behave. Instead, it:

- Gives a bad example of how to handle strong emotions
- May lead children to hit or bully others
- They may lie, or hide feelings to avoid smacking
- It can make defiant, uncooperative behaviour worse, so discipline gets even harder
- Children feel resentful and angry, which can spoil family relationships if it goes on for a long time.

I was smacked as a child - did my parents get it wrong?

These days we know a great deal more about why children behave as they do, and about the effects of smacking. Our parents did the best they could at the time. Modern parents choose parenting without the pain, for child or adults.¹¹

The public debate over the UK legislation did not focus on the value or morality of physical violence as a means of punishment of children—this was largely assumed to be both morally wrong and practically harmful—but on the questions of whether the legislation went far enough (since it still allows smacking that does not cause “actual bodily harm”) or whether it adversely invades family privacy and runs the risk of disrupting healthy families that are suspected of offending the law. Violence against children is a strong cultural taboo.

I raise the example of corporeal child punishment, not to defend the practice in any way, but rather to sharpen the point that Old Testament portrayals of the LORD punishing Israel with physical violence are deeply problematic. A stark example is the array of violent punishments prepared for Israel if they disobey the commandments of Deuteronomy. Moses testifies:

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: ... The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. The sky over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you iron. The LORD will change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed. The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your corpses shall be food for every bird of the air and animal of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away. The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed. The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as blind people

¹⁰ [http://www.politics.co.uk/domestic-policy/smacking-law-comes-into-force-\\$7570908.htm](http://www.politics.co.uk/domestic-policy/smacking-law-comes-into-force-$7570908.htm).

¹¹ <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/html/home/needadvice/encouragingbetterbehaviour.htm>.

grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help. . . . The LORD will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favor to the young. It shall consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed, leaving you neither grain, wine, and oil, nor the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, until it has made you perish. It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land; it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout the land that the LORD your God has given you. In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the LORD your God has given you. (Deut. 28:15, 20-29, 50-53).

When one is part of a community that both worships the LORD of the Old Testament¹² and is culturally shaped to reject anger and violence, an ideological tension is a predictable result. The question is then what theological moves one makes in order to clarify the tension, to respond to it with integrity, or possibly to move toward resolving it.

THOMAS MANN: ENGAGING THE DIVINE WRATH IN DEUTERONOMY

I now turn to Thomas Mann's theology of Deuteronomy's divine curses to understand how one contemporary interpreter engages this problem.¹³ My goal is to analyze the moves that he makes as he wrestles with the problematic aspects of Deuteronomy and then to question some of those moves as to their consistency with a faith stance that depends upon scriptural revelation for knowledge about God.¹⁴ Furthermore, I attempt to place his work within my proposed methodological framework to begin the process of moving beyond what he has done.

In the following section I attempt to outline Mann's difficulties with the divine curses of Deuteronomy. I then consider two basic moves he uses to justify the presence of the curses in the text, or at least temper their offensiveness for his readers. I then attempt to elucidate Mann's resulting theology of divine violence.

Justifying the LORD's Wrath

Mann deals with the LORD's wrath against his sinful people in several places. In the introduction, relevant section headings include: "The Wages of Sin," "A Moral View of History," and "Grace and Repentance." In chapter 1, "D-Day or Doomsday? Deuteronomy 1:1-4:40" he touches on the tension

¹² The New Testament is also problematic for anti-violent morality, however discussion of the New Testament is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹³ Thomas W. Mann, *Deuteronomy* (Lexington, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). I choose Mann's work because of his unusually clear interaction with the theological problems raised by the divine curses of Deuteronomy and engage with him out of respect for the steps he has taken. I hope that further fruitful moves can be made by raising questions about his approach.

¹⁴ His book is part of the Westminster Bible Companion series. The series forward states: "We hope this series will serve the community of faith, opening the Word of God to all people, so that they may be sustained and guided by it" (Mann, *Deuteronomy*, xii).

between seeing the LORD as a “devouring fire” and “unfailing mercy.”¹⁵ But he holds back until his penultimate chapter on “Showers of Blessing, Droughts of Curse: Deuteronomy 27:1-30:20” to engage seriously with the issues of divine wrath against his covenant people.¹⁶

Difficulties with Divine Curses

Mann expresses theological tension with the way Deuteronomy presents the curses that result from covenant disobedience. His first tension is with divine causation of suffering: “The threat of punishment and the promise of reward are also part of the warp and woof of Deuteronomic admonition, and blessings and curses are the way they are expressed. Even though both present us with difficult theological questions, we cannot dismiss them outright without eliminating a major component of the political theology of the covenant tradition.”¹⁷ When he considers the curses of natural disaster, he observes that these curses “presuppose a worldview that contemporary people often find unacceptable. For ancient peoples, the world of nature was inextricably linked to divine power, sometimes so closely that the two were virtually identical. What happened in nature was seen as the expression of divine pleasure or displeasure with human behavior. . . . Now most of us do not understand rain this way.”¹⁸ Likewise when considering the curse of traumatic military defeat and other national and international troubles: “We may not want to attribute such suffering to direct divine causation (any more than we do with rain).”¹⁹

His second tension is between the predominantly corporate view of Deuteronomy and the contemporary Western assumption of individualism. He condemns radical individualism in strong terms as a form of idolatry that displaces the more primary community and God himself.²⁰ He finds within Deuteronomy “a struggle to formulate a theology that does justice both to individual responsibility and to corporate guilt.”²¹ He goes on to note several places where Deuteronomy limits retribution to the guilty individuals. Verses 29:18-21 speak of the curse on those whose hearts are turning from the LORD: “The LORD will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity.” He also cites the individual nature of 7:10, where the LORD “repays in their own person those who reject

¹⁵ In this chapter he also engages with the problem of holy war under the heading “Between Literalism and Allegory.” He struggles to find the middle ground between apparently morally-objectionable literal readings and meaningless allegorized readings. The problematic nature of the texts, and the possibility of therefore discarding them, is apparent in the way he transitions from his literal reading to his application of the text to today: “For those who still want to use these stories (they are, after all, part of scripture and thus a ‘rule of faith’), one option has been allegorization” (Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 32). Holy war, though an important aspect of divine violence, is not within the scope of this essay.

¹⁶ The issue of divine wrath against rebellious Israel appears in several parts of both the opening and closing sections of Deuteronomy. In several obvious places (e.g., the punishment of the generation who refused to enter the land [1:43-46; 2:14-16], Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 26-8; the LORD’s anger over the golden calf [9:12-14], Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 98-100), he chooses not to engage the problems raised by divine wrath, choosing rather to wait for his discussion of the extended passage of the LORD’s threatened curse in Deut. 28.

¹⁷ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 149.

¹⁸ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 149.

¹⁹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 151.

²⁰ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 13-4.

²¹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 150.

him.” He also notes that the LORD commands that human-enacted capital punishment must be reserved for the actual offender: “Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death” (Deut. 24:16). However, these examples of individualistic punishment are actually quite exceptional in Deuteronomy, which focuses on corporate suffering as a result of obedience, especially in the great disasters of the curses in 28:15-68.²² However he notes that for many of us (and possibly for the struggling Deuteronomist), our “elemental notions of fairness recoil”²³ at the idea of corporate guilt.

The third problem he outlines is reading apparent curses ‘backwards’ (my term) to infer guilt and therefore divine censure of suffering people. In the case of victims of natural disasters he writes:

To make a direct moral connection between natural disasters and human suffering would almost be theologically cruel as well as careless. Imagine telling people whose children are dying of a cholera epidemic that they are being punished by God. Similarly, people who are killed in earthquakes may be guilty of choosing to live in a dangerous place—over the San Andreas fault, perhaps—but to accuse them of immorality and to suggest that God shook the earth in order to execute them would be obscene.²⁴

He presents the same view of personal illness: “The covenant sanctions do not support the deduction that, because an individual is ill, he or she must have done something wrong and is being punished by God.” He warns that “unwarranted connections between suffering and immorality still haunt us today,” even though he understands the book of Job to be a refutation of such views.²⁵

Mann’s difficulties with divine curses lead him to search for an interpretation of Deuteronomy that maintains some connection with the *prima facie* reading (that rebellion against the LORD leads to suffering) while avoiding the problems of direct divine causation, corporate guilt and backwards readings. He seems to use two basic moves: explaining suffering through natural consequences, and explaining Deuteronomy’s representation of divine curses by the book’s ancient near-eastern background.

Natural Consequences

While Deuteronomy consistently identifies the LORD himself as the direct cause of such existential difficulty,²⁶ Mann employs the observed (and sometimes scientifically validated) patterns of cause and effect to explain how disobedience to the LORD’s law results in undesirable consequences, without any direct reference to the LORD himself. For example, Mann suggests that Deuteronomy’s tradition of blessing and curse could be used to make sense of the contemporary American ecological crisis “in

²² Mann also points out that even 7:10 and 29:21 occur in contexts of corporate punishment.

²³ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 150.

²⁴ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 150.

²⁵ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 151.

²⁶ The direct divine causation of Israel’s punishment is throughout Deuteronomy. Consider especially the parallelism between the LORD’s previous blessing of Israel and warning of his curse: “And just as the LORD took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the LORD will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction; you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess” (Deut. 28:63).

terms of a curse resulting from generations of abuse of nature.”²⁷ Natural causality can also explain the LORD’s threat to punish “children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation” (Deut. 5:9), for “ordinary experience also amply shows that people *do* suffer as a result of irresponsible parenting, often affecting several generations.”²⁸ Mann expresses unease at Deuteronomy’s explanation for such suffering as being the direct action of the LORD: “While we may be uncomfortable with ascribing such punishment to God, few can deny that in families, larger social groups, and even nations, one generation often suffers because of the former’s wrongdoing.”²⁹

The laws of nature also enter Mann’s argument in a separate discussion of drought: “Numerous passages in Deuteronomy show that the provision of rain is a sign of God’s blessing, while the withholding of rain is a sign of God’s curse (11:10-17; 28:12a, 23-24; see 7:13; 8:7). The same understanding of rain is evident elsewhere in the Old Testament, for example, in 1 Kings 8:35-36; 17:1-18:46; and Isaiah 5:6.”³⁰ But he then distances himself (and his readers) from that view:

Now most of us do not understand rain this way. Perhaps in cases of severe drought, we might attend a prayer service for rain, but most of us would not consider drought as a direct divine punishment for human wrongdoing. We would also not think of human illnesses, plant or crop diseases, insect infestations (Amos 7:1-3), or earthquakes (Num. 16:29-34) as expressions of a divine curse. Insurance policies may refer to some of these as ‘acts of God,’ but most of us do not take that phrase literally.³¹

His point is that drought and rain are not typically understood (with the implication that they *should* not be understood) as being from the hand of the LORD. He remains silent as to their actual cause, but it is difficult to avoid that he is implying a mechanistic worldview to replace the ‘naïve’ ancient view. For Mann, drought just happens. The climatologists may be able offer explanations; governmental policies and engineering may be able to correct some of the problems and mitigate some of the harm, but drought is simply not linked to the LORD and his response to human behavior. Mann is willing to link certain behaviors with unpleasant consequences (e.g., abuse of the environment and resulting environmental crises; unwise parenting and maladjusted children), however he appears to limit these linkages to the sort that would hold up to naturalistic scientific scrutiny. Furthermore, unpleasant experiences of nature are apparently to be ascribed to mechanistic causes, not acts of the LORD in response to human behavior. As Mann explains the theology of Deuteronomy, it “represents a view of nature that is unscientific and ‘primitive,’”³² with the clear implication that our present scientific and ‘advanced’ explanations for suffering at the hand of nature are to be preferred. The LORD, as a result, is not liable to the charge that he immorally uses nature as punishment for human rebellion.

Mann breaks the explicit link asserted by Deuteronomy: “Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, for then the anger of the LORD will be

²⁷ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 152.

²⁸ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 151 (emphasis original).

²⁹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 13.

³⁰ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 149.

³¹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 149.

³² Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 151.

kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you” (Deut. 11:16-7). The problem with his approach is that the biblical text describes a non-naturalistic cause and effect (worship of gods other than the LORD resulting in drought), for which an explanation based on natural consequences is not close at hand. The cause-effect connection of which Moses warns Israel is not one that would occur naturally. The naturally-occurring ecological disaster that may result from environmental abuse is not really analogous to the Deuteronomic warning; the curses do not simply attach the LORD’s name to results that would follow apart from the LORD’s personal involvement.

Ancient Near Eastern Culture

The second move of interest is Mann’s appeal to the culture of the ANE as an explanation for objectionable descriptions of the LORD’s behavior. Mann does not soften Deuteronomy’s sickening description of the result of the LORD’s curse upon Israel: “plague affecting both people and animals (28:18, 21-22), starvation and the cannibalism of one’s own children (28:53-57), military defeat (28:25, 48-52).”³³ He focuses on the fact that these horrors are precise parallels to extant ANE documents of punishment that suzerains levied against rebellious vassals. He quotes from the c. 660 BCE report of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal:

Irra, my warrior god [i.e. pestilence] struck down Uate’, as well as his army, who had not kept the oaths sworn to me and had fled before the onslaught of Ashur, my god. . . . Famine broke out among them and they ate the flesh of their children against their hunger. My gods inflicted quickly upon them all the curses written in their sworn agreements. Even when their animals suckled many times, they could not fill their stomachs with milk. Whenever the inhabitants of Arabia asked each other, “On account of what have these calamities befallen Arabia?” [they answered themselves:] “Because we did not keep the solemn oaths sworn by Ashur, because we offended the friendliness of Ashurbanipal, the king, beloved by Ellil!”³⁴

It is commonly accepted that Deuteronomy draws upon ANE suzerainty treaties for much of its structure and content.³⁵ Mann points out that the cultural milieu for Deuteronomy is violent in the same way as the biblical text: “These gruesome details were not the product of some warped imagination; they were the way that suzerains routinely punished rebellious vassals, beginning at least in the mid-eighth century.”³⁶ He uses the German term *realpolitik* in this connection to say that Deuteronomy simply recounts things the way they really were in that culture.

Mann points out that the curses actually fell upon the LORD’s people in ways not dissimilar to these horrible descriptions: “[These curses] are also the way that both Israel (the northern kingdom)

³³ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 148.

³⁴ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 148 (Adapted from James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 299b-300a).

³⁵ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 23-4; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (trans. Dorothea Barton; London: SCM Press, 1966), 21-2.

³⁶ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 148.

and Judah (the southern) eventually met their end (see 2 Kings 6:24-30; 17:1-41; 25:1-30).³⁷ Here then is the problem with Mann's approach: it is not simply that ANE kings did horrible things to their rebellious vassal nations, nor even that the LORD's people suffered terribly in their history, but that Deuteronomy foreshadows and 2 Kings testifies that the LORD himself in fact did these atrocities to his people. (This is the *prima facie* reading of the text, though more careful exegesis may certainly modify such a conclusion.) To my mind this is the primary 'difficult theological question' to which Mann refers but which he does not resolve: not that the curses are expressed in ANE cultural terms, but that real suffering is attributed to the LORD's hand.

In Mann's summary, he writes that "blessing and curse are inherent to a political theology that is modeled on international treaties."³⁸ That Deuteronomy is political and based on ANE treaties is difficult to dispute, however its implications for our subsequent understanding of the LORD remains an important and difficult question. How should interpreters from our vastly different culture discern the best present-day cultural analogues for speaking theologically?

Resulting 'Theology'

So where does Mann's reading of the divine curses of Deuteronomy lead?

For all of the problems that the covenant sanctions present to us, they do reveal a remarkable honesty, an openness to self-criticism, a sense that an entire society can, in fact, be wrong, and that such a wrong can have devastating results that last for generations. ... Perhaps ancient Israel's greater gift to us does lie in the notion of curse, and perhaps the lesson is this: A country that cannot imagine itself under a divine curse has no business assuming itself under a divine blessing.³⁹

Writing for an American readership, he suggests that celebrating the popular phrase "God Bless America" while considering the opposite, "God Curse America," to be "deeply heretical, unpatriotic, [and] subversive,"⁴⁰ is a denial of the reality of which the Deuteronomist writes. The point of the blessing and curse language is that the hearer must make a choice, and that choice has the portentous consequence of either blessing or curse. He concretizes the theology of Deuteronomy's curse for Americans by posing a choice for how to respond to racism:

No one could reasonably deny that racism has functioned as a curse within American history. ... Perhaps the contemporary American decision in terms of racism that is comparable to the choice between blessing and curse in Deuteronomy would be to pose whether our future will conform to the hopeful vision of King's dream [where racism is overcome and a great society ensues] or the tragic vision of Faulkner's novel [where generation after generation continues in the sinful path of their racist fathers].⁴¹

Mann writes movingly as he correctly connects contemporary problems with racism to bad choices and offers hope for a better future if good choices are made. He also correctly identifies the virtue of

³⁷ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 148

³⁸ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 151

³⁹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 153.

⁴⁰ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 153-4.

⁴¹ Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 154.

societal self-criticism in light of the reality and revealed values of the LORD. However, his conclusions are not really a ‘theology,’ properly speaking. By re-working the Deuteronomic curses with the tools of natural consequences and ANE culture, the God of Israel has receded into deism. An unacceptable divine causation of suffering, an imprecise and unjust corporate punishment, and an impermissible ‘backwards’ reading of suffering to identify those who have offended the LORD have all joined forces so that Mann’s resulting ‘theology’ no longer has the LORD as an active presence. In his introduction, Mann points out that Deuteronomy recalls Israel’s history and offers a choice “to all subsequent generations, who also ‘stand beneath the mountain,’ with the hope that they will choose the right path.”⁴² It seems to me that choosing the right path depends on the reality of the LORD’s presence on the mountaintop.

METHOD: PREMISE ENGAGEMENT CRITICISM

Engagement with the God of the Old Testament in present reality, must be done with clarity and honesty, which surely entails encountering challenges that this untamable One presents to the interpreter’s prior commitments. As an opening gambit in that direction, in this section I describe what I tentatively refer to as premise engagement criticism. Each of the three terms is significant. A *premise* is something that the interpreter assumes to be true, a prior commitment that is held with some tenacity. It may have its origin from scripture, from some community, from broader culture, or elsewhere. By *engagement* I mean the interaction between the interpreter’s premises and the text. Interpretation of this sort is inherently bidirectional with the premises being applied to the text and *vice versa*. Both the interpreter’s premises and interpretation of the text are open to change. By *criticism* I mean that the process is disciplined and able to be documented and understood by others.

Premise engagement criticism is closely related to ideological criticism. The most common ideological critiques of the Bible are Marxist and feminist. In feminist criticism, certain premises are held steady during the process of biblical interpretation. Farley writes, “Feminist consciousness includes many elements, not all of which are agreed upon by every feminist. ... Yet some central convictions are shared at least by large groups of feminists. Most fundamental, perhaps, is the conviction that women are fully human and are to be valued as such.”⁴³ Farley then brings this and other prior commitments to the biblical text with the following guiding rule:

Whatever contradicts those convictions cannot be accepted as having the authority of an authentic revelation of truth. It is simply a matter of there being no turning back. We can be dispossessed of our best insights, proven wrong in our judgments. But as long as those insights continue to make sense to us, and as long as our basic judgments seem to us incontrovertible, there can be no turning back. So it is with feminist consciousness and the interpretation of scripture.⁴⁴

⁴² Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 9.

⁴³ Margaret A. Farley, “Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 44.

⁴⁴ Farley, “Feminist Consciousness,” 49-50.

Although she admits the possibility of having her prior commitments modified, the history of feminist interpretation is substantially one of holding feminist commitments above the text (with often positive and creative results in interpreting the text) rather than subjecting those commitments to scrutiny.

Phyllis Trible, one of the most prominent feminist critics, writes of her personal tension between the Bible and her feminist commitments: “If no man can serve two masters, no woman can serve two authorities, a master called Scripture and a mistress called feminism.”⁴⁵ Years of struggle with this predicament has not softened her understanding that “the Bible promotes the sin of patriarchy,”⁴⁶ yet she refuses “to renounce Scripture as hopelessly misogynous, a women-hating document with no health in it.”⁴⁷ Instead she seeks to redeem both the text and its continuing use with a two-stage process. When confronted with a text with patriarchal implications, she first attempts a non-patriarchal reinterpretation of it, which sometimes surprisingly converts it into a critique of patriarchy instead of its legitimization.⁴⁸ However, she finds that sometimes this method fails, even to the point of revealing ever more profound patriarchy within the text. In such cases, she moves to a second stage of interpretation, which takes the stories of biblical women who are victimized by patriarchy and retells them, possibly ranging far from scripture itself, as sympathetic memorials to the abused women, “in the hope that such terrors will cease.”⁴⁹

Premise engagement criticism is similar to ideological criticism in that it struggles with serving two masters: the premises and the text. However it differs from ideological criticism in that the premises are more malleable or negotiable, and are possibly more unconscious and implicit. In fact, the process of premise engagement criticism may very well reveal hidden prior commitments. The method can be outlined like this:

1. Statement of premises
2. Harmonizing interpretation of text, taking note of tensions between text and premises
3. Outline of options for resolving difficulties
4. Steps toward resolution

The method begins with an attempt at making explicit the relevant premises that the interpreter brings to the text. Since the method is focused on the engagement between the interpreter’s prior commitments and the text, these must be made as concrete as the text itself. The next step is to interpret the text, with an eye towards harmonizing the premises and the interpretation as much as possible. All interpreters guide their interpretations according to prior commitments, whether these commitments are to ‘objective scientific history,’ ‘radical deconstruction of texts of faith’ or anything else. Harmonization means that difficult choices between conflicting interpretations are chosen to be

⁴⁵ Phyllis Trible, “If the Bible’s So Patriarchal, How Come I Love It?” *Bible Review* 8 (1992): 45.

⁴⁶ Trible, “Patriarchal Bible,” 45.

⁴⁷ Trible, “Patriarchal Bible,” 47.

⁴⁸ Trible, “Patriarchal Bible,” 55. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁴⁹ P. T. Willey, “Trible, Phyllis,” *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 617.

in harmony with the interpreter's premises. By making this harmonization explicit rather than covert, the stigma normally attached to harmonization is reduced. Since complete harmonization is rarely possible, some tensions will usually remain.⁵⁰ The third step is then to outline the options for resolving them. These options include such things as revising the premises, choosing between competing interpretations that conflict with the premises in different ways, dismissing the text as non-authoritative, dismissing objectionable aspects of the text as alien cultural artifacts that are tangential to the deeper meaning of the text, or more creative approaches such as Tribble's retelling of biblical stories, lamenting the struggle between premises and text, etc. The only option that is off limits is to disengage and ignore the tensions. Finally, engagement means taking a step toward resolution, arguing for one or more of the options, and taking an existential step as an interpreter struggling with competing authorities.⁵¹ Obviously this outline is schematic and ignores many significant complexities of criticism (such as iterations over the steps as the task of interpretation discovers new interpreter premises and clarifies previously identified ones), but the goal is for an ideological engagement between interpreter and text that advances the critical community.

Mann as Case Study

How would Mann's discussion of divine curse in Deuteronomy look when remolded into premise engagement criticism? First, he seems to have three premises that rule out several paths of interpretation:

1. Direct divine causation is not responsible for human suffering;
2. Corporate punishment for individual offenses is unjust; and
3. Human suffering cannot be read 'backwards' to identify those who have offended the LORD.

Second, he seeks a reading—and practical contemporary application—that harmonize with these premises, he reflects upon the horrible curses spoken of in Deuteronomy and concludes that there are sometimes negative results from disobedience to divine commands. He finds that some suffering comes from natural consequences, as in cases of environmental destruction, harmful parenting, and international politics. Choices that deviate from the LORD's plan for society can have lasting effects that go beyond the perpetrators, such as the multigenerational effects of American slavery. So although he does not dismiss outright the characterization of curse given by Deuteronomy, he attributes its form and extremity to the genre of ANE treaty documents, and its reality to natural consequences. He identifies tensions between the text and two of his three of his premises, which remain somewhat unresolved by his reading. Deuteronomy ascribes suffering for rebellion to direct

⁵⁰ In practice, the first two steps may be reversed or intermixed. Often it is in the search for an acceptable interpretation of a text that the interpreter's premises are self-discovered.

⁵¹ Although I suggest personal involvement by the interpreter, it is certainly possible to exercise this method in a hypothetical and imaginative fashion in order to sympathize with another individual or community through their foreign premises.

divine causation while he disallows it. Deuteronomy predominantly assumes suffering by those in the community of the disobedient and not just the responsible individuals, while Mann rejects this as unjust (even though he certainly recognizes it in the corporate suffering caused by racism in America). His third premise about reading ‘backwards’ does not seem to be an issue in the text, but is rather a problem that Mann has encountered in those who are seeking to apply the text to their circumstances by judging sufferers as victims of the LORD’s wrath.

How can I move forward from this starting point?⁵² It is first important to identify any differences in my own premises and Mann’s, including additional premises that may be silently present in his work. A number of personal premises seem relevant:

1. Scripture reveals the nature of the LORD and his dealings with his creation generally and his covenant people specifically. Furthermore, the OT narrator and Moses have authoritative prophetic voices in interpreting events and presenting the mind of the LORD when they choose to do so. Therefore Mann’s reading creates a tension for me since his interpretation of the curses is markedly deistic and refrains from commenting on the LORD’s character and relationship to humanity.
2. The LORD acts in a competent and purposeful manner so that his actions lead from situations that are farther from his desired goals to ones that are closer.
3. In agreement with my culture and the form of Christian theology around me, I see violence as usually evil, to be avoided, and rarely leading to improving bad situations. While violence might sometimes be required in a love relationship (such as knocking someone down to avoid a bullet), such circumstances are exceedingly rare.
4. Compassion is the appropriate response to suffering, even if the suffering is in some way ‘deserved.’
5. I am less certain than Mann appears to be that the LORD eschews directly causing suffering as a consequence of disobedience, though such an action is troubling to me.
6. I agree with Mann that corporate punishment is unjust, though I recognize that my own culturally-drawn radical individualism is suspect.
7. I agree with Mann that suffering should not be read ‘backwards’ in any simplistic fashion, however discerning divine wrath seems to have an important role within the community of the LORD’s people.

How do these premises then affect my reading of the Deuteronomic curses? I will constrain my reading to the particular case of Israel (rather than present day application), with a focus on the southern kingdom of Judah and their defeat by the Babylonians. I take the curses of Deut. 28 to be tightly connected to the horrors of that event, whatever the origin of the final text of Deuteronomy

⁵² I use the first person here with my own premises and engagement. Though these may overlap somewhat with those of other individuals or groups, I do not write here of anyone but myself.

(whether a prophetic warning that anticipated the event or a later anachronistic interpretation of the event after it occurred).

My view of revelation does not allow me to dodge easily the presentation of the LORD as angry and violent in response to Israel's covenant rebellion. Even with the parallels to ANE treaties and human suzerains, the author's choice of presenting the LORD and his wrath in such a form must carry some revelatory weight when other options were clearly available.⁵³ The ancient genre of covenant curses do not allow present-day figurative readings that soften the reality of the curse, because the later presentation of the fulfillment of the curse in military defeat at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24-25) bears enough resemblance to the warning (i.e. an extended siege of Jerusalem until food supplies were exhausted [25:1-3]) that a *prima facie* reading places the cause of the horrific event squarely under the responsibility of the LORD. This reading is in line with my first premise about the nature of revelation, but is in great tension with my third premise that objects to the use of violence for positive purposes. It is also in tension with my fourth premise concerning compassion. The LORD is not presented as compassionate in the face of Israel's suffering under his hand. There are no indications of regret in his anger, though he has compassion on them afterward:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion (חַסָּד) on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. (Deut. 30:1-3)

The LORD's lack of compassion during their suffering is also troubling in that Israel is likewise commanded to have no pity on those upon whom they must inflict suffering.⁵⁴

What about my second premise, that the LORD acts in a competent, purposeful manner? There are some important questions here that are not obviously answered by Deuteronomy. What is accomplished by Israel's punishment for infidelity? It leads to Israel's restoration (cf. 4:29-31; 30:1-8), but is there an assurance that the punishment has accomplished a necessary purpose that outweighs the suffering? For example, is the problem of subsequent and cyclical infidelity solved? The LORD promises to circumcise the hearts of Israel after her return from exile so that they will love the LORD and live (30:6), but why does he not do this earlier and prevent the whole mess? Specifically, why has he not previously "given [Israel] a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear" (29:4)? The prophets repeat the refrain that only after their suffering will Israel know the LORD: "My eye will not spare you, I will have no pity. I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are among

⁵³ The author could have employed, e.g., softened descriptions of vassal punishment, the model of parental discipline, conciliatory family responses to infidelity.

⁵⁴ E.g., in holy war (7:16); those enticing toward idolatry, even if close family members (13:8); the murderer in the city of refuge (19:13); the false witness (19:21); and the woman who rescues her husband through mutilation (25:12). The same term for having pity (חַסָּד) is refused by the LORD when he warns of punishing Israel in Ezekiel (7:9; 8:18; 9:10; 24:14), but note that he had pity on Israel when no one else did (16:5) and he likewise pitied Israel in the wilderness (20:17).

you. Then you shall know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 7:4). But what exactly is the economy of suffering and punishment for the gaining of sure knowledge of the LORD? It is this missing piece that makes the violence of the LORD against Israel most pointedly troubling.⁵⁵

Many more questions remain. Is corporate punishment just, when the righteous suffer along with the unrighteous, despite it being objectionable to our individualistic mindset? Is individualistic morality more correct than corporate morality? If suffering cannot be read ‘backwards’ simplistically to discern the punishment of the LORD, is there a prophetic role for communicating the reasons for the experience of suffering? How does the present suffering generation have hope based on what the LORD will do in a future generation? Or to put a finer point on it, can the starving victim of Jerusalem’s siege praise the goodness of the LORD?⁵⁶

Given these questions and tensions (and there are obviously a great many more), what options for resolution can be offered as the third step? This is a larger question than can be answered here, so I will not attempt any suggestions at this point. However, the final step of my method is to engage the tension and embrace an option that moves toward resolution. Since disengagement is disallowed, on this Good Friday I choose the (possibly) weak option of a moment of silence in observation of the suffering of the exile, the larger suffering of the LORD’s people at his hand (cf. 1 Pet. 4:19), and the mysteriously positive suffering of Christ according to the will of his father, and offer a prayer of commitment to remain engaged with the LORD over this difficult issue.

CONCLUSION

I began this essay with a discussion of the current cultural rejection of violence as unacceptable, whether in society or in scripture. However, rejection is too strong word. Our world has a complex relationship with violence, anger and punishment. On many fronts we rhetorically reject it. Yet we do not actually eschew it. The current U.S.-led war in Iraq is one obvious example, but heavily armed police forces, swelling prison populations, and strong-armed anti-terrorism and anti-drug⁵⁷ measures

⁵⁵ A similar problem exists with the flood narrative (Gen. 6-9). The LORD promises to never destroy all flesh with a flood (8:21-2; 9:11) but it is unclear what has changed in his relationship with his people that renders the flood necessary in its time but unnecessary for any future time. Will the memory of the flood make a repetition unnecessary? Has the LORD realized that it was ineffective? Is his promise a ‘gut reaction’ to Noah’s sweet sacrifice? This same question could be asked of many other examples of the LORD’s violence against rebels in the OT.

⁵⁶ Certainly those who reflected on Israel’s suffering have subsequently praised the LORD (e.g., the previously mentioned Lam. 3; the penitent prayer of Neh. 9). However, these do not necessarily solve the problem since Lam. 3 does not offer a convincing argument that the violence was good, nor does Neh. 9 argue that the result of the exile was Judah’s greater good as much as that the violent punishment was deserved (Neh. 9:30-1). Furthermore, individuals who suffered the violence did not necessarily see that the violence was for their personal good. Those who died in the violence, consumed their children, and so on, should not be presumed to respond so charitably to the LORD’s discipline as those who reflected on it later. Does this affect the morality of the violence?

⁵⁷ A striking example of society embracing immoral (and illegal?) violence is the discussion that followed the downing of a missionary airplane in Peru that was misidentified as a drug smuggler in 2001. The debate was over how the airplane was misidentified, and the tragedy was identified with the death of innocent people. However the question of using deadly force against a suspected criminal (without regard for the doctrine of

are quieter indications that society is fundamentally based on violence and control through power, despite a conscious rejection of such things as problematic or even immoral.

It is exactly in such confusing circumstances that one might expect scriptural insight to be most profitable. And the particularly promising passages of scripture are those that seem most troubling. In a societal situation where violence against perceived evil is problematic, it might just be that turning to places where the LORD uses violence against his rebellious people for positive purposes will be helpful. However, proper engagement with scripture as a source of authority requires a methodological approach that renders one's prior commitments vulnerable to change. Every interpreter comes to the text with an ideology, with deeply held commitments. As the problematic texts clarify those prior commitments, there is an opportunity to engage texts and premises in a reasoned struggle that might not only improve our reading but redirect our path. If we remain unchanged after engaging a problematic text, then we have indeed silenced it.

Moberly puts it well in the conclusion of his interpretation of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, though I refer to sacrificing a cherished conviction rather than a precious son:

Christian faith creates a presumption that in Scripture in general, and in Gen 22 in particular, there is truth. This presumption, however should lead not to any kind of complacency ("we have the answers") or superiority toward others ("we're right, you're wrong") but rather to a willingness on the part of community and individual alike to expose oneself to what the truth, and right worship, of God actually entails: a rigorous, searching, critical, purifying process in which what one holds most dear and God-given may be precisely that which must in some sense be relinquished if faith is to be genuine — and in accordance with the pattern of father Abraham.⁵⁸

being innocent until proven guilty in a court of law) was barely raised. Violent force is apparently pragmatically successful at reducing drug trafficking, and therefore morally permissible.

(<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/04/22/peru.plane.03/>).

⁵⁸ R. W. L. Moberly, "Living Dangerously: Genesis 22 and the Quest for Good Biblical Interpretation," in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 197.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Farley, Margaret A. "Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture." Pages 41-51 in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Letty M. Russell. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985.
- Mann, Thomas W. *Deuteronomy*. Lexington, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- McConville, J. G. *Deuteronomy*. Leicester: Apollos, 2002.
- Moberly, R. W. L. "Living Dangerously: Genesis 22 and the Quest for Good Biblical Interpretation." Pages 181-97 in *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard Hays. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Pritchard, James. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Rad, Gerhard von. *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*. Translated by Dorothea Barton. London: SCM Press, 1966.
- Trible, Phyllis. "If the Bible's So Patriarchal, How Come I Love It?" *Bible Review* 8 (1992): 45, 47, 55.
- . *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Willey, P. T. "Trible, Phyllis." Pages 615-18 in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Edited by Donald McKim. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998.