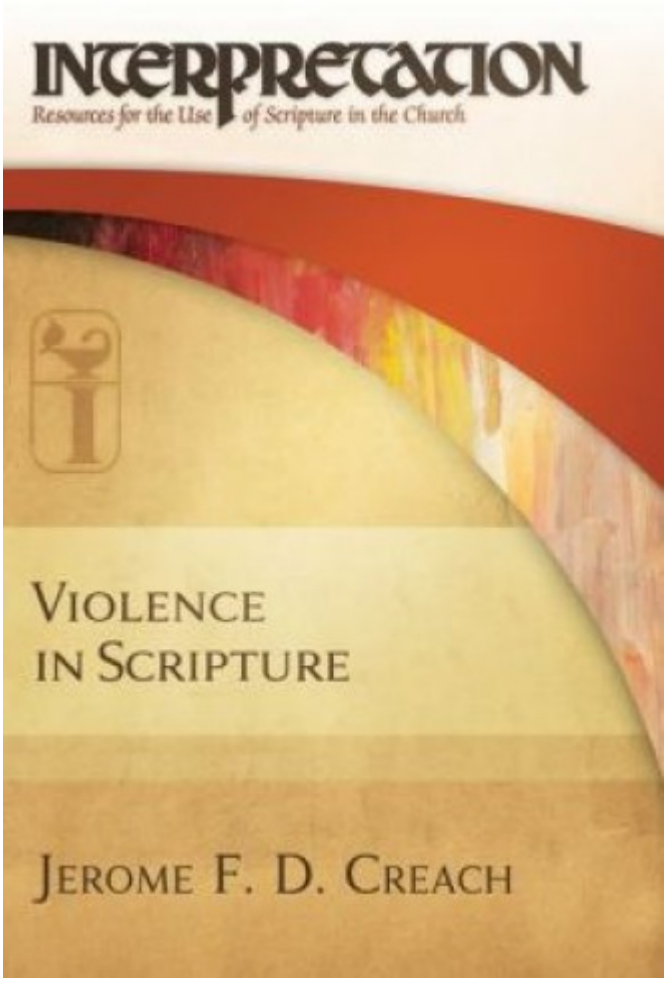
Warrior God

by Walter Brueggemann in the December 25, 2013 issue

In Review



Violence in Scripture

By Jerome F. D. Creach
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In the past decade or so I have regularly been asked the question, “What are we to make of violence in the Old Testament?” So has every Old Testament teacher I know. It is as though there is a new awareness of that violence. Perhaps that is

simply because the church is now paying more attention to the Old Testament, or perhaps it is because we live in an acutely violent society.

I take the question to mean, How are we to understand the human barbarism in the Old Testament that is legitimated by God or, beyond that, the violence perpetrated directly by God? How are we to reconcile that violence with the gospel of God's love, grace and forgiveness given to us in Jesus Christ?

Jerome Creach's book *Violence in Scripture* is among the best of a recent stream of books on the topic. Creach is a knowledgeable, careful reader of texts, he knows the interpretive tradition of the church, and he is committed to the primary claims of the gospel. His general perspective is this:

> Much of the Bible's description of violence and destruction is related directly to God's desire to maintain the proper order in creation. Furthermore, what is often understood as God's violence is actually God acting to protect the creation itself or the creation, following the will of God, rising up in rebellion against those who would ruin it.

Creach's exposition concerning creation, happily informed by the work of Terence Fretheim and William Brown, argues that unlike creation accounts in much of the ancient Near East, creation in the Bible is without conflict with the powers of chaos: "The picture of God's creative work does not involve God fighting the natural world; moreover, it seems the elements of the world are willing participants in the act of shaping and ordering the creation." The actions of the Creator, Creach writes, "are not the demands of a despot. They are rather the invitations of the one who invites the elements as agents in the creative processes." God creates without violence and creates humankind in God's image, and human agents are to govern the earth in nonviolent ways to further the flourishing of the earth.

The Exodus narrative is more difficult with God as a man of war. But Creach sees that God acts as Judge of Pharaoh, whose actions devastate creation. Later, during the exile, the rhetoric of war reflects the powerlessness of the exiles, who appeal to a God who can be forceful enough to overcome the power of Babylon. Thus the warrior is the enforcer of the divine Judge, who enacts justice for the benefit of Israel and for the sake of creation.

Creach offers a close reading of the vexatious narratives of Sodom, Pharaoh and Amalek. In general he makes the case, following Fretheim, that God acts to preserve

creation. Thus in the Sodom narrative Abraham is “the linchpin for righteousness and justice.” Creach also follows H. H. Schmid and sees that the world order of creation is itself an embodiment of the righteousness of God, who will maintain that order against every disorder. The difficult story of Amalek is to be read “figuratively”; Creach notes that he has “downplayed the historical reality of the ‘enemies of God.’”

When Creach comes to the “ban” (*herem*) that authorizes annihilation of Israel’s (God’s?) enemies, he appeals to the allegorical reading of Origen that takes the ban as “a symbol for religious fidelity, not a literal command to kill people.” Deuteronomy 7 is to be read “metaphorically” and presents an act of “sublimation.” Creach reads the conquest narrative with its legitimated violence as an account of the creation of “a conquered people” that “should be read as a liberating story for those who are oppressed, not as a triumphant account of conquest by a dominant force.” Both the conquest and the ban attest to complete dependence on and devotion to God.

When Creach takes up the prophets it is not a surprise that he argues that “God engages in violence in order to counter and correct human violence.” The violence of Elijah and Elisha exhibits the power of “the holy” as champion of the poor and challenges oppressive power against the poor. Creach treats the prophetic oracles against the nations as actions against nations that refuse to accept the legitimate rule of God. He offers a compelling riff on “final judgment” but concludes that such fierce rhetoric of punishment is not the last word.

Creach does not take up the prophetic speeches of judgment against Israel. I suppose if he did, he would make the same argument about divine enforcement of the Creator’s judgment against the vagaries of Israel, but one might have anticipated that God would find a new and improved way to discipline the chosen people.

The final expository section of the book concerns the imprecatory Psalms, those that bid vengeance on the adversary. In general Creach follows Erich Zenger with the notion that the Psalms are urgent, passionate petitions for divine justice in contexts where the speaker is powerless to change circumstances.

The volume concludes with a reflection on Jesus’ teaching concerning nonviolence. Creach tends to follow Richard Hays in taking this teaching as absolute, but he stops

short of Hays's judgment that Jesus' teaching constitutes a new dispensation. Creach insists that the difficult texts should be read in the context of "Scripture's true governing center" in which justice requires enforcement against the violators of that justice.

I am disquieted about two deeply sensed matters regarding this argument. My quarrel is not with Creach's work. Creach is a friend and colleague whose work I regard highly. Rather, my quarrel is with the interpretive trajectory in which he is embedded. The characteristic argument, voiced by Creach, is that the text does not mean what it says. There are various strategies for making that argument, all on exhibit here, including figurative or allegorical reading; retreat from the text in later interpretations, both Jewish and Christian; appeals to canonical rendering; and notice of detailed nuances of "correction" in the text. All of these strategies displace the text for the sake of theological compatibility with the claims of the gospel.

The first cause of my disquiet is that this trajectory of interpretation never takes the voicing of divine violence as serious revealed data about the character of God. But what if God is disclosed in the text as an agent of violence? What if this God has a propensity toward violence with which God struggles, as in Hosea 11:1–9? What if God's own life is unsettled and in contestation? What if we are made in the image of a God who struggles with violence? I think we are required to struggle with such questions, not to explain away violence in scripture. Even if Creach does not go all the way with Hays, I think there is an implicit supersessionism in an argument that refuses to let the text have its say about God.

The second, more practical reason for my disquiet is that when the question of violence is posed by serious readers of the Bible, this response of explaining away is not adequate or persuasive. I think we are, as exemplified by Creach, trapped in an interpretive practice that refuses to struggle with the deep complexity of the character of God. The question is exceedingly hard, and easy answers will not suffice. But the relentless rhetoric remains! If we dared to read such texts in church, we more than likely would still blithely respond, "Thanks be to God." We have much more hard work to do.