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Violence: Biblical Perspectives

A. Gabriel MSFS

Suvidhya College, Bangalore

The people of the lands where the biblical traditions took shape lived in tension and conflict with each other almost throughout their history. They constantly experienced violence, injustice and oppression, both from within their society and from external forces. And they yearned for peace, but rarely enjoyed it.

A dimension of the biblical perspectives on violence will involve the study the entire history of the biblical traditions, from primeval history to eschatology. This article limits its scope within the perspectives of 'realism and hope', and 'history and eschatology'.

Violence in Biblical Myths

On matters of war and peace, of violence and harmony, Israel's experience is in no way different from that of her neighbors. The primeval history succinctly presents this fact. Cain, the first man born of a woman, turned out to be a murderer (Gn 4:8). Later Lamech killed a young man apparently in self-defence (Gn 4:23). The author, in the primeval history, makes the following comment: "The

Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth. ... Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence" (Gn 6: 5, 11).

Hamas, the Hebrew word for violence, appears for the first time in the Bible in the primeval history. Hamas is the main reason for God to make a decision to destroy the earth. The word Hamas is defined as "cold-blooded and unscrupulous infringement of the personal rights of others motivated by greed and hate and often making use of physical violence and brutality" (Haag 1980: 482).

Violence is inherent in human society and it earns divine displeasure at the very beginning of humanity's existence. It is "the breach of a just order," whereby a victim of such violence may cry out for the protection of the community and its laws when his life is threatened (von Rad 1962: 1570). Thus Abel's blood crying to Yahweh from the ground (Gn 4: 10) is symbolic of the victims of violence calling for divine justice in their helplessness. Similarly the patriarchal narratives present the guilt condition of the ten

* A. Gabriel MSFS is a renowned scripture scholar and may be contacted at: Suvidhya College, Bangalore.

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brothers because of the violence they committed against Joseph (Gn 42: 21-22).

Violence denotes any anti-social, unbrotherly/unsisterly activity. Very often it involves brute force but it may just be the exploitation of the weak and the powerless by the powerful (Wenham 1987: 171). Jacob in the last moment of his life does not pronounce blessing on his sons Simeon and Levi but rather uttered curses on them (Gn 49: 5-7) because of the crime they committed against Schechem with 'weapons of violence' (Gn 34: 25-30). It seems that violence is the standard norm to settle disputes and grievances even in the most ancient societies which is, in fact, not the divine standard. But this malaise is a chronic condition in society, not a just sporadic lapse (Hamilton 1990: 273). Moreover, Gn 6: 5-13 the first pericope that mentions the term 'violence' describes the enormity of the evil that is associated with it and its worldwide occurrence. In this short passage the term 'the earth' occurs eight times. 'The earth' here means the whole inhabited world. Thus in the book of Genesis the observations on violence in society are only a prologue to the narratives concerning the biblical, rather the universal experience of violence.

Holy War

In the process of its nation-building and its existence in history as a state, Israel had been grappling with uncertainties because of its geographical position and the socio-cultural realities beyond its boundaries. Amidst the surrounding mighty empires, Israel was

a dwarf nation crippled by the fear of being swallowed by any of them at any time. Socio-culturally they were tribal federations until monarchy came, often living in conflict with each other. Certain narratives in the Deuteronomic history, social laws and protestations to God in prayer at the face of violence reflect the actual situation in Israel.

The concept of 'holy war' is derived from the presupposition that "Yahweh is a warrior" (Ex 15:3) and "the battle is Yahweh's" (I Sam 17: 47). While Yahweh is the ultimate leader of the armies, the military commander is endowed by him with the gift of his Spirit (Judg 6: 34; 11: 29). When he withdraws his Spirit, the commander loses his power to lead anymore (Judg 16:20; I Sam 16:14) (Toombs 1962: 797). Those who participated in the holy war showed complete single-mindedness in the service of Yahweh. They considered it "cultically as a religious act, initiated by the will of Yahweh, and carried out by people devoted to his service and ceremonially pure" (Toombs 1962: 797).¹ Together with it came the practice of herem known as "the ban" which means the extermination of the inhabitants of the conquered territory (Josh 6:17; I Sam 15:3). It is an ethnic cleansing in the name of keeping the 'purity' of their religious faith. When herem was exercised, "the result was an orgy of destruction" (Lohfink in Botterweck 1986: 194). Neither human beings nor cattle were spared. But when monarchy arrived in Israel, the extermination of the conquered people was less, because the

subjugated population was put under slave labour (Lohfink 1986: 195).

On the other hand, Israel enacted laws in order to protect the people from violence within society. “Thou shall not kill” (Ex 20:13, Dt 5: 17) is one of the ten commandments. The Hebrew term ‘rasah’, meaning ‘to kill’, “carries the connotation of intentional and evil violence” (Childs 1974: 421). It is a command against taking the law in one’s own hand and committing acts of violence to achieve personal goals.

Killing in war and capital punishment are permitted in the Old Testament. But it should not be seen as the norm of the covenant community or the ideal human society. Any bloodshed is bad and it carries with it blood-guilt which requires purification. Killing in self-defence or executing criminals may be exempted from blood-guilt (Ex 22:2; Lev 20:9). Yet there is some kind of disapproval in any type of killing. Thus David was not allowed to build a temple in the name of Yahweh because he was a man of war and shed much blood (I Chr 22:8) (Sperling Quoted in Freedman 1992: 763). In this sense, even a ‘just war’ cannot have the right sanction. There cannot be any approval of God in the acts of violence committed even in the name of God; for violence is the enemy of God.

Society and Law

Israel was to be an egalitarian society according to the intention of Yahweh. Every individual as a member of the covenant community had the right to exist with dignity and freedom. One who infringes the rights of his/her

neighbor is a person of violence. The oppressed person prays for deliverance from such violent people (Ps 140). The victims of such violence are often the poor (‘ani), the needy (‘ebhyon) and the weak (dal), namely the powerless (Ps 72). Often those in authority, princes, judges, prophets and priests, that is, persons of importance in the social hierarchy are responsible for the oppression in society. “They do violence to the law” (Zeph 3: 3-4). Violence goes together with socio-economic oppression and exploitation of the poor by the rich and the powerful. “They do not know how to do right, says the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds” (Amos 3:10). “In Samaria, the strongholds had become treasuries in which the powerful stored away the profits of ‘violence’ against others and of ‘destruction’ of rightful custom” (Mays 1969: 64). Often in the prophetic literature, ‘violence’ and ‘destruction’ go together (Jer 6:7; 48:3; Ez 45:9; Hab 1:3). In these prophetic utterances violence and destruction are perpetrated by the ‘chosen people’ for their own evil ways (Craigie 1991: 100, 101 & 273). Violence is what they sow and destruction is what they reap.

A false accusation or an unjust judgement is also seen as violence. It is “the false accusation that demands the life of the innocent” (Ps 7:16) (Haag 1980: 483). Law can be misinterpreted and misused in order to persecute the innocent. The irony is that the falsely accused expect justice from the court which itself is full of violence. Thus the denial of justice becomes a graver violence. In such cases, only Yahweh can come to the rescue of the victims, a

sentiment which the anawim cherish (Ps 25, see especially vv. 19-21). On the other hand, we see that the predatory violence mongers prey upon the pious sentiments of the innocents, masquerading as the dispensers of the divine law and thus making the people blind to the reality. Social crimes, unjust judgments and bloodguilt are primarily directed against Yahweh (Haag 1980: 485). And it is the violation of the created order, and disorder in society is its effect.

View from Apocalypticism

The exilic period can be considered the watershed of Israel's understanding of God, world and human society. They were subdued by the mighty empires and kept as captives in foreign lands. It was a time of introspection for the chosen people. They were victims of the violence perpetrated by the powerful foreign nations and at the same time they realized that violence was inherent in their own societal systems. And they regarded their present state as a punishment from Yahweh for their infidelity to the covenant, which manifested itself in the worship of alien gods and the practice of anti-social vices.

The return from the exile and the reorganization of the Jewish society too could not lead them to live the ideals of their religion. After the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great, the Jewish society came under Hellenistic influence. The Seleucid kings were staunch hellenizers. Under their oppression, especially that of Antiochus Epiphanus, visionary movements began

to appear. The book of Daniel sees a mighty figure made up of gold, silver, brass, iron and clay, which was shattered by a mysterious stone (Dan 2: 31035). "This image is interpreted to mean that the various metals represent the successive rise and decline of world empires from the time of Neo-Babylonians to Alexander the Great and the age of Hellenism" (Lohse 1976: 56). Daniel sees the history of the rise and fall of all these empires as a unit and their ultimate destruction by God whose Kingdom will remain for ever (Dan 2:44). This marked the beginning of classical apocalypticism.

Apocalyptic literature is a crisis literature, born in the context of the oppression experienced by a subjugated society (Hanson 1976: 30). And apocalyptic movements always generate their symbolic universe in opposition to the symbolic universe of the dominant society. In the early stage opposition is expressed in the form of social protests aimed at changing the stance of the dominant society. But when the oppression is severe, three types of responses are foreseeable (Hanson 1976: 31): (a) The oppressed community can withdraw and establish a new society based on a symbolic utopian universe just as the Qumranites did. (b) The community can yield in the face of opposition and go underground leading to a sub-society expressing its identity in a symbolic sub-universe. Hasidim, early Christians and Jewish ghettos in the last century are some of the examples of it. (c) In the face of persecution, the community may choose to reply with violence, becoming a revolutionary community constructing

a symbolic counter-universe just as the Zealots did. All these groups believed in the end of the existing unjust and oppressive social order. But there are fundamental differences in their perceptions. The Qumranites were preparing themselves for the eschatological war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness as described in their 'war scroll' (1QM). It is the complete overthrow of the present evil world order which is under the power of Satan and the establishment of a new world order under the sovereignty of God, in which only the righteous people will have a place. On the other hand, Zealots countered violence with violence. They organized revolts against the occupying forces, refusing to accept their authority. "They cling to their liberty with great tenacity and will acknowledge none but God as their Lord and King" (Josephus XVIII: 23). The Romans considered them bandits and robbers indulging in all criminal activities, and so they treated them harshly. Since these Zealots "distinguished themselves by their zeal for law, they formed a growing body of followers among the inhabitants of Palestine" (Lohse 1976 :84). They also showed absolute intolerance towards the Gentiles, the people who followed other faiths. It is one of the ancient examples of committing acts of violence with the claim of divine sanction.

Search for Peace and Harmony

The originary vision of the Judaeo-Christian religious experience is for peace and harmony in society. The 'garden of Eden' and the 'land flowing with milk and honey' should be seen as the images of a violence-free,

harmonious and prosperous human social order.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is 11: 6-9).

Here the prophet gives a set of images depicting the safety and security in his vision of earthly human existence. "The most helpless and innocent will be at ease with those who were formerly the most rapacious and violent" (Oswalt 1986: 283). It is a complete turn-about of the present state of life which is encompassed by fears of insecurity, danger, natural calamity, war and terrorism. The author finds the leadership over the wild animals in a mere child, but not in an intelligent and powerful leader. "In innocence, simplicity, and faith lies the salvation of a globe grown old in sophistication, cynicism and violence" (Oswalt 1986: 284).

Isaiah is not alone in visualizing such a society. Several prophets and noticeably Micah had such a vision: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every

man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken” (Mic 4: 3b-4; and see also Is 2: 4). Both these prophets, probably depending on some earlier tradition, visualize a peaceful and harmonious future. “Weapons will be converted to tools of agriculture; people will use the scarce and valuable materials of earth to cultivate life instead of crafting death” (Mays 1976: 98). Mic 4:4 presents the tranquility and the sense of security that a peasant farmer will experience, devoid of any type of violence or terrorism. There will not be extortionists who prey upon the hard-earned livelihood of the poor peasants. “When a person decides that he is the final judge both of what his legitimate needs are and how these needs may be met, the weak are trampled and violence results” (Oswalt 1986:118). The prophets visualize that the messianic times will be totally free of such factors, rather all will live in peace and harmony.

New Testament Perspectives

Jesus’ proclamation of the rule of God fulfilled the Old Testament expectations, but in a new way. It is not by the overthrow of the surrounding mighty empires that the Kingdom of God will be established, but by bringing peace, justice, forgiveness, compassion and love into the lives of the people. Gospel calls for repentance as the first act (Mk 1:15). Repentance means to think, act and live in a different way. The sermon on the mount (Mt 5 – 7) is seen as a blueprint for true Christian behaviour in our society. Where the exhortations, “Do not resist one who is

evil” (Mt 5:39)² and the golden rule “whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Mt 7:12) are taken seriously and put into practice then there will be no violence or conflict in society. The New Testament vision of the human society revolves around this hope. The new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1) should not be seen as a totally other worldly reality, but as something that begins here and now.

Jesus by his life and teaching has shown a way for humanity which requires a transformation from within if it is to reach peace and harmony. It is the way to experience the rule of God which has already broken into history with the coming of Jesus. This transformation has to take place at two levels – personal and societal (Soares-Prabhu 1981: 605). At the personal level, there should be change of heart in every individual. This conversion does not mean opting for one set of ‘dogmas’ instead of another set of ‘dogmas’ or for one code of religious conduct in the place another code of religious conduct. It is the inner refinement of one’s character which leads to greater and greater compassion, mercy and love towards the other, which in turn will make him / her more acceptable to the Ultimate. At the same time, unjust and oppressive socio-political and economic structures too should be changed, not by violent overthrow, but by non-violent means. One sees an analogy between the approach of Jesus Christ and that of Mohandas K. Gandhi (Cassidy 1989: 80-82). Both advocated social patterns different from the existing ones. Both

refused to endorse the oppressive political order that prevailed in the society around them in varying degrees; but both opted for non-violence and both had deep faith in God. And the similarity almost ends with these. Jesus was rejected by the elites of his society and condemned to death by the political authority under the criminal law of Rome. The resurrection experience of his followers gives a new impetus to the movement that Jesus started, and thus becomes the foundation of the new creation. The first creation was corrupt in God's sight and was filled with violence (Gn 6:11). And the new creation is oriented towards a new heaven and a new earth.

Conclusion

Contrary to today's situation in which wealth 'buys' power, in ancient societies power brought wealth; but the latter is true even today in economically backward societies. "Being powerless meant being vulnerable to the greedy who prey on the weak" (Malina and

Rohrbaugh 1992: 49). Being poor means being subject to the denial of human rights and social honor, to the destruction of personal property and the source of livelihood, and to become the butt of persecution and public outrage. Therefore, the weak are more vulnerable to violence, whereas the agents of violence go scot-free. According to the Bible in such cases God confronts the perpetrators of violence, especially when the victims are innocent. This is seen in the cases of Abel, Uriah and Naboth in the biblical narratives. But the vision of the prophets like Isaiah and Micah and the New Testament is quite different. They visualize a society which lives the values of the Kingdom of God both individually and collectively. Ultimately, the biblical traditions find fulfilment in the one who lived in Palestine as an ordinary village preacher, died on the cross in Jerusalem, rose from the dead and will come again to find the total realization of the Kingdom of God which will be a violence-free society.

Endnotes

1. Notice its analogy with Jihad Movements of today and the Crusades of the past.
2. Leo Tolstoy's book *My Religion* is an exposition of this passage, which had a great influence on Mahatma Gandhi.

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