Sonja Ammann and Julia Rhyder

Editorial Introduction: Transforming Memories of Collective Violence. Key Methods and Future Directions

1. Approaching Ancient Narratives of Collective Violence

Collective violence is a dominant motif of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple traditions such as the books of the Maccabees and Judith. These texts contain a multitude of stories of violent episodes, many of which applaud or claim divine sanction for acts of collective violence. To some extent this preoccupation reflects the prevalence of violent exchanges that characterized life in antiquity. The history of ancient Israel and Judah was undoubtedly shaped by war and violence. However, many of the violent narratives found in the biblical traditions lack foundation in archeological or other historical evidence, or they engage in considerable literary embellishment when recounting historical events. Such texts, then, raise intriguing interpretive questions about the socio-historical purposes of such violent narratives and the complex ways in which they serve as a memorialization of the past.

The subject of collective violence has recently attracted a renewed scholarly interest in the fields of Classics, ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern studies. In the past five years alone, titles such as *Brill's Companion to Military Defeat in Ancient Mediterranean Society*,[1] *Texts and Violence in the Roman World*,[2] *Les massacres de la République romaine*,[3] and *The*

1 J. H. Clark and B. Turner eds., *Brill's Companion to Military Defeat in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Brill's Companion in Classical Studies: Warfare in the Ancient Mediterranean World 2; Leiden: Brill, 2017).

2 M. R. Gale and J. H. David Scourfield, eds. *Texts and Violence in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3 N. Barrandon, *Les massacres de la République romaine* (Paris: Fayard Éditions, 2018).

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Topography of Violence in the Greco-Roman World[4] have spoken to this growing scholarly fascination with collective violence as an historical and cultural phenomenon in diverse contexts of antiquity. Over the past decade, scholars of ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible have also considered the major impact of the violence of armed conflict and inner-group clashes on the history of ancient Israel and Judah and the place of the Hebrew Bible within that history.[5] Experiences of warfare and collective violence are now frequently cited as major drivers of the literary development of the Hebrew Bible, and its historical narratives in particular. Certain scholars even suggest that the Hebrew Bible as a whole should be described as "crisis literature"[6] that developed in reaction to historical experiences of military loss.

The present issue of *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* contributes to this burgeoning scholarly discussion by exploring the complex ways in which collective violence was memorialized in Judean narrative traditions from the Iron Age II to the turn of the common era.[7] The issue comprises five articles written by contributors to an international research project, "Transforming Memories of Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible," led by Sonja Ammann at the University of Basel.[8] The project analyzes the processes

4 W. Riess and G. G. Fagan, eds., *The Topography of Violence in the Greco-Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

5 See recently, e. g., D. M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); J. Schnocks, *Das Alte Testament und die Gewalt: Studien zu göttlicher und menschlicher Gewalt in alttestamentlichen Texten und ihren Rezeptionen* (WMANT 136; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014); Z. Zevit, "The Search for Violence in Israelite Culture and in the Bible," in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (ed. D. A. Bernat and J. Klawans; Recent Research in Biblical Studies 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 16–37; I. Fischer (ed.), *Macht – Gewalt – Krieg im Alten Testament: Gesellschaftliche Problematik und das Problem ihrer Repräsentation* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016); T. Römer, "La guerre dans la Bible Hébraïque, entre histoire et fiction," in *Guerre et Religion* (ed. J. Baechler; Paris: Hermann, 2016), 31–39; E. Bloch-Smith, "The Impact of Siege Warfare on Biblical Conceptualizations of YHWH," *JBL* 137 (2018): 19–28; J. L. Wright, *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

6 T. Römer, "The Hebrew Bible as Crisis Literature," in *Disaster and Relief Management* (ed. A. Berlejung; FAT 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 159–177.

7 The focus in this special issue on ancient Judeans should not be taken to imply that violent texts in the Bible did not hold cultural or religious significance for other ancient groups. The narratives of self-defense in the book of Numbers discussed by S. Germany, for instance, form part of a Pentateuch that was held in common by Judeans and Samarians already in the Persian period. However, our focus on memories of collective violence among ancient Judeans stems from a desire to combine the analysis of the Hebrew Bible with texts such as 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees and Philo, for which a specific association with Judeans is clearly apparent.

8 Swiss National Science Foundation project number 181219 (funded 2019–2023), https://theologie.unibas.ch/en/departments/hebrew-bible-and-semitic-philology/tmcv/.

by which narratives of collective violence evolved in response to historical events and the manner in which, as part of shared cultural memory, they contributed to identity formation and the legitimation of socio-political institutions in antiquity. The project especially addresses the complex issues that surround the *agency* of groups who experienced and perpetrated acts of violence in ancient Israel and Judah, with the aim of moving beyond simplistic dichotomies such as "victim" and "victor" when describing the literary representation of collective violence in the Bible and related traditions. In our introduction to this issue, we aim to offer a definition of collective violence, before turning to address the main theoretical issues that pertain to the memorializing of collective violence in Judean narrative traditions. Then, following a brief description of the contribution of each of the articles in this issue, we conclude by outlining the key areas of future research on collective violence that the present issue identifies.

2. Defining Collective Violence

The term "collective violence" of course begs definition. In its most simplistic form, it might be used to mean little more than violence committed by groups rather than individuals. But in many respects such a limited definition is inadequate. "Collective violence" has to be seen as being instrumental; that is, it implies agency and intent on the part of the group inflicting it, whether that intent be political, economic, social, or for purposes of identity formation. Roberta Senechal de la Roche thus has argued that collective violence, or "personal injury by a group,"[9] has a fundamentally social character that distinguishes it from individual violent actions, such as suicides, individual homicides, single-perpetrator rape, assault, robberies, or vandalism. Charles Tilly, for his part, explains in his seminal 2003 study *The Politics of Collective Violence,* that "[c]ollective violence is not simply individual aggression writ large. Social ties, structures, and processes significantly affect its character."[10]

Such violence can take many forms, ranging across a spectrum from sporadic, disorganized, and even spontaneous outbursts involving relatively small groups, to highly organized forms of collective violence, warfare, and

9 R. S. de la Roche, "Collective Violence as Social Control," *Sociological Forum* 11 (1996): 97–128, here 97.

10 C. Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

mass mobilization of populations. In the case of the ancient world, we can usefully employ the following typology:[11]

- *Violent rituals,* such as shaming ceremonies, public executions, gladiatorial games, and combat sports.[12]
- *Institutionally sanctioned and coordinated destruction,* such as intergroup warfare and mass killings.
- *Organized group violence that lacks official sanctioning or that reflects broken negotiation between a particular group and the governing power*, such as rebellions, terrorism, and riots.[13]
- *Opportunistic violence and situational clashes*, such as looting, gang rape, and brawls.

The boundaries between these various types of collective violence are of course permeable. Looting and rape, for instance, commonly accompanied the coordinated violence of ancient warfare, and rebellions escalated into more coordinated forms of violence. Any typology therefore can only offer a general framework for grouping the main manifestations of collective violence, not a set of bounded categories.

3. Remembering Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible

The social aspect of collective violence makes it an especially pertinent topic for the study of traditional literature such as the Hebrew Bible. Given that these texts are the product of collective endeavor over generations rather than the expression of an individual mind, they reveal little, if anything, about the motivations behind, or the consequences of, acts of individual aggression. They serve rather as a window into the agency being exercised by generations of scribes via textual representations of the social phenomenon of collective violence across diverse periods of Israelites and Judeans' shared history.

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11 The below typology shares affinities with that offered by Tilly, *Politics*, 12–16, especially in types 1 and 3. However, it offers a considerably simpler scheme to that of Tilly that aims at a more appropriate classification for the study of violence in the ancient world.

12 On ritual violence in the Hebrew Bible, see S. M. Olyan, *Ritual Violence in the Hebrew Bible: New Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On the violence of gladiatorial games and combat sports in Greece, Rome, and the ancient Near East, see M. B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

13 See further the essays in T. Howe and L. L. Brice, *Brill's Companion to Insurgency and Terrorism in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Brill's Companion in Classical Studies: Warfare in the Ancient Mediterranean World 1; Leiden: Brill, 2015).

As mentioned, many of the biblical narratives of past violence are literary fictions rather than reliable historical accounts. For example, scholars have long recognized the fictional character of historical novels such as Esther or Judith, generally dated to the Hellenistic period, given the historical improbability of the narrated events.[14] Researchers have also shown that archaeological evidence contradicts the violent description of the military conquest of the "land of Canaan" narrated in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.[15] The conquest narratives in Deuteronomy 1–3 and Joshua 6–11 are generally regarded as forming part of a mythic story of the origins of Israel, with the extermination of the Canaanites commanded in Deut 7:1–2; 20:17 and narrated in Josh 10:40; 11:16–21 never actually taking place. However, other violent traditions, such as the war accounts of 1 Samuel–2 Kings, are the subject of greater debate as to whether they merely embellish historical events or rather reflect substantial literary invention by their authors.

Why, then, did Judeans choose to represent the past in these ways and thereby cultivate such violent traditions, traditions which for many modern readers are a source of ethical indignation? As John J. Collins has commented, the fictional quality of such violent narratives "scarcely relieves the moral problem posed by the biblical texts, which portray Israel as an aggressive, invading force, impelled by divine commands."[16] One possible explanation is that many of the most violent texts of the Hebrew Bible were written or edited in the post-monarchic period; that is, at a time when Judeans lacked political sovereignty and military power, and hence the capacity to inflict collective violence on foreign enemies. The violent tone of the biblical texts might therefore be a form of "counterpresent"[17] memory – a narrative of the past that "proceeds from deficiencies experienced in the present, and conjures up memories of a past that generally takes the form of an heroic age."[18] According to this view, the biblical authors were

14 See B. Ego, *Ester* (BKAT 21; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 62–63; J.-D. Macchi, *Esther* (trans. C. Palmer; IECOT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 38–50. Cf. now the article by H. Bezold in this issue.

15 See among others I. Finkelstein and N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2002).

16 J. J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122 (2003): 3–21, here 10.

17 See G. Theißen, "Tradition und Entscheidung: Der Beitrag des biblischen Glaubens zum kulturellen Gedächtnis," in *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (ed. J. Assmann and T. Hölscher; Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 724; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 170–196, here 174–179 ("kontrapräsentische Erinnerung").

18 J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 62.

actually processing their experience as *victims* of collective violence when they imagined their foundational past as a time of violent triumph against various enemies; the Bible was thus written "from the vantage point of the vanquished."[19] This interpretation overlaps with exegetical approaches informed by hermeneutics of trauma, which stress the complex strategies by which Judeans used literary expression as a means of coping with catastrophic injuries in their collective history and to reclaim, from the experience of collective violence, a sense of agency.[20]

However, not all Judean narratives of collective violence can be explained as "counterpresent" stories from the perspective of the "vanquished." The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, for instance, describe a revolt which we know from historical evidence to have been successful. These texts, moreover, were most likely composed when the Hasmonean dynasty wielded considerable military agency in Judea. Indeed, certain scholars have suggested that 1 and 2 Maccabees might inverse the agency involved in this episode of violence. Instead of accurately reflecting the historical experiences of violence in Seleucid Judea, the narratives of the revolt may obscure the part that the Judeans played in provoking the violent clash with the Seleucid powers in favor of a memory of the revolt that construes Antiochus IV's acts as "unprovoked aggression and therefore pure wickedness."[21]

The case of 1 and 2 Maccabees raises the larger question of whether the dichotomy of "vanquished" and "vanquishers" can ever provide an appropriately rigorous analytical framework for the complexity of collective violence in antiquity (and beyond). Such a dichotomy is usually false, since the roles of victims and aggressors are rarely clear-cut. Individuals involved in war and conflict are rarely just the subject or object of violence. Those who suffer violence are also capable of inflicting it; and those who emerge from a conflict as victors will also have suffered losses. Indeed, even if Judeans suffered violence at the hands of imperial powers in the post-

19 J. L. Wright, "The Commemoration of Defeat and the Formation of a Nation in the Hebrew Bible," *Prooftexts* 29 (2009): 433–473, here 434.

20 See, e. g., Carr, *Holy Resilience*; R. Poser, *Das Ezechielbuch als Trauma-Literatur* (VTSup 154; Leiden: Brill, 2012); D. L. Smith-Christopher, "Trauma and the Old Testament: Some Problems and Prospects," in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions* (ed. E.-M. Becker *et al.*; Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 223–243. For a discussion of cultural trauma theory and its use in the study of collective violence in biblical narratives, see the article by S. Ammann in this volume.

21 S. Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochos IV* (HCS 56; Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 293.

monarchic era, they remained capable of perpetrating collective violence at a more local level. This violent potential can be seen in texts such as Ezra 9–10, where the language of the conquest tradition is used to justify the mass divorce and deportation of all foreign wives in Judah (see esp. Ezra 9:1–2).[22] While the historicity of this event is difficult to determine, this passage illustrates how violent language could be used not only to express fears of domination by menacing external powers, but also to exclude and disenfranchise certain groups *within* the community of Judah itself.

This all suggests that a more complex and multifaceted approach to collective violence in Judean traditions is required if we are to acknowledge the *multiple* functions that violent texts could serve over diverse time periods. While certain texts may indeed preserve a form of "counterpresent" memory, biblical scholars should also explore other ideological functions that texts of collective violence could serve in ancient communities, and the potential for such texts to be reactivated or transformed to serve different purposes at later times. This includes paying attention to how the narratives about past violent episodes could be used to express normative power relations or reinforce hegemonic structures, whether these be those related to royalty, priesthood, or other elite groups. To this end, scholars should enquire as to which institutions might have benefited from cultivating particular narratives of collective trauma, and the possible socio-political and economic benefits that could arise from shaping violent narratives in ancient Judean communities.

Moreover, the rhetorical strategies and ideological purposes of Judean narratives of collective violence should be positioned within comparative evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean and ancient Near East. The fictional quality of many Judean narratives of past collective violence, which can reverse historical situations of violence in both directions (victimological / triumphalist), is also apparent in narratives from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, Greece, and Egypt. For instance, Assyrian royal inscriptions are notorious for claiming victories where sources from their opponents and modern historical reconstructions point to the contrary.[23] On the other hand, a Hittite text reports a conquest and de-

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22 See further D. Janzen, *Witch-hunts, Purity, and Social Boundaries: The Expulsion of the Foreign Women in Ezra 9–10* (JSOTSup 350; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

23 A. K. Grayson, "Problematical Battles in Mesopotamian History," in *Studies in Honor of Benno Landsberger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, April 21, 1965* (ed. H. G. Güterbock and T. Jacobsen; Assyriological Studies 16; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); A. Laato, "Assyrian Propaganda and the Falsification of History in the Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib," *VT* 45 (1995): 198–226.

struction of the Hittite capital Ḫattuša that most likely did not take place.[24] Bringing Judean materials into dialogue with other violent traditions therefore has the potential to illuminate broader patterns in how violent episodes were narrated in antiquity, while also highlighting those aspects that might be specific to the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish traditions.[25]

4. The Articles in This Issue

This special issue begins with two discussions of the memorialization of attacks against the Judeans involving the mechanics of warfare. Sonja Ammann addresses the complex and multifaceted strategies by which the violent defeat of the Judean kingdom with the conquest of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonian army – an event that is widely considered catastrophic and potentially trauma-inducing – was narrativized and transmitted. In particular, she offers a detailed analysis of the differences between the accounts of the conquest in the Hebrew and Greek texts of Jeremiah 52 and 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30. Far from conveying a unified memory of the fall of Jerusalem, Ammann argues, these passages attest to the divergent ways in which this event was construed as a cultural trauma in the collective memory of ancient Judeans, as well as the complex scribal strategies used to eventually harmonize the accounts to form a more united picture of this violent event.

Stephen Germany then analyzes the diverse ways in which narratives of self-defense were employed to justify military aggression by Israelites and Judeans, and how this compares to the way self-defense is described in other ancient Near Eastern sources. In particular, Germany shows how differing religious frameworks led to alternative conceptualizations of military defense in Mesopotamian, Hittite, and biblical sources, as well as different conceptions of the collective "self" that required protection using violent means. Whereas in the Mesopotamian and Hittite texts the collective "self" is perceived as threatened by the loss of access to economic resources (such

24 See J. Klinger, "Krankheit und Krieg im Spannungsfeld zwischen mythischer und realer Katastrophe," in *Disaster and Relief Management* (ed. A. Berlejung; FAT 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 471–497, here 477.

25 This comparative dimension was the subject of an international webinar series organized as part of the above-mentioned research project, "Historical Narratives and Memoralization of Collective Violence in Antiquity" (September–December, 2020), the proceedings of which will be published as S. Ammann *et al, Collective Violence and Memory in the Ancient Mediterranean* (CHANE; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

as taxable land and human labor), Germany contends that biblical texts more often focus on a collective "self" that is threatened by illicit religious practices ascribed to the cultural "other."

The next article, by Helge Bezold, turns to the topic of mass killing, and in particular the description in Esther 8–10 of the ways in which the Judeans living under Persian domination reversed the threat of imperial violence against them. Bezold shows that the Esther narrative does not depict Judean elites or imperial power holders according to the dichotomy of "enemies" and "allies." Rather, the book of Esther uses the imagined threat of mass killing to model how Judean elites could exert their own political and military agency. Building on recent theories concerning the possible Hasmonean influence that can be detected in the book of Esther, Bezold explores the potential ideological purpose of the violent Esther narrative in the 2nd century B.C.E. In particular, he argues that it might have provided an ancient model of diplomatic relations with imperial agents that could legitimate the kind of power wielded by the Hasmonean dynasty.

The final two articles explore the mechanisms by which rebellions, riots, and battles were memorialized through both narrative accounts as well as new festivals that commemorated violent events. Julia Rhyder discusses the link between narratives of collective violence in 1 and 2 Maccabees and the establishment of the new festivals of Hanukkah and Nicanor's Day that commemorate the Maccabean revolt. She shows how the accounts in 1 and 2 Maccabees of the origins of these festivals reinforce the close connection between the violation of the temple cult and violence against the community in the memories of the Maccabean rebellion that the authors of the books promote. The annual celebration of Hanukkah and Nicanor's day is thereby positioned as a sophisticated form of mnemonic legitimation for the Hasmoneans' claim to exercise both military and cultic agency as kings and high priests in Judea.

The article by Sylvie Honigman compares several instances in which traumatic events were transposed into fictional story worlds and commemorative settings; namely, the Persian wars in Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E., Antiochus IV's storming of Jerusalem in 168 B.C.E., and the inter-ethnic clashes in Alexandria in 38 C.E. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including Herodotus' *Histories,* 1 and 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees, Philo's *In Flaccum*, the Masoretic Text of Esther, and Judith, Honigman shows how ancient attempts to make sense of these traumatic events required the communities that were affected by them to go beyond the abstract words of narrative accounts to institute new performances and festivals.

5. Directions for Future Research

The findings of these articles illustrate, first, the benefit of more complex interpretive models that move beyond simplistic dichotomies such as "victims" and "aggressors." The tendency of much previous biblical research on collective violence has been to focus either on texts that describe Judeans as vanquishing their enemies or on those that describe their collective suffering. In this issue, the contributors attempt to explore the *intertwining* of images of defeat and victory, vanquishing and being vanquished, within biblical and Second Temple traditions. In so doing, a more complex image of Judean agency emerges, one in which Judean traditions show a range of sophisticated responses to threats of violence from external enemies, as well as varied means of justifying their own use of violence within and outside their community.

Second, this issue affirms the value of combining social-scientific approaches with comparative and historical-critical methodologies in the study of collective violence. Theoretical insights from memory studies and cultural trauma research attune us to the larger socio-cultural purpose of texts that describe or legitimate violent events. However, such theories need to be anchored in detailed analysis of the specific historical contexts in which violent Judean traditions were composed and transmitted in order to avoid universalizing and anachronistic conclusions. The findings of text-, source-, and redaction criticism are particularly helpful in showing how memories of collective violence were transformed over time as texts underwent scribal adaptation to new historical contexts. Moreover, comparative evidence can help biblical scholars to better understand the violence in the Hebrew Bible as reflecting broader literary tropes and patterns in describing social conflict and warfare in the ancient world.

Finally, the articles in this issue illustrate the many benefits that come from bridging the study of collective violence in the biblical traditions with that of the broader Second Temple writings. Such an approach facilitates a *longue durée* perspective on how collective violence was memorialized by ancient Judeans from the monarchic era to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In addition, it enables the scholarly discussion to progress beyond the limited number of biblical texts that typically dominates exegetical imaginations to explore a much more diverse range of Judean traditions that deal with the theme of collective violence. In so doing, scholars stand to gain a stronger appreciation of the diverse ways in which collective violence was represented, interpreted, and legitimated in biblical narrative traditions and related ancient Jewish writings.