

# MUST THERE BE SCAPEGOATS?

Violence and Redemption  
in the Bible

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accursed and life-bringing. Sacred awe emanates from him or her. Around him or her arise taboo rituals and a new social order.

5. The sacrifices subsequently carry out in strictly controlled ritual limits the original collective transfer of violence onto a random scapegoat. Internal aggressions are thus diverted once again to the outside, and the community is saved from self-destruction.

## 1. VIOLENCE AMONG HUMAN BEINGS

The Old Testament writings talk about various forms of violence. They tell of individuals killing others, of Israel decimating the inhabitants of the land and destroying surrounding cities and kingdoms; they tell of nations attacking other nations. Aside from the questionable accuracy of such stories in a modern historical sense, it is evident that, at least on the level of the written text, violence plays a prominent role in the Old Testament books. They contain over *six hundred* passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others. In doing so, the authors do not hesitate to speak of unrestrained violence. Of Joshua, for instance, it is said that when he conquered the entire land with all its kings, "he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed" (Jos 10:40). Somewhat the same is said of David's general: "Joab and all Israel remained there six months, until he had cut off every male in Edom" (1 Kings 11:16). No other human activity or experience is mentioned as often, be it the world of work or trade, of family and sexuality, or that of knowledge and the experience of nature. For the biblical authors, the most impressive and distressing experience seems to have been that human beings war with and kill one another.

The actual import of violence, however, becomes obvious only when one shifts from a quantitative to a qualitative consideration. It is important then to observe the fundamental significance that individual texts and tradition attribute to this phenomenon.

The so-called priestly codex contains three important stories of sin: the great flood (Gen 6—9), the dispatching of scouts from

Behold, the name of the Lord comes from far,  
 burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke;  
 his lips are full of indignation,  
 and his tongue is like a devouring fire. (Isa 30:27)

In still more general form comes this threat to all the godless:

"Now I will arise," says the Lord,  
 "now I will lift myself up;  
 now I will be exalted.  
 You conceive chaff, you bring forth stubble;  
 your breath is a fire that will consume you.  
 And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,  
 like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire." (Isa 33:10-12)

We have not chosen isolated texts; we could add almost any number of further statements about Yahweh's violent anger. Wherever judgment is mentioned, Yahweh is portrayed as an aroused and passionate lord. The theme of God's bloody vengeance occurs in the Old Testament even more frequently than the problem of human violence. Approximately *one thousand passages* speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishments by death and destruction, and how like a consuming fire he passes judgment, takes revenge, and threatens annihilation.<sup>9</sup> He manifests his might and glory through warfare and holds court like a wrathful avenger. No other topic is as often mentioned as God's bloody works. A theology of Old Testament revelation that does not specifically deal with this grave and somber fact misses from the very start one of the most central questions and thus will hardly find the right perspective for a profound understanding of the revelation event.

The numerous texts about divine violence can be grouped into four categories according to their different formulations. We will see later if there are also factual differences behind this grouping.

In a small number of stories, God's wrath appears as a totally irrational reaction. On the occasion of David's transferring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, the following is reported to have happened:

And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled.