

FYS 16: Third Essay (Nov. 14, 2010)

The Covenant in Blood

>In the Book of Matthew how does the forming of the new community restage and transform the violence and destruction needed to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and form them into a nation?

Post-mortem on the assignment:

Writers did well overall with this conceptually steep assignment and made progress from the second essay. In some cases, bad stylistic habits crept back in (e.g., verbosity, weak verbs), but expect that to happen when you move up to tougher projects.

Everyone made good use of the draft-and-conference sequence. From these conversations and the essays I cannot isolate particular issues in writing that affect more than a few of you, other than the core issue of critical reading and careful argument building. I continue to hear strong testimony that the Writing Center helps mightily with those particular issues.

It took well planned organization to account for the range of violent acts – actual and prophesied – and acts of destruction (e.g., the dismantling of Israel), while supporting a larger view of how violence transforms itself from Exodus to Matthew. Below I present the outline (distilled by me) from one essay and the whole of a second essay.

Most writers devised a reasonable sequence of exposition: e.g., plagues → healing miracles; golden calf → purging the temple; immediate punishment → Day of Judgment; law code enforced by death → Day of Judgment; animal sacrifice → self-sacrifice of Jesus and his followers. I saw more variation in how well writers mapped their argument and signposted its progression.

As often, uncertainties about the argument frayed the prose. Some essays warmed up with plot summary before cautiously beginning to analyze on p. 2 or so. Some put up a barrage of quotation on already familiar and non-controversial points. Some writers who wrote more crisply on the second essay reverted to using four repetitive sentences where one would do.

Essay #1

The following essay used a phase-by-phase paralleling of the making of two covenants. The essay needs a stronger organizing idea about how violence is being transformed, but the following structure shows a clear way to sort out the details:

Introduction: "The old covenant has Moses as its mediator while the new covenant, which ushers in a new order, has Jesus as its mediator and sacrifice. The making of both covenants involves many events that take place in three levels: The events leading to the covenant and before it is made; those that happen when the covenant is being made; and what happens after the covenant has been sealed to the breakers of the covenant. In these three levels, we sometimes witness a lot of violence and destruction. The violence and destruction happen in two ways; death to human beings and the killing of animals as sacrifice. I shall examine both covenants in these aspects."

Preliminaries

Exodus: God inflicts plagues on the Egyptians to liberate the Israelites and prove his power; then the Israelites purify themselves, wash clothing, and refrain from touching mountain.

Matthew: Jesus performs healing miracles to liberate mankind from the darkness to the light and prove the power of God. John baptizes to purify, but this is not based on external ritual so much as change of heart.

Making the covenant:

Exodus: Animals are sacrificed; then the 3,000 idolatrous Israelites are purged, leading to the institution of the Levite priesthood in reward for their obedience. Only the holy can approach God.

Matthew: Jesus is sacrificed in place of an animal, for redemption. The temple is symbolically destroyed. Equivalent to the 3,000 idolators, the Pharisees are warned, but this is prophesied not actual violence. Those outside the covenant are treated more as the blind to be taught than criminals to be punished.

Afterward:

Exodus: In the Mosaic Code, the payment for violence and for deserting God is violence.

Matthew: Judgment is deferred to the Day of Judgment.

Essay #2

The following essay, in its entirety, provides more evidence than is needed and therefore goes on for 2,000 words, but manages to cover the topic broadly and insightfully. The first paragraph surveys the phenomena to be explained and summarizes the thesis. Subsequent paragraphs maintain the close back-and-forth contrast between Exodus and Matthew. The conclusion draws together the thesis in more detail.

“Destruction with Destruction to Destroy”¹

While generally seen as a negative concept, violence is in fact, somewhat paradoxically, used as a means for peace and resolution worldwide; this usage is, for example, the entire conception of war. Indeed, the Bible, as a definitive literary and religious work, deals with uses of violence throughout its various books, though in varied and changing ways. In Exodus, violence is a prevalent aspect of the covenant God makes with the Israelites: the Egyptians are punished with plagues and finally the death of the first-borns to ensure the Israelites’ freedom; the law given to Moses states that punishment for breaking the law is death; and animal sacrifice brings forgiveness of sins. In Matthew, these destructive aspects are transformed and magnified: the Second Coming involves the destruction of the entire world; the new law, while emphasizing faith and love, involves a prevention of violence to save from later damnation greater than simply death; and Jesus’ sacrifice carries a greater significance because he is the Son of God dying a terrible death of his own choice. Then Jesus requires his followers to suffer as he suffered; his sacrifice and the oppression of his followers together bring an ultimate deliverance for mankind. Therefore the violence involved in the covenant of Exodus is increased in Matthew to ultimately end in a greater, fuller, and more encompassing deliverance.

The first step towards the Israelites’ covenant with God is freedom from their slavery in Egypt, and destruction is necessary for this exodus to occur; in Matthew, it is the world that is destroyed in the Day of Judgment and the Second Coming, though the events are merely foreshadowed and not played out. The first nine plagues are fraught with violent and destructive images: the bloody river, the locusts eating crops, the destructive hail, the dead livestock, the darkness, the boils (Exodus 8-10). As the tenth plague, “the LORD [kills] the first-born son of every Egyptian family, from the son of the king to the son of every prisoner in jail. He also [kills] the first-born male of every animal that belonged to the Egyptians” (Exodus 12: 29-30). The killing of the first-born

recalls the sacrifice of Isaac. However, the Egyptian first-borns are not spared as Isaac was, implying an exclusivity of the Israelites as the nation of God. Finally, “the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived” (Exodus 14:27-28). In Matthew, Jesus repeatedly warns of the Second Coming and the violence that will occur, affecting everyone and not merely one group. Jesus describes the end of the world, saying that “immediately after the oppression of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew). The “darkened” sun recalls the plague of darkness; as with the plagues, a visible change in nature will occur. Similarly, “there will be famines, plagues, and earthquakes in various places” (Matthew 24:7). Whereas the destruction of the Egyptians brings freedom to the Israelites, allowing them to form a unified nation, the Second Coming will cause “nation [to] rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matthew 24:7). Furthermore, Jesus proclaims clearly that “the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12).

Once they are in the desert, God gives the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, and states death is the punishment for breaking it. In Matthew Jesus emphasizes the new law as one in which faith and love are crucial in following law—violence is here a method of prevention for later damnation. The law in Exodus states that “if you work on the Sabbath, you will no longer be part of my people, and you will be put to death” (Exodus 31:14). God also tells Moses to “warn the people that they are forbidden to touch any part of the mountain. Anyone who does will be put to death” (Exodus 19:12). God emphasizes strict obedience to the law and uses violence to enforce this obedience: when the Israelites make a golden calf to worship, God punishes them by “[commanding the Levites] to strap on [their] swords and go through the camp, killing [their] relatives, [their] friends, and [their] neighbors.’ The men of the Levi tribe [follow] his orders, and that day they [kill] about three thousand men” (Exodus 32:27-28). This command demands violence even among the Israelites themselves, shown in “relatives” and “friends.” Jesus, on the other hand, says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and most important commandment. The second most important commandment...is, ‘Love others as much as you love yourself.’ All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:38-40). Here Jesus emphasizes love for God and for others as the most important commandment, adding “with all your heart, soul, and mind” to show its honesty and vigor, while still asserting its validity by connecting it to “the Law of Moses.” However, Jesus does mention violence, saying, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into

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life maimed or crippled, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire" (Matthew 18: 8). Here violence is a means for prevention of even greater and more permanent ("eternal") destruction later. While the law is now connected to heartfelt and not forced obedience, the punishment is actually superior, and so a lesser violence may be necessary to prevent it. Thus the Law of Exodus uses violence as punishment, making violence not merely a measure for freeing the Israelites but one for enforcing the covenant as well, while Jesus emphasizes the heartfelt and loving nature in living out the law, but uses violence to deter greater punishment later.

Despite all the transformations of old covenant violence in Matthew, Jesus' death simultaneously resembles and replaces Exodus' animal sacrifice because he is the mediator of the new covenant, and his death perpetuates the covenant. Before He kills the first-borns of Egypt, the Lord commands the Israelites to kill a lamb; "the animals you choose must be year-old males without defect...then slaughter them at twilight. Then...take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where [you] eat the lambs" (Exodus 12: 5-7). This killing of the pure ("without defect") lamb marks the instatement of Passover. Later, God gives specific and extensive instructions on animal sacrifice: "Kill the bull near my altar in front of the tent. Use a finger to smear some of its blood on each of the four corners of the altar and pour out the rest of the blood on the ground next to the altar. ...Kill the ram and splatter its blood against all four sides of the altar" (Exodus 29: 11-16). Again, animal sacrifice and the use of its blood in the altar is an important aspect of the covenant. Sacrifice is also meant to bring forgiveness of sins: "Sacrifice a bull each day as a sin offering to make atonement" (Exodus 29: 36). Jesus' crucifixion bears great resemblance to the animal sacrifice of Exodus, where other aspects of the new covenant don't: when Pilate tells the people to take responsibility for Jesus' death, "all the people [answer], 'his blood is on us and on our children'" (Matthew 27: 25). This statement implies that the Israelites are in a sense killing him, just as they kill the lamb or bull. Pilate asks, "What crime has he committed?" (Matthew 27:23) Jesus is faultless, just as the lamb was "without defect." Before his crucifixion, which is the highest death sentence of the time, he is hurt even further: he is "flogged" (27: 26), "spit on," "struck" (27:30), and crowned with thorns (27: 29). Jesus says, "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). His sacrifice is meant to bring forgiveness of sins and their consequences (death), just as the sacrifice of the bull atones for sins and the lamb protects the Israelites from death. However, Jesus' suffering is greater than that of a mere animal—not simply because he is the only Son of God, but he suffers extensively, as crucifixion is a slow, painful death. Even upon his death, "the veil of the temple [is] torn in two from the top to the bottom. The earth [quakes] and the rocks [are] split" (Matthew 27:51), a kind of destruction not seen

associated with animal sacrifice. Therefore Jesus' sacrifice for mankind on the cross is a direct replacement of Exodus's animal sacrifice, as he must die for the covenant to be effective, but his suffering is greater because a sinless Son of God willingly chooses an excruciating death.

Jesus' sacrifice perpetuates the new covenant, but his followers are required to suffer in the same way that he did, together ensuring deliverance for mankind and finally creating a new community both on earth and in the Kingdom of Heaven. At the Last Supper, Jesus "[gives bread] to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he [takes] a cup [and] he [gives] it to them, saying, 'Drink from it... This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'" (Matthew 26:26-29). In eating his body and drinking his blood, the disciples internalize Jesus' suffering, but also the promise of the covenant, as it is the "blood of the covenant." In stating that he will "drink it with you in my Father's kingdom," Jesus assures them that despite their suffering, they will reach heaven. As he says later, "He who doesn't take his cross and follow after me, isn't worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39). The image of "taking up his cross" mirrors that of drinking his blood, as both involve taking on Jesus' own suffering. The promise of "finding [one's] life" is once again given as a reward for suffering. All throughout Matthew, Jesus repeatedly warns his followers of the violence they will endure, but also promises them deliverance: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when people... persecute you... for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:10-12). Again, Jesus tells his followers that "they will deliver you up to oppression, and will kill you. You will be hated by all of the nations for my name's sake... But he who endures to the end, the same will be saved" (Matthew 24:9-13). Thus through the internalization of Jesus' own suffering, his followers may finally gain deliverance, completing the covenant's promise.

Therefore the gospel of Matthew reveals greater forms of violence and destruction in the new covenant than those portrayed in the covenant of Exodus, but also concludes with an equally greater liberation and reward for all mankind, and not merely the Israelites. The destruction of the Egyptians becomes the destruction of the entire earth in the Second Coming; the old law punishes disobedience with death and the new law involves violence to prevent a more terrible fate than death later; Jesus' sacrifice consists of the sinless Son of God readily accepting a dreadful death, and his followers suffer along with him. Ultimately, however, the reward is eternal life in the

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Kingdom of Heaven for all who follow Jesus. Matthew in a sense destroys the concept of destruction in Exodus to put in its place a suffering that brings blessing, a sacrifice that brings salvation, and a death that brings life, introducing the great paradoxes of the Christian faith: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18), and because of his paradoxical sacrifice, "when we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly" (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). So while some may believe that violence brings more violence, Jesus would have to disagree...although he would certainly say, "humans, don't try this at home."