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**BRIAN BRITT, DEATH, SOCIAL CONFLICT, AND
THE BARLEY HARVEST IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

DEATH, SOCIAL CONFLICT, AND THE BARLEY HARVEST IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The stereotype of the Hebrew Bible as violent and harsh persists in churches and popular opinion.¹ The propitiation of an angry and jealous God, inscrutable misery, and harsh systems of justice (“an eye for an eye”) are all elements of this stereotype. There is no denying that the Hebrew Bible describes and prescribes a range of violent actions, but the stereotype often reads texts at face value, overlooking literary, religious, and historical context. Since most biblical narratives were written long after the events they claim to relate, often by many hands and over many centuries, biblical accounts of death and violence often represent the difference between past and present by narrative conventions. The approach

¹ A recent newspaper story about hockey, for example, begins as follows: “Hockey has always been the most Homeric and Old Testament-like of sports--the only one with its own code of vengeance and retribution, where eye-for-eye justice is meted out by large, short-tempered men hired expressly for that purpose,” (McGrath).

I take here considers biblical texts primarily as *representations* of events rather than as transparent *records* of events.² Such representations have real historical and social purposes, however, and in this essay I show how several biblical texts illustrate René Girard's insight that religious violence can address social conflicts.

The phrase “barley harvest” (קציר שערים) appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible: 2 Sam. 21:9-10 and Ruth 1:22.³ It also figures in the Greek apocryphal book of Judith (8:2). All three instances of the phrase occur in the context of scarcity (of food or water), death, and social conflict. Read on their own, the stories of death around the barley harvest may give the impression of being

² This is not to suggest that biblical texts can be studied exactly like single-author works of literature. Rather, like the work of such scholars as Michael Fishbane, J. Cheryl Exum, and Robert Alter, and in some ways like Jewish midrash, this approach attends to the language, structure, and thematic patterns of the text. Social scientific approaches in the tradition of Weber, Durkheim, and others, by contrast, tend to focus mainly on how the text reveals social and cultural realities. My criticism of such work is a tendency to read references to sacrifice and violence as transparent records of events. The task is to combine literary and social scientific approaches without reducing one to the other. Even those who recognize the symbolic nature of biblical sacrifice, such as Jonathan Klawans, make sacrifice, rather than texts about it, their primary object of study (149-55). In an age when the relationship between texts and their contexts has never been more deeply questioned, many studies of violence and sacrifice continue to treat texts about sacrifice as straightforward records of primitive rites. Even Girard, a scholar of literature, makes no clear distinction between reports of sacrifice in ancient Greek tragedy and modern ethnographies (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 39-67 et passim. See also Girard, *Things Hidden Since The Formation of the World*, 103-4, e.g., where Girard's awareness of symbol and signification extends to sacrifice and the victim rather than to the production of texts depicting sacrifice).

³ In the longer phrase בימי קציר בראשנים תחלת קציר שערים in 2 Sam. 21:9, and מתחלת קציר in 2 Sam. 21:10, and בתחלת קציר שערים in Ruth 1:22. The fact has been noted in Bernard Gosse, “Le Livre de Ruth et ses liens avec II Samuel 21,1-14,” *ZAW* 108 (1996) 430-33. Gosse observes that the phrase “barley harvest” provides narrative context and transition in both texts and concentrates on the social implications of the parallel for Ruth's social theology. He does not, however, discuss the issue of sacrifice.

straightforward historical narratives. Each of these episodes, however, marks an important transition (e.g., end or beginning) in its narrative context.⁴ Each case of death is a singular or special occasion that also refers to seasonal tradition.⁵ As such, each text is at least as much a representation as a record of past events. Few scholars or general readers have linked the three episodes: a violent episode of David's reign in the Deuteronomistic History; the prologue to a literary masterpiece about a Moabite woman of skill and virtue; and a story of an Israelite woman whose beauty and skill defeat the Assyrian enemy. This essay claims that Ruth 1, 2 Sam. 21, and Judith combine the seasonal occurrence of the barley harvest with violence and death in order to depict and address social conflicts. Each of these stories moves from a state of disequilibrium, marked by death and violence, toward a new equilibrium in which famine and conflict are resolved. In each text, women (Naomi, Ruth, Rizpah, and Judith) play key roles in the resolution of these conflicts.

Since the publication of Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, biblical scholars have increasingly explored the central roles of violence in traditions (Lohfink, McKenna). Is the religion of ancient Israel essentially violent? According to Girard, religion serves primarily to control and limit social violence. By channeling violence in this way, religion, through sacrifice, serves "to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric" (*Violence and the Sacred*

⁴ Gosse, "Le Livre de Ruth" 431-32. More theoretical works include Schenker, McKenna, and Lohfink.

⁵ De Vaux tries to distinguish routine from extraordinary narratives of violence: "But the story [of Jephthah] is told as a quite extraordinary and shocking incident: so, too, was the action of the king of Moab, when he immolated his only son upon the rampart of his capital while it was being invested by the Israelites (2 K 3:27)" 442.

8).⁶ The biblical texts discussed here seek this harmony through literary rather than literalist means. The mention of barley harvest and the killing of Saul's "sons" to end the famine in 2 Sam. 21 may suggest sacrifice as propitiation, but the story, like Ruth 1 and Judith 8, concerns social conflict in the context of the barley harvest, famine, and death. The three texts are carefully-written textual representations in a literary tradition, not merely straightforward records of events. The deaths reported in Ruth 1 are no more or less "real" than those in 2 Sam. 21. Nor is the killing in 2 Sam. 21 any less story-like or literary than the deaths in Judith and Ruth 1.

2. SECOND SAMUEL 21

2.1 Sacrifice as Motif

According to Arvid Kapelrud, the killing of Saul's sons and grandsons in 2 Sam. 21 demonstrates an ancient pattern linking the king to fertility. Citing 2 Kgs. 3 and 16, Pss. 15 and 72, and studies of ancient Near Eastern culture, Kapelrud argues that the killing of Saul's descendants "took place at no accidental point of time. They were killed in the first days of the barley harvest, in the middle of April, and they were lying exposed till the rain came, in October-November. . . The corpses had to remain exposed till the rain came, then their task was fulfilled" (301). According to Roland de Vaux, the "Gibeonites took their revenge in the form of a fertility rite (as a passage in the poems of Ras Shamra shows)" (491).

⁶ A different theory of sacrifice, set forth by Georges Bataille, concentrates less on the deity and social relations than the object of sacrifice itself, which is removed from the world of things by sacrifice. For Bataille, sacrifice helps bring about the restoration of lost intimacy, 43-44. The theme of restored intimacy will appear in Ruth and 2 Sam. 21.

Kapelrud's account fits the sacrifice theory of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss more closely than that of Girard: the sacrifice of Saul's sons brings the sacrificers (Gibeonites, but by implication, David and Israel) closer to the God of Israel. The sacrifice is related to a natural cycle, and it seems to propitiate the deity in a way that yields fertility. Like Hubert and Mauss, Kapelrud focuses on how sacrifice relates to the sacred.⁷ How convincing is Kapelrud's view of 2 Sam. 21 as a sacrifice in the context of an agricultural fertility tradition? I propose that agricultural propitiation appears more as literary motif than ritual practice in this text, and that a more convincing case can be made that the narrative of these deaths addresses social conflict.

Cultic and historiographic phenomena are not immediately or necessarily available on the surface of biblical (and other) texts. Corroborating physical and documentary evidence is very difficult to produce. Even more to the point, the high level of literary sophistication in biblical narrative, which includes a high incidence of inner-biblical exegesis, allusion, folklore, legend, pious glosses, and creative invention, calls into question the whole project of reading biblical narrative as a mere chronicle of historical events and everyday practices. Few issues in biblical tradition are more contested than the various forms and reports of sacrifice in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East.⁸

⁷ See also Hanson. Kapelrud allows that David's action also strengthens his social position, but he characterizes this as a political maneuver rather than a basic function of sacrifice (as Girard would) (Kapelrud, 301).

⁸ The list of important works on Israelite sacrifice is too long to include here. See the recent summary of research in Klawans, esp. 133-39. Jacob Milgrom's three-volume commentary on Leviticus offers a strong survey and analysis of priestly sacrifice traditions. See also Anderson and de Vaux, 415-32 and 447-56.

2.2 Death and Social Conflict

David's permission to kill Saul's descendents may appear to be a non-Israelite propitiation, but it falls within the parameters of the religious pact made with the Gibeonites in Josh. 9. According to 2 Sam. 21, the famine is a punishment for Saul's unwarranted killing of Gibeonites, a protected people. Even though there is no other report of this massacre, David appears prudent and pious in his efforts to overcome the famine. When God tells him about the bloodguilt against the house of Saul because of his unwarranted slaughter of the Gibeonites, David approaches the Gibeonites, who demand seven sons and grandsons of Saul to be impaled "before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord" (2 Sam. 21:6). The plan is carried out "at the beginning of barley harvest" (v. 9). Once the bones of the seven sons and grandsons are buried, along with those of Saul and Jonathan, the famine is lifted (vv. 10-14). Commentators have pointed out that David's actions eliminate not only the plague but also his remaining opponents in Saul's family (McCarter 445-6). The justification for David's action, bloodguilt, appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, including Shimei's charge that David bears bloodguilt for killing Saul (2 Sam. 16:8).⁹ Is it a human sacrifice? Other sanctioned cases of human sacrifice or near-sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible include Gen. 22 and 2 Kgs. 3:27. But despite the thematic similarity between 2 Sam. 21 and these cases, the linguistic and structural relationship with Ruth 1, including the elements of barley harvest, famine, death, and narrative transition, is arguably closer, though its resemblance is more literary than cultic or historiographic.

⁹ See also Joab's guilt after the succession struggle: 1 Kgs. 2:28 ff.; and the bloodguilt ceremony for unburied corpses, which involves a heifer sacrifice and cleansing by the priests: Deut. 21.

Is there any connection between sacrifice, death, and harvest? Are the deaths in 2 Sam. 21 cases of what Hubert and Mauss describe as those forms of sacrifice that are “repeated periodically because the rhythm of nature demands this regular recurrence” (89)? The most prominent form of human sacrifice mentioned in biblical tradition, the Molek cult, does not seem to be routine or related to the harvest. According to George Heider, the cult of Molek, while it may have been practiced in Israel until the reform of Josiah, specifically included the elements of fire, and the sacrifice of children. By this definition, not even the Moabite sacrifice in 2 Kgs. 3:27 would count decisively as a case of Molek sacrifice, much less the killings in 2 Sam. 21. The report that King Manasseh “made his son pass through fire” (2 Kgs. 21:6) is more probably a case of Molek sacrifice, but it makes no reference to an agricultural cycle (Heider 280-81, Cogan and Tadmor 47-48 n. 27). Meshah’s sacrifice of his son is an act of propitiation rather than a seasonal ritual, and, as Heider argues, it is not part of the Molek tradition (see Day 31). Even if “barley harvest” refers to the festival of first fruits, which would include an offering of grain (see below), there is no evidence that the term implies human sacrifice. Far from the images of fertility sacrifice one finds in literature about ancient traditions and modern fictions like Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” the deaths in 2 Sam. 21 lack overt chthonic and agricultural elements. At the same time, the reference to the sacrifice festival when grain offerings are made to the God of Israel may suggest a faint allusion to propitiation.

In 2 Sam. 21, David facilitates the killing of Gibeonites in order to fend off a famine. Like other biblical and ancient stories of plague or famine, this episode makes the king responsible for overcoming the catastrophe through religious or sacrificial means.

Nothing of this kind occurs in Ruth, but the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion during a time of famine also lead to the restoration of order and well-being. While there is no overt sacrifice in Ruth 1, the narrator “kills off” the father and two sons, so to speak, in order to obtain the desired outcome; they are “sacrificed” to the story, or for the story. Like 2 Sam. 21, Ruth 1 launches a story with a famine and follows the famine with deaths that lead to a resolution of the famine. In both stories, a mother’s grief for her sons (Naomi and Rizpah) moves the story toward its resolution.¹⁰ Both scenes conclude with the narrative transition that describes the time of the barley harvest (Gosse, “Subversion” 45). The structural and thematic resemblance between the two texts suggests that literary and narrative artifice play an important and heretofore overlooked role in their composition.

3. RUTH 1

The pattern of famine, death, barley harvest, and relief from famine in 2 Sam. 21 also appears in the book of Ruth. Famine initiates the book, just as it does in 2 Sam. 21:1-14. In both cases, famine *motivates* what comes next: David’s inquiry and Elimelech’s family sojourn in Moab. The consequent deaths in 2 Sam. 21 are carried out by David and the Gibeonites to alleviate the famine (and avenge Saul’s bloodguilt). The deaths of the three husbands in Ruth do not alleviate famine, but they immediately precede its end: the death of Elimelech is reported in v. 3; the two sons die (ten years later) in v. 5; and the famine then ends and Naomi decides to return in v. 6.

¹⁰ The role of the grieving mothers and family in the stories links sacrifice to the status of women, a central concern in Jay, who argues that some sacrifice traditions perform the function of overcoming matrilineal group structures.

Not only are the deaths of the three men associated with the end of famine; they are also necessary to carry the story forward, along with its main points about the virtue of “steadfast love” (אֲדָרָה), divine action in human affairs, and the lineage (partly Moabite!) of David. When the famine ends in both stories, it happens fittingly though paradoxically at the time of the barley harvest. This temporal marker ends the narrative sequence and forms a transition to the next scene. As Vincent Tollers argues, the narrator in Ruth controls the action and closely follows Naomi’s point of view (252-9). On this interpretation, the narrator not only tells the story but also helps to shape it. Through structuralist analysis, Tollers demonstrates how the action of the story brings together the skillful power of Naomi with the “will of God worked out in history” (258). With Tollers, it is possible to understand the narrator of Ruth as an *agent* of the story, responsible in important ways for what happens, including such events as famine, death, and chance meetings. Just as modern playwrights and screen writers may speak about getting certain characters “out of the way” or “killing them off,” so to speak, the narrator in Ruth must eliminate the three Ephrathite men, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, in order for the story to proceed. The concept is close to what J. Cheryl Exum describes as “literary murder.” In the case of Saul’s daughter Michal, Exum notes (2 Sam. 6), “the murder does not take place in the story, but rather by means of the story” (Exum, 16-17). A similar notion is the “narrative mortality” developed by Walter B. Crouch (Crouch). By mixing famine and death with the time of the barley harvest, the narrator creates the dramatic tension and symbolic structure necessary for a story in which a Moabite woman will become the heroic ancestor of David.

4. JUDITH AND THE BARLEY HARVEST

Like Ruth, Judith is a heroine whose bold action brings success to her people as well as to herself. Also like Ruth, she is a widow: “Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest” [θερισμου κριθου; the same phrase used in the Septuagint Ruth 1:22 and 2 Sam. 21:9]. For as he stood overseeing those who were binding sheaves in the field, he was overcome by the burning heat, and took to his bed and died in his town Bethulia” (8:2-3, NRSV). As in Ruth and 2 Sam. 21, the barley harvest in Judith is a time of death and crisis (a water shortage). Just as Ruth’s widowhood sets the story in motion, the death of Manasseh allows the widowed Judith to pursue Holofernes. Like Ruth (and Esther), Judith will approach Holofernes in the role as a submissive woman (Esler). Although she will kill rather than marry him, Judith still takes the position of a vulnerable supplicant asking a powerful man for help and protection. As if to highlight the parallel (and contrast), the narrator puts Ruth’s famous words into the mouth of Holofernes: “[Y]our God shall be my God” (11:23).

Piety and beauty are given as Judith’s most distinguishing attributes, and both figure in her seduction and beheading of the Assyrian general Holofernes. But it is mainly Judith’s religious cunning that brings her triumph. She suggests that violating dietary laws will bring the wrath of God on her own people, and she uses prayer as a stratagem to guarantee her escape from the scene of the killing. The violation in question, she says, is that the people are about to eat religiously-forbidden foods, including the “first fruits

of the grain” (11:13) that traditionally correspond to the barley harvest.

Of course, the dietary laws alone are considered less important in Judith than pious wisdom. In her song of praise, Judith makes the point: “For every sacrifice as a fragrant offering is a small thing, and the fat of all whole burnt offerings to you is a very little thing; but whoever fears the Lord is great forever” (16:16). Nevertheless, Judith and the people carefully reinstate the practices of sacrifice when they return to Jerusalem (16:18-19). In one of the most extraordinary killings in biblical tradition, the book of Judith relates the extremes of war and death to the orderly domain of the barley harvest, ritual sacrifice, and feasts. In war, the most extreme form of social conflict, the death of Judith’s husband and her killing of Holofernes bring about the most desirable outcome: victory, a victory framed by two deaths: the first of Judith’s husband during the barley harvest, and the second of Holofernes. The embodiment of great piety and courage combined, Judith singlehandedly brings about a resolution to the disequilibrium of war and drought.

5. THE BARLEY HARVEST IN CONTEXT

5.1 First Fruits

It is difficult to establish exactly what the associations of the barley harvest are. Biblical accounts of festivals vary, and explaining their interrelationships raises questions of their relative dates. The festival of the first fruits harvest is one of three major feasts listed in Exod. 23:14-17 (usually considered E), the other two being the feast of the *massot* and the feast of ingathering. A slight variation appears in Exod. 34:22 (usually considered J), which refers to our

feast as the “festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest.” Similarly Deut. 16:9-10 refers to a “festival of weeks” without using the term “harvest” (קציר). Leviticus 23, however, specifies a grain offering of first fruits using the term for “harvest” (ראשית קצירכם), to take place before the feast of weeks, at which point another grain offering (presumably of wheat rather than barley) will take place (vv. 15-21). The law of gleaning, so important to the plot of Ruth, appears immediately after this passage, in Lev. 23:22. According to this law, which also uses the term “harvest,” some grain must be left unharvested so that the poor and aliens may glean (see also Lev. 19:9-10 and Deut. 24:19, which also allows specifies that widows may glean).

The festival of harvest of first fruits, mentioned in Exod. 23:16 and Lev. 23:9-14, was evidently a late spring festival that marked the barley harvest. According to H.L. Ginsberg, the Deuteronomistic reforms of the seventh century led to changes in the calendar to accommodate the centralization of the cult. One of these changes, he suggests, was to replace the barley harvest festival with the festival of weeks.¹¹ Regardless of when and how the tradition changed, it is clear that the barley harvest festival was an ancient, pre-Deuteronomistic tradition with a clear agricultural basis. There are also later references to the tradition, in 2 Kgs. 4:42-44, e.g., where Elisha feeds a crowd of 100 with one man’s first fruits offering. In other words, the barley or first fruits harvest festival appears to be a familiar sacrificial tradition even in the Deuteronomistic history. The barley harvest in 2 Sam. 21, Ruth 1, and Judith 8 thus refers or at least alludes to an ancient agricultural festival. The barley harvest may have been known to the authors

¹¹ H.S. Ginsberg, 55-83. See also de Vaux, 484-494.

of 2 Samuel and Ruth as an early and important agricultural festival that would have been practiced in the days of Ruth and David.

The possible associations of the barley harvest must not be overstated. Ancient Israel was an agricultural society, its calendar was shaped by agriculture, and so the mention of a harvest was on one level simply a useful temporal marker (Propp 383-90). (See Judg. 15:1, e.g.: “After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest...” See also 2 Sam. 23:13.) Indeed, as the position of the phrases on the barley harvest attest, they do play an important role in placing the narrative in agricultural time and setting the narratives off from other episodes. There is, however, no suggestion in the biblical texts that the first fruits festival is linked to the sacrifice of kings to propitiate the deity. The term “harvest” does appear once to describe divine punishment against Judah (Hos. 6:11), but in most cases it simply refers to the harvest. Nevertheless, the fact that the barley harvest was the occasion for one of the three pilgrimage festivals in ancient Israel makes the phrase allusive; a reference to the harvest is also a reference to the festival. In the context of famine especially, mentioning the barley harvest is poignant if not ironic, for how can there be a harvest during a famine?

5.2 Barley Harvest in Biblical Narratives

For Ruth, the barley harvest represents an essential plot element, since it enables the main character, who is a widow, an alien, and (presumably) poor, to go to the fields under the law of gleaning. The harvest festival itself is not central to the plot of Ruth, but it is evoked by the mention of the barley harvest. Ruth contrasts famine and bounty precisely through the barley harvest; the book’s elaborate references to biblical traditions of intermarriage (Ezra 9-10), treatment of widows and aliens (Deut. 24), gleaning (Lev. 19

and 23, Deut. 24), levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10), covenant language (“steadfast love”), and idealized womanhood (the “woman of substance” of Prov 31:10 and Ruth 3:11) all emerge in the context of the barley harvest. Ruth, like Judith, alludes to sacrifice by its prominent placement of the barley harvest.

2 Sam. 21:9 deals more overtly with sacrifice, yet the barley harvest seems mainly to mark the time at which the story occurs; there is no explicit connection to the harvest or the festival on which it is based. Like the famine and deaths in Ruth 1, the famine and deaths of 2 Sam. 21 stand against the background of a harvest and (at least by allusion) its attendant festival. For the reader who knows the religious festival of the barley harvest, the expiatory (if not propitiatory) killing of Saul’s descendents to stop a famine would certainly *evoke* an association between the harvest sacrifice and the bloodguilt killings. At the same time, such an association would not be mistaken for an equation--there is a vast difference between the killings in 2 Sam. 21 and the grain sacrifices of the first fruits festival. In this sense, Kapelrud’s attempt to link the killings to a fertility rite is overstated. As a literary composition, the text makes a subtle connection between the harvest sacrifice and the killing in 2 Sam. 21 without equating them.

6. DEATH AND SOCIAL CONFLICT: RESTORING EQUILIBRIUM

6.1 Social Conflicts Addressed

Crucial to 2 Sam. 21 is sense of balance or proportionality: one Israelite king (Saul) acts against a foreign people (the Gibeonites), and another Israelite king (David) must compensate by handing over seven of Saul’s descendants to be killed. But the equilibrium

is not restored until the grief over Saul's family is resolved. Rizpah, a concubine widow of Saul and mother of Armoni and Mephibosheth, puts on sackcloth and watches over the bodies of the slain sons to keep birds and wild animals away. In response, David performs another transaction with a foreign people: he retrieves the bones of Saul and Jonathan from the Philistines. Like the seven sons of Saul, the bodies of Saul and Jonathan have been disgraced by public exposure. David buries the bones of Saul and Jonathan and gathers the bones of the seven sons. At that point the famine is lifted and "God heeded supplications for the land."

In Girardian terms, violence is resolved in 2 Sam. 21 in a number of reciprocal stages: Gibeonites are killed, Saul's sons are killed in turn; when Rizpah grieves over the sons, David confers respectful burial on Saul and Jonathan. Through these actions, the struggle between the houses of David and Saul is presumably resolved. The story has also resolved the conflict with the Gibeonites, who are not mentioned again in the Deuteronomistic History (though see 2 Kgs. 3:4-10). At the same time, by recovering the disgraced bones of Saul and Jonathan, an act that symbolizes David's just and merciful resolution of domestic conflict, Israel regains the upper hand in its struggle against the Philistines: the next episodes in the narrative relate the Israelite victories against them (vv. 15-22).

6.2 Comparisons

Like 2 Sam. 21, Ruth combines death and the barley harvest to address social conflicts among Israelites and between Israel and others. In Ruth, the fact that some terms and practices are explained in the text (the exchange at the city gate in ch. 4, e.g.) implies that those that are not explained must have been assumed

to be familiar to readers. The intended audience must be familiar in some way with the barley harvest and its attendant festival; they must have recognized as least some of the biblical traditions regarding Moab,¹² levirate marriage, the covenantal term “steadfast love,” and King David. Ruth and Naomi’s attempt to gain their proper social position from a recalcitrant Boaz and the next-of-kin represents a social conflict that must be overcome. While this antagonism is less open than the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen. 38, the problem is serious enough that Ruth must risk approaching Boaz in stealth to bring her and Naomi to resolution with him. Even if the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) is not the object of direct allusion here, men’s reluctance to treat women justly and fairly is a familiar social pattern in ancient Israel, and the deaths and barley harvest in ch. 1 set this drama in motion.

There are also two foreign parties in the story: the exceptional Moabite who joins Israel (Ruth) and all other Moabites (symbolized by Orpah). A number of biblical texts, including Num. 22, Deut. 23:3-6, Zeph. 2:9, and Neh. 13, single out the Moabites as enemies of Israel. Ruth’s decision to remain with Naomi, to assimilate to Israelite religion and society, sets her apart from Orpah and the Moabites in general. The implicit point here is that Ruth is exceptional among Moabites; her integration into Israel is the exception that proves the rule of separateness (and hence rivalry). The deaths and the barley harvest make this extraordinary harmony between a Moabite and Israelites possible.

¹² André LaCocque regards Ruth as a late work written in part to challenge the ban on Moabites in the fifth century: 86-90. While my purpose is not to assign a date of composition to Ruth, I would argue that the internal evidence of the text suggests a late enough date to justify familiarity with anti-Moabite attitudes in the Bible (Zeph. 2:9, Num. 22, e.g.).

While 2 Sam. 21 addresses mainly the conflict between Israel and foreigners (Gibeonites), Ruth concentrates on the more delicate issue of conflict among Israelites without ignoring the question of foreigners (Moabites). As Regina Schwartz points out, the book of Ruth embraces its foreign main character when she embraces the God of Israel (90-91). In all three stories, innocent Israelites die in the context of a famine (or drought), and their deaths contribute to a resolution of the central conflict. As stories, these texts provide setting, characters, and a conflict to be overcome by an artfully constructed plot. What makes the stories' resolutions possible, of course, is the death of innocent men and the barley harvest itself. While the deaths of the husbands trigger the narrative action in Ruth 1, the barley harvest, the antecedent to the first fruits sacrifice festival, is the setting for Ruth's gleaning, the chance meeting with Boaz, and the eventual resolution of the crisis. And in 2 Sam. 21, the time of the barley harvest emphasizes the urgency of ending the famine; unless Saul's sons and grandsons die, the whole growing season could be a disaster.

Ruth, 2 Samuel, and Judith bear the signs of elaborate literary composition: extensive allusion, subtle characterization, and compelling plot. Like Greek tragedies (and unlike ethnographic reports), Ruth and 2 Samuel place significant historical distance between the narration of events and the events themselves (see Ruth 4:7 and 2 Sam. 21:1). By the time it enters written tradition, the barley harvest festival is a belated phenomenon; the narrative itself symbolizes and replaces the supposed real death in the story. To paraphrase Levi-Strauss, narrative death is more cooked than raw. Accordingly, the differences between 2 Sam. 21, Ruth, and Judith lie mainly on the level at which a function is carried out. In 2 Samuel 21, death is carried out by characters *in* the story (the

Gibeonites, with David's, and presumably YHWH's, sanction). In Ruth, death is carried out by the story (or narrator, also presumably with YHWH's sanction) itself. In Judith both kinds of death appear: her husband dies during the barley harvest, and later she performs the heroic act of killing Holofernes. Like Ruth, Judith becomes a widow at the hands of the narrator, but she then engages in her own act of killing. In all three cases, the deaths function to resolve social conflicts.

6.3 Girardian Representations

The similarities between the Judith, Ruth, and 2 Samuel 21 narratives appear on a deep structural level as well as on the surface.¹³ The contradictions in these stories involve the kind of conflict described by Girard, that is, social antagonism. The stories involve conflicts between Israelites and foreigners and *among* Israelites. In each case, the untimely death of men contributes to the resolution of these conflicts. In 2 Samuel, there is a struggle

¹³ The distinction between function and character was theorized by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928): "Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (21). By separating characters from their functions, Propp's formalism enables the kind of analysis that understands stories to express certain kinds of cultural contents regardless of their *dramatis personae*. Claude Levi-Strauss carries this work further by identifying the structure of myths in terms of the cultural elements and oppositions they express, regardless of a story's surface details (Levi-Strauss). By separating the core function of stories from the specifics of character and plot, Propp and Levi-Strauss make it possible to study narratives in terms of the cultural issues and meanings they articulate. The semiotician A.J. Greimas takes this approach to a more abstract, schematic level. Greimas distinguishes between the surface of a story, on which human subjects *do* things, and the deep grammar of a story, where logical operations occur (71). According to Greimas, any story posits some opposition or set of oppositions, and the logical operation of the story, on the level of its deep grammar, is simply how it resolves the opposition(s) it contains. Greimas also makes this distinction in terms of actors, who are characters in the story, and actants, which are the narrative function or operation of a story (106-7).

between two groups of Israelites and between the Israelites and foreigners (Gibeonites, and less directly, the Philistines). Only when David and Rizpah have negotiated the death of the “sons” of Saul are these conflicts resolved (in favor of David and the Gibeonites).

In Ruth, Naomi finds herself at odds with other Israelites in Bethlehem when she and Ruth return there. The conflict involves the social and religious position of Naomi, who announces to women of the town that she is “bitter” about her state of affairs. The conflict then develops into the women’s pursuit of a redeemer in the face of the kinsmen’s failure to act as redeemer (stipulated by the laws of levirate, e.g.).¹⁴ The fact that Ruth is a Moabite complicates matters further, since it contrasts the biblical animosity toward Moabites. The resolution of the inter-Israelite conflict has implications, implicit but unmistakable, for the conflict between Israel and Moab. At the very least, Ruth suggests, the chasm between Israel and Moab does *not* obviate marriage between the groups, even a marriage leading directly to the birth of David himself (Ruth 4:13-22). In any case, there is considerable social conflict in Ruth which the story works to resolve. André LaCocque observes: “The story is no mirror of Judean pride during the Davidic empire, but of the deep split between Palestinian parties during the Second Commonwealth” (90). In Judith, the main social conflict, war, is unmistakable, and the allusion to the barley harvest, along with the killing of Holofernes, bring about its resolution. The narratives of 2 Sam. 21, Ruth 1, and Judith *represent* violence rather than simply *record* it. There is nothing primordial or primitive about the artifice of biblical narrative. The three

¹⁴ See Campbell, 132-38; though see the reservations summarized in Sasson, 125-30.

narratives make rich use of storytelling devices, allusion to earlier biblical traditions and texts, and the main characters' confrontation with death, social conflict, and danger at the time of the barley harvest.

A key divergence in the three stories is the identity of the men who kill and die: Gibeonites kill Israelites in 2 Sam. 21; Judith includes many killings, including Judith's slaughter of Holofernes; and Israelites die at the hand of the storyteller in Ruth 1. The primary conflict in Ruth is among Israelites, but it is less tolerable, culturally speaking, to narrate the killing of Israelites by Israelites. In 2 Sam. 21, the primary conflict is between Israelites and Gibeonites, though the conflict among Israelites is hard to miss. But it would be a mistake to identify the death in 2 Sam. 21 as more "real" than the death in Ruth. In Algirdas Greimas' terms, it comes down to a distinction between actors (2 Sam. 21) and actants (Ruth). Who does the killing (narrator or characters) is less important than the fact of death and its function to resolve conflict in the story. To consider one story to be more literal than another would also overlook the high level of literary artistry--the allusion to the "barley harvest" and the surprisingly key role of women, for instance--in all three narratives.

7. BEYOND THE BARLEY HARVEST: FEASTING AND SHEEPSHEARING IN GEN. 38, 1 SAM. 25 AND 2 SAM. 13

7.1 Sheepshearing

Like the barley harvest, the time of sheepshearing is an agricultural event marked by hard work and feasting. What is more, the time of sheepshearing may be associated with the festival of first fruits: "The first fruits of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him" (Deut.

18:4). Like the barley harvest, the work of sheepshearing involves cutting. In addition, sheepshearing is explicitly associated with sacrifice in Isa. 53:7, which describes the figure of the servant “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” The tales of Nabal and Abigail and Amnon’s murder of Absalom both occur during the time of sheepshearing (1 Sam. 25:2; 2 Sam. 13:23) and a feast (1 Sam. 25:8; 2 Sam. 13:28). As with many feasts, drinking is involved, and it contributes to the actions that follow (Walsh). Like the narratives of the barley harvest, these two stories include deaths, narrative transitions, and agricultural feast, and they address social conflict. The following brief survey of sheepshearing stories in parallel to the barley harvest narratives suggests some avenues for future study.

7.2 Genesis 38

Sheepshearing stories combine love, death, instability, and danger. In Genesis 31, Rachel steals Laban’s household gods when he goes to shear his sheep (v. 19). The story of Judah and Tamar, an artful tale of social and sexual instability and a strong parallel to Ruth, also begins at sheepshearing time: “In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua’s daughter, died; when Judah’s time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite” (38:12). Like Ruth and Judith, the story begins with a widow (Er and Onan are both “killed off” by God) and an agricultural festival. Judah, like Ruth and Judith, will shift from a period of mourning to new sexual liaisons during the agricultural feast. Although ritual sacrifice is not part of the story, the description of Tamar as a temple prostitute (38:21), along with the setting at sheepshearing time, evokes a cultic context. And like

the other narrative episodes identified here, Gen 38 marks an important narrative transition (Alter 10-13).

7.3 First Samuel 25

In 1 Sam. 25, Nabal awakens from the drunken stupor of his sheepshearing feast to learn from his wife Abigail that David plans to kill him: “His heart died within him; he became like a stone. About ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died” (25:37-38). David celebrates it as a victory for himself: “Blessed be the Lord who has judged the case of Nabal’s insult to me, and has kept back his servant from evil; the Lord has returned the evildoing of Nabal upon his own head” (1 Sam. 25:39). The setting of the story is crucial: the sheepshearing and feast day set the story in motion, and the feast and drunkenness at the end bring its conclusion. There is social conflict between the parties of David and Nabal mediated by the death of Nabal and, more importantly, Abigail herself (Kessler 411). She invokes the concept of guilt (v. 24) and suggests she would offer herself as a kind of sacrificial victim in place of Nabal. But Abigail also uses the language of bloodguilt to signal that David should assure her own safety for his own good (v. 26). Like Ruth and Judith, Abigail invokes divine protection for herself, and it helps win David over, as his echo of her statement on bloodguilt in v. 33 suggests.

7.4 Second Samuel 13

The case in Absalom’s killing of Amnon is different: here the agent of death is not God but the brother avenging his sister’s rape. The occasion is another feast (2 Sam. 13:27-28), one which, as P.

Kyle McCarter notes, would involve lots of drinking.¹⁵ The killing is a straightforward act of revenge, but its occurrence at the time of sheepshearing suggests a seasonal festival.¹⁶ In addition, it sets in motion Absalom's divisive quest for the throne and kind of poetic retribution for David's wrongful actions in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba immediately before this (Jensen). In the stories of sheepshearing in 1 Sam. 25 and 2 Sam. 13, an agricultural feast combines with the deaths of Nabal and Amnon to address social conflict; both episodes thus represent important narrative transitions, toward greater conflict in 2 Sam. 13, and in 1 Sam. 25, toward a further consolidation of power in David's hands just after the death of Samuel (1 Sam. 25:1).

8. CONCLUSION

Stereotypes of the Hebrew Bible as a violent text often overlook the difference between representation and reality. The tendency to identify biblical texts with specific social practices appears in the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and, more recently, René Girard. But when narrative representations of violence are read primarily as accounts of real actions, the familiar stereotypes can surface in scholarship on biblical violence.¹⁷ It

¹⁵ See the P. Kyle McCarter's note to this effect in the Harper Collins Study Bible, 487 n. 13.27, as well as Walsh.

¹⁶ Sheep also represent a literary motif in the story, building on 2 Sam. 12:3 and 1 Sam. 16:11; see Rudman, 328.

¹⁷ Recent scholarly treatments of biblical violence include Bal, Delaney, Girard, Schwartz, and Williams. While all of these works contain valuable insights into biblical texts and traditions, they typically claim that biblical accounts of violence and sacrifice record real actions and incidents. For Bal, Schwartz, and Delaney, violence and sacrifice are characterized as typical of the Hebrew Bible, or at least of its reception. Schwartz calls for a rewriting and opening up of the Bible: "My re-vision would produce an alternative Bible that subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity" (176). For Williams, the violence of the Bible is

would be equally simplistic, however, to assume that the artificial nature of biblical texts was a kind of art for art's sake with no social or historical value. Ruth 1, 2 Sam. 21, and Judith 8 combine the barley harvest with stories of death and social conflict within artfully-formed narratives. It may be that the combined elements of famine, death, harvest, and relief from famine represent a literary tradition, one that would reappear in the book of Judith, rather than a ritual prehistory. Instead of imagining biblical stories to be a transparent record of ancient ritual and myth, we may attribute the links between these texts to literary artifice. Similar stories of death around an agricultural feast in the sheepshearing episodes of Gen. 38, 1 Sam. 25, and 2 Sam. 13 suggest patterns for the future study of death, festivals, and social conflict in biblical narrative.

In these texts, women often play a mediating and symbolic role, and often intercede as forceful agents in the story. Ruth, Rizpah, Judith, Tamar, and Abigail work to resolve conflicts that involve violence or the threat of it. Some of them--Ruth, Judith, Tamar, and Abigail--are objects of desire as well as agents in the story. The characterization of women in these stories is a subject that goes beyond this study, and it would include further discussion of the stories of Jephthah's daughter, Deborah and Jael, Jezebel, Esther, and the Levite's concubine in Judges 19-21.

mythical, yet it refers to realities confronted by ancient Israel and the New Testament: "This story, the narration of a struggle against mimetic desire and for a good mimesis, God's will for nonviolent human community, will lead us through the Law and the Prophets to the Gospels, where we find a radical articulation of the revelation in the story of the Innocent Victim," (30-31). Williams thus suggests a kind of evolutionary schema, whereby ancient Israelite law and priesthood preserve sacred violence with some countervailing measures while the gospels more fully overcome the logic of divine violence (126, 232-40). A refreshing alternative to these approaches, in response to Girard's work, is J.Z. Smith's "The Domestication of Sacrifice."

Like many other scholars of religion, Girard still locates “real” violence at the core of all religious tradition: “All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual. Such is the case, as we have seen, with political power, legal institutions, medicine, the theater, philosophy and anthropology itself” (*Violence*, 306). In a recent elaboration of his position, Girard avers that the Bible (unlike Greek mythology) represents violence in order to criticize it. In his view, vivid depictions of violence in the Bible are designed to confront the reader with the horrors of injustice, thus laying the groundwork for contemporary ethics of nonviolence: “It is for biblical reasons, paradoxically, that we criticize the Bible” (“Violence,” 392). Girard’s statement is highly suggestive, but its high level of generality, which echoes the familiar dichotomy of “Athens and Jerusalem,” would require extensive textual analysis to gain cogency.

Whether Girard is right that violence and religion are essentially linked, the simple difference between “actual” violence and complex written traditions about it deserves more scholarly attention than it receives. With Mauss and Girard, the analysis of sacrifice and violence still concentrates more on ritual than text, more on reality than representation. But the “real” sacrifice and violence of Mauss and Girard themselves belong to systems of representation, namely, modern theories of religion that pursue idealized and original forms of myth and ritual.¹⁸ Studies that

¹⁸ A vivid example of this tendency is the recent controversy over Lindow Man, a prehistoric body found in Britain believed by some to have been a victim of human sacrifice. According to Ronald Hutton, scholars jumped to this conclusion because they were intellectually and culturally predisposed to interpret the evidence as human sacrifice: see Hutton.

isolate ritual completely from the literary context reflect this pattern in scholarship on religious violence.¹⁹

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