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FOREIGN KINGS AS THEOLOGICAL PLAYTHINGS WITHIN BIBLICAL EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLENCE

Debra Scoggins Ballentine

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Abstract

Theorizing violence, I argue that Judean treatments of violence associated with the Assyrian king Sennacherib, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the Persian king Cyrus exhibit dynamic theological play. Stories portray Yahweh using Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar violently against his people and then using Cyrus to benefit them at the Babylonians' expense. Rhetorically, this diminishes the foreign kings' agency and elevates Yahweh's. By incorporating foreign kings into historiography, prophecy, and poetry, Judean authors participated in synchronic shared theopolitical discourse, contributing to the royals' reputations. The Mesha Stele, Cyrus Cylinder, and Nabonidus's Sippar Inscription share this theopolitical discourse. Later, the status of some Judean writings as "scripture" generated "inscriptured violence." Diachronically, attention to ancient contexts and scrutiny of subsequent political repurposing challenge "inherited" models of sanctified violence.



En théorisant la violence, cette étude soutient que les représentations de la violence associée à Sennachérîb en Assyrie, Nabuchodonosor à Babylone et Cyrus pour la Perse dans la tradition juive témoignent d'un jeu théologique dynamique. Les récits dépeignent Yahwe, qui utilise Sennachérîb et Nabuchodonosor de manière violente contre son peuple, puis qui se sert de Cyrus pour se venger de Babylone. Sur le plan rhétorique, cela diminue l'influence des rois étrangers et renforce celle de Yahwe. En intégrant les rois étrangers à l'historiographie, à la prophétie et à la poésie, les auteurs judéens ont participé à un discours théopolitique synchrone commun, contribuant ainsi à la réputation des rois. La stèle de Mesha, le cylindre de Cyrus et l'inscription de Nabonide partagent ce discours théopolitique. Plus tard, le statut de certains écrits judéens en tant que «textes sacrés» a engendré une «violence inscrite». D'un point de vue diachronique, l'attention portée aux contextes anciens et l'examen minutieux des réutilisations politiques ultérieures remettent en question les modèles «hérités» de violence sanctifiée.



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Tradition Inheritance and the Reputations of Foreign Kings

This article presents the motif of Yahweh using foreign kings as a theological explanation of violence relative to the analytical concept of “tradition inheritance.” The editors of this special issue of AABNER, Andrew Tobolowsky and Kelly J. Murphy, have offered this concept to bring together the current collection of articles. They explain that tradition inheritance includes inheriting and repurposing traditions with an eye to considering both the initial settings and the motives for such repurposing as well as its results. As Tobolowsky and Murphy point out, we can study phenomena of tradition inheritance both synchronically and diachronically, that is, synchronically for Judeans within their ancient milieu as well as diachronically for postbiblical interpreters of inherited ancient Judean stories.

I understand the dynamic of tradition inheritance to be generative.¹ It includes both what interpreters do with the tradition that they inherit, which biblical scholars have long studied within the area of the history of interpretation. Likewise, tradition inheritance includes how we might account for the literary creativity that led to the production of a textual tradition, which biblical scholars have long studied within the area of *Überlieferungsgeschichte* and *Traditionskritik* (Pioske 2022, 174). Throughout my research, I am interested in such processes of reusing notions, motifs, and ideas that are understood to be or framed as “inherited” within new contexts and for new purposes.

As a case of tradition inheritance, I consider select agents of violence as they are featured within the biblical anthology, namely, foreign kings. I address several aspects of how inherited traditions are repurposed. First, Judean storytellers participated in (and in turn contributed to) sociopolitical discourses that were common to the ancient milieu, incorporating themes, figures, and motifs from their surroundings (Ben Zvi 2010, 160). In the case of foreign kings, Judean authors incorporated actual, historical kings from neighboring states as well as larger empires into their stories, historiographies, prophecies, poems, and theologies. In so doing, they also contributed to the reputations of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the Persian king Cyrus, the three kings of focus in this article, as well as other royals such as the Moabite king Mesha and the Egyptian pharaohs. In addition to such synchronic repurposing within the ancient milieu, I also discuss diachronic repurposing within the history of interpretation of the texts that now comprise the Hebrew biblical anthology. I address how the repurposing of purportedly older traditions from “our past” entails claims of inheritance within an in-group construct as well as modes of interpretation that both generate and are built upon the concept that biblical phenomena are “inscriptured.”

I argue that Judean authors’ treatments of violence associated with foreign kings exhibit dynamic and creative theological play when they portray Yahweh using these kings to accomplish his own acts of divine violence. Rather than showing Yahweh as unjust, the story goes that the



¹ Wright 2009, 439, 442–46, 448; Ben Zvi 2011, 95; Müller 2015, 87.

people aggravated their reciprocal relationship with him. Within this explanatory framework, Yahweh punishes his people through devastation and siege using Sennacherib and, later, by defeat and destruction using Nebuchadnezzar. By contrast, Yahweh uses Cyrus to benefit Judeans, though at the expense of the Babylonians. The Judean characterizations of these three royals that are preserved within the biblical anthology show that Judean authors generated local theologies, as did the scribes of the Moabite Mesha Stele and the Babylonian Cyrus Cylinder. Such portrayal of foreign kings as divine playthings diminishes the foreign kings' agency while bolstering the patron deity.

Moving beyond the synchronic shared discourses around gods and kings, the process of Judean writings becoming "scripture" generated models of divine violence, divinely sanctioned violence, and the idea of divinely endorsed authority figures. I discuss how status as "scripture" developed, in order to analyze inscriptured violence and postbiblical hermeneutics of violence. It becomes especially important to recognize and analyze biblical violence and frameworks of divinely sanctioned violence when biblical ideas are invoked in political contexts that have global impacts. To illustrate this point, I briefly describe a snapshot political theological moment in which the biblical characterization of Cyrus was invoked in 2018. I conclude by encouraging scholars and interpreters of the Hebrew Bible to interrogate inherited stories of divine violence through the critical analysis of ancient political contexts as well as contemporary political repurposing of them.

Elsewhere, I have engaged in the theorization of religious violence, ritual violence, and biblical violence (Ballentine 2020), and I am currently completing a monograph on the theological politics of explaining communal calamity, in which I situate Judean examples within a shared ancient discourse (Ballentine 2023). Building on the insights of many scholars of ancient Judah and Mesopotamia, this article analyzes the motif of Yahweh using foreign kings relative to my theorization of inscriptured violence. The surprising revivification of the foreign king motif in contemporary politics accentuates the importance of critically analyzing claims to tradition inheritance.



Royals of Looming Empires within Theological Explanations of Violence

From ancient times to the present day, some interpreters of violence have employed religious or biblical frameworks. Critical methodologies are crucial for investigating such rhetorical buttressing. Continued theorization of violence, religious violence, and biblical violence is necessary in order to identify root sociopolitical issues (Ballentine 2020). Here, I focus on prominent cases of foreign kings that feature in Hebrew biblical historiographic and prophetic books.

It is clear, in this case, that political and military issues are at the root of these prominent cases of foreign kings who are agents of violence within the biblical stories that feature them. Judean treatments of the violence associated with Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus exhibit dynamic and creative theological play. Not only are these human royals agents of violence, but several Judean authors also portray the Judean god Yahweh as using non-Israelite and non-Judean kings as tools for his own divine violence.

Generally speaking, non-Israelite and non-Judean kings appear as both aggressors and as agents of Yahweh. Within biblical historiography, kings of more powerful polities exert structural and physical forces against Israelite and Judean kings and populations. Political subjugation and military defeat occurred as a fact of life in the ancient West Asian geopolitical landscape. Literary representations of such events include theological interpretations that serve to apologize for subjugation and defeat. The idealized situation is that the patron deity ensures the safety, health, and possessions of his or her loyal people. Therefore, if a people or polity suffer, the question arises as to why the patron god did not or could not protect them.

Indeed, several Judean authors utilize the rhetorical question “Where is their/your god?” within laments and invocations that aim to provoke Yahweh to assist in current crises (Ps 42:3; Ps 79:10; Ps 115:2; Joel 2:17). The question is framed as something that witnesses, onlookers, or mockers would say to challenge those who are suffering crises. These hypothetical mocking questions are part of Judean creative literary



responses to crises, and they imply a theological problem that Judean authors address extensively, as I explain below.

I wish to emphasize that these hypothetical questions are not merely literary or theological flourishes. Many Assyrian texts that describe the campaigns of Assyrian kings include the taking of defeated gods as a central aspect of their victories and subjugations of peoples. In royal annals—as just two examples among many—scribes feature Sennacherib dislodging the gods of defeated polities from their abodes and carrying them off in boats (RINAP, Sennacherib 022, lines iii 60–65), and, likewise, scribes feature Sargon recounting that “I counted as spoils the gods who dwelt in them,” referring to conquered cities (COS 2.118A, 118E). The taking of gods, via icons or cultic objects that represent them, constituted direct as well as symbolic violence.² The symbolic violence is well-articulated in the Judean hypothetical question “Where is your/their god?”, in that the speakers within the world of the narrative express suffering from abandonment, loss, fear, dejection, and humiliation. This internal and possibly external challenge, “Where is their/your god?”, is one of several aspects of the sort of theological crisis that results from military defeat within the ancient milieu, and Judean authors generated various explanations to answer this question.

In the face of potential accusations of divine abandonment, whether from within or from onlookers or fictive witnesses, the creative and theologically safe explanation is that the patron god chose not to protect his or her people from the more powerful king. Moreover, the god’s motivation for choosing not to protect his or her people is key. Rather than portraying the patron god as unjust and failing to uphold his or her covenant promises, we read that the people must have fallen short of their obligations to the patron god, thereby aggravating their reciprocal relationship with the divine. This explanatory framework posits that the patron god then punishes his or her people through defeat and exile.³

² Thompson 1984; Cogan 2009; Ballentine 2020.

³ Gertz 2010, 11–12; Levin 2010, 1; Müller 2010, 212; Pakkala 2010, 91; Ben Zvi 2011, 96; Carr 2014, 6; Müller 2015, 84; Pioske 2023, 231, 237.

This theological reasoning is shared among Judean and other ancient West Asian literatures.⁴

Biblical treatments of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar exhibit this sort of dynamic and creative theological play. Yahweh chooses not to protect his people at certain moments, and he even facilitates attacks by utilizing these aggressing kings against his people. As Susan Niditch describes it, divine participation in war presents a “God-run” war, which serves to portray Yahweh as the real victor and which diminishes the roles of humans (1995, 145). While the cases of Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus each present nuanced differences, they share the rhetorical dynamic of diminishing the foreign king’s agency in service of elevating Yahweh’s agency.



The Case of Sennacherib

Around 721 BCE, the polity of ancient Israel was defeated. Assyrian king Shalmaneser laid siege to its capital, Samaria, and his successor Sargon oversaw Samaria’s fall.⁵ Two decades later, in 701 BCE, the Assyrian king Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem.⁶ While other Judean towns were damaged, the Assyrians left without entering Jerusalem because Hezekiah paid tribute (2 Kgs 18:13–20:21). A substantial amount of (First) Isaiah is about Assyrian dominance and Sennacherib’s military endeavors.⁷ This is the political, social, and theological context for Isaiah’s articulation of the foreign king motif.

Isa 10:5–19 speaks of Assyria as the instrument of Yahweh’s own anger and casts the Assyrian king’s military threats and actions as resulting from the Judean deity’s decrees. While the Assyrian king is not named in this chapter of Isaiah, Sennacherib explicitly features in the narrative of the siege (Isaiah 36–37), which is most plausibly the focus of the Isaiah 10 passage.⁸ “Assyria” plausibly refers to the king, rather than the people or polity as a whole.⁹

⁴ Cogan 1974, 9–21; Ballentine 2023.

⁵ RINAP, Sargon II 043, lines 19–20; 2 Kgs 17–18:12.

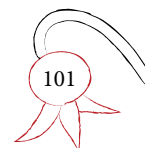
⁶ RINAP, Sennacherib 022; Grabbe 2003.

⁷ Machinist 1983; Carr 2014, 44.

⁸ Carr 2014, 44; Pioske 2023, 225, 231.

⁹ Machinist 1983; Blenkinsopp 2002, 251–56.

Isaiah's oracle features Yahweh suggesting that he will treat Jerusalem just as he had punitively treated Samaria (Isa 10:11). The theological apology for Samaria's past suffering and Jerusalem's current suffering lays blame on the people. The Judean deity is portrayed as being in control of the entire geopolitical landscape. Once Yahweh accomplishes his goal by means of the king of Assyria, according to Isa 10:12, he will deal with the powerful and haughty king, who purportedly and mistakenly credits himself with accomplishments that the narrator asserts are actually the prerogatives of the Judean god (Isa 10:13–14). Notice that Yahweh is the agent of violence against his own people through the Assyrian king as well as against the Assyrian king, and theological justifications serve to legitimate all of the relevant violence. Peter Machinist summarizes this theological reasoning thus: "How could you imagine that our God Yahweh would give us up to Assyria? Answer: Yahweh must be controlling Assyria and using Assyria for his own ends" (2005: 38).



This assertion of Yahweh's agency fits within Isaiah's broader depictions of Yahweh as an international divine power. We see the same international scope in Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 27) as well as (Second) Isaiah, though in later contexts and with differing hegemonic political powers: Jeremiah features the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and (Second) Isaiah features the Persian king Cyrus. Biblical depictions of Sennacherib adapt contemporary Assyrian ideas and practices, which constitutes synchronic tradition inheritance, while, diachronically, Isaiah's treatment of Sennacherib contributes to the legacy of ancient Assyria (Machinist 1983, 737). Each case entails an analogous dynamic of synchronic and diachronic tradition inheritance. The biblical presentations of these foreign kings feature distinctive details that fit their differing contexts, and within those differing contexts we see a shared rhetorical dynamic of diminishing the foreign king's agency in service of elevating Yahweh's agency.

The Case of Nebuchadnezzar

Similar to the case of Assyrian king Sennacherib, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar appears as the means for the Judean god to enact his will against Judeans, who carry the blame for their misfortunes. Ezra's

narrative purports to copy a letter that cites a speech in which the elders state that *elah shemayya* (Aramaic, “the god of the heavens”) gave the Judeans into Nebuchadnezzar’s hands because they provoked the deity’s anger (Ezra 5:12). The passage includes the fact that doing so led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple as well as the forced migration of Judeans into Babylonian exile (Ezra 5:11–16).

Prior to the destruction, Jeremiah pleads with Judeans to submit to Nebuchadnezzar’s political subjugation in order to avoid a worse fate, and he does so by claiming that Yahweh has determined that the Babylonian king will dominate Judean lands and the Judean people (Jer 27:6). How can we understand why a Judean author would develop such a theological explanation? First of all, as with the examples considered throughout this article, the apology protects Yahweh’s reputation, both concerning his divine power and his loyalty to the covenant. Second, the apology disempowers the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar as well as his army (Vanderhooft 2018, 111). For example, Yahweh characterizes Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant” and takes credit for bringing the Babylonian army against Judah.¹⁰ This diminishes Nebuchadnezzar’s agency, since Yahweh utilizes Nebuchadnezzar as an inferior (Hill 1999, 137). As Ehud Ben Zvi remarks:

Even the enemy that caused the destruction was not always emphatically construed as the sinful Enemy/Other. In fact, the community even held some memories and texts that commanded much mindshare that characterised the Babylonians who carried out the catastrophe in a positive light (see the reference to Nebuchadnezzar as YHWH’s servant in Jer 25:9; 27:6; and its Jeremianic characterisation in Jer 40:1–6) (Ben Zvi 2011, 109)

Likewise, 1 Chron 6:15 continues the characterization of Nebuchadnezzar as lacking agency in the downfall of Jerusalem and the exile of Judeans. Casting the Judeans’ own patron deity as the agent of violence rhetorically disarms the powerful king. However, the theological precedent of a patron deity causing the suffering of his or her own people is ominous (Ballentine 2020). Note that in the cases of Sennacherib and

¹⁰ Jer 25:8–11; Hill 1999, 106–7.

Nebuchadnezzar, Judean authors employed theological politics to explain Judean misfortunes (Carr 2014, 2, 6).

Like Isaiah earlier, Jeremiah asserts that Yahweh's agency extends throughout the regional and international context. Jeremiah does so not only with the foreign king motif, as applied to Nebuchadnezzar, but also throughout his messages to regional powers (Jeremiah 27) and his polemics against Babylon (Jeremiah 50). Jeremiah's political context entails the looming Babylonian threat to Jerusalem, then the destruction of Jerusalem, forced exile, and finally Judean refugees fleeing to Egypt. In Jeremiah's framing of these political events, Yahweh is always in charge. The character Jeremiah even estimates that exile from the land will last seventy years (Jer 25:11–12), which subsequent authors reference as a Sabbath for the land in order to reflect a ritualized amount of time that Yahweh has predetermined.¹¹ Jeremiah's political commentary relocates the efficacy of human leaders to the theological realm. It is vital to interrogate such rhetorical moves because the ancient political events entail a great deal of material destruction and violence to humans, as I discuss further below.

The next case of the foreign king motif brings us to the end of the Babylonian exile with the Persian king Cyrus, whose case offers a contrast to the misfortunes associated with Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, the depictions of all three kings relative to Yahweh serve to diminish their agency while bolstering Yahweh's agency.

The Case of Cyrus

The biblical anthology features a prominent positive example of Yahweh using a non-Judean king to benefit the Judeans: the Persian royal Cyrus the Great. While Yahweh uses Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar to act out his anger, he uses Cyrus as an anointed instrument with which to deliver the Judean people. According to 2 Chron 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–4, Cyrus allowed the exiled Judeans to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. 2 Chronicles and Ezra purport to quote from an edict of Cyrus.¹² Both passages identify the event as fulfilling Yahweh's

¹¹ 2 Chron 36: 20–21; Lev 26:34–45. See also Dan 9:2.

¹² Bickerman 1946, 249; De Vaux 1937, 29; Grabbe 2006, 531; Kuhrt 2010, 85.

message given through Jeremiah (2 Chron 36:22; Ezra 1:1), and both feature Cyrus giving credit to Yahweh for his successes (2 Chron 36:23; Ezra 1:2).

The author of (Second) Isaiah credits Yahweh with Cyrus's political and military successes, applying explicitly royal endorsement terminology and imagery to Cyrus (Isa 44:28–45:7). (Second) Isaiah's treatment creatively and remarkably utilizes language from Davidic royal ideology (Wilson 2015, 328, 341–43). This use of Davidic royal ideology serves to give Yahweh credit for Cyrus's success while maintaining that Yahweh himself is actually "king of Israel," according to the claims and phrasing of Isa 44:6. The shared focus on Cyrus exhibited in 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and (Second) Isaiah reflect Judean perspectives on the end of Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.¹³ Within this historical, political context, Judean authors developed a distinctive characterization of Cyrus relative to Yahweh (Wilson 2025). The biblical portrait of Cyrus contributes to his legacy, as I discuss further below.

As for Yahweh's legacy, (Second) Isaiah, 2 Chronicles, and Ezra continue the well-established theology of asserting Yahweh's international reach, in service of Yahweh's focus on the fate of his people, as seen in Isaiah with the case of Sennacherib and in Jeremiah with the case of Nebuchadnezzar. The case of Cyrus benefits the Judeans, unlike the cases of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, but Cyrus's agency and power are still diminished when Yahweh is characterized as determining Cyrus's successes to benefit Yahweh's people, temple, and the city of Jerusalem. As David Carr sums up the case of Cyrus: "Yahweh is the one and only God to have punished Judah with Babylon, and Yahweh and only Yahweh is the one who has called the Persian ruler, Cyrus, to rescue Yahweh's exiled people (Isa 45:1–5)" (2014, 83).

Domesticating Theologies and Apologies as Performance of Synchronic Tradition Inheritance

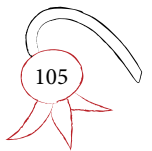
The examples of Judean characterizations of Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus that are preserved within the biblical anthology

¹³ Fried 2002; Van der Toorn 2007; Wright 2007.



show that Judean authors generated local theologies. By local theologies, I simply mean Yahweh-centered and Judah- and Jerusalem-centered theologies that serve to effectively “domesticate” international affairs. Judean authors engaged with and contributed to theopolitical discourses within the ancient West Asian milieu. The Judean exemplars give the *interpretatio Judaica*, that is, the distinctly Judean version of a shared theopolitical framework. Likewise, the following Babylonian exemplars bear distinctly Babylonian ideologies, and the Moabite Mesha Stele gives a distinctly Moabite theology, and so forth. The comparative data show a synchronous shared discourse.¹⁴ As Machinist comments:

Now a retributive view of history was not unique to Israel in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world ... Both Israelite-Jewish and Babylonian traditions, one cannot have failed to notice, assess the fall of Assyria in the same way: as compensatory punishment for earlier Assyrian actions against them. In each case, moreover, the punishment is supervised by the god or gods of the erstwhile victim, whether Yahweh, or Marduk and/or various other Babylonian deities; and it is that same divinity whose wrath can be said to have brought on the offending Assyrian actions in the first place. (Machinist 1997, 186–87)



At the same time, a diachronic view reveals the following: the Judean articulation of this shared discourse is preserved within what we now have as the biblical anthology; the processes of generating “scripture” (and much later, canon) impact the perceived status and modes of reading of the Judean exemplars, as I discuss below. Thereafter, as part of scripture, the inherited Judean traditions are employed to generate new meanings in subsequent postbiblical interpretive contexts, ranging from late antiquity to the present. In postbiblical interpretive contexts, how is the inscriptured paradigm of Yahweh using foreign kings (or, more generally, any human agents of violence) for his own designs repurposed in response to changing geopolitical events within new historical and confessional contexts? What power dynamics are at play? For whose enfranchisement? At whose expense? I maintain that understanding tradition inheritance within postbiblical contexts, whether in

¹⁴ Nissinen 2010, 30, 35, 38; Ballentine 2023.

antiquity or in contemporary settings, ought to begin with an analysis of the ancient data.

As a scholar of ancient religion, particularly the Hebrew Bible and ancient West Asian texts and traditions, I research the ancient world for its own value. At the same time, I consider academic scrutiny of the distant past to have pressing import. There is a rhetorical sanctification of violence that occurs when agents of violence are featured positively in scripture. In each case, we must identify when narratives exhibit ambivalence regarding violent acts done by divine beings, holy men, royals, soldiers, priests, prophets, patriarchs, or other characters (Ballentine 2020). Identifying this ambivalence facilitates our ability to scrutinize the ways that violent acts performed by inscriptured figures may be used to justify violence within socioreligious discourses and religiously framed phenomena. Yet in striking contrast, in the cases of these foreign kings, there is no ambivalence; rather, the sanctification is abundantly clear.



We can better appreciate the creativity and operative dynamics of such rhetoric and theopolitics by considering alternative perspectives. Briefly, let us consider Babylonian perspectives on Cyrus, the Moabite perspective on the Israelite king Omri as a foreign tool for the Moabite deity, as well as biblical characterizations of Egyptian pharaohs.

Babylonian Theopolitics regarding Cyrus

While the case of Cyrus is portrayed as positive for Judeans, at least for those who had been exiled and then enfranchised to return (Edelman 2005, 168), his ingratiating of his Judean subjects occurred only after Cyrus had defeated Babylonian forces (Beaulieu 1993). What was the Babylonian perspective on their conqueror? Did Babylonian scribes and lamenting mourners fear the question “Where is your god?” Perhaps they did.¹⁵ At least, we can see that Babylonian scribes offered theological explanations for Cyrus’s takeover of Babylon.¹⁶ The Babylonian account of Cyrus’s success, which was clearly at the expense of the Babylonians,

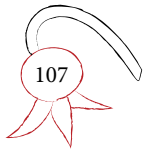
¹⁵ Tolini 2005; Waerzeggers 2021.

¹⁶ Vanderhooft 2006, 362; Van der Spek 2014; Van der Spek 2015, 451.

utilizes the shared theological logic of divine punishment and reward by crediting the Babylonian patron god Marduk with Cyrus's success.¹⁷

The Cyrus Cylinder is familiar to biblical scholars, and the general public has had occasion to see it on museum tours, for example at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City in 2013.¹⁸ This foundation deposit inscription is a lovely piece of royal propaganda that exhibits creative theological politics, and its very placement furthers the propagandistic aspect of the Babylonian scribes portraying Cyrus as a restorer of Babylonian cultic sites. Both Bel, that is Marduk, and his son Nabu love his kingship, and his kingship pleases their hearts. Marduk called Cyrus by name, set him on his way to Babylon, and accompanied him, marched at his side, ushered him into Babylon without a battle, and delivered Nabonidus the Babylonian king into his hands. The Babylonian people are joyous, and the gods are joyous; throughout the land, all enjoy their peaceful abodes. The grandiosity, specific motifs, and theological reasoning are analogous to the Judean treatment of Cyrus that we see in Isaiah 44–45.

An ancient person having heard the good news of the Cyrus Cylinder, namely, that Marduk delivered the late Babylonian ruler Nabonidus into Cyrus's hands, might be surprised to learn that Nabonidus also portrayed Cyrus as a divine instrument. In a cylinder inscription from Sippar, a Babylonian scribe celebrates Nabonidus's building and repair projects (COS 2.123A).¹⁹ Within the context of Nabonidus's temple repairs, the inscription's narrative addresses the role of Cyrus, and the scribe attributes anger to the moon deity Sin, who utilizes the Medes to destroy the god's temple in Harran. The narrative features Marduk himself as well as Sin speaking with Nabonidus in a dream, telling him to restore the Harran temple. He reverently points out to the gods that Median forces still occupy Harran. The inscription then credits Marduk and Sin with rousing Cyrus against the Median forces and the Median king, Astyages.



¹⁷ Cyrus Cylinder BM 90920; Van der Spek 2015, 461.

¹⁸ Kuhrt 2010, 70–74; Finkel 2013.

¹⁹ Gadd 1958; Beaulieu 1989, 224; Beaulieu 2007; Weiershäuser and Novotny 2020, 12.

This is the same theological reasoning that we see in the Cyrus Cylinder, many biblical passages, and various other inscriptions that address military successes and failures. Sin utilizes the Medes against a Babylonian town and his own temple therein, then Marduk and Sin utilize Cyrus to take out the Medes. Within Nabonidus's Sippar Inscription, the focus is primarily highlighting the king's positive rebuilding projects and his loyalty to the moon god Sin in particular. The deities' use of the non-Babylonian kings, in this case a Median king and a Persian king, is part of the background context for Nabonidus's good deeds. For the purposes of this article, the theopolitical dynamics on display in Nabonidus's Sippar Inscription attest to a shared discourse around patron deities using foreign royals for their own purposes.

Passages explaining Cyrus's successes in (Second) Isaiah, the Cyrus Cylinder, and Nabonidus's Sippar Inscription show competing claims over which god was responsible for Cyrus's success. I emphasize that these are competing claims within a shared discourse by observing that Cyrus himself most likely would have attributed his own success to the Persian lord Auramazda. While we do not have Persian inscriptions from Cyrus about his purported saving of Babylon from cultic disrepair, his strategic genealogies identify his ancestors as being from Persia and Anshan (Lincoln 2007, 3–5), and his successors Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes II clearly attribute their successes to Persian deities (Kuhrt 2010, 554–55).

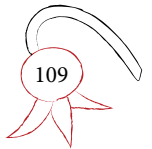
Heretofore, I have highlighted select data from Judean and Babylonian authors in order to exhibit a type of theological politics that was widespread in the ancient West Asian milieu. The pattern of reasoning within this type of theological explanation for political or military misfortunes is particular, by which I mean it is nuanced, dynamic, and recognizable. In emphasizing how this theological paradigm was shared throughout the ancient milieu, I want to make explicit the implication that the biblical data are not “unique,” *sui generis*, or distinct in any sort of qualitative manner. Rather, the very practice of differentiation and competing theological claims that was utilized to “domesticate” international affairs was a shared practice; it constitutes shared discourse. In a moment, I return to what is distinct about the biblical data, namely, its later status as inscriptured, by which it becomes a locus for tradition inheritance.



First, though, I briefly mention two final examples of foreign kings to draw out additional comparative nuance.

Egyptian Kings

For a contrast within the biblical foundational narrative, it is noteworthy that Egyptian kings are not presented in the manner that Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar are—that is, as instruments of Yahweh’s punishment. In the Exodus narrative, we do see the well-known motif of Yahweh “hardening pharaoh’s heart.” That motif, obviously, has a similar rhetorical effect, in that it detracts from the Egyptian king’s agency.²⁰ However, we do not see the same type of apology: pharaoh’s oppression of the people is not something that Yahweh intended in order to punish the Israelites. By considering this alternative way to frame the violent actions of a foreign royal within the biblical anthology, we can identify with greater nuance the rhetorical dynamics of each exemplar.



Moabite Chemosh and the Foreign Israelite King Omri

Finally, the Mesha Stele (COS 2.23) broadens our reconstruction of the ancient theopolitical motif of gods using foreign kings to accomplish violence. This Moabite inscription credits Chemosh with utilizing a foreign king. It offers a helpful comparison for two reasons: first, the Mesha Stele exhibits the same theological logic and “domestication” of inter-polity relations that I identify within the biblical data, Cyrus Cylinder, and Nabonidus’s Sippar Inscription, and second, the featured foreign king is Omri, an Israelite king.

In the Moabite inscription, the scribe claims that the Moabite king Mesha has seized the town of Nebo from the Israelite king Omri. Mesha is able to do so because his patron deity Chemosh empowers him to succeed in this moment, just as Chemosh had previously empowered Omri to possess some Moabite territory when Chemosh was angry with the Moabites. The most relevant lines for the purposes of this article are as follows:

²⁰ Exod 7:3–5, for example, and throughout Exod 4–14.

Omri was the king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land. And his son succeeded him, and he said—he too—“I will oppress Moab!” In my days did he say [so], but I looked down on him and on his house, and Israel has gone to ruin, yes, it has gone to ruin for ever [sic]! (KAI 181, lines 5–7a)²¹

The Moabite scribe portrays the Moabite patron god Chemosh using the Israelite Omri in the same manner that a later Judean scribe portrays the Judean patron god Yahweh using Nebuchadnezzar to punish the Judeans. The theological reasoning, in both cases, serves to explain and apologize for the loss of territory and relative political power. Despite the prominence of Omri in the Mesha Stele as well as his prominence in Assyrian references to the polity of Israel as “the land/house of Omri,”²² Omri does not get much play within biblical historiography (1 Kgs 16:16–17, 21–28).

In the interest of comparative study, we can appreciate the rhetorical payoffs of the notion that the Moabite god Chemosh chose to utilize the Israelite king Omri as an instrument of his divine justice. Alongside the pragmatics of transmission history, which differ substantially for the Mesha Stele as compared with the biblical anthology, the notion of tradition inheritance assists us in understanding the relative prominence and obscurity of Omri as an exemplar of a foreign king whom a god uses to enact his violence.

The above cases of the foreign king motif within the biblical anthology, Babylonian inscriptions, and the Mesha Stele share in producing domesticating theologies that elevate patron gods over powerful human kings. This is a synchronic shared discourse, which entails a sanctification of violence. Moving to the diachronic perspective, we now turn to how sanctified violence became inscriptured violence.

²¹ Translation after Smelik 2000, 137–38.

²² Among many, RINAP 1, Tiglath-Pileser III Composite Annals, fragment 7, line 2.

The Diachronic Sanctification of Inscriptured Violence

Thus far, I have emphasized that the biblical data are not *sui generis*. However, it is just as important to recognize the disproportionate attention that has been afforded to the biblical data within the history of transmission and interpretation of ancient West Asian examples of divine violence (as well as other topics). This is primarily a pragmatic aspect rather than a result of the biblical anthology's historiographic content or theology. The process of becoming scripture impacted both the amount of attention paid and the type of hermeneutics applied to the Judean data that ended up in the Hebrew biblical anthology.

For cases of violence featured within the biblical anthology, violent acts and agents are presented negatively, neutrally, or with ambiguity. However, after the status of scripture was applied to the Hebrew Bible, cases of inscriptured violence gained the possibility of being (mis)interpreted as models or paradigms of sanctified or pious behavior. Several interrelated factors are important, each of which I discuss in the next section: relationships among the processes of becoming scripture; constructions of the biblical anthology of texts as if it comprises one text or a homogenous divine word; the development of hermeneutics; and the use of scripture within communities for generating group self-understanding and boundaries. Understanding the implications of scriptural status vis-à-vis interpretations of divine violence is requisite for interrogating the use of inherited biblical models of authority in political settings, because such authority always has potential for direct, structural, and cultural violence.



Developing Status as Scripture

The process of a collection of Judean texts becoming scripture is a matter of reception, as is this scripture later coming to comprise the Hebrew Bible through processes of canonization. The status of scripture is not simply about labeling something as the “word,” “will,” “dictate,” “gift,” “image,” or “property” of a deity, since there are many examples of divine attributions and invocations that do not become scripture

(Wright 2020, 102). The label “scripture” entails a claim to divine communicative speech—that is, being the “word of god”—and also reflects a hermeneutic that generalizes the acute authority of formulaic phrases such as “thus says Yahweh” to a broader set of statements, stories, and texts. This process occurs through the continued use, reuse, and adaptation of the material that ends up in “scripture,” examples of this being through prooftexting, teaching, and commentary writing. These processes generate and reify an authoritative characterization of these texts as scripture. Among many scholars, Carr, Michael Satlow, John Collins, Jacob Wright, James Watts, and Hector Avalos offer analyses of the processes, qualifications, and textual and group dynamics involved in elevating texts to the status of scripture.



Carr presents a comparative analysis of utilization of ancient West Asian texts within educational contexts. He situates Israelite and Judean textuality within this context (Carr 2008, 111–71), then traces developments of the status of “eventually biblical” texts within the Hellenistic period. As he argues, the educational use of these texts entailed the “enculturation” of the elites who studied them. Moreover, all uses of these texts, whether for educational or liturgical and ceremonial purposes, would have contributed to “intellectually shaping and marking off a group of people from others” (2008, 287). Carr helpfully observes that modern distinctions between literature and scripture often obscure how ancient texts functioned (2008, 289). Such a distinction is important for my position that status as scripture is operative in later contexts and that understanding this phenomenon is important for unpacking the hermeneutics of interpreters, especially when they use their scripture to frame violence.

Satlow describes how texts gain “normative authority,” as compared to their preceding “oracular” and “literary” authority (2014, 4–5). He traces how early Jewish and Christian authors gave the Hebrew Bible or Septuagint and New Testament “only limited and specific kinds of authority well into the third century CE and beyond” (2014, 3). He distinguishes three types of authority: normative “authority to dictate our behaviors”; literary authority of “authors using earlier texts as models for new ones,” especially ancient scribes; and oracular authority, whereby the text “is thought to deliver a message, usually about the

future, from the divine realm. This is the authority that in antiquity was most commonly linked to the term ‘holy’” (2014, 4–5). He explains that for ancients the literary data show that they utilized scripture primarily as having oracular authority. Satlow’s distinctions are useful for my theorization of inscriptured models of violence. When violence portrayed in scripture is regarded as normative, this hermeneutic changes the potential significance of the original literary exemplars of violence as models for behavior. Likewise, when the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old and New Testaments are continually interpreted as having oracular authority, past inherited types of violence are readily projected upon potentially violent situations within interpreters’ contemporary contexts.

Collins describes the interrelated processes of the development of Torah authority and the development of Jewish identity (2017, 183–87). The development of Torah authority entailed constructions of the idea of torah, texts, and collections that came to be referenced as “the Torah” and the use of the Torah as a normativized authoritative anthology. All the more complex, the development of Jewish identity entailed constructions of Israel, chosenness, the histories and narratives of the polities of Israel and Judah, and several reinterpretations of the concept of Israel within ancient and antique contexts. Collins traces, “from Deuteronomy to Paul,” the “instrumentalist” creations of group identity constructs or ethnicity constructs that employed notions of Torah authority (2017, 6, 39). Collins’s analysis is especially helpful for emphasizing that such processes were activities that were dynamic rather than static. Elsewhere, Collins addresses violence in particular and describes prominent ways that postbiblical interpreters have utilized biblical models for framing the agency and purposes of violence, such as creating stark contrasts between “us” and “them” within a “cosmic dualism,” presenting illusions of certitude by interpreting circumstances as participating in a cosmic or eschatological battle, and writing about the divine endorsement of a pious, charismatic, or zealous hero (2003, 14–19). Such use of biblical exemplars as models or paradigms for framing and interpreting later violence rely upon the biblical anthology being regarded as authoritative, divinely produced scripture.

Wright asks with a subheading: “How Does a Text Become Sacred?” (2020, 101). Wright emphasizes in his answer that such texts have a



connection to a people's "sense of kinship," to their diverse stories of origin, and to a sense of "national community." He describes the centrality of the people's or audience's perspective that the text expresses "fidelity" to them, that they are of primary importance within the text. He focuses on a community's use and reception of the text as being "relevant to their own concerns," and not only on claims to authority or "holiness" within a text or by individual authority figures such as kings or other political or social authorities. Wright offers the scene in Nehemiah 8–10 as illustrative of this sort of relationship between a community and their beloved text (2020, 101–3). Of course, in the case of Nehemiah the scene is a literary portrayal of Judeans reaffirming their relationship to Torah authority through a covenant, and that literary scene is featured within the anthology that later is regarded as scripture itself. The Nehemiah story generates and promotes such an idealized relationship between a community and textual authority, including the voluntary and eager following of purportedly divine dictates. The behavior of the community within the story models an ideal posture toward an authoritative text, and the story presents the authority of that text as a given. Wright's insights regarding community and audience perception of seeing or interpreting themselves within scripture assist us in accounting for community or group compliance when agents of violence utilize their scripture to frame or justify past, present, or imminent violence.

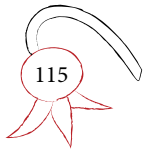
Watts theorizes "the nature of scriptures as a function of their ritualization in three dimensions—semantic, performative, and iconic" (2006/2008, 135). He emphasizes how performances of the content of scripture in artworks, movies, plays, and songs are more creative than performances by means of recitation, memorization, and aural reception (2006/2008, 137). Therefore, such performances are less bound by authoritative interpretations (2006/2008, 141). Moreover, interpretive performances that are regarded as "inspirational" are received as if they are "inspired," which bolsters the interpretive authoritative claims of the performer(s) (2006/2008, 149). I would add that such performative interpretations might go beyond or be at odds with the actual content of the source scripture. Watts identifies how persuasion and rhetorical dynamics are especially relevant in dramatic and artistic performances



of scripture (2006/2008, 150). The stakes for such persuasive and rhetorical efficacy are all the more dire when violence and oppression are at play (Jones 2010, 93–97).

Avalos uses the term “inscripturation” for the “reduction to writing of what is believed to be uniquely authoritative information about or from supernatural forces and/or beings.” This is beyond rendering oral information, stories, and teachings into texts, that is, textualization. “A sacred scripture is created when a text is believed to bear the authoritative thoughts and actions of a god (or gods) and/or supernatural forces” (Avalos 2013, 558). Avalos then identifies inscripturation as a resource that can be perceived as scarce, as only select individuals or groups have access to special texts, can read them, have authority to interpret them, or claim a status of having received purportedly divine revelation (2013, 558–59). There is conflict, competition, and contestation over the status of particular texts as scripture and over endorsement of the correct interpretation thereof. Such contestation bolsters a sense of scarcity around the status of and access to scripture, and that perceived scarcity has the potential to undergird various forms of violence, exclusion, and oppression (2013, 559).

Each of the scholars referenced in this section articulates a central aspect of how (by what means and under what circumstances) status as scripture developed. Status as scripture fundamentally determines the modes of reading of inherited Judean traditions, and these modes of reading, or hermeneutics, generate new meanings in subsequent contexts. Understanding how the processes of developing scripture impacts hermeneutics is central to my arguments regarding inscriptured violence, because with the status of scripture cases of inscriptured violence become possible models for “sanctified” or “pious” violent behavior. In turn, the implications of scriptural status vis-à-vis interpretations of divine violence (and divinely endorsed violence) are of primary focus when analyzing the use of inherited biblical models of authority in cases of direct, structural, and cultural violence. To reiterate, Carr’s argument regarding modern distinctions between literature and scripture informs my description of authority figures using their scripture to frame violence. Likewise, Satlow’s discussion of oracular authority bolsters my point that inherited types of violence may be projected upon



potentially violent situations within an interpreter's contemporary context. As Collins shows, the use of biblical models to frame violence relies upon the biblical anthology being regarded as divinely authoritative, which is fundamental to what I mean by inscriptured violence. More broadly, I build upon Avalos's notion of perceived scarcity to argue that the "proper" interpretation of scripture undergirds various forms of violence, exclusion, and oppression. Both Watts's explanation of persuasion and Wright's insights regarding how a community might see themselves within scripture assist scholars in accounting for group compliance with violence or violent rhetoric. In sum, my analysis of inscriptured violence incorporates these scholars' insights regarding status as scripture in order to address the weight of biblical rhetoric in framing cases of violence. This rhetorical weight elucidates the efficacy and continued generation of postbiblical hermeneutics of violence, as I discuss in the next section.



Inscriptured Violence and Postbiblical Hermeneutics of Violence

The cases of theological play with foreign kings within Judean explanations of violence that I feature in this article represent a subset of the broader range of phenomena that engage in theological apology for communal calamity in ancient West Asian political discourse (Ballentine 2023). Within that broader range of data, these cases of foreign kings typically stand in contrast to biblical treatments of violence that is portrayed positively and carried out by divine beings or holy men. For divine beings and holy men, the sanctification of violence occurs when agents of violence are featured positively in scripture, even when narratives featuring violent acts attributed to divine beings and holy men exhibit ambivalence.

Postbiblical interpreters have sometimes invoked biblical models as inscriptured models of violence in order to sanctify various types of violence. That is, once these figures are inscriptured, their violence may be invoked as sanctified models to justify violence within socioreligious discourses and religiously framed phenomena. It is a vital scholarly and humanitarian task to identify when narratives exhibit ambivalence

regarding violent acts done by divine beings and holy men, as well as how violence is critiqued within the Hebrew Bible (Lynch 2020). Identifying this ambivalence facilitates our ability to scrutinize the ways that violent acts performed by inscriptured figures may be used to portray violence as justified or sanctified in postbiblical contexts. As Saul Olyan (2019) argues, analysis of violence, especially ritualized violence, is crucial for understanding its impacts on social distinctions within the ancient context.

Individuals within many religious, political, and social groupings hold a self-understanding that they have inherited the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament, not only from the ancient Israelites and Judeans, but also from the divine. In such a paradigm, teachers, parents, authority figures, peers, and various other sorts of influencers teach, train, and disseminate the impression that biblical tradition belongs to the individuals and groups in the present. Individuals then learn to repurpose, apply, and interpret biblical tradition for their own needs and interests. While violence is based on social factors in the immediate context, some interpreters frame motivations for violence by employing religious notions such as values and divine authority.

My point is neither to excuse religion nor to make any sort of apologetic distinction regarding religious violence. Rather, scholarly inquiry necessitates analyzing religious rhetoric as such. Religious rhetoric bears explicit and implicit claims about divine prerogatives and transcendent truth-claims. It is such appeal to notions of transcendence or the divine that are seemingly so useful for justifying violence. Agents of violence might claim or consider themselves to be enacting directives or standards that divine beings have communicated or that are in line with transcendent truth-claims. I refer to this as the “sanctification of violence,” that is, the rhetorical use of religious notions to present violence as legitimate (Ballentine 2020, 208).

Within such a hermeneutical context, when figures who are often presented positively in the biblical anthology, such as patriarchs, priests, prophets, and anointed royals, are featured doing violent things, there is a sanctification of the violence. Through the hermeneutic of divine agency in scripture, the holy men might no longer be considered the actual agents of whatever violence the biblical narrative attributes to



them. Rather, the deity might be characterized as the actual agent. Once inscriptured, acts of direct violence as well as structural and cultural violence can become pious models for divinely approved behavior. As with other cases of ritualized violence, the typical consequences do not apply (Ballentine 2015, 12).

The cases of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian rulers offer somewhat of a contrast to biblical characters who are Israelite or Judean protagonists, in that one might not assume that foreign kings would have a positive role in Judean historiography or scripture. These cases show the extent to which the theological reasoning for explaining violence is elaborated, in these cases specifically massive military violence. When I initially prepared this material for a conference, I concluded that I did not imagine that any postbiblical interpreters would cite these foreign kings as pious models for divinely approved behavior (Ballentine 2018). This was in contrast to what we see with the postbiblical use of holy men such as Israelite and Judean patriarchs, priests, prophets, and royals who might be characterized as pious models for behavior in later contexts.



To support my speculative conclusion, I point to the undoing of the positive portrayal of the Persian king Cyrus in rabbinic commentary as well as the flourishing of positive characterizations of Cyrus in the 1960s Iranian context. Rabbinic discussion in the Babylonian Talmud, also quoted by Rashi, interprets the labeling of Cyrus as the “messiah” in Isaiah 44–45 to mean that the “Holy One” was complaining to his unnamed messiah about Cyrus (B. Megillah 12a). This dismantling leaves the rest of the royal ideology language intact, which serves to portray the “Holy One” as utilizing Cyrus to accomplish his doings, which, as discussed above, is similar to how the deity uses various foreign rulers throughout the Hebrew Bible. This interpretive note diminishes Cyrus’s positive portrayal by altering his implied relationship to the Judean deity. As an example of tradition inheritance, the rabbinic discussion reshapes the characterization of Cyrus.

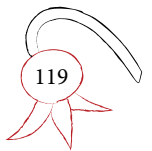
By contrast, apart from biblical tradition inheritance, the 1960s saw a renewal and reification of Cyrus as a positive figure. Within the context of the Iranian White Revolution, royals described the Cyrus Cylinder as a document of human rights and tolerance, and the cylinder became

a political symbol of Persian heritage.²³ The British Museum, The Iran Heritage Foundation, and the United Nations continue to celebrate the Cyrus Cylinder as a symbol of humanitarian concern and tolerance.²⁴ This is related to the propagandistic story that Cyrus entered Babylon peacefully, that he liberated inhabitants, and that he allowed previously deported peoples to return home. Of course, Cyrus's actions were politically pragmatic and served to ingratiate subjects throughout his territory, rather than being about modern values of religious tolerance and humanitarian ideals (Finkel 2013). These framings of the Cyrus Cylinder and use of the artifact as a contemporary political and humanitarian symbol exhibit nicely the long-lasting impacts and adaptability inherent in dynamics of tradition inheritance.

A Surprising Snapshot of Divine Endorsement in Contemporary Politics

As mentioned above, I had assumed that within the arena of biblical tradition inheritance Cyrus was unlikely to be invoked as a positive paradigm. However, in early 2018 the Persian king Cyrus was invoked as a positive and divinely approved model to attempt to portray the 45th President of the United States as having a positive and divinely endorsed role within particular veins of modern Israeli politics as well as modern American Christian politics.²⁵

In this comparison, there is hermeneutical space for both humor and horror, or at least disturbing perplexity. There is humor in comparing the notion that Cyrus did not even know Yahweh when Yahweh utilized him (Isa 45:5) to doubts about the sincerity of the 45th President's Christian faith. There is horror in the suggestion that any modern leader might be viewed as divinely sanctioned and therefore beyond the checks and balances of modern governing structures. In 2018, the invoking of the ancient theo-imperial model of Cyrus was surprising to me. The fact that the ancient theopolitical phenomenon of Cyrus was invoked in such a radically different modern geopolitical context



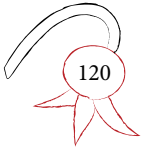
²³ Pahlavi 1967, 9, 142; Ansari 2007.

²⁴ Schulz 2008; Curtis 2013.

²⁵ Barrett-Fox 2018; Burton 2018; Silow-Carroll 2018.

highlights the importance of unpacking the ancient theological logic as well as the postbiblical use of inscriptured models.

In the past few years, and especially after the United States Capitol attack of January 6, 2021, journalists and scholars have grappled with modern religious, especially Christian evangelical, framings of the 45th President as part of “God’s plan,” even as an “imperfect vessel.”²⁶ More recently, leading up to the 2024 US presidential election, the biblical king of Israel Jehu was invoked to endorse the 47th President (Elia-Shalev 2024). Then, in early 2025 the 47th President was incorporated into the theological schema of a battle between “God and Satan,” with believers understanding themselves to be part of a righteous army ready to fight (McCrummin 2025). Though the presidential invocation of Cyrus was but a 2018 snapshot, it is no less important to trace, and the process of analyzing the Cyrus model is instructive for understanding subsequent examples of the political use of biblical paradigms.



Throughout such contemporary US Christian political discourse, we have influences of both biblical religion (as constructed by some Christians) and American civil religion (Bellah 1967), and both of these influences have precedent for justifying violence. Indeed, perhaps nationalistic violence offers the closest parallel to religious violence. Like religion, nationalism is a subset of ideology. Like universal cosmogonies and anthropogonies, systems of nationalism invoke foundational moments enshrined in functionally mythic narratives. Like religion, nationalism features ritualized behaviors, emphasis on shared conceptions of authority and “us,” and a sense of rallying around a common cause that is framed as serving a “greater good,” especially in nationalism’s distortion of patriotism. Likewise, structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1990) are well hidden in nationalistic views of society. Individual agents of violence and witnesses to violence might have a self-perception of pure patriotic or religious fervor while being influenced by authority figures with ideological, social, political, and economic interests.

²⁶ Balmer 2021; Alberta 2023.

Conclusion: Inherited Models of Violence

Jonathan Klawans succinctly makes an important methodological point that applies to the analysis of inherited biblical models of violence: “It matters whether the violence in question is celebrated, legitimated, merely tolerated or even condemned” (2008, 6). Of course, this point applies to any narrative representation of violence. A key implication of recognizing how instances of violence are portrayed within biblical narratives is that we must investigate the role of authors and editors of biblical narratives featuring violence. On this point, I find Kenneth George’s articulation helpful: “Dictating what the story of violence will be is fundamental to its exercise, and being in a position to do so puts someone or some group very close to the matrices of order and disorder” (1996, xii). George is an anthropologist speaking about cultural politics performed through ritual speech and violence. Applying his insight to biblical narratives, there are multiple layers of biblical interpretation to analyze, and focusing on any particular layer is not mutually exclusive with focusing on another layer or on the whole anthology. Biblical storytellers dictated how agents of violence were portrayed in their particular versions of many actual historical events of violence.

In the case of Yahweh’s foreign kings, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus were historical political figures with massive military reach, and their victims had relatively little voice. The theological paradigm of these powerful kings as Yahweh’s playthings diminishes their agency in service of a narrative creation of divine violence. By apologizing for historical violence as if it were divine violence, biblical storytellers advertently and inadvertently bolstered structural and cultural violence. Likewise, postbiblical interpreters who tell their own version of biblical stories as sacred stories, using the biblical text as a source of narrative details and claims to authority, dictate how agents of violence are portrayed. Postbiblical interpreters, like the original biblical storytellers, sometimes bolster structural and cultural violence within their contemporary settings.

Throughout my discussion of inscriptured violence, I have emphasized the role of postbiblical interpreters in the sanctification of



violence. At the same time, I heed Lester Grabbe's caution that value judgments informed by modern theological, political, or social sensibilities do not comprise "sociological analysis" (2008, 5). I admit that I maintain a general humanitarian interest in discouraging the use of the Bible or any religious text for the promotion or justification of violence or civil rights abuses. However, I have no interest in overlooking or sugarcoating biblical violence in order to inhabit a "comfortable theory" that might romanticize biblical themes of nonviolence.²⁷

While my primary interest, throughout my research and in this article, lies in ancient theopolitical ideologies, I think that historians of the Hebrew Bible, especially those of us who study cases of violence, are well positioned to contextualize modern invocations of ancient figures. As we navigate 2026, aiming to analyze ancient and contemporary data for tradition inheritance, it is vastly important to make critical distinctions among political contexts within their historical settings; to interrogate claims that the ancient inherited phenomena have anything oracular or normative to do with modern political settings; and to study how such claims dynamically reinterpret and repurpose inherited notions.

Judean treatments of violence associated with Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus exhibit dynamic and creative theological play. Judean authors portray Yahweh using Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar to enact violence against his people and using Cyrus to benefit his people, though at the expense of the Babylonians. These cases of Yahweh using foreign kings share the rhetorical dynamic of diminishing the foreign king's agency in service of elevating Yahweh's agency. Judean authors participated in a synchronic shared discourse of political theology. Subsequently, the status of some ancient Judean writings as scripture led to notions of inscriptured violence. From a diachronic perspective, we may interrogate inherited models of divine violence and sanctified violence through critical attention to ancient political contexts as well as through scrutiny of contemporary political repurposing.



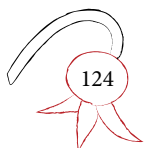
²⁷ Sandmel 1979, 139; Grabbe 2008, 22.

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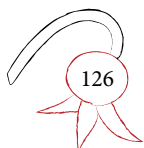
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