

Sanctifying Violence and the Biblical Tradition

Professor Debra Ballentine

Fall 2020

Religion 840:549 graduate seminar

Remote instruction via Sakai

Religion 840:401 senior seminar

Virtual Office hours: Fridays TBD

We will explore the relationship between biblical traditions and justifying violence, through critical analysis of how violent acts may be legitimated by appeal to notions of the divine. We will begin with theoretical questions such as: What is violence? What are possible relationships between religion and violence? The bulk of the seminar will involve in-depth readings of particular biblical stories that feature violence, from mutilating corpses of enemies to slaughtering children. When and how are such acts portrayed as legitimate? When are such acts deemed unacceptable? We will also examine broader ancient Near Eastern themes of ritual violence and sanctified combat in order to better understand biblical descriptions of violence. We will conclude with the use of biblical “scripture” to frame violence within Jewish and Christian traditions.

Our primary objective is to examine the relationship between biblical traditions and the rhetorical act of sanctifying violence. In order to do so, we examine instances of ritual violence and sanctified combat from ancient Mesopotamian literature, iconography, and the Bible. A second objective is for students to develop understanding of scholarly methodologies used within religious studies and biblical studies. This is accomplished through critical analysis of primary texts and discussion of current scholarship. More broadly, we emphasize recent developments in the theorization of religious violence.

Requirements and assessment:

30% submission of weekly reading comprehension questions

20% submission of weekly video comprehension notes

20% presentation of research project, including: chat with me about a topic by week 10; submit 1 page topic description and preliminary biblio around week 12; present week 14 or 15

30% final research paper: 10-15pg undergrads; 20-25pg grad students

We will adhere to the University’s policy on academic integrity.

Books:

All articles and book chapters are available on Sakai.

You need a copy of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, such as *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, college edition; preferably the NRSV or the NJPS for the Hebrew Bible. We will discuss various translations in class as well as suitable online versions.

Topics and Reading Schedule

The course will be divided into three main units: (1) comparative study and theories of “religious” violence; (2) sanctified violence in ancient texts and art; and (3) the use of biblical tradition in subsequent justifications of violence.

Week 1 - Background: academic study of religion; scholarly approaches to Hebrew Bible
Read: Lincoln, “Theses on Method”

Week 2 - Overview of ancient West Asian and Greco-Roman history
Read: Collins, “Israel”; Oxford Study Bible essays; Ballentine, “Violence and the Bible”

Unit 1: What is the relationship between religion and violence?

Week 3 – an exemplary treatment of our topic; how does ideology work?

Read: John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 3-21; all biblical citations in the article; McCutcheon, “Myth”; Lease, “Ideology”

Week 4 - What is violence?

Read: *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Abbink and Aijmer (Oxford: Berg, 2000), preface, chapter 1; D. Riches, “The Phenomenon of Violence,” *The Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 1-27; idem, “Aggression, War, Violence: Space/Time and Paradigm,” *Man* 26 (1991): 281-98

Week 5 - Comparative study of religious violence; religious justifications for violence
Read: *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence*, edited by Juergensmeyer and Kitts (Princeton University Press, 2011), intro and part 1

Week 6 - Roles of religion in violence

Read: *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence*, part 2

Unit 2: Sanctified violence in ancient West Asian texts and art

Week 7 - Violence in Israelite/Judean culture and the bible

Read: Klawans and Bernat, “Religion, Violence, and the Bible”; Zevit, “The Search for Violence in Israelite Culture and the Bible”; Ballentine, “Violence and the Bible,”; review Collins, “Zeal of Phineas”; all biblical citations in these essays

Week 8 - Ancient West Asian texts and monumental art: divine combat, mutilation of defeated gods, war-related violence as glory

Read: Lincoln, “Sanctified Violence”; Noegel, “Dismemberment, Creation, and Ritual”; Zainab Bahrani, intro and ch. 8; Jacob Wright, “Urbicide: The Ritualized Killing of Cities in the ANE”;

you might want to skim selections from the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*; Ugaritic *Baal Cycle*; Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris; ANE royal inscriptions; and Hebrew Bible

Week 9 - Violence in biblical prophecy and royal traditions

Read: Kamionkowski, “The ‘Problem’ of Violence in Prophetic Literature”; Geller, “The Prophetic Roots of Religious Violence in Western Religions”; Mark Leuchter, “Between Politics and Mythology: Josiah’s Assault on Bethel in 2 Kgs 23:15-20”; all biblical citations in essays

Week 10 – Violence in biblical legal traditions

Read: Wright, “Homicide, Talion, Vengeance, and Psycho-Economic”; all biblical citations

Week 11 – Ritualized violence in the bible

Read: S. M. Olyan, “Theorizing Violence in Biblical Ritual Contexts: The Case of Mourning Rites,” *Social Theory and the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill), 169-94; Olyan, “The Instrumental Dimensions of Ritual Violence against Corpses in Biblical Texts”; Ballentine, “What Ends Might Ritual Violence Accomplish? The Case of Rechab and Baanah in 2 Sam 4”; Susan Niditch, “‘The Traffic in Women’: Exchange, Ritual Sacrifice, and War”; all biblical citations in essays

Unit 3: Sanctifying violence *using* the biblical tradition

Week 12 – Sanctified violence in antiquity

Read: *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, 79-134; all biblical citations in essays; Tracy Lemos, “Order from Chaos: Comparing Approaches to Violence in Anthropology, Assyriology, and Study of the Hebrew Bible,” *CBR* 18 (2020)

Week 13 - into modernity

Read: *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ch. 4, 5, 6, 14, 15, 27, 37; Review: *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence*

Week 14 – Student Presentations of Research Projects

Week 15 – Student Presentations of Research Projects

Final papers due December 15