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An Application of Pope Benedict XVI's Principle of the "Hermeneutic of Faith" to the Problem of Divine Violence

Kelly Anderson
St. Charles Borromeo Seminary
Overbrook, Pennsylvania

In *Verbum Domini*, 47 Pope Benedict XVI outlines his vision for the study of Sacred Scripture in the seminary:

A further consequence of an adequate hermeneutic of faith has to do with its necessary implications for exegetical and theological formation, particularly that of candidates for the priesthood. Care must be taken to ensure that the study of sacred Scripture is truly the soul of theology inasmuch as it is acknowledged as the word of God addressed to today's world, to the Church and to each of us personally...A notion of scholarly research that would consider itself neutral with regard to Scripture should not be encouraged...Along these lines, I urge that the study of the word of God, both handed down and written, be constantly carried out in a profoundly ecclesial spirit, and that academic formation take due account of the pertinent interventions of the magisterium, which "is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant (*DV*, 10).

The phrase, a *hermeneutic of faith*, is often repeated by Pope Benedict, usually in the context of discussions concerning the historical-critical method. The original idea associated with the historical-critical method was that once religion, creeds, Fathers of the Church, liturgy, etc., were stripped away from reading the Bible, then the Biblical texts could be examined objectively and a real picture of Israel and Jesus could begin to emerge. But Pope Benedict, then Cardinal Ratzinger, noted in 2003 at the 100th anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The mere objectivity of the historical method does not exist. It is simply impossible to completely exclude philosophy or hermeneutical foresight... it has become evident

that the pure historical method – as in the case of secular literature as well – does not exist.”¹ How, then, is one to arrive at an objective understanding of the Biblical text? For Pope Benedict, any intellectual journey must involve God. Only God knows everything completely, and only someone who is God can make sense of the various, contradictory depictions of God.² And that “someone who is God” is Jesus Christ, for “in Jesus Christ, God and man, the Infinite and finite, the Creature and the creature are joined together. Man has found a place in God. Only he who is both man and God can overcome the infinite distance between Creator and creature.”³

Further, the Pope maintains that knowledge of Christ which can lead us to God must be a way of life. To know Christ, to know the Word of God, it is necessary that one follow him. The decision to follow Jesus is an existential one as well as an intellectual one, and these two dimensions cannot be separated.

New knowledge [of Jesus] should be accompanied by a renewed life, which reopens our closed horizons. Therefore the ancient Church regarded conversion to the faith as a positively intellectual journey, in which man is confronted with the “doctrine of the truth” and its arguments, but in which he also acquires a new life companionship, in which new experiences and interior progress become possible for him.⁴

True knowledge, therefore, necessarily means a *relationship* with Jesus Christ.

The faith does not refer simply to a book, which as such would be the sole and final authority for the believer. In the center of the Christian faith stands not a book, but a person – Jesus Christ who is himself the living word of God and who is revealed in Scripture, and as the Word of God and only norm, interprets himself, so to speak, in the words of Scripture. Scripture can be understood correctly only in life with him, in a living relationship with him.⁵

In other words, only Jesus Christ can be the norm for understanding Scripture, and the pope explains how this is possible:

Christ has built and is building for himself the Church, the people of God as his living organism, his “body.” Since Christ is building his body, his Church, it follows that part and parcel of the relationship with him is fellowship with the pilgrim people, which is actually the human author and proprietor of the Bible.⁶

Therefore, to arrive at the truth, Jesus Christ, one must enter and be part of that people, the Church that Jesus has built for himself, which is his body. It follows then that in order to arrive at an objective understanding of the Bible and to uncover the depth of its mysteries, the hermeneutical presupposition with which we approach the text cannot be that of discounting

¹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Relationship between the Magisterium and Exegetes,” 100th Anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Vatican Website, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030510_ratzinger-comm-bible_en.html (accessed Sept. 14, 2011).

² Benedict XVI, “Christ, the Redeemer of Mankind” in *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) 67.

³ Benedict XVI, “Christ, the Redeemer of Mankind,” 68.

⁴ Benedict XVI, “Redeemer of Mankind,” 67.

⁵ Benedict XVI, “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” in *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) 151.

⁶ Benedict XVI, “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” 151-52.

creeds, religion, and liturgy, but needs to be precisely a presupposition of faith! One must approach the Bible living within the faith community born of an existential decision to follow Jesus. For only then will the deep treasures and riches become visible to the human person. Secular study of the Bible teaches that only without faith can one read the Bible objectively; the Pope counters that only *with faith* is one truly able to uncover and encounter the deep mystery within the sacred text.

Thus it appears to me that it is fundamentally necessary for the Scripture theologian and professor to approach the text with the hermeneutic of faith and the awareness of the ecclesial nature of the text (cf. *Verbum Domini*, 29-30). When the constitutive relationship between Scripture, Magisterium and Tradition (cf. *DV*, 9-10) is ignored or even rejected, the Sacred text is incomprehensible and impossible to penetrate. But when the text is read correctly, it then becomes the soul of theology.

Teaching OT courses presents a particular challenge in demonstrating this relationship. OT courses usually begin with historical issues, and then concentrate on an overview of the texts, often employing the historical-critical method or other methodologies, such as narrative or rhetorical criticism. At times, other readings, such as Rabbinical or Patristic writings may be consulted. What can be lacking is a demonstration of how the Church's teaching is fundamental in order to understand the Scriptures, or how the OT fits into the larger context of the NT or the teaching of the Church.

Since each OT course is necessarily different, how this can be achieved will be unique for each course. This paper will examine how this can be accomplished within the prophetic corpus. Because the prophetic books span a wide time of composition (most scholars agree that Amos preached in the 8th century, and that Zech 9-14 may be from the late Persian period), one can trace themes or "characters" within the texts and begin to see the development and growth therein. This flow naturally continues in the NT, and later in the Church. A study such as this can be done with many themes and topics, such as the role of the prophet or grace, but this paper will primarily address the question of divine violence.

I have chosen the theme of divine violence since this appears to be the most complex and difficult topic when teaching the prophets to seminarians. By violence, I intend any act which abuses, violates, injures or kills. This must be distinguished from anger and even certain punishments, which may cause harm, but do not necessarily constitute violence.

In this paper, I will first examine two modern studies on this topic which disregard the constitutive relationship between Scripture, Magisterium and Tradition, in order to illustrate how necessary it is for seminary professors to engage in proper hermeneutical work. These methods and conclusions must be rejected. Second, since Benedict XVI teaches that Jesus Christ is the truth, I will then briefly examine violence in his life. With that as a backdrop, I will then study the OT prophets. This will be in two parts: a study of imprecatory language, and a survey of five prophetic books. Finally, a conclusion will be offered.

Part I: Two Modern Studies on the Question of Divine Violence

It is not necessary to illustrate that the prophetic books are replete with violent oracles. What makes this violence so disturbing is that God's threats do not remain merely abstract warnings: God first punished Israel in 722, and then Judah with the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile in 587. Needless to say, such divine violence is shocking and scholars have struggled to make sense of these texts.

Such texts have led to various attempts to “shelve” the topic of divine violence: spiritualizing it (“put on the whole armor of God”), reducing it to the mysterious ways of God (though the texts have a remarkably “plain sense”), “projections” of human behaviors, or even cutting these texts out of the bible, whether practically (as in lectionaries) or actually.⁷

Modern solutions to the problem of divine violence often seem to move toward the same end: rejection of the Biblical and Christian tradition. Two examples will suffice.⁸

The first is from John J. Collins' Presidential Address delivered in November of 2002 to the Society of Biblical Literature.⁹ Collins examines the issue of violence in the Bible and finds that the root of religious violence lies in the absoluteness of God's command to separate oneself from others who are different which thus legitimates violence.

What this literature [the NT] shares with Deuteronomy, however, is the sharp antithesis with the Other, whether the Other is defined in moral terms, as sinners, or in political terms as the Roman Empire. Both Deuteronomy and the apocalypses fashion identity by constructing absolute, incompatible contrasts. In the other literature, the contrast is ethnic and religious, but regional. In the apocalypses, it takes the form of cosmic dualism. In both cases, the absoluteness of the categories is guaranteed by divine revelation and is therefore not subject to negotiation of compromise. Herein lies the root of religious violence in the Jewish and Christian traditions.¹⁰

In exploring solutions to this dilemma, Collins first rejects the solution proposed by Luke Timothy Johnson: that of turning to the Church Fathers who wrestled with the text in order to find an interpretation “worthy of God.” Collins rejects Johnson's proposal saying that allegorical interpretations are hardly viable in the modern world.¹¹ He then rejects a canonical reading of Scripture for this only illustrates more fully the problem.

The full canonical shape of the Christian Bible, for what it is worth, still concludes with the judgment scene in Revelation, in which the Lamb that was slain returns as the heavenly warrior with a sword for striking down the nations. In short, violence is not the only model of behavior on offer in the Bible, but it is not an incidental or peripheral feature, and it cannot be glossed over. The Bible not only witnesses to the innocent victim and to the God of victims, but also to the hungry God who devours victims and to the zeal of his human agents.¹²

Finally, Collins concludes that since no explanation can be given for violence in the Bible, parts of it must be rejected as a moral guide.

⁷ Terence E. Fretheim “‘I Was Only a Little Angry’: Divine Violence in the Prophets,” *Interpretation* 367 (2004) 366.

⁸ On the idea that religion is the cause of violence, see Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For another study, see James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The idea that violence can be abolished by rejecting religion and God is also prevalent in the blogosphere.

⁹ Later published as “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *JBL* 122 (2003) 3-21.

¹⁰ Collins, “Legitimation of Violence,” 18.

¹¹ Collins, “Legitimation of Violence,” 19.

¹² Collins, “Legitimation of Violence,” 19-20.

The least that should be expected of any biblical interpreter is honesty, and that requires the recognition, in the words of James Barr, that “the command of consecration to destruction is morally offensive and has to be faced as such,” whether it is found in the Bible or in the *Qur'an*. To recognize this is to admit that the Bible, for all the wisdom it contains, is no infallible guide on ethical matters. . . . Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world, is to show that certitude is an illusion.¹³

Thus, human morality is elevated to the point of judging the morality of the Bible, not the other way around, and places human subjectivity in the highest realm. Once again, we have made ourselves gods, continuing the trend begun in Gen 1-11, and falling into idolatry, the very thing that inflamed God's wrath throughout the OT. Furthermore, in a matter of a few terse paragraphs, Collins has rejected the basic Catholic hermeneutics for biblical study as outlined in *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*, those basic hermeneutics first purposed by Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and those very methods the Church continues to hold until today.¹⁴ All that is left for us to do is to trust in ourselves and our own ability to wade through the Biblical texts to cull whatever wisdom is “worthy of humanity.”

The second study to be examined is done by Gerlinde Baumann who brings together the latest advances in feminist interpretations.¹⁵ She examines the issue of violence in the prophetic texts and finds that violence is usually situated in the contexts of the metaphor of marriage. She individually examines the books of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve Prophets. Only two will be presented here: Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In the book of Jeremiah, Baumann categorizes the suffering and punishment on the part of Judah and Jerusalem as typical female suffering. For example, the images of sexual violence, labor pains, and childlessness belong to the realm of feminine suffering. Even the prophet is “feminine” in his sufferings and “can best see himself in the role of a woman.”¹⁶ Like a female, Jeremiah suffers violence and pressure from his surroundings. Further, he is powerless, “overpowered,” and “seduced” by YHWH. Both the prophet and the “woman” who is Israel/Judah/Jerusalem are chosen by YHWH from their youth (1:5-10; 2:2), and both are perceived primarily in a relationship with him. However, while the prophet struggles to understand why he has to suffer so much, the “woman” is depicted as having brought this suffering upon herself which she can avoid by turning back to YHWH. Baumann maintains that while men are responsible for most of the sinful behavior described in the book, God's punishment is depicted in predominantly female images. “If the traits and behavior attributed to the different sexes are considered, it becomes clear that suffering is expressed in images of women's life experience.”¹⁷ This does not mean that only women suffered God's wrath in Israel, but the means by which God expressed his rage against Israel is done in female metaphors. This renders the image of God especially difficult: “God and his prophet are two men who, in their imagined actions or fantasies, exercise excessive forms of violence primarily against women –

¹³ Collins, “Legitimation of Violence,” 20-21.

¹⁴ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.40-41 where Augustine teaches the end of Scripture study is love of God and neighbor. Further, clearer scripture passages can be used to help understand the meaning of more obscure ones.

¹⁵ *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 128.

¹⁷ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 133.

two men who live without women, without a relationship, self-sufficient and alone.”¹⁸ Such texts therefore can furnish “violence-prone men today” models for violence against women.¹⁹

According to Baumann, the picture in Ezekiel is climatic in the Biblical tradition, for no longer is God's punishment depicted in feminine terms, but is actually wrought against women themselves. In other words, no longer in Ezekiel is the enemy of God *portrayed* as a woman, but based on Ezekiel 23:48, she concludes that women are those who are to be punished (“Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, so that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done.”).

The words in 23:48 are no longer addressed to all Israelites, who previously were included in the notion of Jerusalem/Samaria, and even Sodom. In a certain way this verse confirms the thesis of feminist exegetes who do not reduce the treatment of the “woman” solely to the symbolic or poetic level. Here fantasies of violence against concrete women play their part: these women are promised the same fate as the metaphorical “women.”²⁰

Thus, for Baumann, the book of Ezekiel serves to explicate the “utterly violent end of the ‘women,’ Samaria and Jerusalem, and to legitimate it.”²¹ Further, she speculates that one of the reasons the book was accepted as canonical is the presence of pornography.²²

In proposing solutions to these images of God, Baumann considers, but then rejects the canonical approach where other images of God as tender or loving in a marriage or parental scene may soften or even abrogate the more terrifying depictions of God.

Images of God as the rapist or abuser of his daughter cannot be “neutralized” even by the most positive “counter-images.” Their scandalousness cannot and should not be softened by counter-texts. Only permanent outrage is an adequate response to an outrageous image of God. There is no biblical “medicine” that can help the story of God as the abusive husband of his “wife” Israel come to a happier end.²³

Having thus rejected the prophetic corpus, and the Bible at large, as a means of finding God, Baumann instead offers Nature images where “God is thought of as ‘power in relationship,’ as a (female) friend, or (male or female) lover, in the image of a self-transforming clown.”²⁴ Such images avoid the Biblical hierarchies which inherently enable violence. Baumann furnishes no specifics as to how these images are concretely validated.

Baumann's study appears biased. First, it is contestable whether Jeremiah's sufferings are feminine. His pain stems from his vocation as a prophet which bring him reproach and mockery (20:7), thus causing him to question the ways of God (15:18). He was commanded by

¹⁸ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 134.

¹⁹ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 134.

²⁰ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 164.

²¹ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 224.

²² Baumann maintains there are four reasons that these texts were handed down: first is because they have pornographic features, second, they reflect the horrors of war which the people experienced at that time, third, they offer a consistent explanatory model for the exilic fate of Israel and Jerusalem, and fourth, the book expresses God as the only God, a thought which dominated exilic and post-exilic OT writing. This dominance of God was accomplished by the “killing” of the city “woman” Jerusalem, leaving no counterpart to God. Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 164.

²³ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 236.

²⁴ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 237.

God not to marry or engage in normal human relations to feel within himself abandonment and loneliness (16:1-13). None of these are typically “feminine.” Further, Baumann maintains that the metaphoric language becomes concrete language using the slight evidence of Ezek 23:48, which is questionable. And even if the verse refers to concrete woman, the evidence remains scant and inconclusive. Finally, I will leave it to the reader to determine whether the image of a self-transforming clown is an improvement over the God of Israel.

Both of these solutions to the problem of divine violence must be rejected by Catholic theologians. The fundamental problem in each of these interpretations is that they reject a hermeneutic of faith in their studies which must ontologically be part of exegetical study in order to attain a correct understanding of the Biblical text. Rather, these scholars have sought an objective understanding in the text based on their own presuppositions, and both conclude that the text must be rejected.

Part II: Violence in the Life of Jesus Christ

A Catholic understanding of the problem of violence in the prophetic literature must begin, flow from and somehow return to Jesus Christ. He is the hermeneutic of faith through which the prophets are read, and at the same time, he is their fulfillment. Thus, a dialogical relationship with Jesus is necessary. To that end, I will first briefly examine the life of Jesus, and then the prophets, and finally see how the prophets are fulfilled in Jesus.

A short survey of the life of Jesus Christ illustrates that he is not a violent man. Despite being sorely provoked and tried, he never shows signs of aggression, vengeance or retaliation. For example, Jesus is often threatened with violence and death: the crowd tries to throw him over the cliff in the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30); after showing himself to be the Messiah, the Pharisees seek to put him to death (Mark 3:1-6); Herod Antipas sought to kill him (Luke 13:31); he is forced to hide from the Jews because they sought to kill him, and his arguments with the Pharisees reveal that he knows they intend to kill him (John 8:59; 12:36). Even his disciples know that by entering into Jerusalem he was accepting death (John 11:16). Yet not once does he demonstrate anger, bitterness or hatred toward his would-be or actual murderers. In fact, when John the Baptist was put to death, Jesus does not say a word but goes to the mountains alone to pray (Matt 14:13).

Further, the religious leaders often provoke Jesus publicly, intending to embarrass, belittle or test him (Matt 16:1; 19:15ff; 22:18; Mark 8:11; Luke 10:25; 11:16; John 8:6). Jesus responds to their challenges, often reducing them to silence when showing their errors. But he never resorts to hostility or violence. Further, crowds and throngs of people continually harass him, stopping him for a variety of reasons: seeking a sign, asking for healings, asking questions. This constant chaos and activity leaves him weary and even frustrated, but never angry. Additionally, Jesus also shows no anger toward sinners. Whether he is pardoning or eating with sinners, or calling the thieving tax collectors to follow Him, Jesus demonstrates no anger, no repulsion.

Finally, and perhaps the most thought provoking, is that he conveys absolutely no anger, animosity or hostility on the cross. The betrayal by a kiss, the abandonment by his closest friends, the mockery, the torture and his eventual murder do not make him angry. Even more astounding, he asks the Father to forgive his torturers and murderers (Luke 23:34). After his resurrection when he appears to his apostles, he offers them peace, not harsh words or a reproach (Luke 24:36; John 20:19).

In conclusion, Jesus repeatedly shows no violence or desire for revenge when he is treated maliciously. Rarely does Jesus even get angry. The scriptures state only on three occasions that Jesus is angry. First, he is angry with his apostles when they do not allow the children to come to him and he indignantly reproaches them (Mark 10:13-16). He is angered at the hardness of heart of the Pharisees who refuse to accept that it is better to save a life rather than destroy it on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5). Finally, he is angered and moved to tears in John 11:1-44.²⁵

A difficult moment remains: Jesus' entry into the Temple where he throws out the moneychangers and merchants (Mark 12:15-18; Matt 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17). Pope Benedict has a discussion on this in the second volume of his series *Jesus of Nazareth*. He first rejects the exegetical interpretations that Jesus' actions were a justified attack on the misuse of the Temple, or that Jesus was a political revolutionary. Rather, he notes that Jesus entered the temple and "taught" the proper function of the Temple: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:17).

According to Pope Benedict, Jesus' teaching fulfills two ancient prophecies. The first is Isa 56:7 where Isaiah preached that all peoples would come together in the house of God to worship the Lord. The Holy Father notes that Jesus' action takes place in the Court of the Gentiles, the place where all were invited to come and pray to the one God. By cleansing the Temple, Jesus removes whatever obstacles there may be to the common recognition and worship of God. Thus, Jesus makes possible a space for common worship.²⁶ Second, Isaiah's universalist promise is combined with Jeremiah's prophecy "You have made my house into a den of robbers" (Jer 7:11). Jeremiah fought against the politicization of the faith which believed God would always protect the Temple; the prophet taught that God would not protect a Temple that was a "den of robbers." The pope maintains that Jesus sees the situation of Jeremiah's time repeated in his own day, and his words and actions thus constitute a warning.²⁷

The pope then turns his attention to Jesus' statements in Mark and John where he declared that if the temple were destroyed, he would build another in three days (Mark 14:58; John 2:19). The new temple Jesus refers to is himself. The old Temple cult ends with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and his resurrection, and from that moment begins the formation of the new temple which is his body, "the Risen One, who gathers the peoples and unites them in the sacrament of his body and blood. He himself is the new Temple of humanity."²⁸

Further, in the Johannine account, the disciples recall the words, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17). The pope says that the "zeal" that leads Jesus to cleanse the Temple and build a new one is actually the zeal which leads him to his Passion and cross.²⁹ The pope states, "The 'zeal' that would serve God through violence he transformed into the zeal of

²⁵ John 11:33, 38 use the word *embrimaomai* to describe the emotions of Jesus. Scholars have sufficiently established that the word means "to be moved to anger." See Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (AB 29; Yale: Yale University Press, 1995) 425-26; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999) 193.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week, From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011) 17-8.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 20.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 21-22.

²⁹ The pope notes that John 2:17 "Zeal for your house will consume me" is a quote from Ps 69 which is the prayer of the just one who lives in isolation for obeying the word of God. The disciples see in Jesus' action the just one who suffers for God. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 22.

the Cross. Thus he definitely established the criterion for true zeal – the zeal of self-giving love.”³⁰

Thus Jesus, who shows us the Father, is never violent even though he is terribly provoked. Rather, he *accepts the violence of humanity* in his very being and responds with self-giving love. His death on the cross demonstrates the great love of God for mankind. Love is the motivation behind his sacrifice, and love transforms the violent actions of men into that which wrought our salvation.

Jesus Christ, who is God, is not violent.³¹ But is it possible to reconcile the depiction of Jesus Christ with the violent depiction of God in the prophetic literature? If Pope Benedict is correct and Jesus Christ is the truth, then these seeming contradictions must be resolved. Moreover, the solution itself cannot be foreign to the text of the OT, but must be within it.

Part III: A Study of the Prophetic Texts

This third part of the paper will concentrate on a study of the OT texts and will unfold in two parts: a study of imprecatory language in the OT, and then a study of the “characters” within the prophetic literature. Both of these studies seek to provide an insight into the problem of violence.

A. A Brief Study of Imprecatory Language

In order to examine the problem of divine violence, an overview of the imprecatory language, threats or judgment oracles may prove helpful. In the Ancient Near East such language was not uncommon.³² Imprecatory language in the ANE can be divided into two types. The first is conditional, usually indicated by the conjunction “if” and linked to specific prohibitions in order to warn against certain behaviors. The second, the unconditional curse, is a solemn response to an act already committed and its function is to announce the destruction of the violator.³³ Imprecatory language and threats are used to modify human behavior and to punish.

God's threats of violence are similar to those in the ANE, but exhibit some important differences. First, God uses violence to modify human behavior. However, the OT makes it clear that if God uses violence, it is because humans are first violent.³⁴ Gen 6:11-13 states,

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is

³⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 22.

³¹ Pope Benedict XVI asserted in his Regensburg address that “Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul.” “Three Stages in the Program of De-Hellenization,” Meeting with the Representatives of Science, Sept. 12, 2006, <http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english> (accessed April 4th, 2011).

³² Pierre Gilbert notes, “Moreover, far from being limited to international treaties, the imprecatory motif is attested in funerary and votive inscriptions, international treaties, *kudurru* stones (used to indicate the boundaries of a field), law codes, oaths, myths, epic stories, legends, hymns, and prayers, as well as in a number of historical and prophetic texts.” “The Function of Imprecation in Israel's Eight-Century Prophets,” *Direction* 35 (2006) 46.

³³ Gilbert, “Function,” 46-7.

³⁴ Terence Fretheim, “God and Violence in the Old Testament,” *Word & World* 24 (2004) 21; cf. Fretheim, “Divine Violence,” 365.

filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.”

The prophets also teach that war is a result of oppression of the weak and vulnerable (Isa 10:1-5; Mic 2:1-3; Ezek 22:19-31).³⁵ Violent actions of God are a response to the violence in humanity, and would not exist if somehow they were not first in us. Violent actions are not intrinsic to the nature of God, but rather the means that God uses to reduce violence in people and to bring justice. The most common word for violence is *ḥāmās* and it is used almost exclusively for human violence. As Fretheim points out, it is almost always condemned, implicitly or explicitly.

God sharply rejects violent people: “The Lord...hates the lover of violence (Ps 11:5), commands that Israel ‘do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow’ (Jer 22:3), demands that violators of the command “put away violence and oppression” (Ezek 45:9), and condemns those who do “violence to the earth” (Hab 2:8; 17; see Zeph 1:9)...Such a resolute divine opposition to human violence is important to remember in reflecting upon divine violence.³⁶

Second, the unconditional curses in the ANE simply announce destruction which is a punishment for having acted in a certain way. But the prophets insert in the unconditional curses a rhetorical and pedagogical perspective.³⁷ The oracles, therefore, do not simply announce destruction, but seek to bring the Israelites to conversion and repentance. Gilbert notes the following examples:

On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. (Hos 2:16-17)

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isa 1:15-17)

So, the end or *telos* of announcements of destruction is not punishment, but *conversion* and *salvation*. “Violence becomes the means by which God’s people are delivered from violence.”³⁸ God allowed the horrors and suffering of the exile, but prior to the exile, Israel and Judah were engaged in heinous crimes. Further, the exile proved to be a time of great flowering in theology and faith. Thus, wrath and violence is not an end in itself, but their end is for salvation.

Finally, the oracles of judgment, paradoxically, are closely tied to the election of Israel. Note for example Amos 3:2: “You alone have I intimately known of all the families of earth, that is why I shall punish you for all your wrong-doings.” This indicates that God’s motive for

³⁵ Fretheim, “Divine Violence,” 365-66.

³⁶ Fretheim, “God and Violence,” 20.

³⁷ Gilbert, “Function,” 51.

³⁸ Fretheim, “God and Violence,” 24.

punishment is his love for Israel, indicating that punishment is a good for Israel and used to ultimately help and heal her.

Thus, imprecatory language is common in the ANE, but takes on a different tone in the Bible. What begins to emerge is that violence does not seem to be inherent in God. God hates violence, but tolerates it, and can even use it to reduce violence in human beings. God ultimately uses violence against Israel in order to bring about salvation, precisely because she is chosen by him.

B. A Study of the “Characters” in the Prophetic Literature

The prophetic corpus spans a large period of time and centers on the most searing event of the OT: the exile. Thus, in looking at the development of various thoughts within the prophetic books, one can get a glimpse of the thought processes and development of Israel before and after the exile.

In the course that I teach on the prophets, I present the books in chronological order (not canonical) and attempt to trace various themes and their developments. One of the more fruitful themes is the development of the character “Israel” and the study of the prophets as real individuals. Viewing the dynamics that exist between Israel and the prophets yields various insights. I will now attempt to describe the prophet and to trace the character “Israel,” examining how the prophet lives his vocation and how Israel responds to the prophet’s message, in order to get a deeper insight into the problem of divine violence. I will try to show two things:

1. The prophet is called upon to live a life not by his own choice, and this call costs him deeply, on both a personal, societal and spiritual level. The prophet stands apart from his people and sacrifices himself in a real way in order to deliver his message of salvation. Often, this entails actually living the punishment which the people will suffer in his own life (cf. Jeremiah, Ezekiel).

2. Israel actually grows as a people throughout the prophetic corpus. In the first two books that will be examined, Amos and Hosea, she remains hard-hearted and hostile to the message of the prophets and makes no real attempt to convert from her terrible crimes. This changes, and by Third Isaiah, she attempts a real conversion, but recognizes that she *cannot do so*. Israel (and the reader!) come to realize that if one is to follow God’s commandments, there *must be an action on the part of God to make it possible*. As Israel comes to a deeper awareness of her guilt and her inability to follow God’s commandments, the prophetic message changes from one of destruction in and of itself (cf. Amos and Hosea) to one of destruction through which there will be deliverance and salvation, but Israel must live through this time of suffering (cf. Micah, Isaiah). Further, promises of a new heart and a future messiah begin to flower. In other words, Israel is called upon to live the sacrificial life that the prophets are already living in order to bring about a conversion that she is unable to attain on her own.

Given the limits of this paper, only the following books will be examined: Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah. First, I will briefly examine the prophet, then Israel’s reaction to the prophet’s message.

1. Amos

The book of Amos reveals little of the prophet’s character. We know nothing of his age, the length of prophecy, the locality where he preached, though he seemed to prophesy in three localities: Bethel 7:10-17; Samaria 3:9; 4:1; 6:1; and possibly Gilgal 5:5. He was a Judean

shepherd and orchard keeper from Tekoa and he was called to be a prophet by God during the reigns of Jeroboam of Israel and Uzziah of Judah (790-750 BC).

Two passages of the text give some insight into the person Amos and his call.

A. 3:3-8: The first passage is a series of seven rhetorical questions expressing causality of relationships. The questions all address situations in which one is overpowered by something stronger, be it animal, human or divine.³⁹ The series move from the animal world (vv. 3-4), to the animal and human world (v. 5), to the human world (v. 6a), to the human-divine sphere (v.6b), and then to the unique relationship that exists between God and the prophet (vv. 7-8). The seventh question reveals that Amos received the divine mandate to speak the word of God, and must do so. He has not chosen this profession for himself; he has been overpowered by a force stronger than he and must comply.

B. 7:10-17: The second passage is a dialogue between Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, and Amos. There are four parts: Amaziah reports an oracle of Amos to Jeroboam II and accuses the prophet of conspiracy against the king (vv. 10-11); Amaziah orders Amos to leave Bethel (vv. 12-13); Amos responds that he is at Bethel because he received a commission from the Lord (vv. 14-16), and then Amos pronounces an oracle against the priest and his family (v. 17). These verses are fraught with difficulty, but the general consensus of commentators take Amos' reply to mean that he is not a professional prophet who earned his keep prophesying.⁴⁰ His present prophetic activity is because he has been chosen by the Lord to speak and given a message to preach. "...he is under inescapable obligation to deliver the prophetic word to Israel."⁴¹

Thus, Amos is caught up by a force more powerful than he in order to deliver a message that is not his own; once given the word of God, he is under compulsion to speak it.

The nation Israel, for her part, is shown to be guilty of grievous crimes (2:6b-8; 5:7; 8:4-6). Amos calls Israel's sins a "crime" (*pesha'*) which include selling the poor into slavery because of insignificant debts, using the pledge taken from the poor to get drunk and perform illicit sex in the sanctuary (2:6, 8). Further, they trample the weak by exacting levies of grain (5:11), accept bribes and repel the needy at the gate (5:12) and fix the scales for cheating (8:5).⁴² Despite the particular love shown by God (2: 9-11; 3:2) she has refused to live by his decrees. Rather, she has silenced his messengers (2:12), and refused to convert even after ominous signs (4:6-11). She exhibits neither shame nor sorrow for her sins, but doggedly continues on her path of greed and destruction.

To conclude, the prophet and Israel seem to be polar opposites. On the one hand, the prophet must obey and speak the word of God, but Israel refuses to listen and obey.

2. Hosea

The next prophet, Hosea, is equally mysterious. Nothing is known of his hometown, occupation, how or when he was called by God, the time or length of mission or his age. He

³⁹ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 106.

⁴⁰ The difficulty rests in that Amos denies the title prophet (*nābī'*) but then asserts that he is one (v. 15). Various proposals include: "I am neither a prophet nor a professional prophet"; "I am indeed a prophet (changing *lō'* to *lū'*) and indeed a professional prophet"; "I am indeed a prophet but not a professional prophet" or "No, I am a prophet, and indeed, a professional prophet." Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 376. There is no satisfactory solution proposed. For an overview of positions, see Paul, *Amos*, 243-45.

⁴¹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 776.

⁴² Carroll Stuhlmuller, "The Prophetic Price for Peace," in *Biblical and Theological Reflections on the Challenge of Peace* (ed. John T. Pawlikowski and Donald Senior; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984) 36-7.

prophesized in the Northern Kingdom and mentions the royal city of Samaria (7:1; 8:5f; 10:5, 7; 14:1) and the cultic centers of Bethel (4:15; 5:8; 10:5; 12:5) and Gilgal (4:15; 9:15; 12:12). The language is particular to the North and often refers to the political situation in Israel (5:13; 7:8, 11; 14:3). Hosea received a divine command to marry a harlot to symbolize God's "bad marriage" with Israel (1:2-9) and was also instructed to buy an adulteress (3:1f). It is likely that the adulteress is the same woman who is presented in ch. 1.

One passage, 3:1-5, provides an insight into the call of Hosea.⁴³ Unlike ch. 1 where Hosea is referred to in the third person, here he presents his own account. God commands him to "love" a woman, and Hosea immediately obeys. He then gives four instructions to her, each more restrictive (v. 3): she must remain or live with him for a long time; she will no longer engage in prostitution; she will not have relations with anyone else, and finally neither will Hosea have relations with her. Though she is bought with the wages of a slave and he could rightfully claim her as his own, he outlines these restrictions as a means of showing love. This signifies the relationship that God and Israel will have in the future, currently lived out in the life of Hosea who "has not bought her for pleasure, but in order to reform her."⁴⁴ Thus we see the prophet engaged in concrete sacrificial love in order to show the nation Israel her future. Her future punishment of being without a king or sacrifice is to bring her to conversion.

On the part of Israel, we see that once again, she is guilty of serious sins: swearing; lying; murder; stealing, and adultery (4:1-2; 7:1). However, Hosea incriminates the leaders more than the nation which suffers on account of the sins of her leaders (4:4-19; 5:1-14; esp 4:13). She shows signs of half-hearted conversions (6:1-4; 7:14; 8:1-2), but remains unhealed because her conversion remains superficial. What God desires is a relationship of the heart, but she is not willing to give her heart to God. Once again, there is no sign of conversion despite the enormous love of God poured out for her.

3. Micah

In Micah, the picture begins to change somewhat. As with all prophets, little is known of Micah. His name means "Who is like God?". He is said to be "of Maresheth" (Mic 1:1; Jer

⁴³ Another possible passage is 9:7-9. This passage forms part of a larger unit, 9:1-9, where Hosea denounces the feasts of Israel (vv. 1-6) and then announces that the time of punishment has arrived (v. 7a). The people respond to Hosea's announcement of judgment by calling him a "fool" and "mad." In the wisdom literature, a fool was one whose words could not be taken seriously or who did not have a grasp on reality. Thus, the people reject Hosea's words as foolish babble. Hosea responds that their enmity toward him is due to their own iniquity, and that he is a prophet and "watchman of Ephraim" on the side of God (v. 8). A watchman is a typical term used to describe a prophet, who would warn the people of impending evil (Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17). This task "of bearing bad news does not make a prophet like Hosea the enemy of Israel, but at a deeper level someone who is concerned to point out self-destructive behavior." J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 245. However, for all his pains, the prophet only receives hostility and snares and is mistreated because his message is not palatable (v. 9).

I have not included this passage in the larger discussion because vv. 7-8 present difficulties. These include: identifying the speaker and the prophet (I have assumed the speakers are Israel (v. 7) and the prophet (v. 8), but this need not be so); and the difficulty in understanding the MT (the MT literally reads "a watchman/lies in wait (is) Ephraim with my God the prophet (is) a fowler's snare," so Ephraim could be the subject who "lies in wait," or the prophet could be a watchman. Further, it could be a question, "Is Ephraim a watchman? Are God's people a prophet?") While most commentators agree with the description provided above, it cannot be stated with certainty. For various proposals and discussions, see Stuart A. Irvine, "Enmity in the House of God (Hosea 9:7-9)," *JBL* 117 (1998) 645-53 and Dearman, *Hosea*, 246-48.

⁴⁴ Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 66.

26:18), which is probably a reference to Maresheth-Gath, a town in southwest Judah. There is no call account, but the superscription indicates that the word of the Lord came to him in a "vision" and he became the Lord's messenger. He is a contemporary of Isaiah and according to the title of the book, he was active during the reigns of Jotham (742-735), Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-687). Additionally, he may have prophesized during Sennacherib's unsuccessful campaign against Jerusalem.

Micah's prophesies move seamlessly between destruction (1-3; 4:9-10; 5:9-14; 6:9-16) and salvation (4:1-8, 11-13; 5:1-3, 6-8; 7:11-13). What is new is that Micah proclaims that through Israel's destruction she will be redeemed, destroy her enemies (4:9-10), and her pagan idolatry be removed (5:9-14). Thus the prophet teaches that destruction is not simply the wrath of God poured out on Israel, but rather is intended for her salvation, redemption and freedom from idolatry. The interweaving of judgment and salvific oracles further shows this tight connection. Finally, for first time the prophet announces a future messiah who will come and shepherd his flock (5:1-3).

While there are many interesting aspects of the prophet that could be examined, I will only examine two passages where the picture of Israel emerges.⁴⁵

A. 6:6-8: The passage immediately follows a trial scene where God calls upon the mountains and hills to hear his case against Israel (6:1-2). Israel is weary of God, tired under the burden of following him (v. 3), and God answers her weariness by recounting his deeds of mercy (v. 4-5). Israel, in turn, recognizes that she has become unacceptable to God because of her sins and assumes that an acceptable sacrifice will bring forgiveness. But what sacrifice? She then enumerates a series of possibilities to find out how a sinner can restore his relationship to God. Each prospect becomes more expensive and costly until the most precious one: "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul" (v. 7). And therein lies the reason for the "weariness" of Israel: she thinks that God simply wants a slew of expensive or precious sacrifices that are never enough. But God wants something else.

God's answer does not address the question of sacrifices, but is a threefold answer of what every Israelite is to do (v. 8). First, to practice justice means to advocate fairness, maintain the rights of the weak, assuring that one's neighbor is provided for. Second, to love kindness indicates a behavior that is just, but marked with tenderness, affection and compassion. Finally, to walk humbly with your God probably means to journey throughout life allowing God's plans and desires to be the blueprint of one's life. So, Israel attempts to offer a sacrifice, but God desires a radical conversion or repentance.

B. 7:8-10: In this passage Zion confesses to her enemy her faith in God. Zion warns her enemy not to rejoice over her because she is certain that God will save her. This certainty enables her to be defiant and proud despite the taunts of the enemy. Israel understands that she must accept the consequences of her sin and suffer God's wrath. To her enemy, it may seem as if she is defeated, but Israel knows that her present predicament is because of her sin, and she admits this freely and without reservation or hesitation. But, God will rescue her, and she will see the downfall of her enemies.

⁴⁵ In 7:18-20, an unidentified speaker, either Micah or Zion, pleads with God to come and shepherd his people. I have not considered it in the larger discussion of Israel, since the speaker remains uncertain. However, if it is Israel, then we see for the first time an acknowledgment that only God can save her from her situation of sin. This theme is more fully developed in Third Isaiah (59:1-21; 63:7-64:11).

The words of Zion in 7:8-10 mirror the oracle of Micah in 4:9-10 where sin would lead to destruction, but then salvation, and the defeat of her enemies. Thus, for the first time we see Israel listening to the words of the prophet, internalizing them, and responding positively.

In the book of Micah, we see a true development on the part of Israel who acknowledges her guilt and recognizes that something must be done in order for her to stand before God. She first thinks her sinful situation can be remedied with perfunctory sacrifices (6:6-8), but God's answer reveals he wants a radical change in the way Israel conducts herself and desires that she lead a life of justice and goodness. She also recognizes her guilt and looks forward to God's future redemption in her life (7:8-10). Finally, for the first time, Israel responds positively to the words of a prophet.

4. Jeremiah

In 648, Josiah was declared king and in the thirtieth year of his reign, Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. His mission continues until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah (586 BC) when Jeremiah was taken by his countrymen as a prisoner to Egypt. After that we hear no more of him.

Jeremiah is a priest, a native of Anathoth (a village three miles northeast of Jerusalem), and a descendant of the tribe of Levi. Of all the prophetic books, the Book of Jeremiah contains the greatest amount of material which provides insight into the interior life of the prophet. A series of "confessions" or "lamentations" of Jeremiah mark the book: 8:18-9:1; 10:23-24; 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 16:1-13; 17:9-10, 14-18, 18:18-23; 20:7-12, 14-18. Some of these are a monologue, and others have the answer of God (11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:15-21).

The dialogues show a man whose life was marked by strong tension between his natural desires and inclinations, and his love for God and vocation as a prophet.⁴⁶ Jeremiah delighted in God and says that his words were the joy and delight of his heart (15:16) and were like a burning fire in his bones which he could not contain or control (20:9). He also wrestled with God, calling him a deceitful brook whose waters do not abide (15:18) and accusing God of deceiving him, overpowering him and making him a perpetual laughing stock (20:7).

As a prophet, Jeremiah's suffering brought him to despair. He wished that he had never been born (15:10; 20:14-18) and he wanted to run away from his people and live alone in the desert (9:2). His relationships with his fellowmen are particularly complex. He called upon God to take vengeance on his enemies, (11:20; 12:3; 15:15; 17:18) and he prayed that God might afflict the wives and children of his personal enemies (18:21-23). He did, however, also pray for his enemies even though they had spurned him (15:11; 18:20). Finally, he weeps not only for himself, but also his people (8:21).

Gerhard von Rad summarizes the sacrificial aspect of the mission and life of Jeremiah:

...this man serves God not only with the bold proclamation of his mouth (his person), but his very life is unexpectedly involved in God's cause on earth. Thus the prophet (this is something new in Jeremiah) now becomes a witness to God not only by virtue of his charisma, but in his very humanity – yet not as the person who is triumphant over human sin, not as the person who is gaining the victory, but as the messenger of God going down to destruction in the midst of humanity. Therefore even the *bios* of Jeremiah now takes on the authority of a witness. His suffering soul, his life bleeding to death in God's task –

⁴⁶ Terence Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) 22.

all this becomes a pointer toward God. Alongside the *munus propheticum*, the *munus sacerdotale* presents itself on the scene!⁴⁷

Thus we see Jeremiah living a sacrificial life, without family or the ordinary joys and sorrows of human company for his people (16:1-13). He feels his suffering deeply within himself, and yet the necessity of his call and his inability to refuse his mandate push him forward (20:7, 9).

Israel again refuses to listen, but now her hard-heartedness is explained through the intercession of Jeremiah. Two of these passages will be examined.

A. 10:23-25: This is a small prayer of Jeremiah on behalf of his people. Jeremiah often pleads for his people, and his words are meant to reflect the words of the people.⁴⁸ In this prayer, Jeremiah pleads with God saying, "I know, O Lord, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps" (10:23). There are two possible meanings for these words. First, Jeremiah may have been referring to a fundamental moral weakness in men which makes them unable to resist evil consistently and to walk uprightly all their days.⁴⁹ Or, the reference may be to the destiny of man which he is unable to control. Thus, God has a purpose for Judah which is inexplicable to Jeremiah, and people must trust in his divine providence. It is not easy to decide, but if it is the first, then Jeremiah recognizes that Israel is trapped in a situation of moral weakness in which she cannot follow God.

The prayer which follows (vv. 24-25) petitions God for mercy. God has commanded the people to walk uprightly and since they have not done so, they deserve punishment. The caveat, however, is that they are not really responsible for their actions (v. 23), and so God should punish them with restraint.⁵⁰ "God was being asked to show mercy and patience with his people, correcting their behavior but sparing them from destruction."⁵¹

B. 17:1-11: This second prayer is thematically united in that it discusses the guilt of Israel. It is formed of three smaller units (vv. 1-4, 5-8, 9-11). The first unit, vv. 1-4 indicts Israel for her sins written permanently on her heart. The second unit, vv. 5-8, contrasts the blessedness of the one who trusts in God with the wickedness of the one who trusts in human flesh. The third unit, vv. 9-11, sometimes called one of the confessions of Jeremiah, is the most important. Why is it that people choose to live dependent upon another frail person instead of God? The answer rests in the innate depravity of the human heart. The heart is deceitful, and needs to be healed of its ingrained love of sin; wickedness does not spring from people's deeds, but from their hearts. The only remedy for this hardened heart is God who will write the law upon their hearts in a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34).

To summarize, in the book of Jeremiah the prophet both conveys a message of destruction to Israel, but also lives that destruction sacrificially in his very being. Unlike in Micah, Israel does not respond positively to his message, but the prayer of Jeremiah implies that she *cannot*. Thus, Israel is caught. On the one hand, she cannot do otherwise but sin, yet sin brings punishment and destruction. The problem rests on the level of the heart which is *unable to convert to God*, and only God can come and rescue Israel from her destructive, sinful life.

⁴⁷ Gerhard von Rad, "The Confessions of Jeremiah," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 98.

⁴⁸ Regarding Jeremiah's unique position as an intercessor, see Samuel Balentine, "The Prophet as Intercessor," *JBL* 103 (1984) 161-73.

⁴⁹ John Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 1980) 336.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 337.

⁵¹ Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 337.

5. Isaiah

Since Bernhard Duhm's magisterial work *The Book of Isaiah*, most scholars divide Isaiah into three distinct time periods with possibly three different prophets. In this paper, I will concentrate only on distinct passages in Second and Third Isaiah.

A. Second Isaiah preached between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the downfall of the Babylonian empire in 539. Like the other prophets, we know virtually nothing of Second Isaiah's hometown, occupation, the length of mission or even his name. Second Isaiah proclaims only salvation, comfort and love and the harsh oracles of judgment are nowhere to be found.

Within Second Isaiah are found the four servant songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). These songs remained mysterious and no exegesis has unraveled their intricacies. Questions remain unanswered, such as the identity of the servant and the original context of the songs. While the identity of the servant remains debated, the general consensus is that the servant represents Israel. "For anyone who takes the larger literary context seriously, there can be no avoiding the obvious implication that *in some way* Israel is the servant who is named in 42:1. No one else is named."⁵²

What is important is the description of the suffering servant in the fourth servant song (52:13-53:12). The depiction of the servant is not simply biographical, but seems to transcend a particular moment or occasion and resemble the description of the just, suffering one in the psalms (cf. Pss 22:6-7; 88:8). Further, like Jeremiah, "the description of the prophetic suffering depicts a calling, even an office, into which the servant of God has been summoned."⁵³ Thus, the suffering servant forms part of the OT tradition of the innocent, suffering one, and his vocation entails self-sacrifice, much as Jeremiah's did. But Isa 53 also describes something completely different: vicarious suffering. "What occurred was not some unfortunate tragedy of human history but actually formed the center of the divine plan for the redemption of his people and indeed of the world."⁵⁴ Through obedience and an acceptance of suffering, the servant will justify many. "...two things are involved in what the Servant bears, what he has loaded upon him – the sins of others and the punishment which results upon them."⁵⁵ If the songs on a literal level refer to Israel, and in some sense they must, then Israel is called to suffer for the redemption of the world. No longer is her punishment simply a suffering for her sins, or for the purpose of procuring her own salvation, now she will suffer the punishment of other's sins to bring redemption to the world.

B. Third Isaiah, like his predecessor remains an anonymous figure about whom virtually nothing is known. There is likely a rebuilt temple and warring factions within the community, thus scholars date these chapters to sometime after 538. In Third Isaiah the voice of Israel is slightly more dominant than in other parts of Isaiah, and it is a voice of a people devastated by destruction and yearning for redemption.⁵⁶ Two passages in particular show this: Isa 59:1-15 and Isa 63:7-64:11.

1. Isa 59:1-21: The passage can be divided into three parts: 1-8, 9-15, 16-21. In the first part, vv. 1-8, the prophet explains to Israel that her present dilemma is not because God is impotent, but because her sins keep her from salvation. Israel responds to this charge in vv. 9-

⁵² Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL: Louisville: John Knox, 2001) 325.

⁵³ Childs, *Isaiah*, 414.

⁵⁴ Childs, *Isaiah*, 415.

⁵⁵ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 263.

⁵⁶ In Second Isaiah, only two passages give voice to the nation Israel: 40:24 and 49:14.

15, the second part, by fully acknowledging her sinful state. The first two verses, 9-10, describe the present dire situation, but the heart of the passage is v. 12 where Israel recognizes that her sins have caused her own destruction (“For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities” (Isa 59:12)).

Moreover, she also knows her salvation is only in God, and instead of sinking into despair over her fate and punishment, she turns to God to “plea for the mercy of God whom they have denied.”⁵⁷ In the third part, vv. 16-21, God reveals himself to be a warrior who will come and save Israel from her sins. To summarize, “The faithful within the nation, who are fully enmeshed in Israel’s self-destructive fate, throw themselves completely on God’s mercy without offering any mitigating excuses...The ensuing theophanic description of the response...establishes once and for all that God alone can shatter the power of sin and bring justice and salvation to suffering Zion.”⁵⁸

2. Isa 63:7-64:11: The passage can be divided into two parts 63:7-14; 63:15-64:11. In the first part, the people sing God’s praises for his past deeds and then they confess their sins. In the second part (63:15-64:11), the people call out for divine intervention and plea for God’s help. Even though it seems as if Abraham has abandoned the Israelites, they appeal to God as their father, who is the only one who can help them.⁵⁹ In v. 17, Israel calls herself a servant, one who is faithful to God, and perhaps she sees herself in the role of the servant depicted in the servant songs of Second Isaiah. Israel again recognizes that her present sufferings are caused by sins, and she sees herself as unclean and polluted (64:5). Yet in the midst of feeling abandoned by God, she affirms that God is her father (64:7) and maintains her faith that he is able to save her.

There is a tremendous leap forward in the theology of Second and Third Isaiah. First, in Second Isaiah, suffering is not only a punishment and a means of deliverance, but it can actually bring redemption to the whole world. Secondly, Israel fully recognizes her inability to convert and that she is weighed down by the burden of sin. No longer is God wearisome (Mic 6:1-6) or a burden to be avoided, but he is now her only hope of salvation. She deeply recognizes that she is sinful and that the reason for her present sufferings is because of sin, but is unable to extricate herself from her sinful life and has no recourse but to plea to God.

6. Conclusion

In the first part of this section, I looked at imprecatory language in general and found that violence is not intrinsic to God, but that it can be used by God to reduce the problem of violence in human beings. Paradoxically, Israel’s special call by God is given as the reason that God allows violence against her, and thus God punishes because he loves Israel and desires her conversion and salvation, not her destruction.

The second part examines two separate “characters”: the prophet and Israel. The prophets are called to live a sacrificial life for a message and purpose that is not their own. These men are faithful, obedient and exemplify what Israel ought to be. For her part, Israel is a dynamic figure who moves from hard-heartedness (Amos, Hosea), to bargaining (Mic 6:6-8), to accepting her present sufferings as a cause of her own sin but trusting God will redeem her (Mic

⁵⁷ Childs, *Isaiah*, 488.

⁵⁸ Childs, *Isaiah*, 490.

⁵⁹ Paul Niskanen has shown that by using the term “Father,” Israel is appealing to their covenant relationship. See “Yhwh as Father, Redeemer, and Potter in Isaiah 63:7-64:11,” *CBQ* 68 (2006) 397-407.

7:8-10), to the recognition that her own suffering can redeem others (Isa 53), to pleading with God to free her from the situation of sin. (Isa 59; 63:7-64:11). On her own, Israel is unable to convert and follow God's law. She is asked to suffer the violence of the exile without rebellion and to trust in God to give her a new heart and to make a new covenant with her. If she accepts to suffer obediently, redemption will not only come to her, but through her to the whole world. This aspect of suffering echoes the fundamental vocation of the Israelites who are called to be a nation of priests (Exod 19:6) or mediators through whom knowledge of God will reach to the ends of the earth (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4).

Several aspects of violence and punishment have become clear in this study. First, the fundamental problem does not rest with God, but with Israel. In the discussions of divine violence, it is often overlooked that Israel's sins are truly heinous: idolatry, murder, bloodshed, adultery, fraud, lying, swearing, and oppression of the poor and weak (Amos 2:6b-8; 5:7-12; 8:4-6; Hosea 4:1-3; 7:1ff; Mic 2:2). Such behavior is absolutely incompatible with God's law, and God uses every means to bring Israel to disavow such conduct. But despite the words of the prophets and ominous warnings, the people refuse to convert. God thus withdraws his protection from Israel and allows the nation to suffer the pains of the exile; violence becomes the solution to the violence in Israel. And in point of fact, only the harsh experience of the destruction of the North and the exile in the South begin a penetrating interior search within Israel. Had it not been for that horror, Israel's sins would have continued *ad infinitum*, the violence and oppression would have persisted, and the cult of YHWH would probably have died out. But, paradoxically, she is saved, both as a spiritual and historic entity, through the violence that God tolerates.

Second, it also becomes clear that the absence of punishment means the absence of justice. The oppressed and exploited ought to be freed from their sufferings. It is naïve and foolish to think that God, who is just, would simply overlook violent crimes against the poor and weak. Pope Benedict XVI says, "God cannot simply ignore man's disobedience and all the evil of history; he cannot treat it as if it were inconsequential or meaningless... That which is wrong, the reality of evil, cannot simply be ignored; it cannot just be left to stand. It must be dealt with; it must be overcome."⁶⁰ Such violence is overcome by experiencing its effects which can bring conversion.

Third, Israel's suffering is not an end in itself. Suffering is meant to save her by bringing conversion and repentance. Her suffering, however, can also save others – it is vicarious suffering. If Israel accepts her punishment, God can bring justice, knowledge of his laws, and salvation to the whole world. Through her trials and the suffering of the exile, the whole world will benefit. But Israel is caught in an impossible situation. She *cannot* turn from her sins, yet recognizes that her sins bring punishment and suffering. Her only hope is to trust in God to save her from a situation from which she cannot extricate herself, and God promises to give her a new heart and make a new covenant with her.

Finally, and most importantly, the violence Israel suffers is because she has been *chosen to be in a covenant relationship with God* (Amos 3:1-2; Hosea 2:8-25)! This indicates that God's motives in allowing Israel to suffer violence spring from both a paternal and spousal desire to bring Israel to a better place. The whole world suffers from terrible violence, and this continues to be the fate and destiny of all of humanity, but *only Israel is given the possibility to escape from it*. Only to Israel does God promise that the violence, deeply ingrained in her heart

⁶⁰ *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011) 132-33.

which she cannot remove, will be eradicated. But to be free from violence and sin, Israel must be willing to abandon herself to God whose ways are not our ways (Isa 55:8).

In the final analysis, God, whose nature is not violent, tolerates violence to rid Israel of it, to lead her to conversion and repentance, and finally, to use her to bring salvation to the whole world. Through her suffering, the violence, hostility to God and rebellion which lay deep within the human heart can be transformed into knowledge of God and justice. In short, the violence allowed by God in the prophetic texts is not motivated by crazed, wild fury, but paradoxically, it is motivated by love: love for the ones suffering exploitation who need to be rescued, and love for the ones exploiting who also need to be rescued, but most importantly, love for his people Israel whom he will save in his own way. This picture of God in the OT better accords with the portrait of Jesus in the NT.

Part IV: Final Conclusion

Pope Benedict has taught that Jesus Christ is the living word of God who is revealed in Scripture. He is the only norm in interpreting the words of Scripture. Through him and his cross, we are given a better insight into the problem of divine violence in the prophetic texts.

God called the prophets, and through them all of Israel, to suffer violence and to be a victim of it in order to transform that violence into salvation. By Israel's own effort she was neither able to be faithful to God nor follow his law. Thus, God's wrath fell upon her. However, this wrath has as its end her salvation and that of the world. To Israel's great credit, she did not reject God and his punishments. Though unable to be faithful to God's commands, and desperate in the moment of her great trials, she clung to her faith in God and believed he would be able to save her from her prison of sin and violence. Precisely in her most distressed moments, God promises Israel a new heart, a new covenant, and a messiah who would usher in an era of justice, peace and stability. Israel held fast to the promises of God, and the enormity of her faith and her sacrifice cannot be understated: because she endured the exile, we today have the possibility of knowing Jesus Christ, and we owe a great debt to our "elder brothers" in faith.⁶¹

The sacrifice of Israel finds its culmination and fulfillment in the person of Jesus who is the perfect Israelite, and both God and man. He is the promised messiah, and the one through whom a new heart is given and a new covenant is formed. The life of Jesus definitely and unequivocally demonstrates that there is *no violence in the nature of God*. Rather, in the face of extreme provocation Jesus never showed any hint of rage or wrath. Unlike Israel before him, Jesus is able to follow the commands of God and live in perfect love. Like Israel, he is asked to suffer the violence of humanity in order to bring salvation to the world, and this he does with tremendous generosity. As God, he tolerates violence and through his cross transforms it into self-giving love. He is the perfect sacrifice, the innocent one, and the true suffering servant who accepts violence upon himself in order to curb our violence, to transform our hearts and to save all humanity. Raniero Cantalamessa says that the cross of Christ reveals that, "Sacrifice no longer serves to 'placate' the divinity, but rather to placate man and to make him desist from his hostility toward God and his neighbor."⁶² Jesus' sacrificial life and the violence he suffered on the cross transform our violence into self-giving love, and are the means by which the violence of our own world can be overcome.

⁶¹ John Paul II spoke these words in his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome. Quoted by Archbishop Timothy Dolan, "Catholic-Jewish Relations" *Origins* 41 (2011) 9.

⁶² Raniero Cantalamessa, "We Have a Great High Priest," Good Friday Homily, April 2, 2010, <http://www.cantalamessa.org/en/predicheView.php?id=354> (accessed Sept. 14, 2011).