

Book Review

Lynch, Matthew J.

Flood and Fury: Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God

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Matthew Lynch, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Regent College in British Columbia, undertakes the issue of violence in the Old Testament to help other people navigate their concerns/qualms. His interest in the subject flows from his own experience witnessing the effects of violence in Hebron and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (pp. 2-3, 7, 35-6, 214). So, it makes sense that Lynch takes a more conversational-personalized approach to the topic rather than a strict academic-theological one.

Lynch organizes the book into four parts. “Part One: A Real Problem (With Options)” lays out the problem of violence and outlines past proposed resolutions. His listing is helpful despite its brevity. However, his criticisms of why the proposed solutions are inadequate are, at best, uneven, leaving this reader wondering why some solutions weren’t considered more deeply. Perhaps the reason for the cursory critiques of prior resolutions lies in Lynch’s predisposition for complexity and mystery (p. 4, 214ff, 224f). Lynch cautions readers that easy solutions may only result in other problems that are worse (pp.8, 220). He suggests that we must avoid the dichotomy of ‘God said it and that settles it’ versus the O.T. is full of barbaric people (p.4).

In “Part Two: Shalom and Its Shattering”, Lynch argues that God’s original plan was for a non-violent creation. But this plan was

shattered by the Fall as signified by the Hebrew word translated ‘enmity’ that occurred between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (pp. 39-40). Humanity’s sin spawned violence by disrupting the original harmony God intended. The rupture led to male dominance (p.54ff) and ecological problems (pp.66ff) that resulted in God’s decision to send the flood. Rather than being a violent act by God, the flood was God’s attempt to end the global violence and preserve creation (pp.84ff). Surprisingly, Lynch even argues that the Noahic covenant is not an authorization for the initiation of the death penalty but rather a prohibition against human-initiated vengeance (p. 80).

In “Part Three: Reading Joshua with Yeshua”, Lynch turns to the conquest passages that seem to cause so much anxiety among people. To soften the narrative, the author endeavors to reframe the stories using literary and historical analysis to contextualize, minimize, or repurpose their impact. On the literary side, Lynch argues that Israel’s circumcision ritual prior to the conquest was a type of disarmament (p. 102) drawing a connection to Jacob’s son’s use of circumcision to massacre the Shechemites (Gen 34:24f). Lynch correctly instructs readers of the book of Joshua that God wanted Israel to prioritize Torah adherence (p.103). The Joshua account is not simply one of military action.

Lynch also employs historical-literary

criticism tools to soften ethical concerns regarding the conquest narratives. He contends that Joshua contains both a Majority and Minority report regarding violence. The Majority Report is characterized by the commands to eradicate the Canaanites. In contrast, the Minority Report shows how the Canaanites, in the stories of Rahab, Gibeonites, and others, were incorporated into Israel and thus not eradicated. Thus, the Minority Report “softens” the blow and suggests that the conquest narratives were more complex than simple readings would lead us to believe.

“Part Four: The Old Testament and the Character of God” is where Lynch endeavors to tie all the disparate thoughts of his previous sections together. He exhorts readers to take a dynamic view of scripture, versus a rigid one, that can recognize the significant point(s) without getting bogged down and distracted by the smaller, less important ones (pp. 200ff). He says readers should remember that the Bible bends towards peace and that God’s compassion outweighs/outnumbers His judgement and wrath (pp. 208-11). It is this sort of reframing and theological triage that the author hopes will help people handle the violence of Scripture. Lynch is careful to say that he hasn’t resolved all the problems, but he believes that his text will help blunt the emotional blow and provide readers with ways to approach this complex issue with care and thoughtfulness.

As one who is very interested in a Christian/biblical understanding of war and conflict, I found this text challenging. While one could question how many people truly have ethical problems with the conquest narratives, it’s not wrong for Christians like Lynch to try to resolve concerns. My difficulty is that he concedes too much credence to the critics. A

second and more substantive problem was his appreciation of the complexities of war and his failure to define “violence.” On the first issue, he did not appear to appreciate the challenges involved with war in that in war, ‘innocents’, to the extent they exist, always suffer. Everyone bears the benefits and failures of their leaders, including their military leaders. On the second issue, Lynch clearly understood violence as the use of physical force (and likely the threat of physical force) against others. But he also appears to consider patriarchy, polygamy, and environmental degradation as violence too (pp. 54, 61, 66). Perhaps they are, but this reviewer thinks that broadening the semantic boundaries of violence to this extent has the effect of making the term meaningless and muddies the differences between just and unjust violence. This improper expansion of violence’s semantic range causes Lynch to misinterpret biblical teaching.

One need only consider how Lynch misunderstands the dominion passages (Gen 1:26-8; pp.45ff). His heading “Nonviolent Rule” shows he wants to downplay the harsh character of the words ‘rule’ and ‘subdue’. The problem is that God wanted Adam to express dominion over the serpent. The Garden was not in perfect harmony. It contained a creature that was inciting rebellion against God and this creature needed to be dealt with, either expulsion or death (cf. Meredith G. Kline 2006. *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*). Furthermore, my own writing, *Dominion over Wildlife? An Environmental-Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations*, argued that first mankind must subdue and press nature into service, once in control, we can transition to husbanding nature to continue to bring about the results we desire. Contrary to so-called

environmentalists, humanity must bend nature to our will. The problem is not the bending of nature to our will but the bending of nature to our sinful rebellious will, which did not occur until Adam fell.

Additionally, several of his lexical observations seem more Talmudic/Midrashic than one would expect from a tenured Old Testament professor. For example, on p. 108 he observes that Joshua's spies were sent from Shittim, a place of spiritual failure, to another place of spiritual failure, namely Rahab's brothel. Could it be that the Bible says they left Shittim because that is where they left? He continues by noting that the terms 'going in and laying' can refer to sexual activity. On its face, this observation is true as Genesis 39:14 can attest. The problem is whether this spy-harlot sexual encounter hypothesis is the most likely interpretation. I suspect Lynch wanted to downplay the military/spiritual quality of these men and thus undermine the Majority Report. But if someone wanted to get information on Jericho what better place than a house of ill-repute where many men visited, especially if Jericho was more of a military outpost than a "city" as Lynch suggests (cf. Trent C. Butler. 2014. *Joshua*)? Spying, after all, is grungy business which lacks flash of a 007 James Bond movie. In addition, the biblical writer does not seem shy about naming sin within Israel. Why would he be shy in this passage?

On other occasions, Lynch does not consider alternative and simpler resolutions to apparent problems in the text. For example, Lynch notes that Rahab was an exception to the command to kill all the Canaanites. While that is true, Lynch seems to "forget" that Israel's call was for religious purity not ethnic purity. The inhabitants of the Promised Land could have fled (Num 33:52). Rahab clearly helped the

spies so why would Israel not grant her benefits for switching sides? Would it have been "better" for Israel to kill her and her family? I do not think so as that behavior would have made the problem of violence in the Old Testament an even wickeder problem.

Despite my concerns, one may wonder, "Is there any benefit of engaging with this text?" I think there is. First, the text contains pearls of insight that can be helpful for those interested in exploring this topic. Second, his introductory chapters do a pretty good job of breaking down reader presuppositions, thereby opening them to alternative understandings of the conquest narratives. Likewise, some of his literary analysis showing connections and repeated themes between passages will give readers deeper insights than a simple reading would often provide. Third, his conversational and somewhat whimsical approach may be more easily received by fuzzy thinking, relational-feeling driven post-moderns. Not everyone can handle the hard truth, plainly given. Some need sugar added to the medicine before they can swallow. I just wish the author adopted a hermeneutical stance that was more aligned with the biblical testimony. We must all be reminded that in the end God's word must shape our reality and understanding of justice and not the other way around.

