

# There is a Crack in Everything

## *Biblical Texts Questioning the Legitimation of Violence in the Name of the One God*

*Klaas Spronk*

Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*kspronk@pthu.nl*

### Abstract

As a contribution to the ongoing discussion about the relation between monotheism and violence a comparison is made between polytheistic stories about the annihilation of mankind and the monotheistic Old Testament story of the flood. There appear to be many ambiguities in Genesis 6-9, also concerning the image of God. This leaves room for criticism on the abuse of power. Whereas polytheism tends to fatalism, monotheism seems to offer a more hopeful view. It cannot be denied, however, that the Old Testament also testifies of monotheism which does not tolerate deviating religious views and in this way can be used to legitimize violence. Nevertheless, there are small but important indications in the text describing violence in the name of God that God is broader minded in this regard than many religious hardliners see Him. Inspired by a text of Leonard Cohen one could call them 'cracks' in the holy scriptures which will help to let more light of tolerance come in.

### Keywords

Violence – monotheism – Assmann – story of the flood – Gilgamesh Epic – myth of the heavenly cow – Leonard Cohen – Joshua 2 – Rahab – Amos 9:7 – Judges 3:31 – Shamgar

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\* Klaas Spronk is professor of Old Testament at the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam. He published on conceptions of the afterlife in the Ancient Near East, Nahum, Joshua, Judges, and the contextual and intercultural interpretation of the Bible.

According to many people there is a direct relation between monotheism and violence. Regina Schwartz speaks of ‘the violent legacy of monotheism.’<sup>1</sup> According to Jan Assmann religious violence is directly related to the ‘Mosaic distinction’ as recounted in the book of Exodus forcing the Hebrews in the desert and in later times Jews, Christians and Muslims to distinguish between true and false religion. The inherent intolerance towards believers in the wrong gods has caused much bloodshed.<sup>2</sup> Assmann points to the fact that the Biblical history of the victory of monotheism is a history of extreme violence. Take, for instance, the extremely harsh punishment following the veneration of the golden calf (Exodus 32) and the murder of hundreds of Baal priests after being defeated by Elijah (1 Kings 18). Is this not the consequence of the belief in a jealous god, who strictly distinguishes between friend and foe?<sup>3</sup> According to Assmann this concept of sin connected with the oath of loyalty binding the one god with his people should be distinguished from the idea, which can be found in many religions, of a primordial guilt resulting in the loss of an initial paradisiacal situation and the birth of the world as we know it, with all its suffering and death, hardship and labor. The Bible offers two such myths of primordial guilt: Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise and the great flood.<sup>4</sup> Because of the numerous parallels to these stories outside the Bible Assmann does not see them as typical for the Mosaic religion: ‘The primal scene of this new form of sinfulness is not to be found in the fall and flood, but in the dance around the Golden calf. With this act, the Israelites betrayed their god and lapsed back into primary religion.’<sup>5</sup>

### The Monotheistic Version of the Story of the Flood

The story of the flood, however, cannot so easily be dismissed from the discussion about monotheism and violence. Assmann may be right that the

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1 Cf. R.M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

2 One of the first books in which he presented his case is J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Moses in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1997. See also P. Walter and J. Assmann, *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott*, Freiburg: Herder 2005; J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2008 (esp. Chapter 6: ‘No God but God: Exclusive Monotheism and the Language of Violence’, p. 106-126); and *The Price of Monotheism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010.

3 Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 114.

4 Assmann, *The Price*, 113.

5 Assmann, *The Price*, 114.

'Mosaic distinction' has become dominant in the way the religion of ancient Israel has been described and it is commonly accepted that Israel took over the Mesopotamian story of the flood, but it is certainly interesting to study the way in which this was done: how did the Biblical writer adapt the polytheistic version of the story of the flood within a monotheistic framework?<sup>6</sup> This is all the more interesting because of the suggestion by Assmann and others that polytheism is less prone to violence than monotheism.<sup>7</sup> One could ask what was going on 'in the heart' of the Lord (Genesis 6:6) when he decided to undo his work of creation, but then eventually not completely destroy it and start all over again with Noah and his family? Did God have regrets and perhaps even two times? What does the story of the flood tell us about God? Can God change his mind? Can God have regrets about his own violence? Can we blame God in this respect or should we accept that the God of the Bible is also a cruel god?<sup>8</sup>

To get a better view on what may be specific of the role of God in the Genesis version of the flood one can make a comparison with related stories from the ancient Near East. There appear to be important differences with regard to the gods playing a role, be it negative or positive, in the story of the flood. In tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic Utnapishtim tells about the decision, which the most important gods apparently made together to inflict the flood. Literally it says in tablet XI, 14: 'The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood.'<sup>9</sup> One may note the similarity with Genesis 6: for the gods it is a matter of the heart. Unlike the Biblical story, however, a reason is not given. It could be the noise, as it was told in story of the flood according to the Babylonian epic of Atrahasis, as an indication of overpopulation or perhaps disrespect towards the gods or an indication of a threatening imbalance between gods and humans. Be this as it may, not all gods agree. Ea is of a different opinion, but he cannot openly go against the other gods. The text says that he is 'under

6 Cf. E. Noort, 'The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen 6:5-9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East', in: F. García Martínez and G.P. Luttikhuis (eds.), *Interpretations of the Flood*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff / Brill 1998, 1-38, esp. p. 17.

7 See on this subject also D. Timmer, 'Is Monotheism Particularly Prone to Violence? A Historical Survey', *Journal of Religion and Society* 15 (2013), 1-15, and R. van Riessen, 'A Violent God? Philosophical Reflections on Monotheism and Genesis 22', in: P. Vos and O. Zijlstra (eds.), *The Law of God. Exploring God and Civilization*, Leiden: Brill 2014, 173-193.

8 Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Our Savage God*, London 1974, positively referred to by E.G. Singgih, 'Why did God send the Flood upon the Earth?: An interpretation of Genesis 6:1-22', in: D. van Keulen and M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Christian Faith and Violence*, Studies in Reformed Theology 10, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum 2005, 28-46; esp. p. 46.

9 M.G. Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989, 97.

oath! Therefore, he has to warn Utnapishtim indirectly, by letting the words of the gods resound via the reed house.

Another interesting passage in the Gilgamesh epic concerns the reaction of the gods when the flood has come: they are frightened to death and seem to have lost every divine dignity: like dogs they creep away, looking for shelter (XI, 116-119). Even Ishtar appears to be upset and confused. So it comes as no surprise that they are relieved after the flood to smell that someone has survived the flood and takes up the human task of sacrificing to the gods again. The gods now are openly angry with Enlil. The mother god excludes him from the offering. In the final scene Ea is defending himself against Enlil who is angry to find out that a human being has survived the flood. He charges him of unethical behaviour: he should have punished the offender (suggesting that some kind of sin was the cause of the flood) and not all mankind. He should have shown more compassion and at least he could have been more creative in finding a good solution to his problems. The suggestions Ea makes concern diminishing the people. So overpopulation was also part of the problem.

In the end Enlil does not apologize, but he turns Utnapishtim and his wife into immortal beings. Does he admit his fault in this way? The difference with the Biblical version of the story is remarkable. According to Genesis 6 it was precisely the transgression between the borders between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, which was the reason for the flood. The sons of god had mixed with the daughters of man. God had definitively put an end to that.

A very interesting parallel to the Biblical story of the flood can be found in the ancient Egyptian text called the myth of the Heavenly Cow, also known as the story of the destruction of mankind.<sup>10</sup> It is found in a number of graves in the Valley of the Kings, dating from the second half of the second millennium, for instance, in the tomb of Tutankhamen. The events in the narrative take place in a mythical time at a moment when the sun god Re (or Ra) has reached old age and mankind stirs up rebellion against his rule. Upon the advice of the council of gods, Re sends his daughter Hathor to kill the rebels. When she returns in the evening from her slaughterous undertaking, Re feels pity for humankind and decides against continuing the massacre. To appease the raging goddess he orders that beer be mixed with red ochre, so as to make it look like blood, then spread throughout Egypt during the night. The next morning, the goddess discovers the red liquid and, in her blood thirst, drinks it until she is intoxicated. Thereupon she returns appeased to the palace, leaving the rest

10 Cf. N. Guilhou, 'Myth of the Heavenly Cow', *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 2010, 2, website *eScholarship University of California*, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2vh551hn>.

of humanity undisturbed. As an alternative solution, the sun god decides to leave the earth for the sky, which is created for him in the form of the Heavenly Cow, a manifestation of the sky goddess Nut. Humanity is now left without the presence of the gods on earth. Subsequently the sun god reorders the cosmos into three layers of existence: the sky, the earth, and the beyond.

Looking at the role of the gods it is interesting to note that it is not just the supreme god Re who takes the decision about destroying mankind, but that he consults other gods. It is also remarkable that Re himself begins to feel pity for mankind and changes his mind and then also the course of the events. This story of the threat of a total annihilation of mankind is — like the stories in Genesis — related to the story explaining the existence of a heaven next to earth. So — also like the Mesopotamian counterparts — it is also a story about the relation between the divine and the human and the problem of keeping things apart in the right way.

When looking for the motive for the flood, the reason given in Genesis 6:5 is at first sight more compelling than what we read in the epic of Atrahasis and indirectly in the epic of Gilgamesh. God observes that ‘that the wickedness of man is great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually’. For the reader of Genesis this conclusion comes as no surprise. This wickedness started with Cain killing Abel and continued in his bloodline as illustrated by the words of Lamech about ruthless violent revenge (Genesis 4:23-24). It was described as the result of the transgression of man, of Adam and Eve, crossing the border set by God. What happened in the Garden of Eden was continued in an extreme way by the sons of God transgressing the border between heaven and earth in their desire for the daughters of men (Genesis 6:1-4). This can be compared to what is said in the epic of Atrahasis about the disturbed relation between the gods and the humans. Comparing the Mesopotamian stories of the flood with the one from Genesis, one could, however, also look at the reproach towards Enlil that he also could have used other measures to restore the balance. Had according to Genesis God not already done enough to put mankind within its boundaries again? He had taken him his immortality after the first sin. After the transgression by the sons of God he had refined this, setting the border of human life at the age of hundred and twenty (Genesis 6:3). God had also taken measures to keep violence within limits after the first bloodshed by Cain (Genesis 4:15). So he already appeared to be wiser than Enlil. Nevertheless, he still ordered the terrible flood. Was that really necessary?

It is interesting to compare God’s reaction to what is told about God in the later story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18). Abraham pleads of God to save the righteous: it is not fair — to speak again with Ea in

his words to Enlil — to let the innocent suffer together with the sinner. Here God appears to be open to this insight. This raises the question whether God changed his mind. Could he also have regretted the outcome of the flood, like many of the gods as told in the epic of Gilgamesh? Within the Old Testament we hear different statements about God's regret. According to Numbers 23:19 God himself told to the prophet Balaam: 'God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind.'<sup>11</sup> This seems to be contradicted again in the story of Saul, in which it is repeated that God cannot change his mind (1 Samuel 15:29), but where it is nevertheless stated that God regretted to have Saul appointed as king (1 Samuel 25:11). God cannot have regrets, but it still happens. Something similar can be observed in the story of the flood. It looks like God was surprised by the actions of man and by the fact that man did not respond adequately to God time and again setting the boundaries. Within the story there seem to be different voices in this matter. When it is repeated in Genesis 6:9-14 we hear nothing of God being sorry. It is simply stated that God sees the evil and then makes his decision. It is also interesting to note that the Greek translator seems to have had his difficulties with God's reaction in verse 6. In the Septuagint this is translated with a greater sense of reluctance: 'then God considered that he had made humankind on the earth, and he thought it over'. There are no regrets here, only considerations.

When we now also look at the end of the story of the flood we can also add that the text indicates some kind of growing insight within God. He is not stubborn like Enlil who refuses to learn from his mistakes. One could say that Genesis 8:21 indicates that God has learned to accept that mankind is imperfect: "The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done"" (Genesis 8:21). He decides not to solve the problem anymore by annihilation but with education. He gives new rules helping mankind to regulate the apparently inevitable shedding of blood: 'Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being' (Genesis 9:3-5).

There is much ambiguity in this story, showing that you can look at things from different angles. This can be demonstrated by the wordplay on the basis of the repetition of the words with the letters *nun*, *chet* and *mem*. It starts with

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<sup>11</sup> As a rule the translation follows the New International Version.

the explanation of the name Noah as the one who will comfort (*nicham*) mankind (Gen. 5:29). This comfort is far away when God starts regretting (*nacham*) the creation of man. On the other hand Noah finds grace (*chen*) with God. This results in him being saved from the flood, when the ark rests (*nuch*) on the mountain. All seems to end well when also God is happy again, smelling the lovely (*nichoach*) peace offering. Noah comforts mankind for the hard work, showing that the efforts are not in vain when you get something nice as wine from it. On the other hand — this is another ambiguity — wine is not always a blessing. Sometimes it is a curse or leads to cursing.

Does this in many respect ambiguous story also indicates that God is ambiguous? Is this one of the dark sides of monotheism? Looking for a plausible answer one should start with the observation that life is ambiguous: there are many questions without answers, good is not always rewarded and evil not always punished. A clear solution would be to ascribe the negative experiences in life to negative powers and the positive to positive. This is the polytheistic solution. In Genesis 6-9 and also in other places in the Bible these roles are combined in the one God. Genesis 6-9 also indicates that this one God is not a distant, almighty and all-knowing God. There is a kind of dynamic, which leaves room for criticism and growth, with God and therefore also with mankind. Polytheism tends to fatalism, monotheism leaves room for a more critical and hopeful view.

### The Crack in Biblical Stories about Violent Intolerance

This way of looking at monotheism will probably not convince Assmann *cum suis* to retract or change their ideas about the relation between monotheism and violent intolerance. Does not history show that the critical view on things, mentioned above, was almost always exclusively directed at the other? According to the Bible there appears to be very little room for criticizing servants of God, let alone of God himself. Korah, Dathan and Abiram dared to ask questions about the way Moses was leading his people through the desert. They had to pay with their lives. They were swallowed by the earth (Numbers 16). A bunch of boys dared to mock the prophet Elisha, calling him 'baldy'. He then cursed them in the name of the Lord, who acted instantly sending two bears who mauled 42 of them (2 Kings 2:23-24). The God of Israel does not need human extremists to safeguard or avenge his honour.

Even more telling in this discussion about the relation between monotheism and violent intolerance are stories which at first sight seem to give a more positive, peaceful view, showing more openness to other peoples. One could

think here of the stories of Rachab (Joshua 2) and Ruth. Both women are outsiders, belonging to the enemy, the Canaanites and Moabites respectively. Both get their place within the community of Israel. It has to be considered, however, that this only happens after they have accepted the God of Israel as their god, leaving their heathen past behind. So these stories cannot be used as argument against the view that eventually monotheism is intolerant and therefore can lead to violence in the name of the one god.

Perhaps is better to stop trying to defend or get in one way or another some kind of positive meaning out of all the texts which so are so clearly filled with violence in the name of the one god.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand this does not have to be the last word in this matter. We can also stick to the insight given to us by the story of the flood, namely that belief in the one God can also inspire to leave room for new, critical and hopeful views on things. Despite the fact that the belief in the one God, especially when it was combined with power or fear, often leads to intolerance and violence, there is also a counter movement. There are also traces of a strong spirit of peace coming from the same one God. They can be found in these old canonical texts, although they are sometimes hidden or only visible at the margins. They are like cracks letting the light of tolerance and peace getting in.<sup>13</sup>

There are also cracks in the stories about violence in the name of the Lord. They can be found in some prophetic texts. The best examples come from probably the oldest of them all: from the prophecy of Amos. Already in the beginning of his book we read how he teaches the people of Israel and Judah not only to look critically at their neighbours, but also at themselves. He starts with oracles against the usual suspects: The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem' (Amos 1:2) first against Damascus, then the cities of the Philistines, then Tyre, Edom, Moab, Ammon. You can almost see the people in Jerusalem nodding, applauding these good words of the Lord against their sworn enemies. But Amos does not stop there. He follows by pointing to the sins of Judah and Israel, which will not go unpunished. At the end of the book we notice a similar 'crack' in the common views about the one God supporting this one people exclusively. After again pointing to the sins of Judah and Israel the prophet states: "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from

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12 A recent example of this approach is P. Copan and M. Flanagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014.

13 This image is taken from the song 'Anthem' by Leonard Cohen: 'Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering. / There is a crack, a crack in everything. / That's how the light gets in'.

Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?' (Amos 9:7). In the end of the prophecy the expected order seems to be restored: Israel will take precedence over Edom. Still there is this crack: the God of Israel is associated with every act of liberation, no matter what people it concerns. The love of the one God is bigger than just the love for the people of Israel.

That is also something that the prophet Jonah has to learn. The book with his name has all the characteristics of a crack in the on-going story of intolerant monotheism. It ends with a question: Should God 'not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left — and also many animals?' (Jonah 4:11). It is an open question. Was Nineveh not the symbol of evil? Did the cruel Assyrians who had massacred so many people not deserve to be punished? Since when did God have any sympathy for animals? You never heard that in the temple in Jerusalem. Jonah had a point when he got angry. Such questions may help to give the reader a new perspective and may inspire to ask critical questions about the common views on who is good and who is bad. It is a crack through which the light of tolerance may come in.

Another and probably more surprising 'crack' is found in the book of Judges, a book full of violence in the name of the Lord. It is about the people of Israel violating time and again the covenant with the God of Joshua, Moses and the fathers. They are punished by God in a violent manner: he surrenders them into the hands of their enemies who suppress the Israelites for long periods of many years. The solution comes after their repentance and is again a violent one: God sends judges who liberate them by exterminating the enemies. The distinction between good and bad is very clear and it primarily coincides with the good relation with the God of Israel. In this way a number of oppressors and liberators are presented. The first oppressor is King Cushan Rishataim from Aram Naharaim. His names can be translated as 'the black double wicked man'<sup>14</sup> and his country is located in the area where the Assyrians come from. So he is the ideal enemy. He is beaten by the first judge: Otniel, representing the first of the tribes of Israel: Judah. Then comes Eglon, king of another archenemy: Moab. He is humiliated by the cunning and brave Benjaminite Ehud. The next enemy king who is mentioned by name is Jabin, King of the Canaanites. His army lead by general Sisera is beaten by a number of tribes under the command of Barak and Deborah, whereas the final blow is delivered by Jael. These stories all fit within the same pattern, but in between

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14 Cf. K. Spronk, 'Cushan-Rishataim', *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, Volume 5 (2012), 1196.

the stories of Ehud and Deborah there is this one verse about one peculiar saviour of Israel: 'After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel' (Judges 3:31). That the Philistines are introduced as enemy comes as no surprise. They perfectly fit in the line of Assyrians, Moabites, and Canaanites. Whereas the first judge, Otniel, worked in the South, as a member of the tribe of Judah, Ehud fought against the Moabites in the East, and Deborah and Barak faced the enemy in the North, now Shamgar is opposing the Philistines coming from the West. But who is this Shamgar, son of Anath? He acts like Samson, fighting the Philistines and using an uncommon weapon: a tool to steer oxen (a metal-tipped pole, approximately 2,5 meters long), just like Samson killed Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15). Shamgar's origin, however, is suspect. He is called the son of Anath. Anath is the name of a Canaanite goddess. It was mentioned before in Judges 1:33 in the list of cities not conquered by the Israelites: Beth Anath, 'the house of Anath', next to Beth Shemesh, 'the house of the sun-god'. Is Shamgar a Canaanite? His own name also points in this direction. In Hebrew it looks like a combination of the words *sham*, 'there', and *ger*, 'foreigner', containing the same elements as the name Moses gave to his son: Gershom. According to Exodus 2:22 'he named him Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"'. This could be very well another pun on a person's name, like so often in the book of Judges (just as, among others, on the names of Cushan Rishataim, Eglon, Deborah, and Barak). So both his name and his descent indicate that we are dealing here with a non-Israelite related to a non-Yahwistic religion. This is someone the Israelites should avoid or — even better — kill. Nevertheless, as is stated in Judges 3:31: 'he too saved Israel'. On the one hand the enemies and the way they were dealt with fits into the program, on the other hand the executioner of the program does not fit into it at all. This is a crack in the system. It leaves the reader wondering: did I read this correctly? Should perhaps the text be corrected — as is suggested often in modern research? Or should we perhaps reconsider our views on who is the enemy and who is our ally?

### Conclusion

It cannot and should not be denied that the Old Testament, like other sacred texts such as the New Testament and the Qur'an, testifies of monotheism which does not tolerate deviating religious views and people holding on to them. Nevertheless, there are indications — we could call them cracks in the

system — that the one God is broader minded in this regard than many religious hardliners see Him or would like Him to be. In the on-going discussions about the relation between (monotheistic) religion and violence focusing on these cracks in the holy scriptures will help to let more light of tolerance come in.