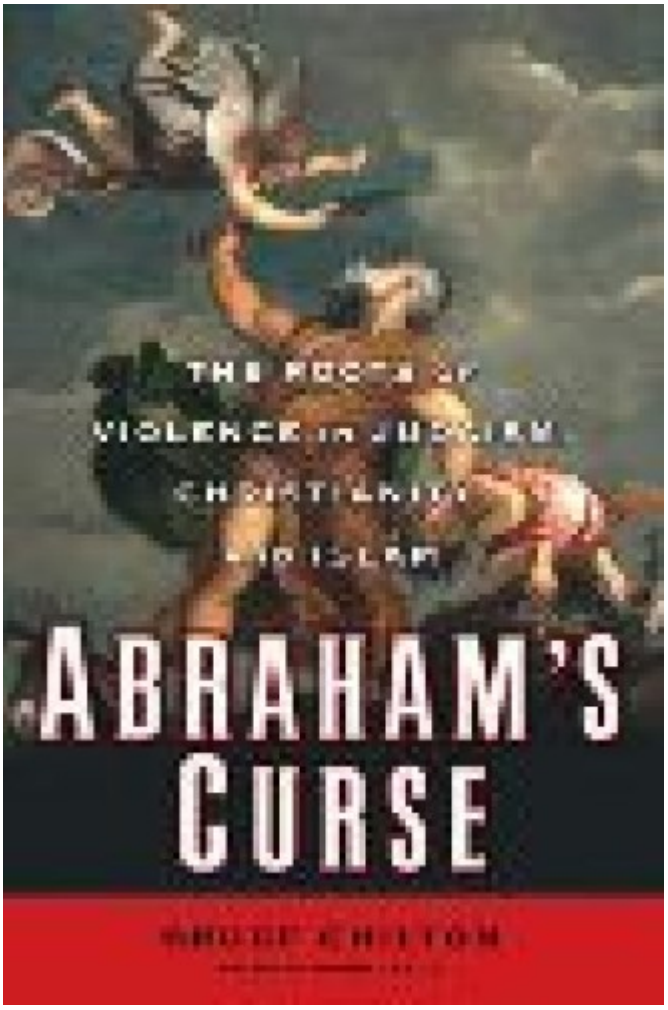
Texts of terror

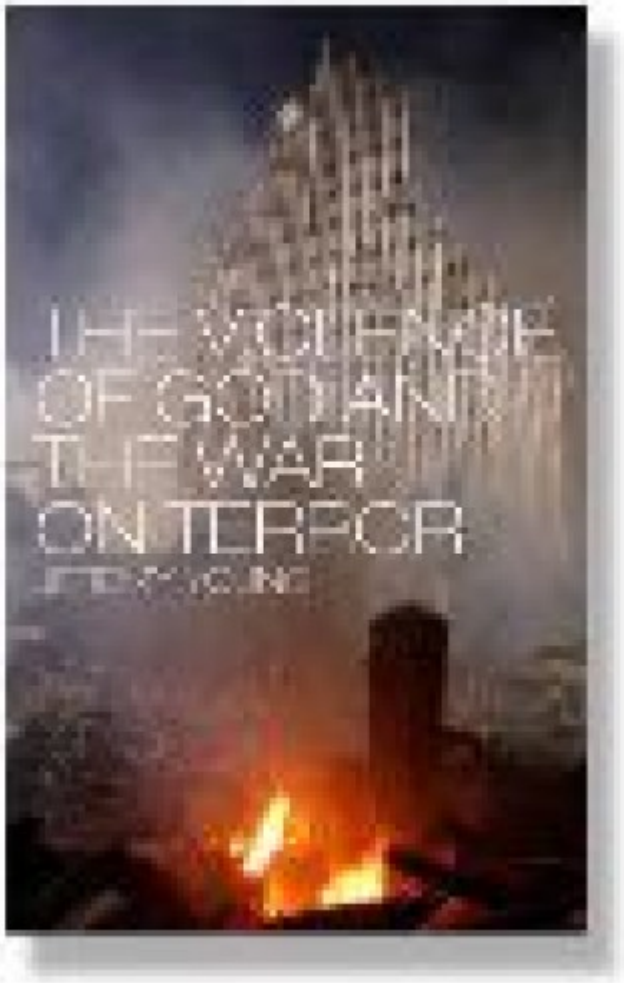
By Walter Brueggemann in the June 3, 2008 issue

In Review



Abraham's Curse: The Roots of Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Bruce Chilton
Doubleday



The Violence of God and the War on Terror

Jeremy Young
Seabury

Either the world is growing more violent or, because of more intense media coverage, we are increasingly aware of the violence that is all around us. Either way, violence—global and local, irrational and that committed as “rational” policy—presses upon us. Violence is also deeply rooted in biblical tradition, a fact that has been largely covered over by the niceties of high-minded theology and well-intentioned morality and piety. In our present circumstances, however, attention must be paid. Among the noteworthy books on biblically rooted violence, these two statements are relatively accessible and will evoke the critical conversation that is required.

Bruce Chilton, an Episcopal priest who teaches at Bard College, has written a thoughtful, reflective book that focuses on three moments in the long religious history that derives from the Bible. His discussion is an implied critique, but for the most part he simply reports on and observes a propensity for violence that takes a variety of forms.

His first moment is the “binding of Isaac” in Genesis 22 and the divine command to sacrifice the beloved son. The text, of course, has long preoccupied Jewish and Christian interpreters, and Chilton does not engage the fine points. (See Jon Levenson’s important discussion in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* [1993].) Rather, Chilton simply notices the divine command in the text and the way in which religious tradition has turned the divine mandate for violence into a positive good. He asks how it could be that God—the God of the Bible—could issue such a command.

Chilton next focuses on the rise of martyrdom in the Maccabean period and makes a daring interpretive connection between the martyred sons of the Maccabees and the old memory of Abraham nearly killing his son. He traces the motif through the Jewish tradition and the death of Jesus, and on to the martyrdom of Polycarp and Justin, noticing martyrdom as a Christian response to the policies of Rome.

The final section of the book concerns the rise of religious fanaticism in Islam, in Christian fundamentalism and in Zionist zeal, and takes the Crusades as the epitome of the “blood harvest” of religion that is rooted in the readiness to sacrifice sons for large truths that are too deeply embraced. Along the way he mentions Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* as a payout of this trajectory.

Chilton’s book is a sad exposé of an ongoing interpretive pattern that will never finish its destructiveness. It opens with the grief of Wilfred Owen:

> Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

And it concludes with Chilton’s own verdict:

> Any voice that calls us back to the mount of human sacrifice, in whatever form it takes in its myriad disguises, is not God’s. It is time for us, whether believers or not, to come down to the place of promise, where we can see

> that no moral value attaches to sacrificing any human life for any cause, with the possible exception of one's own.

Jeremy Young, a family therapist and Anglican priest, traverses the same material but with greater readiness to carry the discussion toward our contemporary cultural crisis. Taking up a theme from David Blumenthal, Renita Weems and myself, he prefers to use the therapeutic term *abuse* when discussing the narcissistic rage of God in the biblical text. From that seeding in the character of God, he moves to consider the cycle of abuse, domination and victimhood, and the way in which victimhood among exiled Jews has produced the exclusiveness of chosenness. Young sees a derivative pattern of abuse that leads to a violent memory of the land conquest recorded in Joshua and to "the myth of redemptive violence." He discerns that all parties in the transaction participate in a variety of ways in the pattern of abuse.

Young also sees a tradition of "counter-abuse testimony" in the Psalms and in texts that raise issues about theodicy and God's justice. In my book *Theology of the Old Testament* (1997) I proposed that Israel's core testimony to God in the Old Testament bears witness to God's fidelity and steadfastness; the text also offers countertestimony against that claim that bespeaks God's absence, violence and fickleness. Young's daring interpretive move is to propose that a recognition of God's violence is at the core of the testimony of Israel, and that the claim of divine fidelity that seeks to counter that awareness is the countertestimony. The inversion of these categories shows how deeply problematic, in Young's view, is the linkage between violence and the God of the Bible. This linkage is not an occasional aberration, but a deeply felt and pervasive awareness in the text.

Young moves on to show how the pattern plays out in Christian tradition. In an appeal to Genesis 22 he cites the cross as a narrative of "divine child abuse" and discusses three phases that constitute a cycle of abuse under the rubric of *kenosis*: voluntary renunciation of dominance, nonviolent acceptance of martyrdom, and exultation of a position of dominance. He suggests that when imperial theology adopted Christian faith, it depended on an internalization of oppression.

The argument then moves abruptly to "the myth of America" and the imperial exceptionalism of the U.S. as the chosen new Israel; the consequent "war on terror" is an almost inescapable outcome of the tradition of violence in which U.S. religion is rooted. Young carries his commentary directly to current U.S. policy and

personalizes it as being embodied in President George W. Bush. By the time he finishes, Young has shown how the United States is a victim (by its appeal to 9/11), how Zionists fuel their military by victimization, and how Muslims also cast themselves as victims. It is victimhood all around—even, curiously, in the heart of the last superpower.

Appealing to object-relations theory, Young identifies “narcissistic rage” as a driving force in U.S. self-discernment, but it is a rage on which the U.S. has no monopoly. Object-relations theory proposes that strong, healthy personality is formed by the interaction of the young child with an attentive mother who is able to give the child a sense of identity, security and power. When the mother fails to do this, the identity of the child is poorly formed, so the child may become excessively preoccupied with self. This excessive self-preoccupation may become narcissistic and, under acute pressure, may break out as uncontrolled rage. Young proposes that the cycle of terror and violent counterterror is a reflection of such deeply rooted narcissistic rage. What is acted out in public is, on this reading, rooted well beneath visible explanations in policy: its source is in failed personality formation. Young makes reference to Jim Wallis, Rosemary Ruether and Miroslav Volf as he concludes with a reflection on how Christianity may be reperceived as a religion of peace.

These books both travel the road from Mount Moriah to contemporary life. Not everyone will follow the connections the authors suggest, but their arguments are compelling. It is remarkable that neither cites the important work of Regina Schwartz (*The Curse of Cain*, 1997), but there is plenty here for continuing study. These two books might be an important wake-up call to the church. The theological tradition entrusted to us contains toxic dimensions that feed public self-understanding and policy. It will not do, in any responsible community of faith, to continue the benign prattle about love, reconciliation and forgiveness unless we seriously take into account the lethal dimensions of the tradition to which we often uncritically respond “Thanks be to God!”