What makes a violent story also a sacred text?

"Is this feeding your souls?" I asked after we slogged through another biblical bloodbath.

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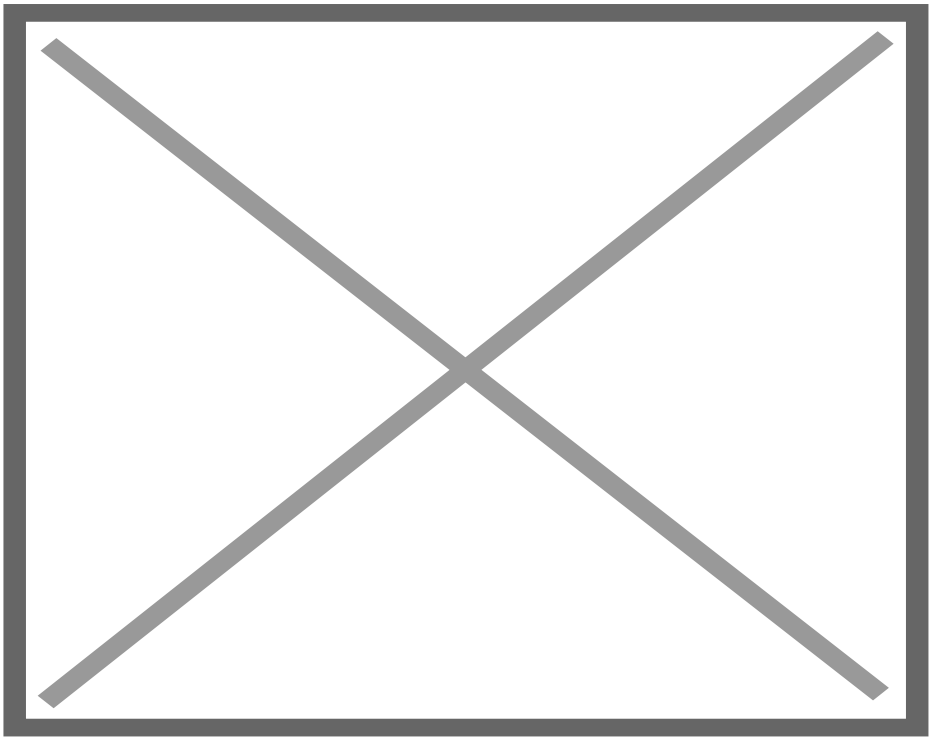

Death of Absalom, anonymous, 14th century German

It's been another challenging season in our stalwart little adult education class.

For three months we've been journeying together through the Deuteronomic History, which is just a fancy-pants way of saying the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. All of them were likely compiled by an editor whose primary interest was the law of Torah, and particularly the ethical and theological teachings found in Deuteronomy.

In these books, there are familiar stories of familiar faces from our Sunday School years. The prophet Samuel, called by God in the darkness. Saul, the troubled, handsome king. David, beautiful and noble and tragically flawed, slayer of Goliath. Solomon the wise, builder of the temple. The prophet Elijah, fed by ravens in the wilderness, rushing to heaven in that sweet chariot.

The tales come in a great rush, names piling upon names, as king follows king follows king over hundreds of years. Sometimes, the transitions go smoothly. More often, though, there were coups or slaughters or revolutions, as into the story of Israel and Judah are written the kind of mess that has defined all of human

history.

And as we're discovering after wrapping up our reading this week, things don't end well. The northern kingdom of Israel, crushed and scattered before the might of Assyria. Judah, the weaker sister to the south, held on a little longer, but finally succumbed to the fist of Babylon.

Centuries of striving and struggle, betrayals and battles and butchery, and all of that human mess goes exactly nowhere.

"Is this feeding your souls? Are we getting anything spiritually out of this?" I asked that question last week, as we heaved through another bloodbath of a power transition. It wasn't. We weren't. There's just not much grace or goodness to be found, historically fascinating and intense as the stories may be.

So what is it, I find myself wondering, that makes this sacred text? Why is this particular narrative ... a people, struggling and bleeding and failing over and over again ... woven into a holy book?

In part, it's because it's honest, unflinchingly so. The historian who compiled these books clearly had his own perspective, but was willing to approach even his heroes with storytelling that pulled no punches. They're recognizable in their human failing, even across thousands of years. Their stories still have resonance.

But it's also because it gives context and ground to the story of the gospel, and to the cries for justice that came from the prophets. Here, written in a sprawling entropy of human power struggles, lies not just the culture and history of Jesus, but also the reason for the gospel.

In Saul's deepening, anxious madness, we can see it. In David's growing agony over the loss around him. In Solomon's wealth, which became both his strength and his hubris.

Human beings, struggling to find a way to be together, in which violence and power and hatred of the other are no longer in control of our lives. Without the story of history—Hebrew and Gentile alike—the necessity of the Way might feel less urgent.

So as much of a struggle as it was, it was well worth the reading.

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