



BOOK REVIEW

Matthew J. Lynch, *Flood and Fury: Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God*

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The violence of the Old Testament, at the hand of God and of God's people, has been a topic of contention for two millennia. It raises questions about the Old Testament's authority and value for Christian belief, and ultimately about the person of God. These debates have become quite prominent within Christian circles and in the public square. Responses deemed unsatisfactory are leading an increasing number of people to question, even leave, the faith.

Flood and Fury by Matthew Lynch, associate professor of Old Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, is a foray into this weighty topic. Its tone is irenic, the presentation accessible and pastoral, his discussion informed – an ideal combination for engaging the centuries-old concerns about the violence of the text. The book also is transparent about Lynch's own journey into the topic.

Two premier case studies, the Genesis flood and the conquest account in Joshua, are the focus of the book. It is divided into four parts: two introductory chapters (part one) set up the accusations and common solutions on offer; part two (chapters 3–6) deals with the flood story; part three, the largest of the book (chapters 7–13), presents ancient background material and careful readings to potentially reorient discussions about the conquest; part four (chapters 14 and 15) proposes reading strategies for those seeking ways to approach these difficult challenges from a perspective of trust in the Old Testament.

Chapter 1 lists the kinds of texts that challenge contemporary sensibilities, including violence committed, commanded or sanctioned by God, and violent prayers and prophecies. The second chapter surveys eight options that Lynch finds inadequate, such as spiritualising the problems, divine command theory, progressive revelation and the default to divine mystery or the cross. Instead, texts must be read within their fuller literary context and in light of central claims about God; we should recognise, too, that scripture may have a deeper understanding of violence than we do because of the lived realities of those times.

The chapters on the flood argue that it cannot be understood apart from a proper grasp of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 and its implications: violence and warfare are not part of God's original design and purposes. Human violence first appears in Genesis 3 and 4 and devolves into unrestrained vengeance, unacceptable treatment of women and even takes hold among animals. God's response is not anger but grief at the complete collapse of the original *shalom*. Accordingly, the flood can be viewed as

a step towards recreation (Genesis 8 and 9), and the setting aside of God's bow (not a rainbow) demonstrates a commitment towards peace and flourishing.

The book's third section is wide-ranging. It is designed, correctly, to complicate too facile a reading of Joshua. Chapter 7 points out that the initial uses of the sword by the people of Israel are unexpected: the men are circumcised and thus neutralised, and then the angelic visitor does not give Joshua some sort of powerful weapon but instead reminds him (as do subsequent passages) that victory would solely be the Lord's doing. Chapter 8 demonstrates that not all Canaanites were exterminated, as commonly believed. Israel's first encounter with them is in the person of Rahab; subsequently, there is the treaty with the Gibeonites, the inclusion of Caleb, and more. The label 'genocide', in other words, misrepresents the narrative.

In the ninth chapter, Lynch contrasts the 'Minority' and 'Majority' Reports in Joshua and Judges. The former (Judges) describes the taking of the land as incomplete and Canaanites as living among the Israelites, whereas the latter (Joshua) presents a picture of total conquest. To highlight only the second and ignore the first distorts the textual nuances. Chapter 10 relates discussion of the annihilation seemingly called for in *herem* to the stern commands against idolatry found from Deuteronomy to Ezra, which are not connected to that kind of violence. Lynch also notes that the date generally assigned for the composition of Joshua would have been at a time when the destruction of these peoples could not have occurred.

Chapters 11 and 12 contain relevant ancient Near Eastern data that explain the war language in Joshua and the historical context: the proper perception of a walled city, the probable number of soldiers involved in an attack and the hyperbolic language about the battles and the giants in the land. The text also links the conquest to the Exodus to suggest that it is best understood the climactic end to the conflict with Egypt. Chapter 13 reveals the liturgical framework of the conquest account.

As Lynch brings the book to a close in the final two chapters, he exhorts readers to root these debates in the character of God (especially Exod 34:6–7) and the tension between mercy and wrath. Finally, to deal adequately with the 'wicked problem' (pp. 214–15) of the Old Testament's violence, which Lynch knows will never be totally solved, one needs to read with 'empathy before evaluation' (p. 216) and with full scriptural literacy.

This is a helpful book to put into the hands of students and lay people, and there are gems for scholars as well. Lynch has done a great service with this constructive contribution to intractable issues that is both gentle and honest. My only quibble would be that the inclusion of a name index and/or bibliography might have made this an even greater resource.

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