

MAYHEM AND MONOTHEISM

The Good Book's dark side.

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER

To hear Regina Schwartz tell it, the whole thing began with a first year student's impertinent interruption in the middle of one of her Biblical studies classes. While Schwartz, an English professor at Northwestern University and the director of the Chicago Institute of Religion, Ethics, and Violence, was talking about how "deeply inspiring" the Exodus liberation story was—especially compared with other foundation narratives, so often strewn with plunder and conquest—this kid had cut her short with a mildly self-evident query: "*What about the Canaanites?*" As she writes in the preface to *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago, \$22.95), this question ended up taking her years and an entire book to try to answer.

The result is artfully rendered, endlessly provocative, and at times wildly exasperating. Schwartz subtitles her study "The Violent Legacy of Monotheism," but what she's really noodling around with are the *genocidal* implications of monotheism. Although her focus is on the Hebrew Bible, Schwartz's real subject is the genocidal tendencies embedded in all of that Book's spiritual progeny—Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism. What they share is the Biblical propensity to conceive of history as One God expressing himself in the world through his choice of One People—a people who get defined against inferior others, with predictably dire consequences.

Schwartz herself was reared in a Reform Jewish tradition that cast the Jews' chosenness in ethical terms—being "chosen" didn't mean you were better, just that you answered to higher ethical expectations—but her student's question about the Canaanites crystallized a lingering unease she'd felt. For "where the Bible both inspired and seemed to fail me," Schwartz recalls, was precisely on this matter of ethics, where "a moving accountability for the widow, the orphan and the poor and commitment to liberation from oppression is joined to obliterating the Canaanites." What she came to realize is that whenever the narrative became concerned with defining Israelite identity—distinguishing insider and outsider—such casual brutality seemed to be the order of the day.

Whereupon she began noticing all sorts of odd things about the Bible. For starters, the Exodus story itself. Let's see if we have this straight: Because the Jews were persecuted by Pharaoh in Egypt, they have the right to take over somebody else's land more than a hundred miles to the east? Why didn't God smite Pharaoh and give the Jews a piece of *his* land? Sluicing beneath the surface of Schwartz's argument, of course, are implications for Zionism itself. Given that the Nazi genocide created the necessity for a Jewish homeland, she seems to suggest, why did it have to be in Palestine rather than, say, Bavaria or the Ruhr Valley? Because of something Pharaoh did more than three thousand years ago?

"The ancient Israelites never lay claim to the land as natives," Schwartz notes, "On the contrary, their story tells of a people who originate elsewhere." And this, Schwartz points out, is a pattern that recurs repeatedly in Bible-sanctioned history. The fact that the Puritans are persecuted in England gives them leave to venture out across the waters and wrest land from the Indians. The Boers decamp from Holland en route to their divinely ordained destiny in Cape Town. And so forth

I recently encountered a variation on this pattern while reporting in the Bosnian town of Banja Luka, whose majority Muslim community was almost entirely "cleansed" by its Serb neighbors during the recent war. As I was standing alongside a rubble-strewn parking lot on the site of what had until recently been one of the most splendid ancient mosques west of Istanbul, I asked a passing Serb student by what justification this and all the town's other mosques had been leveled. "Because of what the Ustasha did to us during the Second World War—they leveled our Orthodox churches," he replied without the slightest hesitation. Only the Ustasha were Croats. I somehow felt transported into a Three Stooges movie; Moe wallops Larry, who then feels entirely justified in turning around and smashing Curly. Reading Schwartz will remind you that Larry's gambit has an ancient lineage.

Across chapters on covenants, land, kinship, nation, and memory, Schwartz lays siege to the very notion of a chosen identity. Along the way, she offers fascinatingly original readings of all sorts of tales: the expulsion from the Garden, God's acceptance of Abel's offering over Cain's (and Cain's murderous revenge), Jacob's wily theft of the blessing his

blind father had intended for Esau, and on through Joseph's exile, Moses's redemption, and beyond. Throughout these discussions she keeps returning to contrasting paradigms of "scarcity" and "plenitude." Why, she asks, as impertinently as any first-year student, does God have to choose either Abel's or Cain's offering—why not both? Why does Isaac have only one blessing to offer? Why must the land of Canaan belong only to the Jews or else only to the Canaanites? Why this strangulating scarcity everywhere?

All this leads, in turn, to one of her book's central exasperations. Schwartz writes as if scarcity were merely some sort of metaphor. But the theme may well have reflected an actual scarcity of resources in ancient Palestine—a condition in which murderous competition would naturally arise. For that matter, is it really clear that monotheism instigated genocidal proclivities, instead of functioning as a sort of post-hoc justification for them? It's worth noting that murder has found many other traveling companions besides monotheism. Pagans—whether Homeric Greeks or Vedic Aryans—weren't exactly slouches at constructing transcendental rationales for their earthly depredations. When it comes to genocidal mayhem, surely the Iliad and the Mahabharata can match Exodus blow for blow.

Just when you're about to toss Schwartz's book away in utter frustration, however, it takes a startlingly suggestive turn. For rather than building toward a critique of the Bible itself, Schwartz offers us a critique of the ways we read the Bible: she insists that those readings themselves suffer from a sort of conceptual scarcity, scanting the plenitude of alternative readings offered by Scripture. In contrast to such images of scarcity as Cain's spurned offering and Isaac's misplaced blessing, Schwartz cites the manna raining from Heaven in Exodus's wilderness as a defining instance of abundance, with plenty for everyone. And though Israel's chosen nationhood is represented as a gift from God, Schwartz notes that elsewhere the story of Babel casts the dispersal of mankind into separate nations as a punishment and a terrible affliction—anything but a gift.

She even questions the centrality of the Hebrews' attainment of a Promised Land by pointing out recurrent counter-motifs—such as the nostalgic celebration of the prior life of nomadism. "The prophets," she writes, "imagine the wilderness, not as a place of exile, but as an idealized place of innocence before the corruptions of the territorial state and a place to return to heal those corruptions." For them, she notes, "possession of the land and idolatry go hand in hand."

Surveying the way a multifarious text has been parched of meaning by successively reductive readings, Schwartz pays particular attention to two traditions of Biblical interpretation. The first she associates with the Protestant Reformation, in a Europe that was "on the road to carving itself into new peoples, new nationalisms"—and horrendously violent and self-righteous ones at that. The second tradition she associates with the rise of modern Biblical studies in nineteenth-century Germany, when scholars were projecting their own emerging nationalist obsessions back onto the Biblical text. "Could it really be coincidence," Schwartz wonders, "that Biblical higher criticism and the ideology of radical modern nationalism were born in the same period in the same place?"

It is in the face of this progressively constricting history of misreading that Schwartz, on her last page, proposes a "re-vision" in which "an alternative Bible . . . subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity. It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism." And she goes on, "When I began this project, I anticipated concluding with the injunction from Augustine to 'close the Book.' For him, faith had superseded it; for me, its ancient agonistic values are far too dangerous to continue authorizing. But I have come to understand that same urge in a new light. The old 'monotheistic' Book must be closed so that new books may be fruitful and multiply. After all, that was the first commandment."

Still, you have to wonder. Just as German romantic-nationalist scholars construed a romantic-nationalist Bible, Schwartz, the postmodern American critic, has projected (surprise!) the perfect postmodernist Bible, with more simultaneous narratives unspooling than at any shopping-mall cineplex. Yet for all the richness and agility of her interpretations, are they any less timebound than their predecessors? And what is to keep the proliferation of these "provisional" new readings—endlessly revisable, never conclusive—from falling into indiscriminate relativism? More to the point, you might wonder how something can be both provisional and sacred—except, of course, that that's exactly what life is.