

HOW TO SELECT WHICH ATROCITIES TO TALK ABOUT AND REMEMBER,
or "SCRIPTURE" AS FACTOR IN SOCIAL COHESION/STABILITY/CHANGE

Today (2nd day of Chistmas '82), an Iranian and his American wife left our home after a three-day visit during which conversation time and again, always with civility, wended to the current Mideast anguish ("current," since the Mideast has been anguished throughout history...so the current anguish should not be taken too seriously, but seriously enough). The two of them always gave selective attention to the atrocities: all their tales were of horrors committed by Israelis. Natural enough, considering their viewpoint: Israel as a state should never have come into existence; and the sooner it ceases to exist, "and that will be soon," the better.

Apparently, like everything else, atrocities come in two kinds: good and bad. Exodus begins with bad atrocities (committed by the Egyptians), and things are definitely looking up when we get to the ten good atrocities (committed by God). Apocalyptically, the Oppression/Exile/Crucifixion motif in our Bible is an essential catena of horrors or litany of atrocities pointing toward the final horror-atrocity, "the Day of Vengeance of our God." (Note that-- "atrocity" being a political word--I'm using the term for how it feels to be on the wrong end of the horror; in this case, the Hell's-eye-view.)

Now, the recital of atrocity-beads, (1) being a strand in sacred literature through the ages and around the world, (2) functions to provide social cohesion (the glue of the common enemy), stability ("We can't afford to rock the boat or to let others rock it."), and change ("Things are so bad, we are so victimized, that deliverance now, 'by whatever means necessary,' is not optional."). I've done more than a bit of this reciting in my time: biblical-style prophets are more concerned with their own people's sins and crimes than with the putative enemies'. (I've been a heavy critic of the church, the government, capitalism, the West--of "me"/"us"/"our.")

1. This mode of recital is of some but limited usefulness in accomplishing the three objectives (cohesion, stability, social change). In written and oral scripture, it tends to blind as well as illumine. It impedes objectivity, rationality, fairness, and thus the mutual search for solutions; and for all these reasons, it's pro-violent. Not that violence is always bad; but developments in war technology have now given violence a permanently bad name.

2. Atrocity-recital being a negative motivator, it must be balanced with positive incentive(s) if we are to make an advance in truth and trust and thus in "freedom and justice for all." The Wampanoag Indians do nothing but irritate me if they do no more than recite the atrocity of losing the land on which we have built our house. Wallowing in self-pity and spleen is worse than useless for individuals and groups/peoples. Some "Palestinians" continue to do it in hope of arousing adequate violence to achieve reentry into "Palestine," but the present and immediately foreseeable result is merely the piling up of little people's corpses. Land claims, though scripture-based (Torah and Koran), though militarily potentially useful, are irrelevant to law, logic, and justice. (How true, pathetic, and worse than useless are the claims that "Palestine" is "the land of our (meaning Jew OR Arab) fathers"! Israel has no right to exist as a state because it is within the boundaries of the Koranic "Islamic Heartland"; and Arabs have no legitimate claims to "Palestine"

An essay in form-critical interpretation of atrocity recital.....

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a command (normative use), to add weight to a teaching (rhetorical use), or as a source of examples (illustrative use, which is often of sapiential force)." Pp.169f: They use Scripture "corroboratively; but 'the Lord' is still largely the highest authority, as in the apostolic age." The gospel story is an indicative "out of which could spring...imperatives."

because their fathers were oppressors, "pacifying" the land with the sword in the 8th century: in 1947-48, Israel "liberated" the land from this and the successive Ottoman and British oppressions.)

3. Atrocity-recital is expensive to truth and dangerous to the public tranquility and even to human life. And sometimes necessary: Sam Adams used it well in freeing us from Britain, and Northern preachers did it well in preparing the Union to crush the South's liberation movement (i.e., denying the right of state secession). I'm not +/- moralistic about atrocity-recital; it's just that at the present time, I'm not into reciting any horrors except those being committed by Reagan. Should I be? I'm quietistic about "Palestine," considering (as did my Lord Jesus) that turf to be historically hopeless. As for S.Africa and S.America, what good can I in my Sitz im Leben hope to achieve by reciting past/present horrors?

4. What am I to do when confronted by horror-catenae? I am, for one thing, to speak truth both to power and to impotence. When three days ago my Iranian friend said, "Zionism claims Iran as part of Israel," I had to say that that is an antisemitic lie (from the fraudulent "Protocols of Zion") illegitimately sanctioning Khomeini's claim that Israel-claimed land is part of "the Islamic Heartland." In ancient Israel, false prophets reinforced power's atrocity recitals: true prophets reversed this, reciting power's own atrocities (oppression of "the poor of the land," and God-denying alliances with foreign powers). As a biblical person, I must not be quiet; as a Jesus-follower ("Christian"), I must be quietistic (i.e., hopeless about power's willingness/ability to arrive at justice, and hopeful of the soon-fullcome "Kingdom of God"--which hope, in the Church Year, centers in Christmas, whose story-cluster includes, as an atrocity recital, a mass slaughter of infants).

5. Sub-motifs in atrocity recital: (1) the foil story, showing how good the good guys are at precisely the points at which the bad guys are bad; and (2) the intensifying, usually highly inflated, statistic, which needs no description. Truth is the first victim....

6. During "Vietnam," I was often pressed by the media (print, radio, television) as to why I recited only the horrors we were creating. Said I, "I cite our atrocities: let them cite theirs." (Also my stance, through the years, vis-a-vis USA/"Communism.") But I hear my father saying, "Be fair! In comparison with what?" As I've grown older, this second and balancing truth has weighed more in my thinking that it did in the past. A fine, tensile line to draw.

7. In many thinksheets, beginning with #27 (the basic life/literature model in my '43 ThD thesis), I've puzzled over the counter-claiming of life ("How are we, here and now, to live as human beings?") and sacred literature, scripture ("How are we, here and now, to be faithful to our sacred heritage and hope as expressed in our sacred texts?"). Often, book/life prove to be mutually invalidating/stultifying/distorting/evading. What would honest hermeneutic(s) look like? More widely, honest language over against the code words, the rhetorical slogans impelling to action at the sacrifice of reflection, poor-quality questions impeding the emergence of higher-quality questions and therefore of higher-quality answers? P.ix, my '54 PhD thesis:

8. Religious communities use their scripture in seeking "guidance and confirmation for belief and behavior (the scriptural sanction)," as did early Christian leaders "to provide Jesus...and the Christian movement with the backing of the past (predictive use), to strengthen