

DISMEMBERMENT AND COMMUNITY: SACRIFICE AND THE COMMUNAL BODY IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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The formation of community is inextricably bound up with violence in the Hebrew scriptures. The first murderer becomes the first city-founder. The first unified action by the tribes of Israel—the first not in response to an external threat—results from the dismembering of a woman's body. The first unified action of the new Israelite monarchy is compelled by the plea of the residents of Jabesh-gilead to be rescued from the threat of dismemberment, and is commemorated by the dismemberment of oxen. The rejection of Saul's kingship and the anointing of a new king is punctuated by the dismemberment of a foreign king. Combining the mechanism of sacrifice (which serves to increase violence rather than quell violence as René Girard would have it) with the seemingly "natural" analogy of corporal body to communal Body, the movement to form a centralized system and structure of authority, at least as it is pictured in the Hebrew scriptures, is inherently violent, and inherently repressive.

The mythological and religious heritage of the West relies heavily on the analogy between the corporal body and the communal Body. Christ is spoken of in Ephesians 1.22-23 as "the head over all things for the church, which is his body [*soma*], the fullness of him who fills all in all."¹ The unity of this body of Christ/Body of Christians is expressed in Galatians 3.28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This theme is sounded again in Romans: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we,

who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another" (12.4-5). Note that in this passage not only are the individual parts united in a greater whole, but the individual parts are "members of one another." In this vision of the communal Body, the relationship between parts is as important as that between parts and whole. Only when each part becomes a member of each other part is the communal Body whole.

The making one Body of many bodies (*hoi polloi en soma*, the many one body) has a less immediately mystical air in the Hebrew scriptures than in the above-quoted passages from the Greek text, but it nevertheless plays a central role in the narrative of Israel. The explicit, linguistically grounded, analogy of community to body is not present in the Hebrew scriptures in the way that it permeates the Greek texts, but it implicitly underlies many of the familiar (and not-so-familiar) stories of Hebrew scripture. That this is so can be made clearer by considering the element of violence in these stories, specifically dismemberment (hacking, cutting, sawing, and otherwise tearing to bits) of bodies.



The first act of physical violence (the first murder) in the Bible is associated with worship and sacrifice. Cain (from *qayin*—fixity, striking fast, and from *qanah*—to acquire, produce, to own) and Abel (from *hebel*, and *habel*—emptiness, futility, or vanity, something transient and unsatisfactory) are the first to try to breach the gap between humans and God; in essence, they are the first (within the parameters of Biblical mythology) to try to form a community with God as its center. How is this attempt made? Through sacrifice:

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. (Genesis 4.3-4)

This emphasis on God (or, more generally, a central figure/superior power) is the first element in the pattern of Biblical community formation. Sacrifices bring those sacrificing together: insofar as they are focused on a common totality or superior power, these individuals become a community. The second element is sacrifice. Cain appears to have invented the idea of sacrifice;² however, his sacrifice of the fruits of the ground is unacceptable to God:

And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. (4. 4-5)

Abel's offering of the fatty parts of the firstlings of his flock (earlier Abel is referred to as a keeper of sheep) is acceptable, while Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground is not.³

Here, then, is the third element in the pattern: the sacrifice must involve blood; a body must be rendered, cut, burnt, somehow consumed in order for the sacrifice to be acceptable, and in order for the community—the communal Body—to be formed. René Girard's thesis that "sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence" (8), and "to prevent conflicts from erupting" (14) finds no support in the earliest chapters of Genesis, where the first sacrifice results in violence: Cain murders Abel. The subsequent history of ritual sacrifice in the Hebrew scriptures—Noah's propitiation of Yahweh on Ararat; Abraham's offering of Isaac; the innumerable morning and evening burnt offerings of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers; the sacrifices of the days of Atonement, of Pentecost, and of the Festival of Booths—has less to do with any violence inherent in the "Israelites" themselves than it does with staving off the violence and/or seeking the favor and assistance of Yahweh. This view is seconded by Baruch Levine, following the early twentieth-century scholar George Buchanan Gray, when he argues that Hebrew sacrifice reflects a "contractual relationship ... [in which the] worshipper pledges a gift to the deity in an effort to secure his assistance" (Levine xxxi). Such sacrifices involving flesh are typically sacrifices of animal flesh; however, as Gray obliquely suggests when considering the episode of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, human flesh may once have been presented sacrificially: "the essential fact to observe is that the custom of vowing persons to Yahweh outlived the custom of sacrificing them to him" (36). Such a gift is intended to gain the favor of the deity, and to use that favor to obtain a desired outcome of human events. In the specific case of Jephthah, what is asked for, and obtained, is victory in battle. In this way, human violence appears as companioned to sacrifice: viewed in this way, sacrifice—itsself a form of physical violence performed upon a body—serves as a plea for the divine favor necessary for a successful use of violence within, or between, individuals, tribes, or nations.

The first sacrifice, which resulted in the murder of Abel, while it appears directed toward the violence and/or favor of Yahweh, does not, on first inspection, seem to share the aims of a sacrifice like Jephthah's: violence in the service of community formation or community goals does not seem to play any part in the offerings of Cain and Abel. However, as

Regina Schwartz has argued, such violence is always present as a subtext in sacrifices of flesh, whether animal or otherwise:

[Israel's] history—of servitude and subsequent freedom from bondage, of building a great people in a mighty nation, of immense land acquisition, of establishing an empire—this entire foundational narrative of ancient Israel is framed by the account of severed pieces of animals. Why? In ancient Near Eastern rituals, the cut made to the animal is symbolically made to the inferior [whether that inferior is an individual or a collective] who enters into the covenant with a superior. (22)

Schwartz goes on to ask a fundamental question: “Must identity be forged in violence?” (22). In the narratives considered in this essay, I believe the answer is “yes,” if Schwartz’s question is amended so that *must be* becomes *is*. Is identity forged in violence in the Hebrew narratives of dismemberment and community? Yes. Communities are formed, communal actions are undertaken, and communal identities are reinforced through sacrificial violence and the violence (often war) that follows.

In the portrait drawn by these narratives, violence among humans did not arise until after the sacrificial process; the pattern of violence, rather than being quelled by sacrifice, actually emerges from the sacrificial pattern. This sacrificial pattern is by no means universally accepted, nor does it go unchallenged in the Bible; Amos describes a God who rejects the sacrifices offered by the people of Israel: “the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon” (5.22). As Shalom M. Paul has argued, “Amos delivered a devastating diatribe against the nation’s distorted concept of the wholesale panacea of the cult,” and what God “requires [is] devotion, not devotions, right more than rite” (2). For Amos, and the other prophets, “worship and ritual were means; justice and righteousness were ends” (139). What the God of Amos wants is sacrifices of justice and righteousness, kind and humane treatment of the poor. The Israelites can no longer appease merely with cultic sacrifices of blood offered as if they were of value in and of themselves, regardless of the true spiritual condition of those making the sacrifices: such sacrifices are condemned because those offering them “sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they . . . trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (2.6-7). Life is relatively urban and urbane in Amos’s time (during the reign of Jeroboam II, ca. 786-746 B.C.), and the primary violence of community formation is now in the past; nevertheless, it still lies at the (perhaps unexamined) root of the community’s assumptions and practices. The view of sacrifice, of “the cut” as Schwartz puts it, as a violent gift given upon entering a

contract—a gift and a contract disconnected from moral and ethical concerns—is one that Amos virulently challenges.

Despite the ethical imperatives of Amos regarding life in an already existing community, community formation in the Bible begins as a bloody affair that relies heavily on an analogy between corporal bodies and communal Bodies, using violence done to the former as a unifying force for the latter. The first murderer, Cain, becomes the first city-founder (Enoch, at Genesis 4.17). Even the sign of the original covenant between Yahweh and Abraham involves sacrifice, blood, and dismemberment as a way of establishing the roles of Yahweh as central authority and of Abraham as the origin of the communal Body:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. . . . Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Genesis 17.10-11, 14)

The original sign of a communal Body involved the “dismembering” of corporal bodies; flesh was cut off of the body so that the body might not be “cut off” from the Body. The pattern of symbolizing Bodies with bodies, of using mutilation and dismemberment to symbolize the formation of a unified communal Body, and of using that Body as a symbol of totality, of centralized authority, is established at the beginning of the scripture.

In the Hebrew text that recounts the “history” of the “Israelites,” the narrative of the formation of an Israelite nation out of loosely connected tribes provides us with some of the most horrifically violent passages of the Hebrew scriptures, two of which, the account of the Levite’s “concubine” in Judges 19, and the hacking to death of King Agag in 1 Samuel 15, reveal the dark, openly physical side of the idea of communities as Bodies.



The unnamed “concubine” of Judges 19, whom I shall call Beth (following Mieke Bal), serves as the glue that binds disparate tribes into one “Israelite” Body. The tribes of Israel have, of course, been united before: they were united in suffering as slaves under the “new king [who] arose

over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1.8); they were united in the experience of forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and were united in worship around the cult-symbol of the covenant ark; they were united under Joshua in the war of conquest in the land of Canaan. These moments of unity, however, were temporary; the unity was one of shared oppression, or shared worship, or shared conquest. Once the yoke of slavery was thrown off, once the conquest of Canaan was accomplished (or at least well underway), the tribes went their separate ways. Joshua 13-21 describes in some detail the allotment of separate territories for each of the tribes. The only thing, it would seem, that holds these tribes together in any sense is a shared acknowledgement of Yahweh—although the dispute described in Joshua 22, one which nearly leads to war, over the altar built by the Transjordanian tribes, reveals how tenuous that unity is. Even the account of Gideon's generalship in the battle of the Israelite tribes against the Midianites (Judges 6.1-8.32) presents only a temporary unity, a temporarily centralized confederacy rather than a permanently centralized nation.

While the dual possibilities of coalescence into nationhood and/or fragmentation into warring factions are always just under the surface, always just unrealized, always at the liminal stage in the Hebrew narrative, the story of Beth is a turning point. It is here that the tensions between unity and fragmentation, between Tribal Bodies and the National Body meet and clash, over the dismembered body of a never-named woman.

"In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judges 18.1). This is one of the central preoccupations of the book of Judges. The "Judges" appear primarily as local charismatic leaders who take on—in crisis situations—a translocal status and purpose.⁴ Israel is better referred to during this period as the nations of Israel; the individual tribes were in control of their own separate (if adjoining) territories, and the tribes only came together when there was an outside force to contend with. Outside threats created an ephemeral unity, a kind of "national" exoskeleton that temporarily bound the disparate tribes into a single military Body. Rather than being celebrated, this situation is portrayed in the Judges narrative as leading only to trouble; the continual necessity of raising up yet another "judge" to deliver the tribes of Israel from their larger, better organized neighbors serves to highlight the need for, and justify the move towards, a monarchical Israelite nation. The story of Beth, with its description of internecine warfare, literally closes the book on a period of chaos with a bleak picture of the dangers of a decentralized social organization. The Israelites must

join as One, or—so the narrative seems to warn—they will destroy each other.

Beth's story starts out with another reminder that there was, in those days, "no king in Israel" (19.1). This sets up the story's message: there is no central authority here, and where there is no authority, there is chaos, and where there is chaos, there is bloodshed. A Levite from "the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah" (19.1).⁵ She (Beth) leaves him (for reasons that are obscure, and the subject of continuing debate among Biblical scholars) and returns to her father's house, residing there for four full months before her husband sets out after her. When the Levite reaches the house of Beth's father there follows a four-day period of eating and drinking, during which time the only social interaction of any kind appears to be going on between the men. Beth appears nowhere in this scene until late in the afternoon of the fifth day, "when the man with his concubine and his servant got up to leave" (19.9). Beth's father, as he had done the previous day, tries to persuade the Levite to remain with him yet another day, but the Levite refuses, gathering up Beth, his servant, and two donkeys, and going out into the night. After approaching, but refusing to enter, Jebus (which the Levite describes as "a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel"—an ironic touch, considering that Jebus will become Jerusalem, the royal seat of the Davidic/Solomonic unified kingdom), the Levite leads his party to Gibeah.⁶ After sitting for some time "in the open square of the city" while no resident of Gibeah takes them in (this failure of the residents to meet the obligation of hospitality⁷ is the first sign that there is going to be trouble before this story is over⁸), finally, an old man, also "from the hill country of Ephraim" takes them into his own house in Gibeah.

The men of Gibeah, described as "a perverse lot," surround the old man's house and start pounding on his door while demanding, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him" (19.22). This is a direct echo of the story of the angelic visitors to Lot in the city of Sodom:

. . . the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." (Genesis 19.4-9)

Against the story of Lot in Sodom, consider the story of the Levite (and Beth) in Gibeah:

“Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.” And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.” But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. (Judges 19.22-25)

These two stories are one and the same, and it is no accident that Gibeah is cast in the role of Sodom. Sodom was depraved and corrupt, so much so that Yahweh determined to destroy it unless ten righteous men could be found there. Gibeah, in the time when there was “no king in Israel,” is as depraved and corrupt as Sodom, and there is no Abraham to argue the case of Gibeah as there was to plead on behalf of Sodom. The lack of a king is at once the lack of a central authority figure⁹ and the lack of a mediator. The king, who in the time of the unified Israel under David and Solomon, served as both judge of the people and advocate for the people, combined the roles of warrior, lawgiver, and Abrahamic mediator in one figure. And it is the lack of such a figure that is made the real villain of the Judges narrative. What saves the story of Lot is the intervention of authority; angelic hands pull Lot back inside his house, seal the door shut, and strike the men of Sodom with blindness. No such intervention is available in Gibeah, because no such authority is present; Yahweh no longer appears by the oaks of Mamre; angelic hands no longer pull the threatened out of harm’s way; there is yet “no king in Israel.” The story of Gibeah descends into horror to make precisely this point.

With no intervention forthcoming, Beth is put out to the men of Gibeah, who “wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning” (19.25). At daybreak, the men leave her, and Beth then crawls to the door of the “house where her master¹⁰ was, until it was light” (19.26). When the Levite gets up (and the text is curiously silent about the sounds of the all-night rape; are we to assume that the Levite has slept peacefully?), he opens the doors to “go on his way,” when, lo and behold, “there was his concubine lying at the door of the house” (19.27). Does he bend over the prostrate Beth, try to pick her up and care for her injuries? Does he express any concern for her at all? No. He says, “Get up, we are going.” Nothing more.

To his brusque command the Levite receives no answer. The Septuagint, after the line “there was no answer,” or “there was no one answering,”

adds this succinct explanation, “for she was dead.” This is not present in the Hebrew Masoretic text, and I believe its addition tends to undermine the overall message, not only of this particular story, but of Judges itself. What happens next illustrates, more perfectly even than the Sodomese perversity of the men of Gibeah, the depths to which the chaos in “Israel” has sunk. The Levite puts Beth on a donkey, and sets out for home: “When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel” (19.29). With this dismemberment of the possibly still-living body, everyone in the story is made complicit in the rape and murder of Beth; the men of Gibeah are guilty; the man of the house in Gibeah is guilty; the Levite is guilty. There is no longer, as in the story of Lot and his family in Sodom, any clear distinction between wickedness and innocence, because the last unproblematically innocent character, Beth, has been murdered and dismembered. The innocent, like Abel, has been sacrificed, and the sacrifice is one of blood.

Though Beth has clearly been killed, how, it will rightly be asked, does that killing constitute a sacrifice? René Girard’s theory of sacrifice as “society ... seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim ... the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members” (4) would seem to necessitate a reading of Beth’s fate as one engineered in order to prevent the very internecine warfare, near decimation of a single tribe, and gang-rape which follow hard upon the Levite’s act of sending Beth’s dismembered body throughout the territory of Israel. By this definition, Beth’s death and dismemberment is, at best, a poor and unsuccessful sacrifice. However, if sacrifice is viewed as a gift marking a plea to enter into a contractual relationship with God promising submission in return for his favor and assistance, as suggested by Gray, then Beth’s dismemberment can be seen as a sacrifice in two ways: it serves to facilitate a contractual arrangement between the Levite and the elders of the non-Benjamite tribes, and further, it serves as a contractual arrangement between this nascent group and God, serving to bring them together into a community focused on God and God’s role in the vengeance they wish to take on the men of Gibeah, and the tribe of Benjamin generally (the city of Gibeah is in the territory of Benjamin).

If viewed as a covenant between a superior and an inferior, as Schwartz suggests, further sacrificial dynamics can be seen in the dismemberment of Beth. The Levite is landless, a stranger in whatever territory he resides, being a member of the one tribe that does not—at the time of this narrative—have its own inherited territory. As such, the Levite belongs to

a group that includes foreigners, women (especially widows—see the story of Ruth), and orphans. As Ilse Müllner argues, such groups are particularly vulnerable: “the fact that the laws in Deuteronomy are aimed at ... social groups especially in need of protection ... tends to indicate that these groups were not treated this way as a matter of course” (135). In this scenario, both the Levite (the sacrificer) and Beth (the sacrificed) are, in a very real sense, inferiors, strangers in the land of the as-yet-disunited tribes of Israel. The sacrifice of Beth serves as a plea from the Levite, not directly for the favor of God, but for the favor of the elders of the landed tribes. In Schwartz’s terms, the “inferior who enters into the covenant with a superior” (22), is the Levite, who enters into a covenant with the tribal elders, who have never seen “such a thing since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt” (Judges 19.30). Each party in the covenant receives something from the sacrifice: the Levite is held blameless for the death and dismemberment of Beth, and the tribal elders, “the chiefs of all the people” (Judges 20.2) are united—albeit temporarily—as a military force.

The dismembering of Beth’s body, cutting it into twelve pieces, serves as the impetus for the first unified action by the Israelite tribes that does not come in response to an external threat. Thus, it would seem that the pan-Israel thrust of Judges has come to fruition—the tribes of Israel have come together as one Israel. They have come together, however, only to take vengeance on one of their own. A Body is formed over the dismembered body of Beth, but it is a Body that begins immediately to eat itself.

Judges 20 describes in detail the near genocide perpetrated upon the Benjamites. The Benjamites (always previously referred to as one of the tribes of Israel) are cut off symbolically in the text; the battle is framed as between the “Israelites” (all tribal divisions are here erased and/or ignored) and the now separate or dis-membered Benjamites. The near-destruction of Benjamin is also the near dismembering of an Israelite communal Body that has not yet been fully formed. The disaster that this might have been is illustrated by an analogy between the relations of son to father and tribe to (yet forming) nation: Benjamin was the son of whom Jacob (Israel) was the most protective; Benjamin’s would have been the death that brought Jacob’s “gray hairs down with sorrow to Sheol” (Genesis 42.38). The near destruction of the tribe of Benjamin represents the complete and utter depravity to which the Judges narrative insists the tribal system has sunk. Judges brings this message home by ending with yet another reminder of the dire consequences of a lack of centralized authority: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did

what was right in their own eyes" (21.25). This situation in which "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" is not fundamentally different from the war of "every man against every man" of which Hobbes writes. The literal dismemberment of a human body as a call for the formation of a communal Body is, for the writer of Judges, a sign of a "society" in which such a war is taking place. This war is blamed on the fact that there was "no king in Israel"; Hobbes would, no doubt, agree:

. . . during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. (185)

Would a King in Israel serve to keep all the warring factions "in awe" rather than at each other's throat? The answer of the book of Judges is "Yes." 1 Samuel, however, qualifies that response.



Samuel, as the last "judge" before the rise of the Israelite monarchy, presided over the transition of Israel from a loosely, and occasionally, organized confederacy of tribes—from which would emerge leaders as crises demanded—to a nation centered on the authority of an inherited kingship. He is the liminal figure in "Israelite" history, like Moses in the sense of leading the people to the threshold of a new era, but being unable himself to cross over to the other side. That is left for Saul, the first king of an Israel that now begins to see itself as a nation.

In this new era, it seems initially that the internecine violence and chaos of Judges has been left behind. The dismemberment motif that is the source of horror in Judges 19 first reappears in 1 Samuel in a kind of comic scene: the mock battle between Yahweh (whose Ark of the Covenant has been captured by the Philistines) and Dagon, the Philistine fish-god. The Ark is taken into "the house of Dagon and placed . . . beside Dagon" (5.2). Twice, Dagon is found fallen on his face; the second time, "the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him" (5.4). Despite the fact that there still is "no king in Israel," Samuel's tenure as judge seems a relatively prosperous period. The Philistines are regularly and reliably defeated once Samuel takes over from the corrupt administration of Eli and his sons Hophni and Phineas: "the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel" (7.13). It is with the demand for a king,

and the anointing of Saul, that the painful struggles to form a communal Body begin again in earnest.

Immediately after the drawing of lots in which Saul is publicly made king of Israel, war breaks out. It seems that Nahash, the Ammonite king, has been gouging out the right eyes of men of the tribes of Gad and Reuben. Josephus tells us that he did this, to all who either surrendered to him or were captured in battle, so that those mutilated in this manner would, when their left eyes were covered by their shields, be useless as soldiers (*Antiquities* 6.5.1). Josephus goes on to say that Nahash

led his army against those that were called Gileadites; and having pitched his camp at the metropolis of his enemies, which was the city of Jabesh, he sent ambassadors to them, commanding them either to deliver themselves up, on condition to have their right eyes plucked out, or to undergo a siege, and to have their cities overthrown. He gave them their choice, whether they would cut off a small member of their body, or universally perish.¹¹

Naturally, this is not taken as an especially attractive offer. The “elders of Jabesh” (11.3) ask for seven days to send messengers throughout the land to see if anyone would come to their aid; astonishingly enough, Nahash appears to have agreed to this. When the new king of Israel hears of this situation, “the spirit of God came upon Saul in power . . . and his anger was greatly kindled. He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” (11.6-7).

Here again we have the motif of the dismemberment of corporal bodies as a technique for the binding together of a communal Body; however, there is an important difference. Here, the binding oath is not made over a dismembered human corpse; the violence has been displaced onto animal bodies. Despite this displacement, however, the symbolism remains the same. A body (or a group of bodies) must be sacrificed in order for the unifying sacrifice to be effective. The sacrifice must also focus those who engage in the sacrifice, or are witness to it, on a central principle or figure. In the case of Cain and Abel, that figure was Yahweh, while in the dark episode of the Levite and the dismembered body of Beth there was no one central figure—rather, the principle of revenge upon the men of Gibeah occupied that central position. Here Saul (and Samuel) are the central figures on whom the focus must be directed: “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!”

The mission to liberate Jabesh-gilead from Nahash and the Ammonites is successful. The Israelites “cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the

day; and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together" (11.11). After this victory, the Israelites solidify their new sense of community by sacrificing: "they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly" (11.15). At this point it seems that the monarchical hopes expressed in the Judges narrative have been realized. The "war of every man against every man" has been halted; the many have been made one Body; there is a king in Israel, and all is right with the world. But Saul doesn't stay in Yahweh's (or Samuel's) good graces very long, and old conflicts soon threaten to tear the new and fragile nation apart—requiring more sacrificial dismemberments.



The Amalekites hold a special place in the Hebrew scriptures: among the tribes with which the Israelites contended, they are perhaps the most hated group, even more than the Philistines. This hatred of the Amalekites (whose primary crime seems to have been their foreignness and their resulting obstinate insistence upon worshipping their own deities) is anticipated even before the Israelites enter into the Promised Land of Canaan, when God orders Moses to write down the command that "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17.14, 16).

The Amalekites were defending their families, homes, and culture against an invasion. They were what we might today call "patriotic." But because they dared to resist Israel, in Numbers (24.20) and Deuteronomy (25.17-19) Yahweh reiterated his intention to wipe them off the face of the Earth. The "final solution" to the Amalekite question took many years to work out. Unlike the Jews during the Third Reich, the Amalekites were able to fight back. The first time that the Israelites tried to enter Canaan, they were defeated by the Amalekites (Numbers 14.45). The Amalekites were able to defeat the Israelites once more before their eventual destruction began (Judges 3.13). By the time of King Saul, however, the tide had turned and Israel was well on its way to exterminating them; and again, dismemberment is part of a sacrificial extermination:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." . . . Saul

defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. (15.2-3, 7-8)

Saul had killed everyone, men, women, children, and babies. But it was not good enough. He disobeyed the order of Yahweh—relayed through Samuel—to utterly devote Amalek to destruction. He had spared not only King Agag, but also “the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable,” destroying only “all that was despised and worthless” (15.9). For this exercise in selective destruction (and selective mercy), Saul is reproved by Samuel and rejected by God as King of Israel:

Samuel said, “. . . the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? . . . Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.” . . . Then Samuel said, ‘Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.’ . . . And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal. (1 Samuel 18-19, 23, 32-33)

Here the motif of dismemberment becomes once again dismemberment of a human body. Why? The dismemberment of King Agag is a graphic representation of the rejection of Saul as king of Israel. With the rejection of Saul, the position of central authority has been vacated. The communal Body must be re-formed, and a blood sacrifice is needed, but the anointed of Yahweh cannot simply be hacked to death. A stand-in is needed, and Agag serves nicely. According to Girard, a sacrifice that works on a principle of substitution depends on having the “victims, even the animal ones, bear a certain resemblance to the object they replace” (11). What better way to symbolically sacrifice a king than by actually sacrificing another king? Immediately after the sacrifice of Agag, Samuel is sent by Yahweh to anoint David as the future king, thus making provision for filling the position of central authority. In addition to representing Saul’s rejection as king, the dismemberment of a human body also represents the upheavals and splits that will take place in the Israelite Body until the death of Saul and the ascension of the new king, David. Just as the death of Agag is the death of the Amalekite Body, the death of Saul will be required before the old Body of Israel under his rejected kingship can be replaced with the new Body of Israel under David and his line.

Even the post-exilic kingdom renews the story. Ezra’s narrative of the end of exile, the re-formation of an Israelite nation and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem ends with a symbolic dismemberment: the separa-

tion from “foreign wives” and the children that had resulted from such marriages:

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.” . . . All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children. (Ezra 10.10-12, 44)

Josephus’ account of this symbolic dismemberment also highlights the issue of law and authority in this sending away of foreign wives:

. . . there came some persons to him [Ezra/Esdra], and brought an accusation against certain of the multitude, and of the priests and Levites, who had transgressed their settlement, and dissolved the laws of their country, by marrying strange wives, and had brought the family of the priests into confusion. (11.5. 3)

The marrying of foreign wives has undermined the law, has threatened to decentralize and destabilize authority; the laws have been “dissolved,” and the communal Body is threatened. The dismembering, or cutting off, of the foreign wives and children is seen as a way to restore the wholeness, health, and unity of the Israelite Body. This dismissal of wives and children, a sacrifice that restores focus on a common totality and renews a sense of centralized authority (the laws presumably are no longer “dissolved”), involves a symbolic shedding of blood, a symbolic death, a symbolic dismemberment. The Israelite Body is re-formed after the exile through the use of the same patterns by which it was formed in the era of the judges and the early monarchy: through sacrifice, violence, and the dismemberment of a body or a group of bodies.



The analogous relationship between the corporal body (the bone, blood, sinew, and muscle at once familiar and alien) and the communal Body (Society, the Church, etc.) is expressed in metaphors so deeply ingrained in our thought and language as to be nearly invisible. We speak of leaders as “heads.” The productive capacity of a manufacturing and transportation infrastructure is the “backbone” of a capitalist economy. A Congress or Parliament or town/village council is a deliberative “Body.” We constitute a Body Politic, and we speak of the various organs of a society.¹² In various disciplines, we speak of a writer’s “body of work.” We refer to a “body of

knowledge”; we speak of economic “growth,” the “birth” of nations, and of the Renaissance (literally rebirth) or the revival (return to life and consciousness) of ideas and social forms. The body is perhaps our most basic metaphor: our experience of the world is as a body, and our sense of unity, arising from a fragmentation by which it is ever threatened with re-engulfment, is a body’s sense. The imperative to achieve, and maintain, social unity thus has its roots in what may be one of a very few (radically ahistorical) human universals: the powerful urge for survival, at any cost, by whatever means are necessary.

The metaphor of the communal Body can be traced back in the West through Hobbes and Hegel, to Aristotle and Plato. For Hobbes

[the] great Leviathan called a Common-Wealth, or State . . . is but an artificial man . . . in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul . . . giving life and motion to the whole body. (81)

Hegel, in his *Philosophy of History*, writes of the decay of a political body in terms of the decay of a corporal body:

As, when the physical body suffers dissolution, each point gains a life of its own, but which is only the miserable life of worms; so the political organism is here dissolved into atoms—*viz.*, private persons. (302-03)

Aristotle, in the famous passage from *Politics* that outlines his view of slavery, describes the relation of ruler to ruled in embodied terms:

. . . in all things which form a composite whole and which are made up of parts, whether continuous or discrete, a distinction between the ruling and the subject elements comes to light. Such a duality exists in living creatures, but not in them only; it originates in the constitution of the universe . . . but . . . we will restrict ourselves to the living creature, which . . . consists of soul and body; and of these two, the one is by nature the ruler, and the other the subject. (447-48)

Later, he explicitly states that “the state, as composed of unlikes, may be compared to the living being” (474).

Plato’s entire premise for the *Republic* is based on an analogy between Individual and State. To find an answer to the question “What is Justice?” and to counter the proto-Nietzschean argument of Thrasymachus (justice is that which is to the advantage of the strong against the weak—the morality of the plague of Athens), Socrates offers the proposition that the ruler rules for the benefit of the ruled. His hierarchical system is an allegorization of the internal relations of the parts of a whole, individual body, or communal Body. The Guardians represent the rational faculty, while the soldiers and the workers represent subordinate yet necessary

functions ruled by the rational faculty. The image is corporal: the head rules the lower regions of the body for the benefit of the whole organism. The passions of the body, the appetites, the *Wille zur Macht* of each individual part is governed, subjected to the need for that cooperation that is necessary if the whole is to survive. A Hobbesian war of “every man against every man” can only be fatal. Somehow, the communal Body must be yoked together if both the Body and its individual members are to survive.¹³

In each of the preceding examples, in Hobbes, Hegel, Plato, and Aristotle, the Body serves as an image for a society built on principles of centralized authority. In this view, order is represented as a whole and healthy Body, while chaos is pictured as a diseased, and decaying Body. Each member of the Body partakes of the whole Body by submitting to, and participating in, the system of centralized authority. Our metaphor of a social Body may not be fundamentally totalitarian, but it is a centripetal metaphor: all elements of the Body have meaning, have life, only through their relation to the Whole Body. Just as a kidney is meaningless without the corporal body, so (in this view) is the citizen meaningless without the communal Body, so meaningless, in fact, that in Athens of the 5th century BCE, the “private” person—whose actions were not directed to the maintenance of the *polis*—was given the label *idiotes*, the root of our word “idiot.”

With this background in mind, what can a modern Western reader take away from the Biblical narratives considered in this essay? By the end of the Hebrew narrative, despite the powerful condemnations and exhortations of prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, no lessons appear to have been learned, even during the long years in Babylon. One wonders, as the foreign wives of the Ezra narrative are sent away like goats for Azazel, whether any lessons are ever learned.

Certainly, a healthy suspicion of systems of centralized authority is in order, but stopping at the level of a simple opposition to “totalizing impulses,” or “totality” as such, seems to avoid the problem of the relations of violence to systems of centralized authority and to the processes of community-formation. Are totalizing visions necessarily oppressive? It is difficult to see, for instance, what necessary connection there is between the (loosely speaking) “pantheistic” totality inherent in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (whose oft-repeated formula *tat tvam asi*—“that thou art,” or “that you are”—is a reminder to the student that all things share in the nature of all other things)¹⁴, and the (again, loosely speaking) “monotheistic” totality of the Bible. The “totalizing” vision of the *Upanishad* is non-

violent; it does not seek to impose itself by force. Postmodern thinkers who follow in the wake of Jean-François Lyotard often seem simply to assume that all totalizing visions are visions which involve violence. This definition is narrow, and ironically, it projects a vision which is itself "totalizing." Lyotard seeks, through the very force of his rhetoric, to impose on his readers (indeed, on his entire era) a "grand narrative" of the end of "grand narratives."

I submit that the problem is not totalizing visions as such, but the *Wille zur Macht* that accompanies such visions and systems of authority in the Western tradition. The Brahminic vision of the *Chandogya Upanishad* displays no will to power; there is a focus on totality, on the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, but there is no mechanism of sacrifice (in the sense of the submission of an inferior to a superior, and the concomitant propitiation of the superior by the inferior) at work, and thus there is no need for the shedding of blood which is a constant element in the sacrificial mechanisms at work in the Bible. Perhaps our particular notions of totality, authority, and community are the problem; our tendency is to personalize totality, to give it the visage of a jealous god, quick to anger and slow to forgiveness. Our tendency is to think of human individuals as members of a communal Body, a dangerous anthropomorphizing of community which suggests that—though it might be painful—some "members" of the Body may be sacrificed for the good of the whole Body. This line of thought takes the dismemberment imagery of Judges 19 and 1 Samuel 15 and transforms it into the imagery of self-dismemberment in Mark 9.43-48,¹⁵ which in turn becomes the model for the functioning of the communal Body. This entire line of thought—the analogy of corporal body to communal Body, added to the notions of sacrifice and dismemberment in the formation of community—has been, and continues to be, at the root of the problem of community in the West. The Biblical stories have been, and continue to be, among our most influential models. The question we must now face is whether we are able or willing to conceive of other models.

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NOTES

1. All citations from Hebrew and Greek scriptures are from *The HarperCollins Study Bible*.

2. He is, at the very least, mentioned as the first to sacrifice to Yahweh. Abel's sacrifice appears to be a response to that of Cain.

3. Orthodox explanations for this apparent favoritism on God's part place the blame, of course, squarely upon Cain. Hebrews 11.4 says that it was "By faith" that "Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's," while 1 John 3.12 tells the reader that "we must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, also blames Cain: "Abel, the younger, was a lover of righteousness. . . . Cain was not only very wicked in other respects, but was wholly intent upon getting . . ." (1.2. 1). This is, of course, nowhere to be found in the Genesis account; any hint of "sin" comes only after Cain's sacrifice is rejected without an explanation of any kind. (This, by the way, is the first mention of the concept in the Bible. Sin, from *hhat-ta'th' / chat-ta'th'*, can be translated as miss, missing the mark, offending by missing the mark. See Judges 20.16 for an example of the use of *hha-ta'* to describe Benjamites who "could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss." These words are also used in the symbolic sense of failing to reach moral and spiritual goals. Proverbs 8.35-36 says "whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor with the LORD; but those who miss (*hha-ta'*) me injure themselves.")

4. Deborah (who is described at 4.4 as a "prophetess") is the only "judge" who serves in a "judicial" sense (see 4.5).

5. Mieke Bal argues that the Hebrew *pilegish*, traditionally translated as "concubine," should instead be rendered as "wife, in the older kind of marriage in which the wife stays in her father's house" (84). This rendering would cast the otherwise odd-seeming passage from 19.2-19.9 in the light of a contest of male ownership of the female: the settled father and the wandering husband are here struggling over who will keep "possession" of the female. This generational struggle for (male) power is an interesting companion to the larger "generational" struggle of the book of Judges—that between the older, decentralized tribal ideal, and the newer, as-yet-unrealized ideal of centralized authority. Bal highlights this struggle in her explanation of the rape of Beth by the men of Gibeah as a punishment of the Levite, an attempt to "climinate the threat represented by the new institution [virilocal marriage—as opposed to patrilocal marriage] that the man stands for" (121).

6. The fact that Gibeah will be the birthplace of Saul, the first Israelite king, leads many writers to suspect that not only is there a polemic against the older, decentralized tribal system at work here, but that there is also at work a polemic against the kingship of Saul. Thus, "no king in Israel," would mean no king of the line of David.

7. For examples of this traditional obligation being undertaken, see Genesis 18.5; 19.2,3, 6-8; 24.15-25, 29-33; 24.54; 29.13,14.

8. See Deuteronomy 23.3,4, where all Ammonites and Moabites are excluded from the favor of Yahweh because they failed to show hospitality to the "Israelites" coming out of Egypt.

9. While the role of Yahweh as the ultimate central authority is still acknowledged at the time of the anointing of Saul, it seems that the then newly forming Israelite nation is more comfortable with a visible, tangible, and permanent figure of central authority. This

is a role that Samuel—and the previous judges—had never played. The pattern of judgeship was to arise in a crisis, save the day, then shuffle off into the sunset (or end in tragedy, as does Samson). While Yahweh seems to take this demand for a human king personally, saying that “they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8.7), this demand seems to be merely a logical extension of the established pattern of symbolizing communal Bodies with corporal bodies.

10. The Hebrew is *‘adon*—sovereign, owner, ruler, lord, master. The Authorized Version uses “Lord.” Previously the Levite has been referred to as her “husband”—*‘yish*—man, in the sense of an individual male person, also husband.

11. Note that this is essentially the “deal” offered by Yahweh at Genesis 17.14. The insurance involved in being one of the people of Yahweh may very well have more fringe benefits than that of being one of the conquered people of Nahash, but the premium is quite similar.

12. Organ, from the Greek *organon*—tool or implement (and through a side door, the Greek *ergon*—work), has as its (speculative) IE root *uerg*, which means *work* or *do*. From this root springs *surgeon* (hand-worker), *ergosphere* (the energy-producing layer of a black hole), *demiurge* *demiourgos*—public or skilled worker, later the Platonic term—and still later the Gnostic term—for the Maker/Creator of the physical world), and *organ* (any tool or implement which serves a particular function). In common parlance, organ has come to be associated first with human organs (often specifically sexual organs, with their associations with doing and making). In a kind of Protagorean “Man is the measure of all things” shift, what was, at its root, a word which seems once to have measured the body is now measured by the body.

13. Hobbes puts it this way: “The finall Cause, End, or Design of men, (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which wee see them live in Common-wealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation . . .” (223).

14. That man in the “enemy” foxhole is, in a fundamental sense, you, and you are he: each of you shares in the connection of *atman* to *brahman*.

15. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell [Gehenna], to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

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