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The Budding of Aaron's Staff: An Ethic of Non-Violent Conflict Resolution in Numbers 17

by Lubunga w'Ehusha

Abstract

The story of Aaron's budding staff in Numbers 17 constitutes the last episode of a narrative filled with violence among the people of God, from both the human and divine participants. The revolt initiated by Korah in Numbers 16 opened the door to hostility between two rival parties, Moses and Aaron on the one side, and other Israelite leaders and the people on the other side. The brutal way in which the matter was dealt with at the beginning caused the death of thousands of Israelites. The point is that violence could not solve the problem but in the end, the conflict was solved through a non-violent procedure, the test of family staffs. The text raises a number of questions in the mind of the reader concerning God's association with violence in the Old Testament, especially in the Exodus narrative. This paper explores how the budding staff can help us understand the tension existing within the text, that the God who had sanctioned the death of thousands of Moses' opponents was also the initiator of a non-violent solution to Korah's revolt.

Introduction

Although God's intent for peace is fully developed in the Scripture, the Exodus narrative opens with violence as Pharaoh decides to oppress the Hebrew slaves and slaughter their baby boys (Ex. 1). It continues with the extermination of all first born living creatures in Egypt as a means to break Pharaoh's resistance to liberation (Ex. 12). The last act of the Exodus is the *Herem* ordered by Yahweh to wipe out all the inhabitants of the Promised Land (Deut. 7:15). This violence becomes disconcerting for modern readers when it involves the people of God and/or God Himself.

The book of Numbers is characterised by a spirit of murmuring and rebellion among the people of Israel as they face hardship in their journey to the Promised Land. The rebellion recorded in Numbers 16-17 is distinctive because it focuses on the rejection of the leadership of Moses and Aaron and the violence that ensues. Korah is described in this text as the instigator of a rebel movement that spreads among other tribal leaders and ends up involving the whole congregation. The narrative reports that the movement, which creates an internal conflict among the Levites about the priesthood, quickly finds support from 250 tribal leaders and then the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram, before it finally permeates the whole congregation. To counter the movement, the narrative describes how the various opponents are condemned to death. The death toll of the rebellion is enormous as 250 tribal leaders are burnt while offering sacrifice (16:35); Dathan and Abiram and their households are swallowed up alive in the earth (16:32-34); 14,700 Israelites are stricken by a plague, and Korah himself perishes in this process. Raymond Brown remarks that, "What started out in one man's mind as an envious

thought reproduced itself until it became a human disaster.”¹ In spite of the fear and sorrow that such a disaster brings on the congregation, its impact on the spirit of rebellion is minimal. It seems that at the end of the plague people are speechless and sorrowful but unrepentant. God breaks the silence by proposing a new test, which does not threaten human lives, but turns it into a non-lethal competition with family rods. The test of the budding rod is approved by the entire congregation and results in the acknowledgment of the Aaronic priesthood. Now the people are ready to continue paying their dues to the priests as they are reminded to do in chapter 18. This paper will attempt to show that the story begins with a violent approach to a problem and then ends with this non-violent solution to the problem. Subsequently, we shall relate this text and the place of biblical violence to the African context.

Violence at the Beginning of the Conflict

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines *violence* as “vehemence of personal feeling or action; great, excessive or extreme ardour or fervour; also, violent or passionate conduct or language.” If one reads the text of Numbers 16-17 in the light of the above definition, it appears clearly that both parties engaged in this contest use violence. Let us first examine the violence on the side of Moses’ opponents.

1. Violence from Korah and His Company

There are three major strands in the movement of rebellion reported in Numbers 16-17 and each of them displays some kind of violence towards Moses and Aaron. Korah and the 250 tribal leaders led the first movement.

1.1 Verbal Violence

The text in Numbers 16:1-3 reads:

Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown.

They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

From the above text, signs of violence in speech and actions can be observed. Although in verse 1 the verb לָקַח (to take) does not have an object in Hebrew, the King James and other versions have opted to add *took men*, to show that there was an intention of raising people against Moses and Aaron. The recruitment of people called to oppose Moses and Aaron is presented before the exposition of the motivation behind the revolt. The intention of

¹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, BST, Leicester: IVP, 2002, p. 143.

violence becomes obvious as verse 3 states, וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן "They gathered against Moses and Aaron." The charge laid against Moses by this group opens with a provocative expression "You take too much". George Gray suggests that רַב־לָכֶם be translated as "Enough"², or we might say, "Enough is enough". Since Moses and Aaron are the two top leaders in the sight of God as well as among the people, to address them by "enough" reveals the disrespect and verbal violence used by Korah and his company. The argument reaches its climax when they question Moses and Aaron's legitimacy. Thus at the end of 16:3, they complain, וּמָדוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-קְהַל יְהוָה "Why/on what account do you lift yourselves up above the assembly of Yahweh?"

In other words, Korah and his company reject the authority of Moses and Aaron to lead the Exodus. After what happened in Egypt as Moses and Aaron laboured to free the people from the obstinate king of Egypt, all the miracles experienced at the crossing the Red Sea, and the provision of water and food in the wilderness, the question sounds like an insult. The point is, Korah and his company have chosen a violent confrontation. There is nothing like Ghandi's pacifism in their language. The second strand of rebellion, as we shall see, follows the same pattern. The reason could be that Korah is the leader behind this insurrection.

1.2 The Defiant Revolt of Dathan and Abiram; and the Reubenites

The text mentions three names Dathan, Abiram and On, but the third name is dropped in the course of the narrative and none of the cross references allude to him. We may consider Dathan and Abiram as the leaders of this second strand of revolt. Their complaint in vv. 16:12-14 goes thus:

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, but they said, "We will not come up! Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you should keep acting like a prince over us? Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"

The defiant revolt of Dathan and Abiram shifts the focus of the narrative from religious hegemony to political issues. Some scholars interpret the revolt of Dathan and Abiram, sons of Reuben, as a claim of privilege of their birth right in Israel. The reader should remember how Reuben, according to natural right, was entitled to the privilege of the first-born and the dignity of the leadership among his brethren. But Reuben forfeited his prerogative because of an immoral act when he lay with his father's concubine (Gen. 49:23). This revolt may then be considered as a way of claiming back their leadership. This interpretation is advocated by Jewish scholars:

According to both medieval and modern commentaries, Dathan and Abiram thought that leadership role was rightfully theirs. Ancient Israel was a

² George Gray, *Numbers*, ICC, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003, p. 191.

society in which the first-born typically became the leader. Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's first-born, were upset that Moses and Aaron were leaders rather than themselves, and they felt jealous.³

There might be some pertinence to the claim of the Reubenites, but they have adopted the same verbal violence as the first group. In their response, Dathan and Abiram repeat the sentence, "we will not come up." The Hebrew root, עלה "to go up, ascend", bears a positive connotation, be it in its active Qal or passive Niphal, as opposed to ירד 'to descend, go down.' One goes up to Jerusalem, to meet Yahweh in his temple or on his mountain. Whereas 'descend' or 'go down' is linked with *sheol* or Egypt or other negatives. The sentence "we will not come up" can therefore mean their refusal to go to the Tabernacle where Moses sits to settle Korah's matters, or the rejection of appearing before Moses as the ruler of the community. But metaphorically, it may be interpreted as "we refuse the liberation, we want to go back to Egypt."

As a matter of fact, going back to Egypt is a possible option for Dathan and Abiram as they describe Egypt as "the land flowing with milk and honey" (v.14), a description often attributed to Canaan, the Promised Land.⁴ The speech of Dathan and Abiram is aggressive and full of frustration. They call on Moses to consider his inability to carry out the promises given at the beginning of the Exodus and the possibility of stepping down. Moses is also accused of bringing up the people from a land of comfort in order to kill them in the desert. Finally, they join the first group in accusing Moses of usurping power. Without any doubt, all contenders have chosen hard language to vent their anger upon Moses and Aaron. This attitude can only stir up violence and inhibit peaceful talk. The result is that God eliminates the violent and unrepentant rebels (16:16-35).

1.3 The Revolt of the Congregation

The argument of the congregation is short and straightforward as Numbers 16:41 shows: "On the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the LORD.'"

The accusation is very short but precise. Moses and Aaron are charged with the murder of God's people. The pronoun אתם "you" is used emphatically and may be rendered, "You are the ones." The suggestion is that Moses and

³ <http://www.batkol.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/paras19062004.pdf> This link is from the Bat Kol Institute, featuring Marie Andre Mitchell, *Shabbat Table Talk: Parashat Korach- Erev Shabbat*, 18 June 2004, dealing with Numbers 16:1-18:32.

⁴ See "The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey", in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, gen. eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leicester: IVP, 1998, p. 488 which states that this phrase occurs 14 times in the Pentateuch, once in Joshua and several times in Jeremiah and Ezekiel within the contexts alluding to Israel's history. This passage is the only occurrence where the phrase is used for Egypt.

Aaron should not put the blame on any other person or reject their responsibility for this affair. To point to Moses and Aaron as responsible for the death of the leaders involved in the two previous revolts reveals how the congregation interprets the matter. The narrative attributes to God the supernatural means used to get rid of the rebels of the two previous revolts. But in the sight of the congregation, the use of supernatural forces does not exclude the implication of Moses and Aaron in the killing of other leaders. The fact that the whole congregation murmurs against Moses reminds the reader of what happened previously as the people murmured and talked about stoning Moses and Aaron (14:1, 2, 10). It is not difficult to imagine how far this congregation could go if Yahweh does not quickly intervene to protect and vindicate his chosen leaders.

In the people's statement it appears there is no room for negotiation or settling the matter in peace because the congregation has decided to address the issue with hostility. To the people, Moses and Aaron are murderers; therefore, any brutality against them could be tolerated. This was the possible outcome of this gathering, especially in the context of ancient Israel where an avenger of blood had the right to kill the murderer of his relative: "... and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood" (Num. 35:17). After considering the approach taken by the people involved in the three strands of revolt, one can conclude that each strand constitutes a threat to Moses and Aaron, as the rebels have recourse to violence as a means of changing the leadership. We now turn to the response of the accused.

2. A Violent Response to Revolt

This series of violent protests elicits more violence as it could be said that "if you sow violence, you harvest more violence", and as Hosea 8:7 implies, "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind". The rebel contenders have threatened Moses and Aaron by their words and attitudes, but the response includes the actual killing of their leaders. The first group of 250 tribal leaders recruited by Korah to contest the priesthood is burnt up during the process of offering their sacrifice at the tent of meeting (16:35). The narrative reports that Moses prays to God to show whom he has chosen for priestly duties during this test of burning incense. However, the fire that consumes the rebellious people does not come from Moses but from Yahweh.

As for the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram, their fate is even more dramatic. The earth opens its mouth and swallows them up alive with all their households and possessions (16:31-33). To convince the audience that his commission comes from God, Moses pronounces the sentence that Yahweh confirms: "If these men die the death of all men and are visited according to the visitation of all men, then Yahweh has not sent me" (16:29). What Moses wishes is that his detractors suffer something that is not common. The proposal is that if the contenders die a normal death, or by any common

means that the people have already experienced or seen, then Moses should be considered a pretender. It is interesting to note that the sentence comes from Moses and not from God but God accepts Moses' proposal, providing convincing evidence of His support of Moses' leadership.

The third group also experiences physical death. A deadly disease that spreads quickly through the camp strikes the congregation for accusing Moses of killing God's people (16:41). God's intervention comes swiftly, so quickly that Moses and Aaron do not have time either to present their defence or to refer the case to Yahweh in prayer as in previous cases. The fact that the whole community gathers around the two leaders gives the idea of a mob about to riot. Experience shows that anything can happen in a mass protest because individuals are not likely to bear the responsibility for mass action. The Israelites pay a very high price as 14,700 persons fall before Aaron can make atonement and stop the plague (16:49). In this case, God seems to act alone without associating his human agents, Moses and Aaron.

After all this disaster has befallen the people, the narrative comes to a standstill. The episode ends with a report of the end of the plague followed by a total silence of all human actors: "Then Aaron returned to Moses at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, for the plague had stopped" (16:50). Contrary to what one might expect after such a tragedy the people do not show regret or repent of the sins that caused the death of so many individuals. Moses and Aaron give instructions to the people concerning a way forward. At the end of chapter 16 it is as if each person meditates on the destruction that has taken place, but no one seems able to provide an adequate response. In essence, the violence brought no peace between the people and their leaders, nor did those who tried to usurp the leadership positions achieve their aim.

Modern writers are becoming aware that coercive measures, such as those described in the text, do not bring satisfactory results. Anstey argues:

Coercion damages working relationships, inhibiting mutual understanding and trust as emotions of anger and frustration are evoked. Agreements emerging from coercive relations are likely to lack a commitment from the subjugated partner, as they will probably have ignored his interest and his capacity to contribute creatively to its content.⁵

This state of affairs prompts God to find a way forward using a new strategy.

A Non-Violent Solution at Last: The Budding Staff

The human actors in this narrative have exhausted their resources without settling the conflict. The revolts and their repression have failed to reconcile the two rival parties. Yahweh now proposes a totally different approach in

⁵ Mark Anstey, *Negotiating Conflict: Insights and Skills for Negotiators and Peacemakers*. Kenwyn, SA: Juta & Co. 1997, pp. 88-89.

order to provide a way out (17:1). The test is that the staffs of Israel's tribal leaders should be displayed before Yahweh overnight and the tribe whose dried stick blossoms and bears fruit would be God's elect who would hold the exclusive rights of priesthood. God instructs Moses to collect the staffs (or rods) from each tribe of Israel. There are twelve staffs according to the number of the tribes, each staff representing the head of the family. The name of Aaron is written on the staff of the house of Levi (17:3). The use of the metaphor of a rod to represent a tribe is striking because in Hebrew the two words have the same root. The Hebrew root *גִּזָּה* is used for "rod, staff, stick, branch and tribe."⁶ The author of Numbers used this same word earlier to represent the word 'tribe' (Num. 1:4, 16). Each tribe is considered a branch of the entire congregation of Israel. God even anticipates the astonishing result of this new approach: "I will cause to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you" (17:5). By this statement, God wants to assure Moses and Aaron that there is a solution to the crisis through a non-violent approach. Moses follows God's instructions and the result is success, that is, the satisfaction of all parties involved in the conflict.

There are a number of reasons that would encourage the reader to appreciate non-violent procedures in resolving even serious tribal conflicts.

1. Non-Violence Depersonalises the Conflict.

God proposes an alternative approach in which human lives are not threatened. The test using staffs deals with material things which are not harmful to human lives, but enable even the losers to continue to enjoy life: "Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff" (17:2). This proposal breaks away from previous tests in which the burning incense is turned into a blazing flame that consumed human lives and in which the living are swallowed up by the earthquake. Life is very precious and even rebels are created in God's image. They may be political opponents but that does not diminish their dignity and worth as human beings. God uses the metaphor of the tribal staff to tell His agents that it is better to settle the issue with the material staff than to put His people in jeopardy: "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18:31-32).

2. Non-Violence Restores Communication and Unity.

Moses spoke to the people of Israel. And all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. And the staff of Aaron was among their staffs (17:6).

At the end of chapter 16, there seems to be a breakdown in communication as a result of the tension raised by the death of Moses'

⁶ Francis Brown, F., S. R. Driver, Charles Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, p. 641.

opponents. Aggressive suppression has erected barriers that hinder communication between the different players. God's mediation and His proposal re-open the channel of communication, as Moses' role as spokesman and mediator of Israel is re-affirmed. In the place of resistance and disobedience, such as shown by Dathan and Abiram (16:12-14), the heads of families willingly accept the instructions given by God through Moses and yield their staffs to the test. The fact that each tribe must be represented in this exercise, suggests that the twelve tribes are considered as inseparable in the sight of God. He loves them all and they are His people. They all have an equal chance to be elected by God as they compete for leadership positions over Israel. All their staffs should be brought before the Lord without exception and God Himself will appoint to the priesthood the tribe of His choice. In this way, Moses and Aaron would be vindicated and the dignity of each individual would be respected in the process. Anstey remarks that; "effective conflict regulation and dispute settlement demand that parties accord each other legitimacy, and that they legitimize the procedures, institutions and forms they will use to resolve their differences."⁷ In the account of the budding staff, all parties legitimated the procedure of solving the conflict in a peaceful way. They accept God's proposal of a non-violent solution to the unresolved issue.⁸

3. Non-Violence Resolves the Conflict.

Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod... Then the children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold we die, we are perishing, we are all perishing! Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord must die. Shall we all completely die?" (17:8-9,12-13).

This passage stands as the conclusion to the whole series of rebellions. The cry of the crowd shows that finally, the Israelites have realised the danger of their protest. Death has taken not only those in the leadership struggle but also the 'ordinary people.' The people know that they are all vulnerable and Yahweh will not spare them if they keep on challenging His appointed leaders. They understand that the cause of the death of so many people lies in the conflict over control of the tabernacle, a privilege given only to priests. The Hebrew root "approach, draw near" (קרב) is used here, in a cultic context, with reference to the service in the tabernacle.⁹

⁷ Anstey, *Negotiating Conflict*, p. 199.

⁸ For more about God's intention for non-violent solution see John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Non-Violence*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994.

⁹ Bill T. Arnold, "קרב" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1977, Vol. 3:976-978.

The budding of Aaron's staff seems to achieve what violent suppression could not. If one takes the outcry of the people in the above passage as a sign of repentance - "Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord must die. Shall we all completely die?" - then the people blame themselves for trying to go in a wrong direction. They should keep their distance from the tabernacle and the priesthood in order to live in peace. The question that has to be answered is, "Why would God and His agents use violence in the first place?"

4. Why Does God Use Violence?

Biblical literature portrays God as a warrior and also a peace-maker. The two images are sometimes so intertwined in a single passage that it becomes difficult to disentangle them. The disturbing reality of attributing violence to the God of love has caused many biblical scholars to grapple with the interpretation of texts of violence. C.S. Cowles expresses the dilemma of such a duality by asking:

How do we harmonize the warrior God of Israel with the God of love incarnate in Jesus? How can we reconcile God's instruction to "utterly destroy" the Canaanites in the Old Testament with Jesus' command to "love your enemies" in the New Testament? The short answer is: with great difficulty.¹⁰

Cowles is right in saying that biblical scholars have great difficulty harmonising the two opposing portrayals of God. In his study on non-violence in the Gospel of Mark, Robert Beck stresses the positive side of God's portrayal as he argues:

The gospel story of nonviolent confrontation and conflict resolution is not simply shown for our admiration. It does indeed have a 'rhetorical' aspect that takes it beyond the interests of literary poetics to the arena of practice. It does invite us, calling us as well as showing us. It not only scripts a way of nonviolent resistance but engages us to go and do likewise.¹¹

In his comments, Beck shows that Jesus' attitude in the gospel of Mark was of non-violence. He explains some texts of violence, such as the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree, as symbolism of a spiritual reality rooted in the prophetic tradition.¹²

However, violence in Old Testament narratives is so vivid that one cannot dismiss its reality by taking those stories as fictions, or interpreting them as spiritual symbols of things to come. It is necessary to engage with the fact of violence because these texts are used to legitimate religious violence or violent repression of wrongdoing. Collins surveys a number of Old Testament texts in which killing is ordained by God - including the command to wipe out

¹⁰ C.S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity" in C.S. Cowles, Daniel L. Gard, Stanley N. Gundry, Eugene H. Merrill, *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, p. 14.

¹¹ Robert R. Beck, *Non-Violent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, p. 113.

¹² Beck, *Non-Violent Story*, pp. 159-162.

the Canaanites (Deut. 7).¹³ He illustrates his argument, in part, on the story of Phineas who pierces Zimri and his Moabite girlfriend with his spear in the Israelite camp and that God approves this action.

The LORD said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them (Num 25:10-11).

Collins contends that, "there is much in the Bible that is not worthy of the God of the philosophers. There is also much that is not worthy of humanity, certainly much that is not worthy to serve as model for imitation".¹⁴ He concludes his argument thus:

The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation. Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible in the world, is to show that the certitude is an illusion.¹⁵

One can understand the rationale behind Collins' conclusion but for evangelical Christians, amongst others, the question we must ask is: "How authoritative is the sacred book in the sight of the community of faith if the certitude of its message is just an illusion?" In other words, should the contribution of the Bible be reduced because of this one aspect of its message even though the Bible is extensively used to challenge violence and oppression? Other scholars view biblical violence otherwise.

For Terence Fretheim, biblical violence can be approached from the side of God's relationship with humanity:

Because Israel understood that God is related to, and indeed deeply engaged in the affairs of this world, even the Creator will be affected by and caught up in every act of violence. Though there may be non-violent breakthroughs, an avoidance of interrelational violence is simply not possible for either Israel or God.¹⁶

Human violence affects our relationship with God. From the beginning, the reader of the Bible is exposed to how God was affected by the murder of Abel (Gen. 4), and the wickedness of the generation of Noah (Gen. 6). According to Fretheim, God enters into a relationship with humanity and he becomes self-limiting in the exercise of his power in order to honour and respect human power. In some cases, there is no "quick fix" to stop human violence as people continue to resist the will of God for non-violence. Fretheim pursues his

¹³ John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence" in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 122, No. 1, 2003, pp. 3-21.

¹⁴ Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas", p. 20.

¹⁵ Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas", p. 21.

¹⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, "I Was Only a Little Angry: Divine Violence in the Prophets", *Interpretation* Vol. 58 No. 4, October 2004, p. 367.

argument by showing that in certain circumstances God works through human agents to get things done; but these agents may exceed their mandate and God will become associated with their excessive violence because of His committed relationship to the world.¹⁷ Fretheim concludes that violence is not the ultimate goal for God.

That God would become involved in such human cruelties as war is finally not a matter of despair, but hope. God does not simply give people up to violence. God chooses to become involved in violence in order to bring about good purposes; thereby God may prevent an even greater evil. The tears of the people are fully recognized; their desperate situation is named for what it is. But because of the anguish of God, their tears will one day no longer flow. By participating in their messy stories, God's own self thereby takes the road of suffering and death. Through such involvement, God takes into the divine self the violent effects of sinful human activities and thereby makes a non-violent future for God's people.¹⁸

Taking into consideration Fretheim's argument, one can explain why the revolt of Korah starts with violence, but is solved by God's proposal of a non-violent approach. We have shown in this essay the determination to violent confrontation between the two parties, Moses and Aaron on the one side and their opponents on the other. God enters this scene of violence by adopting this fallen human method that he may transform it into a non-violent, lasting resolution and so prove the futility of a violent approach.

Although Fretheim's view does not exhaust the presence of violence in the Bible, it nevertheless opens up a possible explanation to the issue because God in the OT also promotes *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם). For example, the law concerning the protection of aliens in Exodus 23:9 is fully expanded in Deuteronomy 15 and 24 commanding the Israelites to be compassionate to aliens and slaves. The laws on Jubilee-Sabbath, with their special emphasis on debts cancellation and protection of the poor, are also examples of peace-making. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of *shalom*. Dale Brown observes that:

Shalom is more than the absence of division, of war. It is a positive vision of mercy, justice, and righteousness Shalom is both the goal and the process of God's emerging kingdom. It is an expression of God's power bringing healing and wholeness to every part of our hurt and alienated lives: our inequitable and unjust socio-economic structures, our discordant community affairs, our broken interpersonal relationships, and our guilt-ridden interior lives.¹⁹

The kingdom of *shalom* does not start with the New Testament, but it is part of God's intention from creation. In an article on God's power in creation, Richard Middleton asserts: "If the portrayal of God's exercise of non-violent creative power in Gen. 1 is taken in conjunction with its claim that humanity is

¹⁷ Fretheim, "I Was Only a Little Angry", pp. 372-373.

¹⁸ Fretheim, "I Was Only a Little Angry", p. 375.

¹⁹ Dale W. Brown, *Biblical Pacifism*. Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 2003, p. 138.

made in the image of *this* God, this has significant implications for contemporary ethics”.²⁰

The implication of this interpretation is that no one, based on biblical violence, should claim that the use of violence in the name of religion is normative. The cases of the attacks on America on 11th September 2001; the war against terrorism; jihad; violence against women; genocide in Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo; and the crisis in Kosovo cannot be justified by appealing to acts of violence in the Bible. The modern contexts of each case must be scrutinised for other causes of the violent means used because God's intention is to promote peace.

CONCLUSION

This paper has depicted the story of Aaron's budding staff as being precipitated by a series of violent acts that led to the death of thousands of Israelites. God substituted human confrontation for the test of the tribal staffs, and this brought peace, reconciliation and the acknowledgment of God's instituted leaders during the wilderness journey of the Israelites. We have examined the use of violence by both parties in the contest and its approval by God. According to Fretheim, God's involvement in violence was the only way of honouring his relationship with humanity, but it was also a way of entering the conflict in order to bring it to a non-violent solution.

We should admit that the use of violence in the Bible has raised ethical problems in the management of conflicts, especially violence done in the name and for the benefit of God. The point we would like to underscore in this paper is that God's intention for humanity from creation is peace and harmony. The corruption that our fallen nature has introduced into the world should not be taken as normative for human behaviour. The world was created in *shalom* and is heading toward an eschatological *shalom*. In His relationship to human beings, God participates in human violence with the sole intention of bringing salvation and redemption. Therefore, no one should give himself to abusive and excessive actions of religious terrorism and tribal cleansing on the basis of approved biblical violence. Violence elicits more violence but peaceful negotiation leads to lasting reconciliation. This is the lesson that could be learnt from the narrative of Aaron's budding staff.

²⁰ J. Richard Middleton, "Created in the Image of a Violent God?: The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts", *Interpretation* Vol. 58 No. 4, October 2004, pp. 355.

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