

## Research Project

### Transforming Memories of Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Transforming Memories of Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible

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**Project Website** <https://theologie.unibas.ch/en/departments/hebrew-bible-and-semitic-philology/tmcv/>

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Violence in biblical texts is often disturbing to the modern reader. To counter this ethical indignation, current biblical scholarship has pointed out that biblical texts often emerged in reaction to experiences of collective violence and were written from the perspective of the vanquished. Moreover, narratives of past violence — such as narratives of the conquest of Canaan or the book of Esther — are recognized as ideological fiction rather than reliable historical accounts. A growing consensus in biblical scholarship holds that the biblical texts were written mainly after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. The fictional narratives of violence can thus be explained as “counterpresent” memory, stemming from a time when the producers of these texts were in no actual position of power. But as we can see in biblical texts like the books of Maccabees, the counter-historical construction of memory might also go the other way round, producing victimological rather than triumphalist narratives. Comparative evidence from ancient Near Eastern and Greek historical narratives confirms the existence of such patterns.

In this project, we will argue that biblical memories of vanquishing and being vanquished are intertwined and need to be studied together as interrelated aspects of the cultural memory of collective violence. In recent years, biblical scholars have increasingly used literary and cultural trauma theories to describe the relationship between experiences of collective violence and their reflection in biblical texts. Building on insights from recent trauma research within and beyond biblical studies, we will explore the cultural function of biblical narratives of collective violence as part of Israel's cultural memory in post-monarchic times. We will draw on V. Volkan's concepts of “chosen trauma” and “chosen glory” as a tool for analysing texts produced by a group that has experienced collective violence and that, through imaginary literature, copes with the violent potential within the group.

The four sub-projects focus each on one specific area of biblical narratives which led to the commemoration of a “trauma” or “glory” in the later history of reception: the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 24–25; 2 Chr 36; Jer 37–43; Jer 52; 1 Esdras 1); the conquest of the land of Canaan in the book of Joshua (Josh 6–11); the religious persecution and subsequent triumph of the Maccabees (1–2 Macc); and the collective violence at the end of the book of Esther (Esth 8–9). The research team will work together to develop an integrated view on how ancient Israel coped with collective violence — including its own violent potential — through the literary construction of an imagined history of violence.

The project will test the following working hypotheses: 1) memories of vanquishing and of being vanquished are interrelated in biblical narratives of collective violence; 2) biblical narratives of collective violence evolve in relation to historical changes and, as part of shared cultural memory, contribute to

identity formation or the legitimization of power in different historical contexts; 3) biblical narratives of collective violence are a means of coping both with violence experienced and with the group's own violent potential.

We anticipate that the results of this project will a) provide new and historically-grounded interpretations of difficult biblical texts, b) provide insights into strategies of coping with experiences of collective violence and with a group's own violent potential, and c) reassess and contribute to contemporary trauma studies.

**Keywords** Hebrew Bible, Trauma Studies, Violence, Collective Memory, Historical Criticism, Esther, Joshua, Maccabees

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**Specify cooperation partners**

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4494113	Ammann, Sonja	Honigman, Sylvie, Prof.	Tel Aviv University	01.01.2019	31.12.2023
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