

divine violence

DIVINE VIOLENCE

Adi Ophir

Right from the start, almost every appearance he made was catastrophic. In the beginning, he who laid the foundations of the heaven and the earth, divided the waters from the land, set the stars in motion, and gave nature its laws, emerged into the world he had created only to wreak havoc, either alone or through his emissaries. Each catastrophic event was taken as proof of his might, sometimes even as a revelation of his being, and always provided him with a setting in which to act. So it has been since the genesis.

In the beginning, when humans were very few and could easily be ruled, he treated them moderately. Even his response to murder was restrained. Though the punishments he laid down were severe and irreversible, his repertoire did not yet include the death penalty. Sinners were forewarned, and it appears they understood why they were being punished. A general law was not yet delivered, only specific instructions and direct orders – but the recipients knew they had to obey. Yet as soon as they *began to multiply on the face of the earth* (Genesis 6:1), his reaction to their *wickedness* turned particularly violent. Ten generations later he was ready to wipe out his entire creation,

and *the end of all flesh* came before him (ibid. 6:13). But rather than begin all over again he rescued Noah, *a man righteous in his generations* (ibid. 6:9). Nothing is said as to what the sins of these people had been or if they were aware of them. But whether they realised the meaning of their deeds or not, their wickedness grew in his eyes until he could stand it no longer. When he acted, his force was devastating. The world and all that was in it could not contain his rage, and his destruction covered the entire universe, save for fish and those who made it to Noah's ark. In the aftermath, when he swore, in a tone that contained a hint of remorse, not to *again smite any more every thing living* (ibid. 8:21–22), he sounded like a frustrated child who has calmed down after a burst of violence, seeking to retrieve what he has broken beyond repair.

When he next paid a visit to mankind, a calamity fell upon a magnificent city that had been built with pride. The entrepreneurial spirit of the people of Babel must have posed a threat to him, so he set a limit to it. They showed a combination of fear (*lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth*) that drove them to action (*let us build us a city*) under conditions

of understanding and agreement (*of one language and of one speech*) (ibid. 11:1–4), which is often responsible for human progress and sublimation. Did he not realise that even at their best humans could never escape their mortality that separates them from him? Was it that he required the plurality of languages and nations in order to continue the act of division that began on that first day of creation? In any case, from now on, no action, no matter how successful, would be enough to protect them from his violence, and only an act of sheer repentance would prevent such eruptions of violence in advance, as the people of Nineveh discovered. For, right from the beginning, he was the lord of catastrophe. It is through catastrophe that he rules and punishes, calming that which has been disrupted, and disrupting that which has been calm. It is through catastrophe that he reveals himself and makes himself known in public, thus turning himself into the object of prayer, hope, salvation and mercy.

After the destruction of Babel – if one follows the order of the chapters – more regular troubles began as *the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife* (ibid. 12:17). The next time he visited man, the world witnessed a catastrophe so spectacular it would be carved in human memory for all eternity. Two cities whose sins were exceedingly grievous, with fewer than ten righteous men among them, were totally destroyed. He poured fire and brimstone upon them and wiped out all their inhabitants, men, women, and little children (whom the

text does not mention), and everything that grew upon the ground (which is mentioned), until *the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace* (ibid. 19:24–28). Both cities were annihilated; the Hiroshima and Nagasaki of their age, with only the tale of their overthrow to remember them by.

Once again, we have no idea what sins their citizens committed. Was there some law they knowingly broke? Were they given any warning prior to their destruction? After their demise, many legends of their sins were told, based on their treatment of the one privileged guest who stayed among them and was spared. But one must remember that Lot was a foreigner, and that he took in people even more foreign than he was, and, as it turned out, the citizens of Sodom had good reason to be suspicious of foreigners. Earlier when Abraham had learned of the plans for destruction, he asked that the righteous should be spared, and he agreed in principle. But as part of his negotiations with Abraham, he was allowed to kill at least nine righteous men, not counting all the children and infants who had not yet sinned.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's personal loss (of his inquisitive wife) offer two faces of catastrophe: one is a revelation brought about by the catastrophe, the other is a catastrophe brought about by his revelation. The people at the time of the flood and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, though their sins were grievous, were given no warning about what was to happen. Only Abraham and Lot – and with them the reader – learned what was

coming. Those deemed worthy of salvation were warned in advance, but even they were to be hurt if they violated the professed laws of the catastrophe. These laws, bestowed from on high by a voice breaking into human discourse, were directed at a few chosen individuals, then later at one chosen people. This voice decreed a new kind of legal code, singular and ad hoc, applied to a single event that would never return. In this sense, a catastrophe is the reverse image of a miracle. It, too, is a deed that disrupts the known course of nature, that determines the law of the moment, that overturns the regular order, and which comes into being through speech. Thus the moment of catastrophe is like the moment of the miracle. Often we are dealing with the very same event: a miracle for some and a catastrophe for others. Like the death of all the firstborn, like the parting of the Red Sea, like the sun standing still upon the city of Gibeon, like the turning of the tables in Purim – which was probably the last miracle, but by no means the last catastrophe.

He always had his reasons. If he didn't announce them himself, others did it for him; each generation with its sins; each with its catastrophes. The two are so tightly linked that whenever one spots a grave sin, one can read it as a sign of a coming catastrophe. At the same time, every catastrophe serves as clear testimony of a preceding sin to which it refers. Whether a sign for the future or a testimony from the past, either way, the occurrence of a catastrophe signifies his presence.

The catastrophe is a substitute for his presence, but also augments it, disguises it, and illustrates it all at once, serving to crown him the lord of catastrophe. What other meaning can there be at this stage to his being the lord of the world if not that of being the lord of catastrophe? Whenever he is present, he who was and forever will be almost always appears as destruction. Destruction is his primary mode of being in the world. Primary at least in the sense that the number of people who have witnessed his presence in this way is several times greater than those who have witnessed it in any other form. Destruction is what he has really brought to perfection. According to the early stories, his omniscience, his omnipotence and his benevolence could all still be doubted; his creatures always betrayed him, ruined his plans, and failed to meet his expectations. He could never get them to restore what they had corrupted – but as omni-destroyer he was truly perfect.

In Egypt, with the ten plagues and the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea, the display of his destructive power is part of the logic of the narrative. His spectacles exhibit an excess of devastation that must have served some function. More than he sought to visit upon the people the wickedness of their deeds, to avenge sin and iniquity, he seems to have used his excess of power to stage an educational drama. Victims played an important role in this series of catastrophes: their suffering and agony allowed for his appearance; their beaten bodies were his form of materialisation. During the final show of that

spectacular season, with the entire army – *all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen drowning in the sea* (Exodus 14:23) until *there remained not so much as one of them* (ibid. 14:28), the entire global community was swept with excitement, like an audience sitting in the balcony. The people heard, they trembled; *sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina; then the chiefs of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away* (ibid. 15:14–15).

Following these events, his destructive power was directed almost solely against that group of freed slaves gradually turning into a people. The sovereign of all worlds became the sovereign of one special nation. Only now a true kingdom was founded and a real political community was formed. Prior to Egypt, the violence of destruction was not part of an act of political governance: he ruled the entire world, which he designed and created, but he governed nothing in it. It was only in the desert that he discovered the art of governance. It was there that he distinguished between his claim for mastery and ownership over the whole of creation and his claim to rule one, chosen people, together with the obligations that came with it. Only in the desert did his rule appear as properly political. Only there were laws given to mediate between the people's deeds and his destructive potency; to protect them from his mighty rage and unrestrained fury. With the help of these

laws, sins could be related to catastrophic punishment in a meticulous and systematic way. The eruption of his violence could be postponed and regulated, and his educational shows of horrors could become a means of governance.

In the desert, his violence was gradually contained, using two new elements that had been missing before: law and time. When laws were given, law-abiding subjects could expect a certain degree of protection (though they could hardly help it if he chose to take revenge for their ancestors' sins). More importantly, his eruptions of violence were seen as something that could be postponed, as something that belonged to a remote, indefinite future. Sinners should have expected the number of impending catastrophes to be truly colossal – in the long chapter 28 of Deuteronomy more than fifty possible kinds of disaster are patiently enumerated and vividly depicted – but the catastrophes are in the future. They were no longer part of the lived present, events people were going through in the here and now, but rather a mixture of memories of a remote past (Egypt, Sodom) and images of a distant future. This basic structure has been preserved in later apocalyptic writing, from the late prophets to the Revelation of St. John the Divine, when the remote, indefinite future became the end of time and the colossal catastrophe became doomsday. His name still designated a blend of violence and justice: his justice was related to sins, but his violence was a promise and a threat, not an actual exercise of force.

With divine violence thus regulated, space was made for an independent economy of violence of which kings and emperors were the main but never the sole agents. They could act without being directly implicated in his scheme of destruction and mercy. At the same time, the door was left open for every calamity, whether natural or man-made, to be interpreted as a sign from heaven; as his message or signature. Only relatively late and very gradually was the link between God and disaster severed, and even in the most secularised societies it has never been severed completely. With every new calamity, voices emerge that try to explain it in terms of divine violence, the product of his rage and his design. And whenever such calamities appear, they compete with representations of the earthly economy of violence and with those who have stakes in its (at least relative) autonomy.

The relations between divine and earthly economies of violence underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of the modern state and its consolidation as a totality (of spaces, people, associations, etc.), a multi-apparatus that strives to control everything it contains and to contain everything it can control. On the one hand, the state has become a potential or actual generator and facilitator of large-scale disasters, and the destructive power of some states has been brought to perfection. On the other hand, the state has also become a facilitator, sponsor, and co-ordinator of assistance, relief and survival in times of disaster. In both cases, the state has taken, or might seem to be taking his role as the chief author of destruction and the

ultimate agent of providence. This is one of the reasons for the persistence of political theology even in the most secular societies. Another is the fact that even when the modern state has taken His place, images of a destructive violence that encompasses the whole world, related to human deeds yet exceeding any human capacity to contain it, are still part of our collective memory and political imagination. These images are easily accessible, ready to be used and abused by the powers that be, as well as by those who oppose them. The chaotic space created by great calamities has always been and still is an arena for divine revelation.

One may think that when everyday life is acutely disrupted and one's world seems to come to an end, a god is called for, not only to save the innocent but also to give meaning to meaningless events and to give sense to the incomprehensible. But if this is true, one can also think that such a god, who benefits from disruptions, may even need them in order to reveal himself, to be imagined, to make sense.

States that tend to imitate God benefit from disasters for the same reason, even when they cannot claim to be their authors, because any such disaster may serve as a pretext for declaring a state of emergency, thus reclaiming and reproducing the state's total authority. And when earthly powers imagine that they can take His place in the divine economy of violence, faith may provide resistance but no shelter. It is not God's response to human sins but sheer human hubris that might bring the world to its end.

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