

BLOODY TIME

Rebounding Violence and the Bible

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Maurice Bloch, an anthropologist, has written a short book called *Prey into Hunter: the politics of religious experience* (Cambridge, 1992), about how bloody time is. Reading it, I am reminded again and again of the work we did in 1980 on the Jacob and Esau cycle, and the story it tells of food supply, family, religion, tribal warfare. And I am left wondering, not for the first time, how much more there is to the Bible than I ever hear about in church.

Prey into Hunter runs to 105 pages, and is in seven chapters: Introduction, Initiation, Sacrifice, Cosmogony and the State, Marriage, Millenarianism, Myth. Bloch's central argument derives from a question. How do human beings, who are transient, who don't last, who are born to die, participate in institutions which do last, which do not die? In other words, how do we keep time? How do we synchronise biological experience, organised round birth, death and reproduction, with historical experience of being members of institutions which endure, like families and societies?

His answer is based on the idea of 'rebounding violence', an act of violence which rebounds on itself. Rebounding violence is our response to a contradiction, the contradiction between a world of process, a world of biological transformation, and a world beyond process, a world which defies transience, a world which lasts. How do human beings belong to both? His answer (p.19):

"To achieve this they must appear, in a certain light at least, to be immortal and unchanging, and therefore other than human; at the same time, they must also be truly alive, in a human body which cannot but be perceived as transformative and mortal. The construction of the ritual drama of rebounding violence is an attempt to avoid the force of this contradiction".

The book gives various examples of this 'construction of the ritual drama of rebounding violence' which I will summarise. But first it is important to get a sense of how Bloch organises his argument round ideas of *vitality* and *conquest*.

Vitality comes in two kinds. There is the vitality of vigorous youth. Vitality of this kind is essentially transient: young men and women exulting in their liveliness. Its whole meaning, its enjoyment, belong in its transience. If it was going to last, we wouldn't exult in the way we do.

And there is the vitality of family, tribe, state, the vitality of institutions which last. They may change, but change is incidental to their lastingness. Their strength, their potency, their vitality, resides in, and is proved by, their permanence.

What interests Bloch is how we convert the first kind of vitality into the second, and then back again, with a difference.

He sees this conversion as a conquest, a conquest that rebounds on itself. The first phase is as it were from within to without. The second is from without to within.

In the first phase, native vitality, what I have called the vitality of vigorous youth, is conquered from within itself by an act of violent overcoming, an act of initiation or sacrifice. This first phase establishes a vitality of a new kind, a vitality which transcends native biological process. But this move into a transcendent beyond is unsatisfactory. For a very simple reason. Because (p.4) "if you leave this life, you leave this life", and so the constructed transcendence is irrelevant to the here and now. What is needed is for this transcendent vitality to reconquer native vitality in a second phase or movement of conquest. Only when this has been done are we back in the world of the living. This reconquest completes the full cycle of what Bloch is calling 'rebounding violence'.

I think we got into something like that in our enactment of the Jacob and Esau story.

(There is an immediate adjustment I want to make to Bloch's argument. He describes his approach to religion as 'materialist', and I think he would want to insist that native vitality is 'prior' to transcendent vitality, with human experience of the transcendent as 'arising out of' our native vitality. Others might want to argue that this is to beg the really interesting question about 'priority' which his examples raise: is the idea of 'being first' given us in our biology, or in our history? As I remember it from 1980, acting the Jacob and Esau story 'raises' that question in others beside myself. Which is where my argument about time being given into *our* keeping comes in.)

I now move on to summarise Bloch's argument chapter by chapter, so as to show its relevance to food, cosmogony and the state ('Israel'), marriage, history and myth.

Chapters 2 and 3, on Initiation and Sacrifice

These are about food and the politics of religion, about how the hunting, killing, cooking and eating of animals is related to the lasting continuity of society. The examples he discusses are the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea (Chapter 2), and Iphigenia, Abraham/Isaac, and the Dinka of Sudan and the Buid of the Philippines (Chapter 3). There is an 'indissoluble link between religion and consumption', which is at its most uncomfortably close to us when we are driven to eat flesh of our own which we have first had to sacrifice.

(This is an example of what he means by rebounding violence. The first act of conquest or violence is to be willing to sacrifice (kill) flesh of your own ('birthright'). The second, rebounding, act is to reincorporate (feast on) that flesh, which has been made wholly 'other' in the act of sacrifice. In thinking of Jacob/Esau we need also to remember how Christian teaching has made that story a 'figure' for the Last Supper.)

In these chapters I have noted the following themes in connection with the Jacob/Esau story, and the placing of that story in a wider anthropological context of hunting, killing, consumption and reproduction, together with psychoanalytic associations from both Klein and Freud.

P.22. Towards the end of his discussion of the Orokaiva, he elaborates his materialist view of ritual in a way which raises timeful questions on what can be thought of as 'innate', and what has to be understood as 'the product of the practical interaction of human beings and other life forms'. For instance, in relation to reproduction, sexual and other. Which puts Jacob's trickster aspect in a wider context.

P.31-38. In writing about the Dinka he distinguishes different kinds of 'speech', in relation to the question: how to talk about the animal aspect and the social aspect of people without getting them mixed up?, which could help us explore the importance the Bible gives to different kinds of 'word'.

P.44-5. In considering the alternative outcomes of rebounding violence, as either socially inward, to guarantee reproduction and therefore lastingness, or as socially outward, into imperialist expansion (which also guarantees lastingness), he underlines the importance for us in the Jacob/Esau cycle of the Dinah-Schechem episode in Genesis 34 (note, that this also involves circumcision, which looms large in his later argument).

(In passing, I wonder also whether this 'alternative' helps us understand something of what is at stake in the political-religious background to Antigone.)

Chapter 4, on Cosmogony and the State

This takes as examples Hindu and Japanese (Buddhist and Shinto) funeral rites. (He explains that he is using the term cosmogonic for all those rituals which dissolve the specific human occasion into a general process re-enacting the creation of moral life.) The ideas here are about different generations, how the ancestors and the living young compete with each other for vitality. For Jacob/Esau it is suggestive of how the violence trapped between the two brothers is related to the ancestral intentions of Abraham/Isaac. The Japanese examples are also strong on political expansionism as the result of rebounding violence (compare again the importance of the Dinah-Schechem episode).

Chapter 5 on Marriage

Here the associations with Jacob/Esau are strongest. The examples are from the Dinka again, and from Ladakh (India) and the Shona (Zimbabwe).

The key idea is of how the contrast and similarity between animals and humans can represent the contrast and similarity between male and female. The violence and satisfaction of animal sacrifice and the violence and satisfaction of giving and taking in marriage ritually represent each other. This brings marriage rules about incest avoidance and exogamy together with rules about killing, cooking and feasting on animals, and both into connection with the establishing of social institutions which last through time in a way that human life does not (which is a necessary precondition for human history as distinct from biology).

The whole chapter is rich in associations not only with Jacob/Esau, but also with familiar psychoanalytic ideas of sexuality, extraversion and introversion, and (Kleinian) oscillation between eating and being eaten. I select some quotes to give the flavour.

On the Ladakh:

"We find in this ritual ... a whole range of evocations made into one. There is the kinship and marriage element, the conquest theme, the alimentary theme, the evocation of submission to an external transcendental force leading to the renunciation of innate vitality, the theme of an alien vitality from an outside source, and even the cosmogonic element. This is ... the same mixture as we found in the analysis of initiation and sacrifice". (P.72)

On the household, not the individual, as the 'unit of agency' (cp. family system theory): [in order to last through time irrespective of the passage of generations, the Ladakh household] "creates its phenomenological permanence by being both conquered, when it marries its daughters, and conquering, when it marries its sons. The household must sometimes act as the 'outsiders' penetrating the inside of another household and bringing back and absorbing from it that which it needs in order to continue, and sometimes it must act as the 'insiders', ultimately surrendering to outsiders who penetrate it and remove a vital element from it" (P.73).

On something like 'projective identification' seen as evidence of 'the social body' rather than of individual psychology:

"... these people believe that the bones in their body are a part of a greater undifferentiated totality. In cases such as these the body is not experienced as finally bounded by the air round it; it is also continuous with parts of the bodies of people who in modern western ideology would be seen as 'others' What such bodyness implies is that what happens to other members of your household is, to a certain extent, also happening to you irrespective of whether these others are women or men. Because of this the radical disjunction between different people is far from absolute in such societies ..." (P.75).

On gender as both biologically given and culturally made:

"The symbolism of gender and sexuality, which is so prominent in much religious ritual, cannot be understood properly if we see it as though it was concerned only with the relations between men and women. Rather it should be understood as being used in rituals in an ad hoc manner to act out a more fundamental and central logic concerning the establishment of a form of human life which has apparently escaped the biological constraint of death".

"... gender and animality are alternative symbolic resources which, together or separately, can be used in the processes of rebounding violence which create the transcendental" (P.78-79).

The last pages of the chapter, 79 to 84, with their examples of how 'the fluidity of human life' can be transformed 'in such a way that it may appear governed by eternal institutional and cognitive structures' started me thinking about the politics of abortion. If we think of abortion as sacrifice, what he is saying here about rebounding violence in relation to both family and state suggests to me a considerable widening and deepening of the 'field' within which to try and understand how much is invested in the political debate between 'choice' and 'life'. In the Jacob/Esau story the Dinah-Schechem episode is once again the way in. Think of (male) circumcision as equivalent to (female) abortion, and we could get a lot of contemporary political energy into the enactment. (And see the next chapter for circumcision and history.)

he last two chapters, on Millenarianism and on Myth

These 'correct the impression' which he thinks the book may so far have given of rituals of rebounding violence as neat and coherent. The truth is more messy. Rituals are not straightforward and often don't work, either for individuals or for societies. He has the catching sentence which I shall try and bear in mind in future: "In ritual, in fact, the meanings conjured up are always on the point of faltering" (P.85).

Chapter 6, on Millenarianism, discusses "the way in which it is possible to reverse the predatory implications of rebounding violence by arresting the progression half-way, at the point when the native vitality has been abandoned but before restrengthening external vitality has been consumed. This possibility comes to the fore when political circumstances make all forms of social continuation appear hopeless" (P.99).

(I read this as applying to individuals and to societies. When life, or history, becomes intolerable we no longer want to go on. If we can get out of ordinary, or native, time by some act of violent sacrifice, then we don't want to come back in again. Societies then want history to stop, which is what we mean by millenarianism: the belief that the millennium has come to pass. Individuals want everyday life to stop, either through some kind of conversion experience that keeps us in a state of permanent exaltation, or through suicide. Perhaps this could link to manic-depressive mood swings.)

Bloch's examples are from the recent history of the Merina in Madagascar, and of early Christian experience as reflected in Paul's discussion of circumcision in the Epistles. (This compares again with the Dinah-Schemem episode.)

In the mid 19th century, under the impact of French and British colonial expansion, the Merina as it were gave up. They stopped celebrating the second half of their rituals of regeneration-through-rebounding-violence. Their intention was to leave the world of the living and never come back. What catches me in Bloch's description is the abandonment of reproduction which this entailed. Agricultural tasks were abandoned, especially forward looking agricultural work such as irrigating, sowing and transplanting. "For the possessed Merina were in fact refusing reproduction altogether, in all its forms, and exchanging reproductivity for the unchanging, otherworldly permanence of ancestorhood and the tomb"(P.90).

This kind of religious-political opting out is interesting in its own right. But also as drawing our attention to what is happening in all those other cases, such as in Jacob/Esau, where the attractions of staying with transcendence are sacrificed for the sake of history, for the sake of going on. Reproduction (sexual and other) is always pivotal for the choice made.

(Psychoanalytically, I find that Bloch's very dense argument moves me between Kleinian ideas of consuming and being consumed as two aspects of the same violence, and uncertainty between sex as for its own sake, and sex as for purposes of reproduction.)

When he comes (Pp 90-98) to early Christianity and Paul's uncertainty as to whether or not Gentile converts need be circumcised (not necessary if the end of history was already 'on us', necessary if the world was to go on in which case sexual reproduction had to submit to being conquered by or for God) the connections with the Old Testament and Jacob/Esau are obvious. To make the most of this discussion I think we have to be prepared to move boldly between Old and New Testaments, and here what Bloch says about Virgin Birth has encouraged me to risk exposure of a new kind.

He sees Christian belief in the Virgin Birth as taking the place of Jewish circumcision. That is, he recognises the violence implicit in the belief. He finds that "the concept of the virgin birth is something of a misnomer since the central idea that lies behind the doctrine is not about the absence of sexual intercourse but rather about the presence of Mary's intercourse with the divine".

This is really quite a shocking thought when compared with the way arguments about the Virgin Birth are usually conducted. It has implications which are in their way pornographic. Violation of an extraordinary kind is being believed in.

Bloch hints at some of these implications with his question as to who we can, or do, identify with: the penetrated or the penetrator?

“...the virgin birth was the invitation to celebrate the re-entry of the divine into the vital through the sexual conquest of a woman, a conquest which much have involved all the overtones of violence which sex and marriage have always carried in Mediterranean cultures. Although, unlike some of our other examples, the believers probably identified in this case less with the penetrator than with the penetrated, the basic pattern remains the same. In other words, the idea of the virgin birth was one of the ways in which the image of the second conquest of rebounding violence was re-introduced, an image which had originally been abandoned in the more millenarian phase of very early Christianity.”

With reference to Jacob/Esau, does that approach to virgin birth help us develop what is latent in the Leah-Rachel alternation, together with their substitute serving maids? I think it could, by enlarging our sense of violation as a necessary aspect of divine intervention in native vitality. It seems that the Old Testament is necessary to an understanding of the New.

But I want to return again to that sentence: “In ritual the meanings conjured up are always on the point of faltering”. Bloch repeats the point on P.98. Millenarianism is about a profound (I would call it ontological) hesitancy as between transcendence and going on, a hesitancy in which the vitality we associate with reproduction is made subject to doubt, doubt of a kind that questions our understanding of time. He writes:

“The element of doubt and uncertainty is as important in the ethnography of the systems I have examined as the apparently over-certain sequences which, for the sake of presentation, I have previously emphasised. Indeed, it is this element of doubt which explains the indirect relation of the political situation to ritual symbolism and individual experience”.

I like that last sentence. It corresponds to how I have come to experience the world through Jung's psychology. Connections which are dubious yet remain insistent, directions which are always indirect, convictions which are binding though never 'safe' (to use the language of our Courts of Appeal). I suggest that the figure of Jacob carries conviction and doubt of this kind. Enacting his story was an opportunity to explore the system of indirect relations which brings politics, ritual symbolism, and our experience of family, together in a common field of meaning. Indirect, hesitant, doubtful connections, always on the point of faltering, may be more important than the obvious highlights of the story.

Chapter 7, on Myth, is short but full to exploding with ideas to be worked on. Bloch's understanding of myth is not that with which we are familiar in Jungian circles, but I think it could lend itself rather well to the kind of exploration we do in enactment. He defines it earlier in the book (P.23) as follows: “The as if speculations of myth cannot be equated either with the experiences of life or the representations of ritual but are rather an intellectual exploration of the lack of fit between the two”.

Myth as exploration of 'the lack of fit' between life as we experience it, and publicly repeated expectation of what life ought to be like: it is an interesting idea. It enables us to take the story both as a description of how things are, and as a criticism of how things are. In telling/enacting it we want to be faithful to the story. But we also want the story to be able to comment critically on its own assumptions, on what it appears to take for granted. In order to develop, to go on, a story has to be unsure about the finality of its own subject matter.

Within the argument of his book Bloch seems to be saying in this chapter that rebounding violence does not work, and that this whole way of trying to combine lasting order with biological vitality should now be recognised as mistaken so that we can begin to search for fundamentally different solutions. His last chapter should be read "as a sketchy...speculation ..concerning how matters might be if everything were different and the attempt to establish transcendental institutions had not even been attempted...It may even show that, when in real trouble, we are able to analyse and criticise the very basis of our ideologies, to begin to demystify ourselves and to search for fundamentally different solutions"(Pp.99,105).

The example Bloch brings to support his argument is of a South Eastern Asian people, the Ma'Betisek: an aboriginal group from Malaysia who now live in very precarious conditions, powerless, driven from their land and surrounded by much more powerful neighbours. But thinking of Jacob/Esau, and what we made of the story, I will conclude these notes with a more general quotation (P.99).

"There was a time when anthropologists saw a direct relation between myth and practice... However, Lévi Strauss has shown quite conclusively how misleading such an approach actually is. He has pointed out how mythology is so often a speculation on practice, exploring all imaginable possibilities in what must remain an intellectual search. Myths often seem simply to review the possible doubts of the participants and explore these with horrified fascination. Myths seem to concentrate on the terrifying or ironic possibilities of the failure of the system, or on the impossibility of its teleological implications rather than ... provide a charter for action".

Is that something our time keepers should be doing: exploring the terrifying or ironic possibilities of the failure of --- well, the Bible?

Our world is conditioned by what the Bible has to say about time. However much some of us might like to get away from it, we cannot escape its influence. Yet we ask: does it fit? We ask that question from, as it were, outside. But the Bible has a way of asking the same question from inside, from inside its own telling. Our enactment of the Jacob/Esau story in 1980 brought this home to us. We found ourselves caught up in a telling that was self-questioning. Bloch's argument carries the same self-questioning into his analysis of rebounding violence in the New Testament, in relation to circumcision, Virgin Birth, eucharist. If we were to explore it further, I believe we would find ourselves keeping time differently.