Ellul on Biblical Violence

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Ellul on Biblical Violence

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I. Introduction

Violence seems to be pervasive in the Bible, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament: “I have not come to bring peace but a sword,” Jesus said (Matthew, 10, 34).1 Many a reader of the Scriptures is then left struggling with this contradiction between a supposedly benevolent God and biblical violence. This contradiction poses a major challenge to biblical exegesis, and the purpose of this paper is to examine what explanatory account Jacques Ellul, an advocate of non-violence, offers of this contradiction and what analysis of biblical violence he provides. Ellul’s basic thesis regarding biblical violence rests on two foundations that underlie his analysis: his hermeneutical stance and his philosophical approach to violence.

A. Hermeneutical Stance

Ellul generally limits his use of the historical-critical method, as he argues that it neglects the hypothesis that meaning might derive from the confrontation of texts. It has long been noticed that the Bible contains contradictory texts. An example is

1 Except otherwise mentioned, all biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version.
the contradictory accounts of creation\(^3\) in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. A possible interpretation of these contradictions is to contend that contradictory texts were written by different authors, at different periods (a widely accepted hypothesis\(^4\)), and subsequently put together in a scribal process by editors who integrated them as best they could in what was to become the final document. Another explanatory account of the contradiction, Ellul argues, might reside in the fact that each text comes as an answer to a precise question, and that two different accounts correspond to two different questions. Under this hypothesis, Ellul contends that the second account has a more anthropocentric character, since in this account, humanity comes first, followed by animals.\(^5\) Another possibility (not mentioned by Ellul, to the best of my knowledge) is that the first account in Genesis 1, which concentrates on the various elements of the world, is the answer to an ontological question, whereas the account in Genesis 2, with the introduction of the interdiction of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is an answer to an ethical problem, which dovetails well with Ellul’s “anthropocentric” interpretation of this chapter. Another explanation could be that the second text of Genesis 2 carries some theological comments on the former and thus brings some new and crucial meaning for the readers.\(^6\) In addition, there might be a third possible interpretation of the contradiction, which does not seem to be mentioned by Ellul either: one could also understand the first account, in which man and woman are created simultaneously, as an ideal creation of equality, as a goal to reach for a harmonious social life, and the second account, in which the woman is created after the man, as a descriptive account of real social life in which what prevails is a relation of domination between any two individuals, and between men and women. Thus, for Ellul, the meaning of a text can only stem from the confrontation with other texts of the entire Bible. If this principle is neglected, the interpretation may be erroneous. This is the case, for instance, of the famous formula \textit{Compelle intrare}.\(^7\) The traditional interpretation of this formula has been used as a legitimation of violence and brute force to convert people, notably during the

\(^{3}\) Among other differences, in the account of Genesis 1, man and woman are created simultaneously (“male and female he created them” [Genesis 1, 27]), whereas in Genesis 2, the woman is created after the man (“and the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman” [Genesis 2, 22]). In the account of Genesis 1, animals are created before man, whereas in the account of Genesis 2, animals are created after man (Genesis 1, 24-25).

\(^{4}\) This hypothesis is accepted by Ellul too.


\(^{6}\) A possibility hinted at in ibid., 41.

\(^{7}\) This is part of the Latin translation by Jerome of Luke 14, 23: “Exi in vias et saepes, et compelle intrare”, in which \textit{compelle intrare} is translated as “compel people to come in”. The context is the parable of guests invited to “a great dinner” (Luke 14, 16) who all turned down the invitation. The “owner of the house” consequently ordered his servant to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and as there was still room for more people, to compel people “from the streets and lanes” to come in. Another reason why Ellul cannot accept the above interpretation of this formula is that for him, violent means can never achieve good ends.
Inquisition. But, Ellul argues, this interpretation results from an error of analysis of the verse and its textual environment. In the parable, it is a man (“the owner of the house”) who invites people in, and this invitation cannot be interpreted as God’s invitation, because in the rest of the Bible, God’s messengers are not humans but angels. When interpreted in the context of the whole Bible, the meaning of this verse can be understood in a completely different manner: it is not that the Church must use brute force to convert but that God’s grace extends to all, in other words, that it is universal. For Ellul then, the meaning of each biblical text results from its confrontation with other biblical texts. More specifically, each text must be seen within the perspective of the revelation in Christ. Consequently, violent biblical texts also must be put in the context of the Cross and the revelation in Christ.

B. Philosophical Approach to Violence

Ellul’s approach to biblical violence, by which I mean any manifestation of violence described by the biblical authors (understood independently from the question of towards whom such violence is directed), is first and foremost descriptive: nowhere does he seem to endeavour to explain the phenomenon, nor does he seem to analyse its deep causes. His perception of biblical violence is always derived from the Scriptures, and for him, what is relevant is not so much the causes of the phenomenon as its various manifestations. Consequently, in keeping with the various shades of meaning attached to the Hebrew word חמס (Hamas), which often translates as “violence,” (e.g., in Genesis 6, 11: “the earth was filled with violence,” or in Jeremiah 6, 7: “violence and destruction are heard in her”), Ellul considers that violence is also manifested (and חמס translated) by “cruelty” as in Judges 9, 24 (King James version): “the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubaal,” or in Psalm 74, 20 (King James version): “the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty.” And as the word חמס is also used to refer to any wrong done to another person, for instance in Job 19, 7 (King James version): “I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard,” and sometimes to the testimony of a false witness, for instance in Exodus 23, 1: “you shall not join hand with the wicked to be as a malicious witness,” or in Deuteronomy 19, 16: “If a malicious witness comes forward...” these too he considers as manifestations of... 

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9 In a nutshell, Ellul summarizes thus: “the meaning of a text derives from its internal dialectics.” See Jacques Ellul, Sans feu ni lieu (Paris : Gallimard, 1975). In this perspective, Ellul’s analysis is somewhat similar to rabbinic exegesis. There, four levels of interpretation of texts are considered, one of which is דרש (drash), which to some extent corresponds to contextual interpretation. Ellul characterizes his method of interpretation as an application of the principle defined by Paul (see Romans 12, 6) as the “analogy of faith.” See Jacques Ellul, Les sources de l’éthique chrétienne (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2018), 287. Ellul further states (ibid., 293) that resorting to this principle guarantees the objectivity of the interpretation of biblical texts.

10 Formulated in theological terms, this is a Christocentric hermeneutic.

11 In this verse “her” refers to Jerusalem.
violence. Nowhere does Ellul seem to offer an explanatory account of biblical violence, and concentrating on its extension and its description, nowhere does he seem to offer an intensional definition of violence either. One can discern in this stance a kind of respect for the object described via the consciousness of biblical authors, who described violence as it manifests itself. This might be described as a kind of phenomenological approach to biblical violence, and given the hermeneutical stance characterized above, several aspects of Ellul’s analysis of biblical violence now emerge.

C. Outline

Crucial to Ellul’s phenomenology of biblical violence is the identification of the following three fundamental features: first, theological violence, understood as violence that might seem to be legitimized by biblical considerations, is always violence against εξουσία (exousia); second, there are laws according to which violence spreads, and third, there is a possible, albeit difficult, path to get rid of violence. These will be discussed in the first section of this study. In the second section, I will then show how Ellul, focusing on two instructive comparisons between violence and language, contends that violence stands in strict opposition to language: first, language and violence differ along two dimensions, that of cooperation and that of accumulation and second, the failure of language in Cain is linked with his mortal violence. In section three, I will finally examine Ellul’s claim that, within the perspective of the revelation in Christ, biblical violence is ultimately the violence of love.

II. A Phenomenology of Biblical Violence

The primordial creation, Ellul observes, was the creation of a benevolent God: “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1, 10). Furthermore, Ellul argues that before

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12 In an unpublished study on Amos, building on the co-presence of the words נכח (nekoaH) which translates as “right” or “equity”, and חמס (Hamas) (violence) in Amos 3,10. Ellul considers that any kind of inequity is also a manifestation of violence.

13 This fact is also noted by Goddard in his analysis of Ellul’s conception of “just war.” See Andrew Goddard, “Ellul on violence and just war,” The Ellul Forum 32 (2003): 3-7; 4. Goddard considers that it is “a fundamental weakness of Ellul’s work” (ibid., n7), and several other authors concur. However, this criticism is ill-founded (at least as regards Ellul’s analysis of biblical violence), as it overlooks the perspective adopted by him, which I argue is phenomenological in spirit. In the same vein, Ellul considers that a definition of freedom is impossible, as freedom is what is experienced by human beings, and he adds what seems to be a programmatic generalization of his method: starting with the experience (or the consciousness) of human beings is necessary in the approach of all questions. See Jean-Philippe Qadri (ed.), Jacques Ellul. Vivre et penser la liberté (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2019), 40.

14 In the collective meaning, the powers that be (as, for instance, in Luke 12, 11, or Romans 13, 1), or the magistrates themselves.


the fall, Adam lived in communion with God and was not submitted to the order of necessity: thus, necessity is a consequence of the separation from God. The definition of “necessity” that I am adopting here (and I understand it corresponds to Ellul’s definition too), can be summed up thus: necessity is what cannot possibly not be the case, and cannot possibly be different from what it is. Violence falls under this definition, and therefore belongs to the order of necessity. Another conspicuous fact about biblical violence is that when prophets called for justice, never did they invite the poor to use political violence against the rich, but they always announced God’s judgement. The prophets’ aim, sometimes in the form of harsh imprecatory curses, is always to get people to recognize their injustice against the poor and to change their ways, as injustice against the poor is always a kind of violence (see Micah 6, 12 “your wealthy are full of violence”). As for what could be interpreted as theological violence, it is never a political act either, but it is violence against ξοσια (exousia).

A. Violence against Exousia

What could be interpreted as theological violence is not directed at flesh and blood human beings, but it is violence against ξοσια (exousia), and more specifically, violence against heathen gods and idols. When God announced the tenth plague against Egypt, although humans and beasts would be smitten, it is clear that the judgement was against idols too, as is made explicit in Exodus 12, 12: “on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.” In one of the most violent episodes of what can be interpreted as theological violence, Elijah the prophet ordered the people to take the prophets of Baal and slay them (I Kings 18, 40); these prophets had turned a

17 Although “the fall” is a widely accepted notion, Ellul, argues that this is not a biblical notion. Neither is, he adds, the notion of “original sin.” See ibid., 70. However, from now on, the term “fall” will be used, for the sake of convenience, in its general accepted meaning. It must be added that despite rejecting the word “fall,” Ellul retains something of the concept in his use of the word “break” (ibid., 77).
18 See Jacques Ellul, Éthique de la liberté. Tome 1 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1973), 41-51. Ellul considers that necessity is a structural and irrecusable phenomenon, that it is inescapable, and that human beings are conditioned to adhere to necessity. The first step in the fight for freedom, then, is for each human being individually, to recognize necessity, to weigh and assess it, and to discover its significance.
19 Ellul, Contre les violents, 163.
20 Ibid., 165.
21 See for instance Amos’s imprecation, in Amos 3, 10-11: “They do not know how to do right, says the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. Therefore, thus says the Lord God; An adversary shall surround the land; and strip you of your defence; and your strongholds shall be plundered.”
22 The link between violence and injustice is also explicit in Ezekiel’s words (Ezekiel, 45, 9): “Enough, O princes of Israel: put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right.”
23 Ellul, Contre les violents, 204-206.
24 It is not entirely clear whether Ellul considers that it is Elijah himself who slays the priest of Baal or the people: in Contre les violents (204, n3), he considers that it is the people, whereas,
lot of people away from the faith in the unique God and had led them into idolatry. The violent behaviour of the people is a manifestation of הרמנ (Herem), that is utter destruction, extermination, as in Deuteronomy 2, 34: “we utterly destroyed men” or in 1 Samuel 15, 8: “go, utterly destroy the sinners”. This act must not be seen as a mandatory act, but it must be understood in its didactic dimension, the message of which is to keep away from idolatry. And it must not be taken as a general encouragement to slay heretics either, as this was ordered by a given prophet, in a unique given situation (a borderline situation, Ellul argues), which is not supposed to repeat itself. In other circumstances, it may happen that other prophets severely condemn violence and even encourage submission to foreign rulers: this is the case, for instance, of Jeremiah, who advised against violence to enemies and urged Zedekiah, the king of Judah, to accept to serve the king of Babylon. Indeed, in Jeremiah 27, 12 we can read: “I spoke to king Zedekiah of Judah:... Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live.”. Ellul makes an important contribution to the interpretation of Elijah’s violence. Drawing on Elijah’s behaviour after the slaughter of the prophets of Baal (he flees to the wilderness and hides in a cave, after Jezebel had sworn to avenge the slaughter and

in Politique de dieu, politiques de l’homme, he writes that it is Elijah himself. See Jacques Ellul, Politique de dieu, politiques de l’homme (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1966), 130. Strictly speaking, the Hebrew verbal form seems to indicate that it is Elijah himself who slays the prophets of Baal. However, this detail is not really relevant as what is relevant here is that there is a change in authority for the people, from that of the priests of Baal to that of Elijah. And everything happens as if God’s authority in the hands of human beings was never the pure authority of God.

25 See Ellul, Contre les violents, 203, n15-1.
26 This is Ellul’s claim, explicitly expressed in Contre les violents (203-204, n15-3), and in an unpublished biblical study on the book of Amos.
27 See Ellul, Contre les violents, 204, n15-3.
28 This is the case, for instance, of Amos in Amos 6, 3 (King James version): “ye that... cause the seat of violence to come near.” Interestingly, Neher (1981, 104), an author often cited by Ellul in his studies of the Old Testament, suggests another translation for the Hebrew sequence לשבת שבט (shevet Hamas), which is translated by “seat of violence” in the King James. See André Neher, Contribution à l’histoire du prophétisme (Paris : Vrin, 1981 [1950]). In this translation, the word שבט (shevet) is analyzed as an infinitive form of the verb (lashvet) that means “to sit down.” But Neher analyzes this word as the word “Shabbat” (same consonantal architecture but different vocalization) and thus translates this sequence as “Shabbat acquired by violence.” The exegetical consequence of this analysis is that this Shabbat is not the true Shabbat: the true Shabbat followed the creation of a benevolent God and was received as a blessing, whereas the Shabbat of the days in which Amos lived was acquired (and not received as a blessing) by violence. Thus, Neher (ibid., 117), concludes that Amos’s message is a heroic call to justice and a plea against violence, iniquity, and ritual religiosity. Neher’s analysis seems to echo in Ellul who generalizes it and states that any legal system established through violent means will always bring about injustice. See Jacques Ellul, Exégèse des nouveaux lieux communs (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1966), 298.
had threatened his life\textsuperscript{30}, Ellul develops an in-depth interpretation, stating that in stark contrast with Elijah’s violent behaviour, God reveals himself to him, not in a violent manner, but as he is hiding in a cave, in the secret of this cave, and not in any of the violent events precisely enumerated in the text: not in the violence of the wind, not in the violence of an earthquake, not in the violence of a fire, but in “a sound of sheer silence.”\textsuperscript{31} Thus, Ellul argues, Elijah receives the revelation from a God who does not act by violent means, and this in itself constitutes a judgement about Elijah’s action against the prophets of Baal.

**B. The Laws of Violence**

In *Contre les violents*, Ellul argues that violence is characterized by three main properties: first, violence begets violence, second, there is no subtype of violence, and third, violence leads to servitude. I now briefly consider these three notable properties.

- **Violence Begets Violence.**

In his analysis of the events leading to king Ahab’s violent death\textsuperscript{32}, Ellul quotes this statement from Jesus: “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew, 26, 52).\textsuperscript{33} The view clearly expressed in this statement is that once it has been unleashed, violence mechanically spreads over time. Focusing on the presence of the word “all” in this verse, Ellul argues that this statement has the force of a theorem: violent means inevitably trigger a sequence of violent events that will eventually turn against the initiator of violence.\textsuperscript{34} The infernal circle of violence and revenge can never be broken\textsuperscript{35}. The whole story of Ahab, Ellul claims, is an illustration of this law.\textsuperscript{36}

- **There Is No Subtype of Violence.**

Ellul forcefully argues that violence is a single thing; contra Casalis\textsuperscript{37} and other intellectuals, (including Maurice Duverger and Jean-Marie Domenach), he argues that

\textsuperscript{30}See 1 Kings 19, 2: “Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying: so may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow”.

\textsuperscript{31}See 1 Kings 19, 12.

\textsuperscript{32}Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of a king of the Zidonians (1 Kings, 16, 31), and together, they served, worshipped Baal and promoted this worship in Israel. Ahab coveted and illegally acquired the vineyard of Naboth and later had him killed (1 Kings 21), then he engaged in warfare against Syria and was killed at the battle of Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22, 29-35). His dynasty was then killed by Jehu’s action (cf. infra, note 45).

\textsuperscript{33}Ellul, *Politique de dieu, politiques de l’homme*, 120.

\textsuperscript{34}Ellul, *Contre les violents*, 124.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 126. This is also what he states in Qadri (ed.), *Jacques Ellul. Vivre et penser la liberté*, 370.

\textsuperscript{36}Ellul, *Politique de dieu, politiques de l’homme*, 120.

\textsuperscript{37}George Casalis (1917-1987), a student of Karl Barth in Basel, was a professor of theology in the faculty of theology in Paris. He is known for his political involvement, notably against
there is not such a thing as justified violence. Nor is there such a thing as minor violence, and this is clearly the meaning of Jesus’s words equating insult and murder in Matthew 5, 21-22: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient time, you shall not murder; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment: But I say to you, that... if you say “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Furthermore, Ellul stresses the fact that Jesus’s statement is not an evangelical counsel but simply a matter-of-fact description of violence.

- Violence Leads to Servitude.

As violence leads to violence and as there cannot be any noble ends without right means, it ensues that violence, which belongs to the order of necessity, is never liberating but enslaving. Never has a necessity produced freedom, Ellul claims. All kinds of violence are enslaving. The corollary of this principle is that as soon as freedom becomes violent, freedom no longer exists. Ellul goes on to specify the conditions of freedom: freedom can only exist and survive when there is love.

C. Getting Rid of Violence?

From the remarks above, and as violence belongs to the order of necessity, it seems that getting rid of violence should be impossible. But Ellul claims that this is strictly speaking a non-Christian way of reasoning. As the whole Bible must be seen in the perspective of Christ, and as Christ is the one that sets humans free, there is a real way for believers to be free. Only freedom can break the vicious circle of servitude to violence and violence to servitude, Ellul claims. And when they are really free, humans are in a position that allows them to challenge necessities, and they can get rid of fear. This point is made clear in Contre les violents: the way to break the circle of violence, the way to get rid of violence, is to reject fear. When Jesus said “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.” (Luke 6, 29), he encourages the oppressed the French war in Algeria. In the upheaval of May 1968, he delivered a radio sermon that was received as a religious legitimation of the violent events and infuriated some in the audience. This controversial figure was seen by many as a symbol of leftist involvement from the Christian church. See Jean Baubérot, Le pouvoir de contester. Contestations politico-religieuses autour de “mai 68” et le document “Église et pouvoirs” (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1983), 124-127. In L’idéologie marxiste chrétienne (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1979), 155-196, Ellul vehemently criticizes the theological positions adopted by Casalis. Concerning this “inductive theology” founded on class struggle, see Georges Casalis, Les idées justes ne tombent pas du ciel (Paris: Cerf, 1977).

38 Ellul, Contre les violents, 128-129.
39 Ibid., 165.
41 Ibid., 100.
42 Ibid., 546.
43 Ellul, Contre les violents, 162.
45 Ellul, Contre les violents, 219.
victim to get rid both of violence and fear.\textsuperscript{46} That fear and violence are closely linked together is exactly and explicitly what Gandhi, quoted by Ellul,\textsuperscript{47} expressed: never fear, as whoever fears also hates and whoever hates also kills.

Violence is opposed to freedom, but it is also, in very significant ways, opposed to language.

III. Violence and Language

If he is insistent on the fact that violence leads to servitude, Ellul also adds that language plays an important role in the freedom of human beings, a theme developed at length in \textit{The Humiliation of the Word}.\textsuperscript{48} Ellul states that language is both an exercise in freedom, and an extraordinary event in which the freedom of the speaker and of the hearer is respected.\textsuperscript{49} As can be seen then, for Ellul, violence, which leads to servitude, and language, which is “an exercise in freedom,” stand in stark contrast with each other. This section presents some characteristics of this opposition. Before doing so, a brief comment is in order here, as the use of terms such as “language” and “speech” may lead to some confusions, all the more so as in this domain, we must account for the added difficulty of the translation of French terms into English. Furthermore (and this is of paramount importance), Ellul notes that the Revelation is transmitted through the \(\lambda\sigma\gamma\omega\varsigma\) (the Word),\textsuperscript{50} but \(\lambda\sigma\gamma\omega\varsigma\) is translated in French as “la Parole.” Although he is aware of the general debates going on in the 1960s and 1970s about language,\textsuperscript{51} Ellul uses the French term equivalent to “language” in a pre-theoretical sense roughly equivalent to a particular way of expressing thought.\textsuperscript{52} However, nothing hinges on this loose use of the term. I will now present Ellul’s observations on the opposition between language and violence in two parts: first, I examine some distinctive properties between language and violence, and second, I consider the impoverishment of language and its relation with violence.

A. Violence and Language: On Some Opposing Properties

One of the most salient properties of natural languages is their ambiguity. Ellul notes that the uncertainty of meaning and the ambiguity of language generate creation,\textsuperscript{53} and he further adds that the uncertainty of discourse is what makes its richness. One can observe then that for Ellul, the ambiguity of natural languages is not a negative

\textsuperscript{46} This link between fear and violence is also explicitly formulated thus by Ellul: only the one who fears is violent. See Jacques Ellul, \textit{La foi au prix du doute} (Paris: Hachette. 1980), 270.
\textsuperscript{47} Ellul, \textit{Contre les violents}, 219.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 56, 63.
\textsuperscript{51} See ibid., 26, n1.
\textsuperscript{52} In a more theoretical view, “language” is used to refer to an infinite set of expressions, and is distinct from “I-language” (“I” for “internalized” or “intensional”), which refers to the abstract procedure of generation of these expressions.
\textsuperscript{53} Ellul, \textit{La parole humiliée}, 23.
property.\textsuperscript{54} It is also because of this property that in an oral dialogue, there is a necessary cooperation between a speaker and a hearer.

- Violence, Language, and Cooperation.

Due to its ambivalent and ambiguous characteristics, language is also freedom in that it leaves room for interpretation. Consequently, Ellul argues,\textsuperscript{55} in a dialogue, the hearer’s role is not a passive but an active role, one which consists in assigning the right interpretation to the words heard.\textsuperscript{56} In this interpretative process, every discourse becomes a kind of enigma to decipher,\textsuperscript{57} and every oral conversation needs cooperation between two persons, between a speaker and a hearer.\textsuperscript{58} Violence, on the contrary, negates the other person.\textsuperscript{59} This is expressed as follows: “The word ... communicates with others by recognizing them. In contrast, violence always denies the other.”\textsuperscript{60} Commenting on the first five verses of chapter 5, and more specifically on verse 4 of the Epistle of James (“Listen! the wages of the labourers who moved your fields which you kept back by fraud cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”), he observes that this verse sheds light on the contrast between the behaviour of the rich, who act violently in order to get their wealth and possessions, and that of the labourers who “cry,” that is who utter words. Consequently, Ellul argues, this verse creates and emphasizes the opposition between the mute violence of the rich and language. This opposition is also explicitly stated as follows: “since all forms of riches imply a measure of violence, they constitute the opposite of the Word.”\textsuperscript{61}

- Violence, Language and Accumulation.

Another conspicuous property of language, which is manifested in oral speech, is that it unfolds in time: because of this unfolding of speech in time, speaker and hearer are plunged into temporality, and the participants in a dialogue are “inserted in

\textsuperscript{54} It is not a negative property for linguistic science either, which considers that it is the very ambiguity of natural languages that permits them to adapt to new situations. If they were not ambiguous, natural languages would become simple nomenclatures, they would not evolve and would subsequently be endangered.

\textsuperscript{55} Ellul, \textit{La parole humiliée}, 28.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 23.


\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 199.
time.”

This characteristic of speech expressing its content in the unique dimension of time, this temporality of oral speech, has a counterpart in the linearity of written texts. It is the temporality of oral conversation that rules out the possibility of pronouncing two words simultaneously. From this point of view then, in an oral conversation, it is impossible to store words: once a word is selected, it is pronounced, and it is gone. Ellul states then that there is no permanence attached to spoken words in an utterance, and he concludes that, strictly speaking, there can be no accumulation in speech. Contrary to this, possessions and wealth acquired by violent acts accumulate. See, for instance, James 5, 1-3: “Come now, you rich people...you have laid up treasure together for the last days.” Furthermore, as described above, violence mechanically accumulates. Ellul then concludes that violence (including the violence of possession) is the opposite of language.

B. Violence and the Impoverishment of Language

In his description of the opposition between sight, which correlates with reality, and articulated language, which correlates with truth, Ellul observes that an image, which has no connexion with truth, cannot convey falsehood, whereas language, which is meant to express truth can, and sometimes does, convey falsehood. Some types of

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63 One recognizes here the Saussurean analysis, which is expressed in very similar terms by Saussure: “In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time.” See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York, Toronto, London: Mc Graw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 70.
64 Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, 49, 52.
65 The elements of a discourse, or of a sentence, are then all presented in succession and form a chain. It is this property that permits to model some aspects of language (such as speech recognition or part of speech tagging) by Markov Models. Markov Models are automata in which the occurrence of a word in the chain is associated with a probability depending on the occurrence of the previous words in the chain.
67 Ibid., 199.
68 Another example of accumulation of violence is provided by the assassination of Gedaliah reported in II Kings 25, 24-25, and in Jeremiah 41, 1-9. A Judean patriot named Ishmael planned to assassinate Gedaliah, a friend of Jeremiah the prophet, who had been appointed governor over Judah in Mizpah by the Babylonians. Gedaliah’s assassination (and the murder of his guards, and of all the men there [see Jeremiah 41, 3]), was followed, two days later, by Ishmael’s barbarous murder of a group of eighty pilgrims who were mourning over the ruin of the temple and were coming to Mizpah with offerings, and eventually, Ishmael threw their dead bodies in a pit (Jeremiah 41, 7). The violence against Gedaliah can be seen as politically motivated violence, but the murder of the eighty pilgrims is the result of the unleashing of violence started by Gedaliah’s assassination. This episode, which to the best of my knowledge was not commented on by Ellul, bears out his analysis: there is no subtype of violence and violence accumulates.
70 Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, 37.
language convey falsehood, for instance the language of propaganda, which is in itself violence and the manifestation of power, as it does not elicit dialogue. Although it does not manifest itself in the form of physical violence, propaganda is inherently violent; it is a case of psychological violence as shown by the phrase “psychological terrorism” used to refer to communist propaganda in the 1960’s. The language of propaganda is also an impoverished language.

• Violence and the Impoverishment of Language: The Beast in the Book of Revelation

Aside from the conspicuous properties of language noted above (invitation to cooperation and impossibility of accumulation), Ellul observes that another aspect of language is its unobtrusiveness: even in cases of fierce discussions or heated debates, language does not impose itself. However, when a message is delivered by loudspeakers or via the television set, instead of being unobtrusive and eliciting dialogue, language is reduced to a mere succession of sounds that no longer elicits dialogue but only provokes a stimulus response sequence: this is the manifestation of a deterioration, of an impoverishment of language. The language of propaganda is an example of such an impoverishment: this language rests on the fact that words no longer convey meaning but only trigger reflexes. In his commentary on the book of Revelation, Ellul analyses the description of the second beast (Revelation 13, 11-18), and he observes that this beast looks like a lamb “but spoke like a dragon” (Revelation, 13, 11). The beast’s words are its very actions, and the speech of this beast is then destruction, blasphemy and disruption. The aim of the beast, via the words used, is to lead people into the worship of the State, represented here by the first beast, which was seen “rising out of the sea” (Revelation, 13, 1). This aim is, strictly speaking, the aim of propaganda, whose function is always to make people conform to the various necessities of powers. By putting a mark on the right hand or the forehead of all people, as expressed in Revelation 13, 16, (“Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead”), the beast exactly fulfils the role of propaganda: it makes people really act (the right hand symbolizes action), and think (the forehead symbolizes thought), in conformity with what the State orders, and thus develop an orthopraxy that deprives them of freedom. The extreme case of the impoverishment of language, its degenerate case, is the absence of dialogue between two persons.

• Violence and the Failure of Language in Cain

An example of the limit case of the impoverishment of language that leads to the absence of dialogue is the episode between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The first four words of verse 8 (from the Masoretic text) are given below in (1):

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71 Ibid., 27.
72 Ibid., 141.
And Cain said to his brother Abel

In the traditional rabbinic exegesis of this sequence, what is generally emphasized is that the Hebrew verb in (1) above does not translate as “talked,” as in the King James and most versions, but as “said.” The problem is that nowhere in the rest of the verse (or further down in the chapter) is the expected complement of the propositional attitude verb “אמר” (say) expressed. Nor is this verb followed by any precise sequence of direct speech, contrary to what is usually the case in the Old Testament corpus. This means that the content of what is said by Cain remains empty, and this blank is analysed as the absence of dialogue between Cain and his brother. What is suggested then, is that Cain is unable to express whatever thought he had in mind: this is the result of an extreme impoverishment of language, which leads him to extreme violence. Ouaknin contends that the silence between Cain and Abel was so violent that it led to murder. This analysis of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain is well-known and it is also that of Rose, or Banon who claims that the origin of violence here must be found in the aborted dialogue between the brothers. This analysis of Genesis 4, 8 was known to Ellul too, who adopted it in his (unpublished) biblical studies on the book of Genesis, and argued that violence is the inevitable consequence of this extreme impoverishment of language. However, more generally, the question is open whether it is the impoverishment of language that causes violence or the other way around: violence may cause an impoverishment.
of language too. This is what Ellul seems to (prudently) accept. Interestingly, Ellul establishes an explicit link between the poor and the murder of Abel by Cain: both the cry uttered by the poor (James 5, 4) and the voice of Abel’s blood (Genesis 4, 10) are addressed to, and received by God. Furthermore, he adds that eventually, the rich tries to kill the poor, and the resulting attitude is murder: Cain killing Abel or the Pharisee killing Jesus. This happens, Ellul argues, because the rich cannot stand being called into question by God via the poor.

Violence is then utter defeat when it leads to murder, but it is also utter victory when it is the spiritual violence of God’s love.

IV. The Violence of Love

The account of Ellul’s analysis of biblical violence presented so far has shown that violence, obeying a logic of necessity, excludes any form of freedom. But God, the free and unconditioned God of the Bible, is the liberator. Ellul goes beyond this generally accepted view to state this tenet of his theology: God is only that, He is nothing else than that, and He is the liberator. And freedom, Ellul insists, is the very centre of the Revelation of the God of Abraham and of the God of Jesus Christ. When He revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, God made a promise: this promise is binding and it is in this promise, which is a sign of His love, that the real meaning of God’s love can be found. Furthermore, although this may seem somewhat paradoxical, Ellul claims that there is indeed a violence of love: this (spiritual) violence is the urge felt by the one who loves towards the object of his love, so that the object of his love may live free. This is exactly God’s love. All the violence of God’s love is contained in His act of love, and conversely, all we know about God’s violence must be understood from the standpoint of this act of love. The violence of God’s love is also manifested in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as it leads to a victory over death, which is the direst and most violent of necessities. Ellul is also insistent on the fact that it is this victory over death that ultimately grants freedom to man.

Consequently, freedom, when granted by God, is indissociable from God’s love: love entails freedom, and conversely, freedom entails polarization by love. Some significant aspects of this love, its relationship with freedom, its radicality and its violence are examined now.

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81 See Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, 163, n2. The link between violence and dialogue is also acknowledged in Weil who notes that dialogue is the domain of non-violence, and that the problem posed to whoever wants to know the nature of dialogue is none other than that of violence and its negation. Éric Weil, *Logique de la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 24.


83 Ibid., 204-205.


85 Ibid., 541.

86 Ellul, *Contre les violents*, 210-211.

87 Qadri (ed.), *Jacques Ellul. Vivre et penser la liberté*, 143, 481.

88 Ibid., 279.
A. Love and Freedom as the Other of Violence

If God, in an act of love, is the only liberator of humanity, then love, which is indissociable from freedom, constitutes the other of violence. In a world where relations of violence prevail, there cannot exist any kind of freedom. But the question obviously arises of the relationship between this freedom granted to man and the law, which is always perceived as a limitation to freedom. In addressing this problem, Ellul adopts a strict Barthian analysis and contends that contrary to all human commandments, God’s commandments are intrinsically the expression of the permission to act freely, in all circumstances of human life. Thus, God’s commandments given right after the exodus from Egypt must be analysed not as a limitation to freedom, but as the condition for true and real freedom. Ellul adds that it is in this respect that freedom is distinct from autonomy or independence from God, which is the situation of man after the fall. Before the fall, Ellul claims that “freedom was lived in trust, it was founded on love... Now, with independence, we have an entirely different picture: a will to power, autonomy, and the absence of a true relationship... This is a new creation, as it were, established by humanity.”

A far-reaching consequence of this analysis is that in the situation before the fall, which was based on love, the order of necessity was unknown, and there can be no question of “a terrible God who amuses himself by trapping humanity in temptation.” Ellul stresses this fact and strongly reaffirms that it is not God who tempts man, but it is man who tempts God. If man succeeded in tempting Him, God would no longer be a god of love, but a violent god that would use domination and power. Contrary to this, God is, strictly speaking, a God of non-power, who, by limiting His power, allows freedom for humanity. The consequences of this theological stance are twofold, first regarding Ellul’s ethics and second his soteriology.

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89 Ibid., 426.
90 Ibid., 465.
91 Bonhoeffer expresses a similar conception of the commandments in the following terms: “God’s commandment, revealed in Jesus Christ, ... is not only obligation but permission. It does not forbid, but it also sets free for life.” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 280.
94 Ellul, Contre les violents, 162.
95 Here, it is hard not to think of the final words of Thomas Hardy’s novel Tess of the d’Urbervilles (London Macmillan 1974 [1891], 449), in which this conception of human beings as the plaything of a sadistic God is expressed in dark and pessimistic terms: “The president of the immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.”
98 Non-power is more than non-violence as it is a manifestation of love (see Qadri, 138). It is also the significance of Jesus Christ’s life: in Jesus Christ, God gives up power and becomes a man (see Qadri, 542). The crucifixion cannot be seen as a political failure: first and foremost, it must be understood as the proof that God accepts the autonomy of man, and has chosen non-power (see ibid., 543).
• Ellul’s Ethics

The ethical consequence of the fall is a shift from a lived communion to a legal behaviour.\(^9\) Thus, after the fall, human beings face the temptation of morality, and the whole creation shifts from a creation from love to a magical, moral and religious world. Ellul argues that knowledge of good and evil is a consequence of the separation from God, in sin and in death.\(^10\) He adds: “when we say to ourselves that something is good, we can be sure that at that very moment, we do wrong.”\(^11\) Thus, the moral world that results from the break with God is a world in which it becomes impossible to discriminate between good and evil. Once the relationship with God is broken, there is no longer communion with God, and man’s knowledge of God becomes “an objective knowledge without love.”\(^12\) This objective knowledge of God leads to a conception of God as a terrible god, an all-powerful god, a violent god who terrorizes people. This terrible god was the god of puritans: “the preaching of the puritans had a constant element of terror”\(^13\) Ellul says. It is also this objective knowledge of God that is hinted at in James 2, 19: “you believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder.”

• Ellul’s Soteriology

If humans are judged according to the “law of liberty,”\(^14\) and according to the law of God’s love, there cannot be any other judgment than that which is overarched by God’s love,\(^15\) and consequently, salvation is universal\(^16\): God’s justice, which is the justice of love, can be neither distributive nor retributive.\(^17\) Furthermore, Ellul contends that the damnation of a part of humanity is a theological impossibility, as this would mean that there is a limit to God’s love.\(^18\)

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\(^12\) Ibid., 78.

\(^13\) Ibid., 78.

\(^14\) The phrase “the law of liberty” is a hint at the epistle of James 1, 25: “But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty....”. Its French equivalent is also part of the title of the biblical study on James published as Ellul (2021): “La loi de la liberté”.


\(^16\) Ibid., 255.

\(^17\) This characteristic of God’s justice is also expressed in Ellul, *Le fondement théologique du droit*, 31.

B. The Radicality of Love

In one of his comments on the book of Genesis, Ellul notes that Elohim, the creator, at the same time both creates the world and reveals himself, thus establishing a relationship of love between the creature and the creator: there is then a theological and ontological link between creation, revelation and love.\(^{109}\) An important property that characterizes this love relationship is that it is a total relationship; consequently, there cannot be any restriction in this relationship. Another important property of this relationship is that it is freely entered into, and that the one who loves submits to the one whom he loves.\(^{110}\) From this, it follows that God submits himself to human initiatives: an example of this is Jesus Christ, who, as the witness of God’s love, submitted himself to whatever the society of his time wanted to do with him. Given these two properties, totality and submission, God's enemies also are the object of his love. He does not sever himself from them, and consequently, striking God’s enemies is equivalent to striking God himself: violence against any human being is then violence against God who suffers from this violence. This corresponds to Ellul's analysis of the episode of Jehu’s revenge against Ahab’s dynasty.\(^{111}\) In his analysis, Ellul acknowledges the fact that God approves of the murder perpetrated by Jehu as a fulfilment of Elijah’s prophecy that Ahab’s posterity would be “cut off from him” (I Kings 21, 21): this is a reminder that God does not allow crime to go unpunished for ever, and this, albeit paradoxically, is a manifestation of his love.\(^{112}\) However, Ellul notes that God’s approval of Jehu’s action is somewhat reticent and God’s communion with Jehu is rather cold and not so complete and warm as it was with Abraham or with Moses.\(^{113}\) And Ellul claims that the radicality of God’s love is such that when Elijah’s prophecy was fulfilled, it was God himself who was the victim of Jehu’s violence, it was God himself who was the victim in the slaughter of the priests of Baal and that of Ahab’s dynasty. He also adds that it is God himself, in Jesus Christ, who is crucified in the massacres perpetrated by knights, crusaders and all violent so-called defenders of the cause of God.

C. Love as the Ultimate Violence

The ultimate violence is death, and consequently, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as a victory over death, is the ultimately free act: it is the victory over the direst necessity, the necessity of death.\(^{114}\) It is also a manifestation of God’s love, and it is thus the

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\(^{110}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^{111}\) Jehu was anointed king of Israel (II Kings, 9, 3) and ordered by “a member of the company of prophets” (II Kings, 9, 1) to smite Ahab’s dynasty (II Kings, 9, 7), which he does indirectly (II Kings 10, 7) or directly (II Kings, 10, 11): “he killed....all who were left of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, all his leaders, close friends, and priests until he left him no survivor”, so as to avenge the Lord’s prophets who had been killed (II Kings, 9, 7).

\(^{112}\) Ellul, *Politique de dieu, politiques de l'homme*, 127.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 126.

\(^{114}\) Ellul, *Contre les violents*, 163, 217.
violence of love that becomes an answer to the alienation of death.\textsuperscript{115} Here, at first sight, it may seem paradoxical to associate love, which is necessarily free, and violence, which obeys a logic of necessity. However, Ellul’s theology is not dualistic but dialectical; consequently, for Ellul, God’s violence, contrary to human violence, does not exclude love but is always dominated by love. Strictly speaking then, this violence is violence \textit{within} love, or violence \textit{under} love. What is expressed then in the resurrection of Christ is, Ellul insists, the supreme spiritual violence.\textsuperscript{116} However, there is also a radical spiritual violence in the confidence in God’s faithfulness, which excludes any other manifestation of violence, notably physical violence. This is illustrated by Joshua’s battle against Amalek (related in Exodus 17, 8-13): Joshua, as a military chief, relied on earthly means of warfare, but Moses kept away from the thickest of the battle and stood on top of a hill, holding God’s rod in his hand (Exodus 17, 9). Whenever Moses held up his hand Israel prevailed, but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed (Exodus 17, 11). This episode emphasizes that the issue of the battle did not depend on violent earthly means but on (violent) spiritual means. It is worth emphasizing too that Ellul considers that aside from prayer, all social (that is technical) actions are necessarily violent.\textsuperscript{117}

Another aspect of the violence of love is contained in Paul’s generalization of the sermon on the mount expressed in Romans 12, 14 and 17: “Bless those who persecute you... Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” What is required here, Ellul contends, is a real fight, hence violence, as indicated by the repetition of the word “overcome” used later, in Romans 12, 21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Not only does Ellul state that Paul’s words are an example of what the violence of love is, but he is insistent on the fact that the whole meaning of the violence of love is included in these words.\textsuperscript{118} The violence of love is also the expression of spiritual violence in the fight against all types of power (\textit{εξουσία}), which cannot be characterized only by their social reality but which also do have a spiritual reality.\textsuperscript{119}

Not only is the resurrection of Jesus Christ the supreme spiritual violence, but it is also indissociable from his historically anchored death, which in itself is, Ellul reminds us, the same death as any other death.\textsuperscript{120} But here is the real miracle: the one who dies on the Cross is God himself, who is then a God that intervenes in human history, in the history of each person, thus breaking once for all the processes of necessity. Since then, Ellul concludes, there has never been, and never will there be any other event in History.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{115} Qadri (ed.), \textit{Jacques Ellul, Vivre et penser la liberté}, 142.
\textsuperscript{116} Ellul, \textit{Contre les violents}, 217.
\textsuperscript{118} Ellul, \textit{Contre les violents}, 218.
\textsuperscript{119} Literally, they have “a soul” (Ellul [1972, 207]).
\textsuperscript{120} Ellul, \textit{Exégèse des nouveaux lieux communs}, 219.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 220.
Conclusion

Ellul’s analysis of biblical violence presented here has shown, first and foremost, that biblical violence is human violence, and that nowhere in the Bible is violence encouraged and nowhere is it advocated as a means to improve human affairs. This is what Ellul explicitly claims: resorting to violence is a priori always contrary to God’s will.¹²² This analysis of violence dovetails well with that of Römer¹²³ in which it is argued that Joshua’s violent narrative about the conquest of Canaan (whose redaction presumably dates back to the 7th century B.C.), must be seen not as an invitation to violence, but as a counter-reaction to Assyrian violent domination in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.: what is advocated then in these texts, Römer concludes, is resistance to violence via words rather than resistance via violent warfare.

Furthermore, Ellul argues that if men are violent and if the Bible describes violent human events, as God is incarnated, He is the victim of human violence, and he assumes it all: this is how Ellul epitomizes the meaning of the Cross, which is also the central point from which all manifestations of human violence must be seen and interpreted. On the Cross, God assumes the human violence that He tolerated, and this is exactly as if God was the victim of one of the laws of violence identified by Ellul: violence (tolerated by God) begets violence (against God Himself). The Resurrection, which cannot be dissociated from the Cross, is both the ultimate violence, as it is the victory over death, the most violent of all necessities, and the possibility of living a free life.¹²⁴ It is also a manifestation of the violence of God’s universal and unconditional love. The soteriological consequence is that salvation is universal, a conclusion that leads to consider Ellul not as a pessimistic thinker of History, as he is often considered, but as a fervent prophet of hope.

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References


