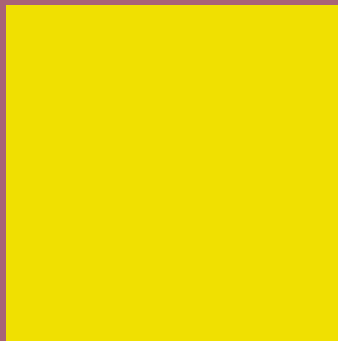


2



ENCOUNTER WITH
SACRED TEXTS: TEXTS
OF VIOLENCE

TEXTS OF VIOLENCE

2.1 TEACHING AIMS & THEOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS

2.1.1 TEACHING AIMS

In the sacred texts of various religious traditions, it is common to find narrations of events where violence is used against humans by God (or Gods). In the Orthodox Christian tradition, such texts can be found frequently in the Old Testament, and throughout the centuries, various interpretations of such texts have been attempted. Therefore, our approach aims to bring students into contact with such texts, so they can discover how they are perceived by the Church community, and to guide them in the evaluation of these texts; while an additional goal is to relate these biblical narrations to situations in contemporary life.



Photo: © Bits and Splits / Adobe Stock

Goals of Teaching

The main goal is to familiarize students with incidents of violence in the Sacred Texts of the Orthodox Tradition, to enable them to interpret them and to understand their importance for contemporary people.

Goals for the students

- To become acquainted with a narrative from the Bible that shows holy violence.
- To approach and interpret the biblical text containing violence, from the perspective of the Orthodox tradition.
- To be able to distinguish the historical elements of the biblical narrative from the theological truths contained in it.
- To understand the need of the biblical authors to use passages of violence in shaping the narration, due to imperatives imposed by the historical context at the time of writing.
- To seek the image of God as it is presented in the New Testament; God as a Father who loves every human being, even the enemy.
- To understand the effects of a biblical text involving violence on our behavior towards our fellow human beings.
- To transform, through a critical approach to the texts, hostile assumptions towards the “other”, who is perceived as a threat or an enemy.
- To adopt the attitudes and behaviors of an active and democratic citizen, who resists all forms of violence, from whatever source.

Expected learning outcomes for students

- To be able to critically interpret biblical narratives that contain elements of violence.
- To understand the particular features of the language used by biblical writers.
- To revise erroneous and stereotypical perceptions created by a literal approach to biblical texts, especially those with elements of violence.
- To assess incidents of contemporary violence according to Christian interpretive tradition.

2.1.2 THEOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS

Theological background to the teaching of the subject

As already mentioned in the teaching objectives, we need to guide the students to a realization that in approaching biblical narratives, they need to distinguish between the particular narrative conventions which are specific to their historical context, and the timeless and always contemporary theological meaning which they embody. That is why the Orthodox interpretive tradition, from the times of the Great Church Fathers of the 4th century to present days, does not coincide with the literal meaning of the Bible. This approach to the biblical text, and in our case to the biblical narration of the crossing of the Red Sea, is of great interest and importance for the student, contributing as it does to the development of critical thought and creative thinking. In this way, the biblical text comes to 'meet' our students, in a real sense, as they themselves approach it existentially and not theoretically or ab-stractly.

To provide a sound and more profound foundation to the theological approach to the subject in the classroom, we quote the following texts, which are excerpts from the relevant literature.

Texts for theological documentation

As a record of experiences, the Bible is not a didactic moralist book, but rather, for the greater part, a narrator of History. But this is a history which does not aim at a detailed description of events of the past of human society, nor at an objective record of Israel's political and military history. Biblical writers processed the material of their earlier oral tradition referring to events in their history, not as historians (the way the work of historians is perceived today), but mainly as theologians. Therefore, the narration of events is not intended to provide "historical" (in the contemporary meaning) information, but to articulate eternal theological truths; truths that will remain relevant as long as there are people on earth. For the contemporary reader of such texts, the dominant question is whether things happened exactly as described; under exactly what conditions a particular result was achieved or in which order the events took place and how long they lasted. For the biblical writers, such details, which would be of great importance to a historian, are irrelevant. What is important for them is the result and especially its theological significance for the present and future relationship between God and his people. Thus, they can tell the same story twice, presenting the facts from completely different viewpoints, without any attempt to reconcile their differences.

Undoubtedly, the idea that God himself orders the annihilation of the inhabitants of a conquered region, even including the infants, causes horror to the modern reader, and apparently similar feelings were born in the ancient audience too. Thus, through such horrific descriptions, biblical writers attempt to demonstrate, in a way that leaves no room for doubt, the non-existence of pagan deities and the omnipotence of the one and only God.

(M. Konstantinou, *The Old Testament: Deciphering the universal human heritage*, Athens: Armos, 2008, pp. 66-67, 78)

The beginning of the Book tells the beginning of the world (Genesis) and is followed by the encounter with the Only God (Exodus), then the tribulations of the chosen people, its distress and its glories. The book most often published, read and glossed, our MetaBook derives its aura from being a source of both information and a faith, the annals of a people and the Word of God. It has a dual value: horizontal (as the chronicle of a localized history) and vertical (as the unveiling of a supernatural design). On the one hand, the epic narrativization of a national itinerary, issuing in a picturesque saga; on the other, the promotion to universality of a number of quite specific events, which have been turned into the stuff of every man's prayers. Two stories for the price of one, the profane and the sacred each drawing support from the other. Yet the more the elements of the file have been examined, the more the theological has come unglued from the historical. The creative virtue of the fantastical, and the efficacy of symbols, deserve to be admired all the more for it. The Bible is not "false" (except from the perspective of our historicist illusions). It's performative.

(Régis Debray: *God. An itinerary* (trns J. Mehlman), London & New York: Verso, 2004, pp.26-27)

And now we come to the crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews. We understand, of course, why Moses, a leader of [former] slaves, does not guide his people to the north, where the borders were guarded by the Egyptian army, but leads them to the NE of the Suez region, to the desert, through areas that were sometimes dry and sometimes covered by water. Eventually they would attempt to enter Canaan along the eastern side. The term "Red Sea" is a misinterpretation of the Septuagint interpreters. The Hebrew text has "Yam Suph" (= reed sea), i.e. located near the Nile Delta, more precisely near the town of Goshen, where many of the slave Jews lived. The "Red Sea", as one can see on the map, is far from the place where the events of Exodus took place. The oldest sources, Yahwist (c. 900 BCE) and Elohist (850 BCE) also speak of Yahweh's war against Pharaoh: The water splits in two and the Jewish people pass through, but when Pharaoh's army attempts to pass, the water floods back and drowns them, or (another version) God strikes terror in the Egyptians, who fall into the sea and drown. The Priestly Source speaks of a miraculous low tide when the Jews passed, and of a high tide when the Egyptian army attempted the crossing. The earliest surviving text speaking of Yahweh's victory is found in the victory hymns of Mariam and Israel in Exodus 15:1. This is a victorious heroic song much older than the rest of the text of the Exodus. It is reminiscent of the women's paeon after David's victory over the Philistines (1 Kings 18:1-2), Balaam's blessing on Israel (Num. 24) and the blessing of the people by Moses (Deut. 32-33). This miracle of the passage of the Jewish travelers and the disaster of the Egyptians was the official "passage" of the Israeli slaves into a great historical nation under the protection of Yahweh, and in this sense was considered the starting point of the Jewish religion and Jewish nation. According to Martin Noth, the events at this sea were so unique and extraordinary that they became the essence of the original Israeli confession and were seen as the real beginning of the history of Israel, and of the fundamental activity of God in favor of Israel. Throughout its history, whenever Jewish people wanted to express the depth of their relationship to Yahweh, they referred to Exodus. The great Prophet of the captivity, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. Chapters 40-45), writing about the liberation of the people from Babylonian captivity, speaks of a new Exodus. And in the New Testament also, Jesus considers

His death and resurrection in Jerusalem to be “his Exodus which was to be fulfilled in Jerusalem” (Lk 9:31). The Apostle Paul also speaks of the course of the Church up to the Second Coming using as a background the image of Exodus and the march of God’s people in the desert (1 Cor 10: 1-13).

(S. Agourides, *History of the religion of Israel*, Athens: Ellinika Gramata, 1995, pp.58-59)

Among God’s great works, Exodus is one of the most important. It is clearly a mystery of liberation. It’s just one aspect of Easter [...] This mystery of God as a liberator of prisoners emerges at all levels of the history of salvation, like a sound reflected in ever-deepening echoes [...] The people of Israel, led by the pillar of light, left Egyptian tyranny. Pharaoh and his chariots began pursuing them. And the people reached the sea. The road is cut. They are doomed to extinction or to a second slavery. Like an army, trapped on the sea shore, about to be destroyed or captured. We must underline the desperate nature of the situation. It gives the episode all of its meaning. Indeed, at the moment they were totally unable to save themselves, God accomplishes what was impossible for humans [...] At dawn, after the tragic and miraculous night, seeing the corpses of the Egyptians cast up on the shore, Moses and the children of Israel improvised the Hymn of Exodus [...] Mariam, the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took a drum in her hands and all the women followed her with drums and dances. Mariam replied to the children of Israel: “Let’s sing to the Lord, he is gloriously glorified, he threw both horses and riders into the sea.” There on the banks of the Red Sea, the first Pesach service is established. Dom Winzen notes that “at that time, the divine liturgy was born.” Because it is indeed a liturgy. The choir of the women repeating the chorus alternates with the choir of the men chanting the verse. We still sing this hymn in the paschal vigil. Throughout the story of salvation, every Easter, Mariam’s hymn will resound.

(Jean Daniélou, *Essai sur le mystère de l’histoire*, Volos: Volos Academy Publications, 2014, pp.240-241)

God’s revelation to mankind is progressive. That is, God gradually revealed more and more of the truth, depending on how much people could feel and accept it each time. Thus, the whole of humanity is being educated through Israel (Gal 3:24) ... For example, a four-year-old child has an absolute need to feel that his father is protecting him from any external threat. He asks for the father’s protection, without caring if the neighbor, the friend or even the brother is wronged in this way, since he feels threatened by them. This is how we can think of Israel in the first centuries of its relationship with God: a child seeking the protection of his almighty father. But through the centuries, God the Father, educating the Israelites, revealed more and more [...] In this light, then, we can recognize that every time Israel sees God as “exclusively its own”, “hostile to others”, “harsh” and “justly vengeful”, it is through the eyes of the childhood phase of its relationship with God. Humans, therefore, because of their own weakness, projected their own needs onto their relationship with God, just as the little child does to its parents (1 Cor 13:11).

(Ol. Grizopoulou – P. Kazlari, *Old Testament, The prehistory of Christianity, Class A Religious Education (Teacher’s book)*, Athens: O.E.D.V., undated, pp. 52-53)

2.2 VIDEO PROJECTION AS A STARTING POINT FOR TEACHING

In this section, the students watch the video and then they answer a first questionnaire, giving a first impression of their comprehension of the plot of the video and of its implementations.



Figure 2.1
Video Clip

2.2.1 VIDEO PLOT SUMMARY

The main characters of the video are two teenage students on a Greek island. They are at a remote spot on the coast, discussing the topical question of the refugees who have crowded their island. They debate whether the refugees should be considered as dangerous, and they consider whether the fact that many of the refugees get drowned, in their effort to reach the Greek islands, should be understood as God's will. This discussion touches upon the story of the drowning of the Egyptians in the book of Exodus. What, then, is God's will? Are the refugees dangerous, being of a different faith and of a different nation? Maybe God wants to demonstrate his power once again, as in the story of the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea? One of the youngsters approaches these questions religiously, while the other keeps disputing his arguments. As they continue their discussion, night falls and the weather turns bad. Suddenly the two boys see a boat in the sea, approaching the cliff, hitting the rocks and starting to sink. In the boat, there are refugees asking for help. How will the two youngsters react? After a short dialogue, the boys decide to help the refugees themselves, judging that going for help would only be a loss of time. With great effort, they manage to tie the boat to the rocks and to help the refugees to come ashore, saving them from drowning. Among the refugees there is also a baby and a young girl. Upon returning home, one of the youngsters (the religious one) talks to his mother, who praises his deeds and offers a new explanation of the facts, and of religiously inspired violence, taking into consideration the question of divine will. The next day, the two boys visit the rescued refugees, who express their gratitude, addressing the boys as sent by Divine Providence. The rescued girl mentions especially the saving of the baby, who proves to be her brother, and she gives a bottle of jasmine perfume to one of the boys, as a gift.

2.2.2 COMPREHENSION QUESTIONNAIRE

Instruction: *Having watched the video, students are asked to answer the following multiple-choice questions individually. These questions aim to help the teacher assess the extent of the students' understanding of the content of the video and to evaluate their views on the relationship between violence and religion. The same questions are to be answered by the students again, individually, at the end of the lesson in order to create some measurable results about understanding and change of opinion. For this reason, the correct answers are given only in the final questionnaire.*

Based on the video you watched, try to answer the following questions.

1. Why were the youngsters initially reluctant to help the refugees?
 - a. Because they did not want to waste time as they had planned to meet their friends.
 - b. Because they believed that refugees are dangerous to their homeland.
 - c. Because it was getting dark and they had to return to their homes.
 - d. I do not know / No answer

2. In the biblical narration of the Exodus, which people are involved?
 - a. Greeks and Syrians
 - b. Egyptians and Greeks
 - c. Egyptians and Jews
 - d. I do not know / No answer

3. In the biblical narration, which sea did the pursued people cross, in order to be saved:
 - a. The Aegean Sea
 - b. The Red Sea
 - c. The Mediterranean Sea
 - d. I do not know / No answer

4. Why, in the biblical narrative, God is depicted to act violently and vengefully?
 - a. In this way the faithful wanted to declare their trust in the one and only God, who is also the Savior of humankind.
 - b. Because God is violent and punishes those who do not follow His will.
 - c. Because God is just and His justice is sometimes rendered only by force.
 - d. I do not know / No answer

5. For Christians, God is the One who:
 - a. Loves all men/women regardless of national origin, religious faith and social class.
 - b. Loves only those who believe in Him.
 - c. Like any father, He punishes those who want to harm His children, i.e. the faithful, even to the extent of using violence.
 - d. I do not know / No answer

2.2.3 TOPICS FOR RESEARCH

With the video we watched, we are introduced to the topic "Encounter with sacred texts: Texts of violence". The main issues to be addressed, after the video screening, are:

- a. Why, in the Bible, is God depicted acting in violent ways?
- b. Maybe there is something else which we must comprehend behind the sacred texts, as, for example, in the narration of Exodus*?
- c. Which assumptions should we keep in mind, when approaching the texts of the Bible?

2.3 WHAT I NEED TO KNOW IN ORDER TO STUDY THE BIBLE STORY

2.3.1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Instruction: *In this part, the students are given more information, which is necessary for them in order to study and process the biblical narration. The students, as they listen to the information, check the map (see 4.3) and follow the summary table with the protagonists, events and dates.*



The story of the crossing of the Red Sea* can be found in the **book of Exodus*** in the Old Testament*. This book includes the events that took place around the 13th century BCE and reveal God's intervention in history with the aim of liberating the Israelites from the Egyptians and leading them to the land of Canaan*. The Israelites lived in Egypt from 1600 to 1200 BCE, for approximately 400 years. When Ramses II* became Pharaoh (1290–1224 BCE), he took strict measures against them, fearing they would ally with other peoples of the desert and revolt against him. One such measure was the killing of Jewish male children to limit their number. **Moses*** was born at that time, and was miraculously saved from death. **He was chosen by God to liberate the Israelites and lead them to the land of Canaan*.**



On their way to the land of Canaan*, the Israelites did not follow the shorter, coastal route. Instead, in order to avoid the Egyptian guards, they headed south to the Red Sea*. Pharaoh at that time was Merneptah* (1224–1204 BCE), the successor of Ramses II*. With his army, Merneptah* pursued the Israelites as far as the sea, but he could not prevent them from fleeing, because God opened a passage for them through the sea. Marching through the sea, they were able to proceed to the desert and were saved. In commemoration of this important event, Israelites celebrate **"Pesach*" (=passage) even today, as the crossing of the Red Sea* marked their passage from slavery in Egypt to freedom.**



During this period, God makes a Covenant, i.e. a **Testament*** with His people and at the same time protects them, supports them, cares for them, strengthens and guides them. On the other hand, the people relate to him, trust him and recognize him as unique and omnipotent.

2.3.2 THE PROTAGONISTS

| Protagonists | Event | Dates |
|--------------|--|---------------|
| Ramses II | Egyptian Pharaoh who took strict measures against the Israelites, fearing they could ally with peoples of the desert and revolt against the Egyptians. | 1290–1224 BCE |
| Moses | Leader of the Israelites who led them to liberation from the Egyptians. | 1393–1273 BCE |
| Merneptah | Egyptian Pharaoh. Son and successor of Ramses II. Pursued the Israelites with his army as far as the sea, but was unable to prevent their escape | 1224–1204 BCE |



Figure 2.2
 Ivan Aivazovsky: Passage of the Jews through the Red Sea, 1891
 Source: Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aivazovsky_Passage_of_the_Jews_through_the_Red_Sea.jpg

2.3.3 MAP



Figure 2.3
Map with the march
of the Israelites fleeing
Egypt
by Vaso Gogou

2.4 THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

In this part of the book, the teacher and the students approach the violent and biased attitude of God throughout the Old Testament narration of the crossing of the Red Sea and attempt to clarify the reasons behind it. In parallel, by referring to other texts as well, they will try to sketch out the dramatic elements and the possible exaggerations and inaccuracies, juxtaposing them to the historical facts the theological goals of the narration.

2.4.1 THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT (EXODUS 14: 1-31 ABBR., NRSV)

The following bible excerpt should be preferably read by the teacher.

Then the Lord said to Moses: ² Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea [...] ³ Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, "They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them." ⁴ I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so. [...] ¹⁰ As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. [...] ¹³ But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, "[...] Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh" [...] ²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. [...] ²⁴ At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." ²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ³⁰ Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

2.4.2 EXERCISES

Instruction: *In the following exercises, students are asked to process the biblical text by identifying words and phrases that show God to act violently, and then to investigate why the biblical writer presents God to be violent and vindictive. The teacher encourages the students to express themselves freely and support their opinion.*

All exercises can take place in classroom, possibly by small groups of students as well.

Exercise 1

Which of the following adjectives would you use to describe the God you encounter in the text?

| | | | | | |
|-------------|--|------------|--|---------------|--|
| Omnipotent | | Biased | | Vengeful | |
| Angry | | Violent | | Forgiving | |
| Evil | | Benign | | Harsh | |
| Protector | | Helper | | Punishing | |
| Intervening | | Miraculous | | Compassionate | |
| Righteous | | Saviour | | Liberating | |

Exercise 2

Find and underline in the Bible text the phrases that show God's wrath towards the Egyptians.

Exercise 3

In the same text, mention sentences which show the reasons for God's violent actions.

2.4.3 SEEKING FOR THE DEEP INTERPRETATION

Instruction: *In the exercises that follow, the students seek to understand the historical context of the biblical text and the aims pursued by its final authors (see again the texts by M. Konstantinou and R. Debray).*

The biblical narration we read, describes a God who uses violence against humans. Let's read the following text and try to understand why the author of the Bible presents God like this. Maybe we need to consider something else?

God as an avenger

All the events of the Old Testament* were **transmitted orally for centuries before they began being recorded**. These Oral Traditions* contained many expressions of emotion and tension, which were often exaggerated, and today we need to distinguish these from historical information. It's not our aim to discover what actually happened then, but to try to understand the significance it had for the life of those people who recorded the events centuries later, with the intention of proclaiming their faith in the one and only God. The one who, when needed, was always present and saved them from harm, evil and death. They were deeply convinced that they could not succeed on their own during those dramatically difficult times. This does not mean (as understood by those who interpret the Old Testament* literally) that God killed children or enemies [...] Rather, it expresses their deep faith that, in this struggle, their lives and rights were protected by God. With such a view, history becomes "**sacred history**." That is, **when man recognizes Divine Providence in cases where life is preserved, protected, and escapes the danger of extinction**. And this God-savior of their lives is the one people trust.

(Ol. Grizopoulou & P. Kazlari, *Old Testament, The prehistory of Christianity, Class A Religious Education (Teacher's book)*, Athens: O.E.D.V., undated, p.58)

Exercise

Based on the fact that the recording of historical events by biblical writers takes place many centuries after the events themselves, try to answer the following questions:

To which extent are these events accurately described? Do they include exaggerations because they serve other purposes? What are the purposes of this record?

Suggestions for answer

These events are not described exactly as they happened, i.e., we do not have a faithful historical narration, since the narration was transmitted orally for centuries before it was written down. And it was pretty normal to be accompanied with strong emotions and to be enriched with exaggeration. Thus, when we study biblical narratives, we need to separate the historical events from the way they were written down and to recognize any exaggerations in their depiction.

These exaggerations, such as God destroying enemies, show the significance that people wanted to give to such events. Their main goal was to proclaim their faith in the one and only God, who was omnipresent and saved them from harm, evil and death. Therefore, they wanted to emphasize their deep faith that God protects them in their struggle for life by acknowledging His providence.

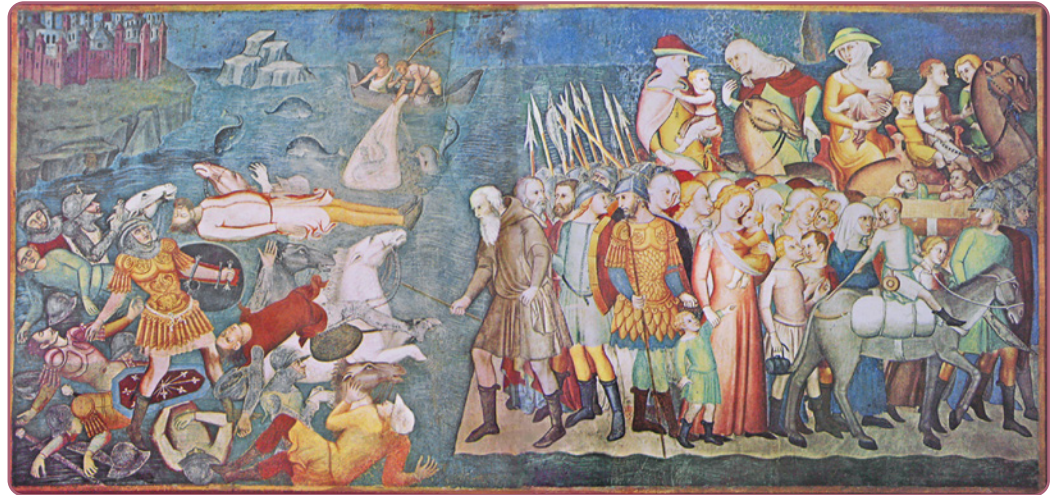


Figure 2.4
Bartolo di Fredi, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*,
Collegiate Church of San Gemignano, Italy, 1356
Source: Wikimedia
Commons: [https://
he.wikisource.org/wiki/
צבוק:SG_OT_304_Crossing_
the_Red_Sea.JPG](https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/צבוק:SG_OT_304_Crossing_the_Red_Sea.JPG).

2.5 SO FAR...

... we have learned ... understood ... clarified

Instruction: *The paragraph “So far ... we have learned – understood – clarified” is a summary of the elaboration of the topic that took place in the classroom, making it easier for the student to recall the main points. At this point, we seek to assess the progress of the learning process so far (formative assessment). In addition, we evaluate the achievement of the expected learning outcomes, monitor and provide feedback on the progress of the students and correct any misunderstandings.*

In the Old Testament*, the narration of the crossing of the Red Sea* (Exodus* 14:1-31) contains scenes of violence. It is violence exercised by God against the Egyptians, whom he eradicates, thus saving the people of Israel from their persecutors. **Approached literally**, this narration describes a God who is biased in favor of one particular nation and uses violence to bring another one to destruction.

The core of the historical events of Exodus* took place around the 13th century BCE; however, the relevant texts of the Old Testament* were recorded much later, in the 6th to 5th century BCE. The motivation for writing down narrations which had been passed down orally over centuries was not the study of history (in the contemporary sense of an accurate, objective understanding of events); but rather, it reflected concerns for the significance these narratives could have for people at the time of their recording. People of that era had already developed civilization, had settled in cities and their living conditions were essentially different from those of the period of the events narrated. **Therefore, the references of the Scriptures are not intended to provide exact historical information, as we understand it today, but rather to elaborate eternal theological truths, that will remain valid as long as there are people on Earth.**

Biblical authors attempted to graphically illustrate, absolutely and leaving no room for doubt, the omnipotence of the one and only God, in contrast to the weakness or even the non-existence of the pagan deities of that time.

Thus, their goal was to emphasize that their God is a unique, omnipotent protector and liberator. Every time they lived through difficult and dramatic situations, he was present and saved them from every evil. Their profound conviction was that they could not cope with the hardships of life on their own, but God, through his saving interventions, protected their every righteous struggle.

Approaching the narration of the crossing of the Red Sea*, as well as all the narrations of the Old Testament*, from this perspective, we are able to understand the significance they have for us today and **distinguish** between the **“sacred history”** found in these texts and the **objective history** describing actual events.

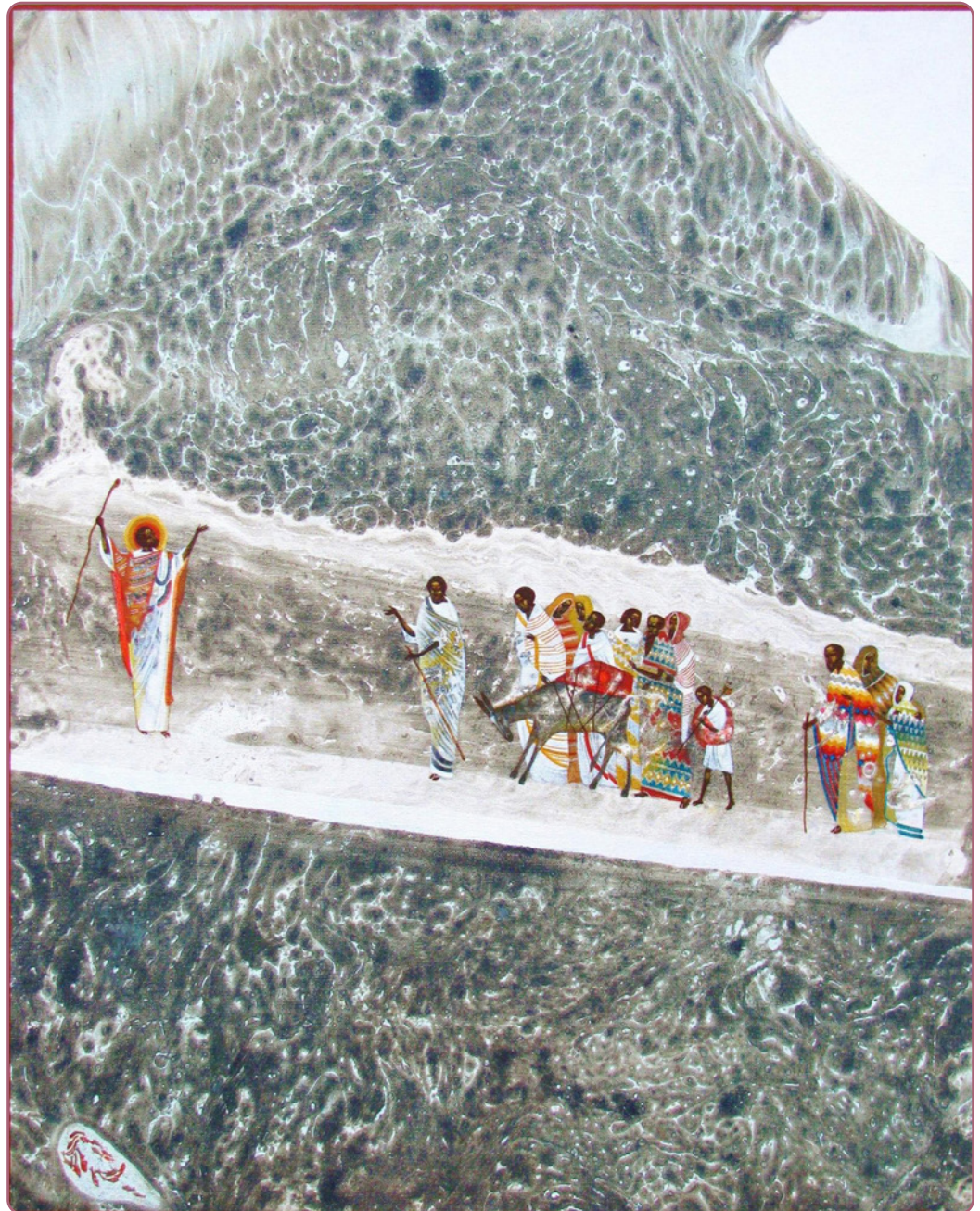


Figure 2.5
Ivanka Demchuk,
Crossing the Red Sea
[https://www.etsy.com/
listing/563765092/
crossing-the-red-
sea-original-print-
on?ref=landingpage_
similar_listing_top-
2&pro=1&frs=1](https://www.etsy.com/listing/563765092/crossing-the-red-sea-original-print-on?ref=landingpage_similar_listing_top-2&pro=1&frs=1)


2.6 THE IMAGE OF TRUE GOD

Instruction: *Through the following questions, taking the video and the text of the Old Testament* as a starting point, we can investigate the image of God the Father, a God of love for all.*

This love eradicates fear and insecurity towards the Other, the stranger and even the enemy. In the video, this image of God the Father finally prevails in the minds of the youngsters and their actions show that they have managed to overcome their initial fears and insecurities towards the stranger.

2.6.1 EXERCISE 1 Who would I want to be my God?

Write down words that come to your mind spontaneously and try to give a description of this God.



2.6.2 EXERCISE 2 In the video, in the scene where Yiorgos chats with his mother about the rescue of the refugees*, he asks “Mom, do you think God can do evil?” to which she answers, “Since we call him Father, I cannot imagine him harming his children.”

What can the phrase “God is Father” mean to a Christian?

In order to answer, we will use the following text from the New Testament*:

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those that hate you and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on both the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Mt. 5:43-45)

In addition, consider the following excerpt from the New Testament:

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk. 11:9-13)

2.6.3 EXERCISE 3

God is Father to all men. Why, then, when we feel fear of the stranger and of the unknown, do we often need a strong God who protects only us and annihilates the one we fear?

When we are afraid, our image of God, but also of our fellow humans, is often affected by our insecurity. How can we deal with our fears towards strangers? In the following paragraph, underline the keywords that answer the above question. Explain your choice.

Let's remember what we saw in the video: Yiorgos shares his father's fear of the supposedly “dangerous” refugees and thus he remembers the story of the Old Testament. In the end, however, the youngsters' contact and acquaintance with the refugees eliminates the fear and creates feelings of friendship and familiarity with them.

Answer: Keywords are “contact” and “acquaintance”

2.6.4 CONCLUSION

According to the Christian tradition, God is ...

... Father, who loves all people with no exceptions and discriminations. God-Father, being Love himself, calls all of us to love all of our **fellow humans, even our enemies**, if we want to be his real children.

2.7 FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Instruction: *The initial questionnaire is given to the students again, aiming at the final evaluation of the lesson. The comparison of the initial answers with the final ones reveals whether and to what extent the students have moved from their original positions. The correct answers are: 1B, 2C, 3B, 4A, 5A.*

After our discussions in class, attempt to answer the following questions. Compare your final answers with your original ones.

1. Why were the youngsters initially reluctant to help the refugees?
 - a. Because they did not want to waste time as they had planned to meet their friends.
 - b. Because they believed that refugees are dangerous to their homeland.
 - c. Because it was getting dark and they had to return to their homes.
 - d. I do not know / No answer

2. In the biblical narration of the Exodus, which people are involved?
 - a. Greeks and Syrians
 - b. Egyptians and Greeks
 - c. Egyptians and Jews
 - d. I do not know / No answer

3. In the biblical narration, which sea did the pursued people cross, in order to be saved:
 - a. The Aegean Sea
 - b. The Red Sea
 - c. The Mediterranean Sea
 - d. I do not know / No answer

4. Why is God shown, in the biblical narrative, to act violently and vengefully?
- a. In this way the faithful wanted to declare their trust in the one and only God, who is also the Savior of humankind.
 - b. Because God is violent and punishes those who do not follow His will.
 - c. Because God is just and His justice is sometimes rendered only by force.
 - d. I do not know / No answer
5. For Christians, God is the One who:
- a. Loves all men/women regardless of national origin, religious faith and social class.
 - b. Loves only those who believe in Him.
 - c. Like any father, He punishes those who want to harm His children, i.e. the faithful, even to the extent of using violence.
 - d. I do not know / No answer

2.8 ADDITIONAL ASSIGNMENTS: MATERIAL FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

In order to enrich the discussion which will take place in the second class hour, the use of art is proposed, since art can help stimulate the creative and critical thinking of the students. To this end, a painting and a song are given.

2.8.1 WHEN PAINTING BECOMES THEOLOGY: DISCUSSION BASED ON WORKS OF ART

Marc Chagall's painting "The Crossing of the Red Sea" is chosen since the painter creates a theological opening, by including the perspective of God as presented in the New Testament; a God who not only avoids the use of violence, but is treated violently and accepts being sacrificed out of his love for humans. Thus, we consider that the main characteristic of this work is the inclusion of the crucified Jesus, and propose that the significance of this inclusion is discussed in class. This aspect of Chagall's work highlights the gradual progression of the revelation of God which begins with the first books of the Old Testament and culminates in the person of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

The work can be found here: https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-o05XXbSK1r0/WbgtkzEU6EI/AAAAAAAAAB9I/eZ1oukmffld4nADyMafrwNhB8WXkTnqACLcBGAs/s1600/crossing_the_red_sea_chagall.jpg.

Work on a painting by Mark Chagall

Looking at Chagall's work

- a. Write down your answers to the following questions:

Which elements from the Bible narrations about the Crossing of the Red Sea can be traced in Chagall's painting?

Which questions come to your mind when seeing this work?

What would you like to explore further?

- b. Discuss the fact that the artist adds, on the distant horizon, the Crucified Jesus.

Answer: It portrays a God who not only does not exercise violence, but is treated violently and gets sacrificed out of his love for humans.

Commentary on Mark Chagall's painting 'The Crossing of the Red Sea'

Mark Chagall created a number of paintings on the topic of the Crossing of the Red Sea between 1955 and 1973. As in most of his works, Chagall uses his own symbols and his own visionary style to express universal truths through the reality of the images he creates. We can see here how he places the characters portrayed into a dramatic coexistence, utilizing strong colors. In a sea interpreted in an ethereal blue, the white angel leads the Jews to their salvation, while Moses, in his bright yellow tunic, orders the sea to block the passage for the Egyptians, depicted in a red color full of despair. The narrative is complemented by secondary themes: A minute angel holds the Ten Commandments while, at the top of the painting, two images in the dark sky frame the savior angel. On the left, King David appears to be playing his harp, and in this way the painter reveals the historical path of the Jewish people. On the right, however, we are surprised to find the depiction of the crucified Jesus. Chagall, in this work as in many others, manages to incorporate opposites and to bridge gaps which existed for centuries between different religions. With the crucified Jesus he sheds a new light on the drama of those who seek escape from slavery and walk through suffering towards freedom with hope. In the orthodox understanding of this work, man is not alone on this path, for Jesus himself is suffering with him.

2.8.2 THE PRAYER OF THE REFUGEE: A DISCUSSION BASED ON A SONG

The first question aims to reinforce the student's empathy and it is, therefore, important to create the proper emotional climate in the classroom so that the student groups can express themselves spontaneously and freely. In the second question, the groups consider the prayer they have composed, and are invited to identify the elements which their composition has in common with the song, but also with the plot of the video. In this way, the treatment of the topic is enriched by stimulating an emotional as well as intellectual response. Simultaneously, evaluation of the progress of the learning process is facilitated, as students are encouraged to take a critical approach and, based on the teaching material (Bible, art, video story), to become responsible citizens against any form of violence.



Figure 2.6
Nikolaos Gyzis, Greeks
fleeing the Destruction of
Psara, 1896-8
Source: [https://commons.
wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Gysis_Nikolaos_After_
the_destruction_of_Psara.
jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gysis_Nikolaos_After_the_destruction_of_Psara.jpg)

The prayer of the Refugee

- The refugees are on the shores of Turkey, ready to board the boats prepared by the illegal traffickers. Before they leave, they feel the need to pray. In what words do you imagine they would pray to God at that moment?
- Let's listen to the song Exodus by Edith Piaf (available at: <https://safeyoutube.net/w/45HE>). Can you find common topics between the refugees' prayer you just composed, the song and the video we have seen?

Exodus (Edith Piaf)

They left during the winter sun
They left running through the sea
To erase fear
To override fear
That life had nailed into the depths of their hearts

They left believing in the harvest
From the old country of their song
Their hearts singing with hope
Their hearts bellowing with hope
They have reclaimed the road of their memories

They have cried the tears of the sea
They have recited so many prayers
“Deliver us, our brothers!
Deliver us, our brothers!”
That their brothers will pull them towards the light

They are there in a new country
That floats with the mast of their boat
Their broken hearts of love
Their hearts of love lost
They have found the land of love

Work on the song Exodus

After working with the song, the teacher can ask the students the following question: Do you think that the refugees in the story of the video we watched “found the land of love”?

2.9 GLOSSARY

Clarification of theological terminology, and also information on the historic personalities and places found in the book.

Canaan

In the Old Testament, refers to the land settled by the Israelites, but also by its “Canaanite” inhabitants. The name means “country of purple” (Greek name “Phoenicia”) and comes from the main export product of the region, a substance used to dye fabrics deep purple. The land of Canaan is the Promised Land; the fulfillment of God’s promises to the people of Israel by enabling them to settle in this area after leaving Egypt.

Easter (Christian)

with the feast of Easter, Christians celebrate the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who gave man the prospect of life, and freedom from death and evil in all its manifestations. They celebrate the restoration of life in its entirety and its victory over death which was brought by Jesus Christ.

Exodus

The book of Exodus is the second book of the Bible and the Hebrew Bible and belongs to the historical books of the Old Testament. Exodus, together with the books of Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy is the Pentateuch (in Hebrew **Law** (Torah). In the Greek translation of the Septuagint (LXX) it was called “Exodus”, because the central issue is the exit (ie the liberation) of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The protagonist in the Exodus is Moses.

Merneptah (1224-1204 BCE)

The 3rd son of Ramses II and his wife Isetnofret (and 13th son of Ramses, overall). With his army, Merneptah pursued the Israelites to the sea, but was unable to prevent them from fleeing.

Moses

Charismatic personality of the Jewish nation and religion. Moses was a leader, a hero, a legislator, a prophet and a mediator between God and his people. He led the people of Israel to liberation from the Egyptians, crossing the Red Sea and through the Sinai Desert for 40 years. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, Moses received the 10 commandments from God. He receives special honour as a prophet from both Christians and Muslims.

Oral Traditions (Old Testament)

Words and narratives that Jews, both men and women, repeated to each other outside their tents in the desert, and in their homes, whether hovels or palaces. At the heart of these narratives has always been the conviction that God is the great protagonist in human life. Most of these narratives were transmitted in ways that were easy to decipher: narratives, images, quotes, poems. In this way they were indelibly engraved in the memory of people and everyone was able to understand them. Centuries later, these narratives began to be recorded and gradually, a collection of texts was created that later became the Old Testament.

Pesach (Jewish)

The word Pesach means “passage”. Jews celebrating Pesach remember that their ancestors crossed the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt into freedom.

Ramses II (1290-1224 BCE)

Also known as Ramses the Great. He was the third pharaoh of Egypt’s 19th dynasty and the most powerful of all Egyptian rulers.

Red Sea

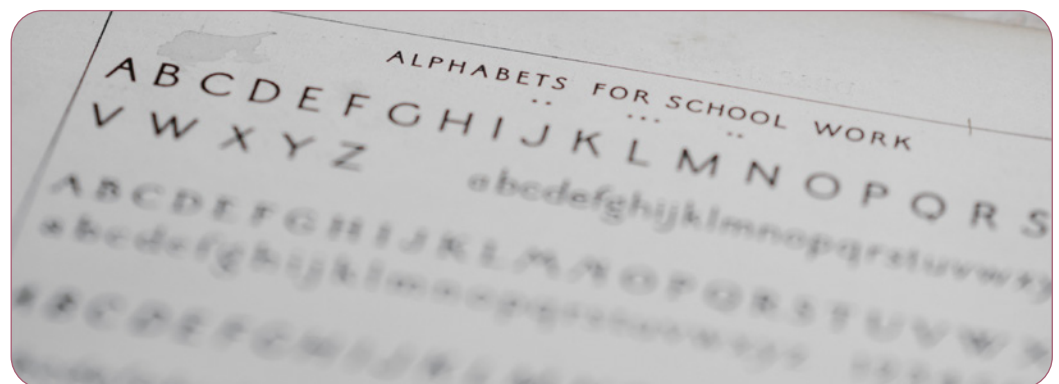
The narrow sea arm of the Indian Ocean between NE. Africa and SW. Asia, where it creates the ancient Arabian Gulf. At the time of the “Exodus” of the Israelites from Egypt, the Red Sea was also called the Sea of Reeds and was then a lake. The northern part, west of the Sinai Peninsula, is mentioned in the Old Testament book of Exodus as being crossed by the Israelites since, for a millennium, it was crossed only widthwise and never lengthwise.

Refugee

Someone who is forced, by circumstances or by violence, to leave his or her home or place of permanent residence and seek refuge in a foreign country or country of ethnic origin. Often used in the plural to refer to populations of people moving in groups.

Testament

The term literally means the last expression of a person’s will, but in the Bible it is used to describe a Hebrew word meaning “treaty”, “alliance” or “agreement”. However, in addition to the meaning it can have for human relationships, the term is used specifically to denote the particular agreement that governs God’s relationship (Gen. 9:8; Ex. 15:18; 17:1) with the people of Israel (Ex. 19-24) and aims to create the conditions for the salvation of all mankind. The responsibility for initiating the agreement lies with God, who determines its content and terms. But this does not abolish the freedom of man, who is free to accept or reject the agreement, which provides for rights and obligations for both God (faithfulness to promises, love and protection for his people) and man (faith in the One and Only God, and social justice). Thus the covenant does not define a God-master and man-slave relationship, but a father-son relationship (Ex. 4:22).



2.10 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

Coast at a Greek island, close to the Turkish coast. Evening

Two youngsters, friends from school, have gone fishing on a rocky and steep coast. It's late afternoon. As they fish they talk.

STRATOS: *Have you heard? Yesterday, two more boats with refugees and migrants arrived on our island. But the sea was very rough and I heard their boat sank and most of them drowned.*

YIORGOS: *Saying the truth, I don't understand why they embark and risk drowning. And those who manage to reach our island, they live in miserable conditions. You see them everywhere.*

STRATOS: *Yeah, I know...*

YIORGOS: *My dad says that we can't afford more of them on the island. He also says that many of them come on purpose, in order to alter our faith and traditions. They are dangerous. May God put his hand.*

STRATOS: *What do you mean?*

YIORGOS: *My dad says that God stands by our side and that's why they are drowning, God doesn't let them carry out their plans for our country.*

STRATOS: *This reminds me of the story of the Red Sea Crossing we read the day before yesterday at school.*

In the class of Stratos and Yiorgos

The teacher act with a bit of talent and with the help of slides showing illustrations on the story of the Red Sea Crossing. Some kids are very enthusiastic, some are a bit bored but the excitement of the teacher is contagious.

TEACHER: *And Lord said to Moses "Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. [...] And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers." [...] and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. [...] Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.*

But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

Coast at a Greek island, close to the Turkish coast.

YIORGOS: *Exactly. That's what my dad says! As of then, so and now God protects his believers and punishes those who try to cause them harm.*

STRATOS: *Do you mean that God destroys people? Does he harm people?*

YIORGOS: *Ehh ... I don't know. I never thought about it, but why not?*

STRATOS: *So, some people are his favorites and some others, "let them go hell", as we use to say?*

YIORGOS: *I'm not sure, but it could be that way. After all, everything happens as God wants to. Isn't that what they say? God can do everything. God is omnipotent.*

STRATOS: *I don't know man... But I really need to go. I don't think God will help me on my geography test tomorrow.*

Stratos struts walking away when Yiorgos sees a flickering flashlight in the sea and hears voices

YIORGOS: *Hey, Stratos, look!*

STRATOS: *Where?*

YIORGOS: *To the sea, yo! There's a light there. Voices too, can't you hear?*

STRATOS: *Yes, right. I hear something. Let's go closer to see...*

(From the side of the sea, voices are heard shouting in an incomprehensible language and in English they cry "Help")

STRATOS: *There are people ... Refugees!*

YIORGOS: *They ask for help. Let's go... (Yiorgos moves towards from the sea)*

STRATOS: *Go where, Yiorgos? Are you crazy? Let's go home. It's perilous here.*

YIORGOS: *No, Stratos. They ask for help.*

STRATOS: *And how will we help them? You think we can?*

YIORGOS: *I don't know. We'll see.*

(The Refugee boat hits the cliffs, gets slashed and starts sinking. The waves hitting the cliffs push the boat adrift back to the sea. The passengers cry for help. Voices and screams of women and children are heard. A man from the boat throws a rope to the youngsters. The end of the rope slides into the water).

STRATOS: *It's dangerous here. Let's go. Let's go to find someone to help.*

YIORGOS: *Let's try to catch the rope they threw to us.*

STRATOS: *And what to do with it? Can we pull the boat?*

YIORGOS: *We will tie the rope to the cliffs so they can pull it themselves. Come on, hustle, there is no time to waste!*

The youngsters manage to grab the rope and to tie it to a cliff. The passengers of the boat pull the rope and the boat, now half-deflated, finally approaches the rocky shore.

STRATOS: *A baby. He gives us a baby.*

YIORGOS (exhausted and soaked): *Now, let's go call for help.*

STRATOS: *Yes, let's go...*

Night at Yiorgos' home

Yiorgos' mother dries his hair and sits on the bed near him.

MOTHER: *It was dangerous what you did today, you know?*

YIORGOS: *You mean I shouldn't have done it?*

MOTHER: *I mean... what you did was madness.*

(Pause)

YIORGOS: *Mom, do you think God can do evil?*

MOTHER: *How did you come to this, right now?*

YIORGOS: *Answer me.*

MOTHER: *Hmm, let me tell you... Since we call him "Father" I can't imagine him hurting his children.*

YIORGOS: *Yes, every father loves his children, but sometimes he gets angry. Do you think dad will be angry with me? You know his views on immigrants and refugees*

...

MOTHER: *I know. But also, I know that if he sees a fire burning, first he will put out the fire and then he will look for the arsonist.*

YIORGOS: *Do you mean that dad, being there in my place, he would do the same?*

MOTHER: *Yes, that's what I believe. Your dad may have his ideas, but he puts compassion above ideas.*

YIORGOS: *And what's your own opinion?*

MOTHER: *I think that since you were there, you did exactly what you had to do. I'm very proud of you.*

(She kisses him, stands up and goes out of the room, turning off the light. Yiorgos lies on his bed and he recalls what happened a few hours ago. Shortly after, he falls asleep. He is exhausted).

Next day at the old olive mill

The boys look at the old olive mill while they approach.

STRATOS: *Lucky we were there, eh? Or was it God's intent; you think?*

YIORGOS: *My grandmother says that God acts in his own way and many times, we can't even imagine them.*

Arriving at the old olive mill, some of the refugees recognize them and approach them, smiling. One of the refugees, together with a girl of their age, comes to meet them.

REFUGEE GIRL: *You are the boys who tied the rope of our boat yesterday, aren't you?*

YIORGOS: (somehow confused and shy) *Yyyyes, eh, you know ... we ... it was by chance, I mean ...*

STRATOS: (almost apologetically) *Yes, yes, it just happened we were there.*

REFUGEE GIRL: *Thank you very much. Thanks to you we have been saved.*

YIORGOS: *No, don't say ... Everyone would do that.*

STRATOS: *It was pure luck, that is.*

REFUGEE GIRL: *Some people call it luck. I name it the Hand of God. Yesterday you became God's hand.*

The young girl approaches and gives Yiorgos something. She smiles at him and leaves. Yior-gos looks at his hand. The girl has given him a small glass bottle. He opens it and an exquisite fra-grance comes out.

STRATOS: *What is it?*

YIORGOS: *Perfume. (He smells it.) Jasmine!*

STRATOS: *Jasmine. Divine! Come on, "God's hand", let's go now and you can give me a help-ing hand to clean our storeroom, as my father asked me to, otherwise nothing will save me from his hands!*

The two youngsters walk away laughing and teasing each other.

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Apostolos Barlos, MTh (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece). Former Teacher of Religious Education and Educational Consultant for High-school education, Instructor of Lifelong Education, Author of textbooks for Secondary Level Religious Education. Associate for Religious Education in Volos Academy for Theological Studies.

Christos Fradellos, Mth (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens - Greece, Neapolis University of Paphos - Cyprus), Teacher of Religious Education. Author of the book *Islamic Orders in the Ottoman Crete*. Associate for Religious Education in Volos Academy for Theological Studies.



Vaso Gogou, BA in Theology and History (University of Athens, Greece). Former teacher of Religious Education, Culture and Aesthetics, Instructor of Lifelong Education, Author of textbooks for Secondary Level Religious Education. Associate for Religious Education in Volos Academy for Theological Studies.

Maria Anna Tsintsifa, Master in Intercultural Education (Free University, Berlin, Germany), Master in Special Education (Frederick University, Cyprus). Teacher of Greek Literature, Associate for Religious Education in Volos Academy for Theological Studies.



Nikolaos Tsirevelos. PhD (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece). Teacher of Religious Education, Adjunct Professor of Religious Education and Religious Studies (Department of Primary Education, University of Thessaly, Volos), Visiting Lecturer of Christian Education (Department of Theology and Culture, "Logos" University, Tirana, Albania), Associate for Religious Education in Volos Academy of Theological Studies.



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