Violence in the Bible has been one of the most disturbing and gruesome issues among biblical scholars as well as anyone who is interested in Old Testament ethics related to modern society. Is the act of honor killing, which still occurs in countries today and is similar to the case in Deut 22:13–21, justifiable? Does the Old Testament support violence with cruelty? Some have suggested that, since the Old Testament texts were composed and edited generally by wealthy and politically powerful authorities, in order to protect and preserve their hierarchical power, the use of violence is not surprising within uneven social structures. Some, however, have rejected this kind of approach.

Reeder begins the first chapter by laying out working definitions for three major topics: family, violence, and reading. Reeder nicely describes the main characteristics of the ancient Israelite family as patrilocal, hierarchical, and public. She states, “Families centered life in the ancient biblical words. They were the social, economic, political, and theological cornerstones of existence. Their importance is emphasized by their omnipresence in ancient narratives, laws, and other texts” (5). Influenced by John J. Collins, Reeder further defines violence as “action taken against a person in order to cause their injury or death” (5). Her definition of violence is broad enough to include the “legislated punishment” appearing in Deuteronomy; however, it is quite narrow in that it excludes any kind or type of injury caused by nonphysical force. No definition of violence can include all violent cases; therefore, it is more important to consider whether certain violence is justifiable rather than how to define violence. At any rate, her definition covers at least three family violence passages in Deuteronomy: 13:6–11; 21:18–21; 22:13–21. These are her main interest in the current volume. Adopting Robert R. Becker’s term “constructive violence,” Reeder proposes that family violence in Deuteronomy may be considered as an effort to protect communal identity from hazardous threats. This concept of constructive family violence is supported from a hermeneutic of trust, which encourages the reader to read given texts with sympathy rather than with suspicion.

Chapter 2 discusses three passages related to constructive family violence in Deuteronomy: the household worship of idols (13:6–11), the disobedient son (21:18–21), and the slandering husband and foolish daughter (22:13–21). Before discussing these passages, Reeder first proposes the major function and role of the ancient Israelite family as a social, religious, and covenantal community in a Deuteronomic setting. That is to say, the familial relationship between parents and children is directly reflected in the relationship between God and Israel. For Reeder, Israel as a nation was the extended family under God’s parental care, and the three passages above should be considered in this setting. For the case of the idolater, she argues that idolatry basically denies “the recognition of Yahweh alone as God” (37), which was the first and foremost confession of Israelites in the Ten Commandments; consequently, this serious threat should be purged in order to protect and reinforce monotheistic worship among the Israelites.

The case of the disobedient son is related to the fifth (“honor your father and mother”) of the Ten Commandments. In particular, Reeder emphasizes this law’s communal and hereditary nature because the accused is a stubborn and rebellious “son.” She states, “The son presumably would inherit at least part of the ancestral land and become the patriarch of a family himself, responsible for embodying and teaching Israelite identity” (43). Although the practicality of this legislation is very doubtful (e.g., the two sons of the priest Eli), its existence itself might bring at least the fear of the possibility for punishment that would deter any son from negligent and imprudent behavior.
The case of the foolish daughter is quite different from that of the disobedient son because the parents were able to defend their daughter (47). Regarding the difference, Reeder suggests that the daughter’s innocence is assumed in Deut 22:13–19. However, the daughter must be first considered innocent due to the presumption of innocence, that is, innocent until proven guilty. Her parents were not direct witnesses to this case because they were not living together with their daughter. This fact opens the possibility that the parents could defend their daughter with the evidence of their daughter’s virginity. In the case of the disobedient son, however, his parents were direct witnesses and thus could be plaintiffs. At any rate, Reeder insightfully presents that, similar to the previous case, this case also has a hereditary nature in that the daughter’s harlotry destroyed her ability to perform her primary duty, to bear a legitimate heir to her husband’s household. Hence, her harlotry was deeply related to the identity of Israel.

The next three chapters explore how extrabiblical references interpret family violence. Chapter 3 discusses constructive family violence found in Sirach, 1 Maccabees, and Jubilees from the Seleucid and Hasmonean periods. Reeder suggests that Sirach, deeply influenced by the Hellenistic culture, valued honor and avoided shame. This cultural and sociological tendency enhances the patriarch’s strict authority over his household. First Maccabees follows the traditions of constructive family violence in the Torah. Reeder proposes that, due to the crisis of the Israelite identity, Mattathias viewed violence as “the most secure means of ensuring the survival of the covenant community” against foreigners and apostate Jews (71). Reeder further argues that the treatment of Jubilees on family violence is somewhat ambiguous, unlike those of Sirach and 1 Maccabees. According to Jubilees, violence was neither rejected nor emphasized because violence did not effectively make the apostates return back to God’s covenant. Rather, keeping peace might bring unity among all the Jews, including the apostates, and studying the law might restore a community dedicated to God’s covenant. Reeder states, “Identifying study of the law as the correct method of restoring the covenant, and emphasizing communal peace and harmony as the eschatological hope of Israel—these strategies reinforce the displacement of constructive family violence” (93).

Chapter 4 surveys constructive family violence from the writings of Philo, Josephus, and the Tannaitic rabbis during the Roman period. Reeder argues that the Jewish tradition described in their writings was influenced by Roman law and custom, especially regarding family life and violence. For example, Philo redefined the concept of kinship as a wholehearted piety to God with a virtuous life, rather than a blood relationship. Any son who dishonored God and despised his parents should be regarded as an enemy instead of a son. Reeder suggests that Philo’s treating rebellious children as enemies is the result of a combination of biblical constructive family violence and the Roman patria potestas (i.e., the absolute authority of a father over his household). Her suggestion, however, is unclear.
whether this treatment of Philo had a definite influence of the Roman family concept, because it is doubtful that this harsh treatment brought absolute authority to Jewish fathers, as in patria potestas. On the contrary, the writings of Josephus present more apparent influence from the historical situation during the Roman period, especially after the First Jewish Revolt. Reeder explains that this is due to the ambiguity of family violence in his writings. Josephus supported violence in the examples of the apostasy at Baal of Peor and the Maccabean revolt in the Jewish Antiquities and Jewish War, yet he criticized the Jewish rebels fighting against the Romans during the First Jewish Revolt (in which Josephus himself had participated).

Chapter 5 explores how constructive family violence was practiced and interpreted in the New Testament and Second Temple period. Reeder suggests that the pervasive use of family language throughout the New Testament signifies the identity of the church as a family among the followers of Jesus. These followers were instructed to be subject to constructive family violence as in Mark 13 and Matt. 10 but were not authorized to enact physical violence against anyone, since God as Father has the ultimate authority to punish evildoers. In this regard, their treatment of punishment in the New Testament is more likely eschatological, similarly to Jubilees. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that Jesus’ disciples were not only prohibited from using violence but also commanded to love their enemies. This is quite a drastic difference from the Deuteronomic instructions, but, unfortunately, Reeder does not pursue further research on this.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, is basically a summary. Reeder concludes that constructive family violence in Deuteronomy demands us to support the common good and to bear each other’s burdens, focusing on others’ interest. She states, “This aspect of ancient traditions of constructive family violence can continue to challenge modern readers: the life of the community may be more important than the desires of individuals in the community” (167). It must be noted that her concluding statement is somewhat risky, especially in the situation where the ideology of a political community demands the sacrifice of individuals.

Overall, the current volume is a beautifully written and carefully researched study. This volume neither suggests all possible solutions to the troublesome issue of family violence nor provides ethical discussions regarding various settings, but it does provide a valuable contribution to the history of interpretation on three passages about family violence in Deuteronomy as well as the fervent striving of ancient Israelites to protect and preserve their Jewish identity. It is highly recommended for both scholars as well as anyone who has interest in the ethical dilemma of family violence.