

# Violence in the Bible

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There's a lot of violence in the Bible. Did you know that the Bible actually has more violence in it, supposedly sanctioned or even ordered by God, than the Q'uran?

If we are to insist on taking the Bible literally in every single aspect, if we are to believe that everything in the Bible is meant as instructions for living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then we must believe:

- That the earth is flat;
- God approves of slavery;
- Women are the property of men;
- Disrespectful teenagers should be executed;
- God approves of genocide and even commanded people to practice it;
- If you work on the Sabbath you should be executed.

And when we read, in Psalm 137, speaking to Babylon, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" or when we read the story of a holy man calling a curse upon some boys who were teasing him, and that then God sent vicious bears to kill the children, are we to try to spiritualize that, or to harmonize those stories with what we know of the entire Bible, including the prophets and the words and actions of Jesus himself?

So how do we address these issues? A few parishioners who have undertaken the Bible Reading Every Day program got to some of the more graphic violence in Exodus and Joshua and elsewhere in the Old Testament, and began to question me. And these are valid questions. No just valid, but necessary.

Well, I'll tell you that I have read a few books on the subject now. It is a fascinating subject, and I can only address a tiny part of it today, but it's an important conversation, one that can and should be ongoing.

So this talk is really just an outline, but let me try to cover a few important points.

There are a few ways to address violence in the Bible.

First, we could just ignore those passages. Many of you know that Thomas Jefferson created a Bible full of only the things he agreed with and that seemed Christian to him. We could make our own Bible, or perhaps just completely ignore all the violent parts.

But for those of us who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, and who want to turn to the Bible for guidance, this isn't a very consistent position.

Or we could say, as many have said and continue to say, that God's ways are greater than our ways, that if God commanded violence against entire nations, God had good reasons – the very survival of Israel was at stake, for goodness' sake! So when we see bears mauling

little boys or God ordering entire cities and all their inhabitants destroyed, we should just take that in faith and trust that God had some sort of plan.

But for those of us accustomed to the message of Jesus, it's hard to harmonize those verses. Think of 1 John 4:16: "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." God ordering genocide on the one hand, and "God is love" on the other.

A third way is to look at the Bible as both human and divine. The Bible, by this viewpoint, is inspired by God, but not in the sense that God possessed the people and they wrote all the words in a trance. These were God-loving, God-fearing people who discerned God's presence and work, and then wrote what they believed God was telling them; but it was written according to their particular worldview, a prescientific, tribal worldview.

Let's look a little at that worldview:

"First of all, the cultures around the Middle East, where Old Testament events took place, functioned according to the strict tribal rules of retribution or retaliation. If you lived back in those days and a person killed your brother, you would have the right to kill the brother of the murderer and would lose face if you let the man off the hook. . . . This "law of retribution" governed the way people lived and helped to form their perspectives of right and wrong. It became such a part of the fabric of their lives that they were unaware of any other way. In

fact, this way of thinking so permeated their understanding of the order of the world that they naturally applied the same perception to God.

“... the Hebrew people understood God as a divine warrior who exacted retribution, who killed or ordered the killing of guilty parties, including entire nations of people. For them, God behaved in the same way that one of their tribal leaders would behave. They also understood themselves as God’s warriors on earth, interpreting all their violent actions as coming from the hand of God. (Baker, 53).

Now, the idea that people could have been mistaken in their perspective, or that the Bible has a human element, makes some people uncomfortable, but think about the first few verses of Luke’s Gospel, when he says “Therefore, since I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account.” (Luke 1:3, NIV).

As I keep repeating, the Bible points us to God, like that finger pointing at the moon, but the Bible is NOT God.

Use handout.

I love the Bible. Let me repeat that . . . I love the Bible. My life has been transformed and continues to be guided and transformed by the wisdom of the Bible. And I’m also troubled by

some parts of it. But I tend to look at the Bible as ongoing revelation of God's will. (talk about  
handout)

Hose 4:1-2 speaks about this endless cycle of violence . . . "They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed." Micah also speaks the word of God and criticizes the people for their violent ways: "The godly person has perished from the earth, and there is no upright person among men: All of them lie in wait for bloodshed" (7:2)

Manasseh, one of the worst kings of Judah, was considered to be very wicked, not only because he reinstated idol worship, causing Israel to sin, but also because "he shed very much innocent blood" (2 Kgs. 21:16). He was a violent ruler and, therefore, considered wicked by God. 55

Psalm 5:6 clearly states that God abhors those who do violence by shedding blood. 56

Although the Old Testament seems to sanction divine war and violence, the prophets proclaimed the way of peace. We see significant hints of a new message in Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 4:2, in which the people "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, never again will they learn war." The "wolf will dwell with the lamb," and little children will not have to fear deadly snakes (Isa. 11:6-9) 56

From Razing Hell by Sharon L. Baker

We do have to take the passages describing divine violence seriously. We can't just eliminate them from our Scriptures. Since we can't ignore the Old Testament "texts of terror" we need to use responsible methods for interpreting them. We can help ourselves do that by looking at the culture in which the Hebrew people lived, where their perspectives came from, how they interpreted the world around them, how they viewed the events they lived through, and the actions they took. 52

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Those ancient peoples, true to the cultures around them, believed that any event or activity that revealed a show of power ultimately found its source in God. . . . God continually tried to demonstrate divine love to the people. But for the Israelites, who were "saturated in a worldview that saw him as power, this was going to be a slow uphill struggle" (quoted from page 49 of Chalke and Mann, The Lost Message of Jesus). Chalke and Mann continue on to say that "having a god of power on your side helped justify cruel acts of revenge towards those who had wronged you. . . . Many scholars believe

that, influenced by the cultural religions around them, Israel fell into that trap. 53

Because they wrote from within a specific context and worldview, they may need have [I say, they had to have!] written their own perceptions of God into the text – unless we believe that every writer and editor of the Old Testament went into some sort of trance and wrote only what God dictated to them. But seeing the texts that depict God as a violent, rage-filled deity as part and parcel of the ancient cultural perspective in no way compromises the truth of God’s Word. In fact, understanding the stories through the eyes of those who told them and eventually put them into writing gives us a beautiful glimpse into the faith journey of those who walked with the same God we love and trust. 54

### **Biblical Examples**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth by speaking them into being. We’re so used to hearing our own creation story that we don’t realize how unusual it is. Every culture and religious tradition has its own story. . . . With the exception of the very ancient Sumerian myth, which has much in common with ours, most of the creation stories from other cultures describe great fights and violence between deities, in which a god’s body parts are divided up to form land and sea and sky. . . . [or] sacrificial death of a god whose body parts make up portions of the creation. . . . But our story is different . . . : God creates the universe not through murder or sacrificial killing, but through peaceful means. God simply speaks. . . . God discloses the divine character as one of peace rather than violence. 54

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I’m not sure that we should try to “harmonize” these opposing passages of Scripture. Any attempt to smooth out the difficulties in the appearance of divine violence will inevitably create new wrinkles. . . . we do have another answer. We can still decide which texts we will focus upon, which image of God we will use as a basis for our own behavior. 57

### **What is the purpose of Scripture?**

John 20:31 tells us that “these [things] have been written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” The purpose for the Bible? Reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, 1 John 1:4 says that “these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.” 57

We don’t see Jesus destroying those who reject God, swinging his sword, chopping off heads, spilling blood in a fit of anger, hell-bent on vengeance. In fact, as he hung on the cross, we see the opposite: he prayed for our forgiveness instead. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus reverses the law of retaliation and exhorts his followers to turn the other cheek, to pray for their enemies, and even to love their enemies—our enemies (Matt.5). 57-58



Reading our Bible through the “Jesus lens” helps us see that God in Christ interrupted the cycle of violence with divine love, seeking to reconcile and restore rather than to punish and retaliate. 60

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| <p>Exodus 21:23-25<br/>If any harm [occurs], then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.</p>   | <p>Matthew 5:38-39<br/>‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.</p>   |
| <p>Deuteronomy 33:27<br/>He subdues the ancient gods,*<br/>shatters* the forces of old;*<br/>he drove out the enemy before you,<br/>and said, ‘Destroy!’</p> <p>1 Samuel 26:8<br/>Abishai said to David, ‘God has given your enemy into your hand today; . . .</p> <p>Jeremiah 44:30<br/>Thus says the Lord, I am going to give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hands of his enemies, those who seek his life, just as I gave King Zedekiah of Judah into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, his enemy who sought his life.’</p> <p>Lamentations 2:5<br/>The Lord has become like an enemy; he has destroyed Israel. He has destroyed all its palaces, laid in ruins its strong-holds, and multiplied in daughter Judah mourning and lamentation.</p> | <p>Matthew 5:43-44<br/>43 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”<br/>44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; . . . 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?</p> <p>Matthew 5:5-9<br/>Blessed are the meek . . . the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers . . .</p>  |
| <p>Deuteronomy 32:35<br/>Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly.</p> <p>Isaiah 61:1-2<br/>The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <u>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;</u></p>  | <p>Luke 4:16-21<br/>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <u>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.</u>” <b>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.</b> The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to</p> |

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|  | <p>them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."</p>  |
| <p>Exodus 23:23-24<br/> 23 When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, <sup>24</sup>you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.</p> <p>Exodus 13:11<br/> 'When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you,</p> | <p>Matthew 15:21-28<br/> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.</p> |
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