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OLD TESTAMENT
VIOLENCE AND
THE SHALOM
OF GOD

FLOOD
AND FURY

The book cover features a central illustration on a black background. A vertical, rusted metal sword or dagger is the focal point. The hilt is made of dark wood with a light-colored, spherical pommel. Green leaves sprout from the hilt. Below the hilt, the blade is a dark, textured metal. The lower half of the cover is dominated by large, stylized waves in shades of blue and teal, with white outlines that create a sense of movement and depth.

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FACING THE PROBLEM (WITHOUT BURNING DOWN YOUR HOUSE)

KEN ESAU TELLS THE STORY that illustrates the danger of trying to “solve” a problem like violence in the Old Testament.¹ Ken had a neighbor who wanted to remove a grease stain from his garage floor. So he doused the floor with gasoline and scrubbed it clean with a wire brush. Gasoline dissolves grease and oil, so it was the perfect solution for the problem. The combination of gasoline and scrubbing rid him of that ugly grease stain. Having eliminated the problem, he shut the garage door. Problem solved!

So it seemed.

Inside the garage burned the pilot light of his hot water heater. Once the gasoline fumes filled the garage, and kaboom! The garage blew up like a bomb, his house caught fire, and everything burned to the ground.

These rather dramatic events provide a cautionary tale. Only use gasoline in well ventilated areas, well away from any active flame. Yes. But for our purposes, we’re reminded to *be wary of solutions that too easily resolve all difficulties*. We may rid ourselves of one problem only to find ourselves stuck with far more destructive consequences than we ever anticipated!

The warning from this story applies to all sorts of issues encountered in the Christian life, and none more than the problem of violence in the Old Testament. For many, divine anger, violent stories, and violent prayers,

¹Ken Esau, “Disturbing Scholarly Behavior: Seibert’s Solution to the Problem of the Old Testament God,” review of Eric Siebert’s *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*, *Direction* 40, no. 2 (2011): 168-78. I’ve reflected on this story in an earlier blog post: <https://wtctheology.org.uk/theomisc/how-to-burn-down-your-house/>, accessed July 7, 2022.

look like ugly grease stains on the pages of Scripture. But before declaring, “This kind can only come out with much gasoline!” let’s consider the hidden costs that might lurk in the back corner. They’re not always out in the open.

But we can’t ignore the grease stains in the process.

THE PROBLEMS OF VIOLENCE

At first glance, the stains will certainly arrest our attention. They may appear worthy of a gasoline dousing! For instance, God commanded Moses to do the following, which Joshua later enacted: “You must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and *show them no mercy*” (Deut 7:2, italics added;² cf. Deut 20:16-17).

The call to “destroy them totally” (Hebrew *herem*) involved annihilating the Canaanites and then dedicating their wealth to God as a sacred offering. It sounds like a bizarre mix of violence and worship. Destroying Canaanites as an offering? Most disturbingly, God commanded them to take great care to deny these nations *mercy*. Several texts in Joshua suggest that the people dutifully obeyed down to this merciless detail (Josh 6:21; 10:40; 11:11-15). As Joshua and the people entered the land, they struck down entire peoples, “devoting them to destruction.” Look at Joshua 6:21: “They *devoted* the city to the LORD and *destroyed* with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.” Killing children and animals puts to rest any argument that this was only about the moral degeneracy of the Canaanites. How could children and animals be held morally responsible? Surprisingly, Joshua doesn’t mention Canaanite immorality as a justification for killing the Canaanites, as do other Old Testament passages (e.g., Gen 15:16).³ They were simply in the land and needed to go. As if to sharpen the point, Joshua tells us the following: “For it was the LORD himself who *hardened their hearts* to wage war against Israel, so that he might *destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy*, as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Josh 11:20).

Ouch! God ensured this merciless horror show!

²Throughout this book, all italics of italicized portions of biblical quotations have been added by the author for emphasis.

³The possible exception in Joshua is idolatry.

At the very least, we must concede the deep tension between these texts and what we learn of God from other places in the Bible:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God *merciful* and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Ex 34:6, NRSV)⁴

Or consider Jesus' healing of the two blind men who cried out: "Have *mercy* on us, Son of David!" (Mt 9:27). "Grant them *mercy*" seems to be God's heart in other texts.

The tensions build as we look at the full range of problems in the Old Testament. Violence is not a single problem. It's like one of those old Whac-A-Mole arcade games where moles would pop up randomly from their holes and you had to whack them on the head. No sooner did you hit one mole than another appeared. The *problems* of violence in the Bible are the same way. No sooner do you address one problem than another appears.

Here are some of the big problems. As you look at this list, consider what you or your friends consider to be some of the main challenges of violence in the Old Testament.

Divinely enacted violence. Some struggle with the problem of divine violence in the flood, where God drowns 99.44 percent of the world's population (animals included) to wipe it clean from sin, only to discover that humanity hadn't really changed.

Divinely commanded violence. Others look with astonished bewilderment at the problem of violence in books like Joshua, where Yahweh commands the people to wipe out the indigenous population of Canaan.

Divinely sanctioned violence. Books like Exodus and Deuteronomy permit the people to take women in war and hold slaves. Sons who dishonor parents are to be stoned, adulterers burned, and the like. Laws like these rubber-stamp acts of violence against other Israelites.⁵

⁴The word translated "merciful" (Heb. noun *raham*) here is different than the verbal root used in Deut 7:2 and Josh 11:20 (Heb. verb *hanan*). However, they appear as synonyms in Ex 34:6, where the NRSV translates the noun form of *hanan* as "gracious." They also appear as synonyms in Ps 86:15 and 103:8.

⁵See Diana Lipton, "Legal Analogy in Deuteronomy and Fratricide in the Field," in *Studies on the Text and Versions of the Hebrew Bible in Honour of Robert Gordon*, ed. Geoffrey Khan and Diana Lipton,

Gruesome stories. Not all problems of violence directly involve God, though God certainly is part of the bigger picture. In Judges, for instance, well . . . let me give you a rundown of the highlights:

- Judges 1:6-7: Israel mutilates the Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek.
- Judges 1:1–3:6: Numerous battles, three of which involve the complete destruction of a civilian population, and all done with Yahweh’s help.
- Judges 3: King Eglon of Moab disemboweled; Shamgar slaughters six hundred Philistines with an ox goad.
- Judges 4–5: Jael kills Sisera by driving a tent peg through his head.
- Judges 9: Abimelech killed his seventy brothers and then one thousand people in the tower of Shechem. He was then mortally wounded when a woman dropped a millstone on his head, before asking his arms bearer to finish him off (so he wasn’t killed by a woman).
- Judges 11: Jephthah burns his daughter as a sacrifice to fulfill a vow.
- Judges 13–16: Samson murders thirty men from Ashkelon for their clothes and sets fire to the tails of three hundred foxes to torch their fields. The Philistines retaliate by burning Samson’s wife and father-in-law, whose death Samson avenges by killing one thousand men with a donkey’s jawbone. Eventually, after his capture, Samson topples the pillars of a Philistine temple, killing three thousand men, women, and children.
- Judges 19–21: A Levite’s concubine is raped and dismembered, followed by a brutal war in which the rest of the tribes perform a conquest on Benjamin, to the point where there are no women left. *Violence against women thus features as a central feature of this story.* So, the rest of Israel destroyed Jabesh-Gilead, killing all but four hundred virgins, which they traffic to the tribe of Benjamin as “wives” for the

Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 149 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 21-38, esp. 32 for a look at how narrative complicates law. For a study on law as narrative, see Assnat Bartor, *Reading Law as Narrative: A Study in the Casuistic Laws of the Pentateuch*, *Ancient Israel and Its Literature* 5 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); Joshua Berman, “Law Code as Plot Template in Biblical Narrative (1 Kings 9.26-11.13; Joshua 2.9-13),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 3 (2016): 337-49.

six hundred surviving men. Then, they steal two hundred women from Shiloh to provide wives for the rest.

These stories raise questions about the apparent silence of God in the face of such rampant violence.

Violent prayers. Imagine a prayer meeting that starts with these words:

May his [an unnamed enemy] children be orphans,
and his wife a widow.
May his children wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children. (Ps 109:9-12, NRSV)

Amen? Should we pray such Psalms? Should they be part of the church's prayerbook or songbook?

Violent prophecies. The prophets knew divine wrath. They felt it in their bones. They prophesied the destruction of Samaria, Jerusalem, the nations, the earth, the skies, and if they had known about galaxies, I don't doubt they'd have gone there too. They were keen to make sure their listeners knew that Yahweh was behind these events. He moved the nations and acted in history. Many wrestle long and hard with this brutal and sometimes sexually violent prophetic language.⁶

End-times cataclysms. This is the world imagined in the postapocalyptic video game *Fallout*.⁷ While lacking the nuclear specifics, some parts of the Old Testament include visions of destruction and violence that engulf and destroy the earth (Is 34). God is involved. Humans are involved. And even the stars and moon are involved. The precise problem here is the sheer scope of violence. While God promised not to flood the earth again, it seems from some parts of the Old Testament that God reserved rights to destroy through every other possible means.

⁶See, e.g., Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁷A role-playing video game. "Fallout (video game)," Wikipedia, last edited June 10, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallout_\(series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallout_(series)).

This list is not exhaustive, but it makes the point that the problems of violence in Scripture are many and varied. The moles keep popping up.

REASONS FOR THE TURN TOWARD VIOLENT TEXTS

Increasingly, I find that Christians want to face up to the Bible's violent texts. There's a veritable cottage industry of "Is God a violent monster?" books. This uptick in attention to the Bible's violent texts has several sources.

Within the church, there is an increasing emphasis on authenticity as an ideal, or even a virtue. This applies to the way we relate to one another and our sacred texts. We desire to honestly face the Bible we have, and not the one that we'd like to have or that tradition has told us we have.

American evangelicalism has also been facing its own day of reckoning. It has been turning inward to interrogate its own history of complicity in violence and cultures of violence. From violence against women exposed in the wake of the #MeToo movement, to the downfall of major evangelical leaders because of abuse, to the problems of racial injustice and violence foregrounded in the Black Lives Matter movement, evangelicals have only just begun some much-needed soul searching. Part of that inward work includes coming to grips with ways Scripture has been used to legitimate violence against the perceived "other." For these and other reasons, there's a need to continue the work of wrestling with violence in Scripture. Not only does it help us address the problem of violence *out there*. It also provides a way of talking about the problem of violence *in here*.

In addition, many evangelicals have recognized the need to turn outward. Increasing awareness of social and economic injustice has helped us grapple with the appropriate place for wrath—divine and otherwise! Those who have privilege and status often take issue with wrath as "unseemly" or "inappropriate," especially when expressed by those on the margins. Divine wrath challenges us to ask *with whom or about what is God wrathful?* Answers to this question are not easy for those of us who don't regularly worry about injustice.⁸

⁸Kevin Kinghorn, *But What About God's Wrath?: The Compelling Love Story of Divine Anger* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019); David T. Lamb, *The Emotions of God: Making Sense of a God Who Hates, Weeps, and Loves* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, forthcoming).

Also, the turn toward the problem of biblical violence arises from an awareness that biblical writers were not unbiased. Isn't it convenient, many would suggest, that Israel's claim to the land is commanded by God and morally justified by the horrific practices of Canaan's previous inhabitants? To some ears, it sounds like a setup. Readers also recognize the yawning gap between how ancient cultures thought about God and violence, and how we do. Whether or not this is the case, it is a perception. For example, some claim that Joshua offers a "primitive" view of Israel's deity. Ancient people were violent—so the story goes—and so *of course* they thought God was also violent.⁹

Within an increasingly post-Christian culture many feel that Scripture is "on trial," so to speak, needing to answer for its complicity in crimes against humanity. From the days of Constantine to the colonialist exploits of the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, Christians have solicited help from Scripture to provide religious backing for violence.¹⁰ In American, Canadian, Palestinian, and many other contexts, Christians wrestle with the church's complicity in religiously based land claims and histories of exterminating indigenous people.¹¹ Faced with such challenges, Christians often feel morally bound to take these accusations of criminal activity seriously. Perhaps the Bible is dangerous and needs to be stripped of its privileges. Though only a few might put things in such stark terms, some may *feel* that we'd be better off letting certain Old Testament texts lie dormant. The Old Testament offers a great deal of raw material out of which to construct a

⁹Discussed in Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 22-43.

¹⁰On which, see Thomas B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, Anchor Yale Bible 6B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 85-94; Elsa Tamez, "The Bible and Five Hundred Years of Conquest," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World. 25th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 13-26; Daniel H. Weiss, "'And God Said': Do Biblical Commands to Conquer Land Make People More Violent, or Less?" in *Scripture and Violence*, eds. Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 32-46; Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹¹John S. Milloy, "The Founding Vision of Residential School Education, 1879 to 1920," in *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, Manitoba Studies in Native History 11 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), 23-47; Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP 2020); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin, 2019), esp. 55-123.

hateful ideology, after all, whether it be allegedly “cautious” xenophobia or decisive violence: “You must *purge* the evil from your midst” (nine times in Deuteronomy).¹²

This leads to yet another reason for the recent anxiety over Scripture’s violence: Violent texts are easily misunderstood in a culture that favors sound bites and Tweets. Violent texts are easily misunderstood if taken out of context and created into a meme. Even Jesus’ words are susceptible to such misunderstandings. Take his words in Matthew 10:34 as an example: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” These texts provide easy targets for those who want to see Christianity crumble and they provide confusion for others.

NOT BURNING DOWN YOUR HOUSE

With all these difficulties facing us as we read the Old Testament, we might be tempted to take radical measures to purge Scripture of such violent stains and residue. We might want to unhitch our faith from the Old Testament, as one prominent church leader suggested—and many imply.¹³

Before rushing toward that stain-removing solution, however, we might take a cautionary cue from early church father Tertullian (ca. 150–220 CE). He wrote a multivolume work to refute a man named Marcion (ca. 85–150 CE), who doused the problem of Old Testament violence with gasoline (or its ancient equivalent) and set it ablaze.

Marcion wanted to excise divine wrath from the Christian faith, and with it, the Old Testament. He found it unbecoming of God’s goodness. He suggested that the God of the Old Testament was a different God than the God and Father of Jesus. So he sought to rid the church of the Old Testament and, consequently, most of the New! It turns out that the two are deeply connected.

In his sarcastic critique of Marcion, Tertullian writes: “A better god has been discovered, who never takes offense, is never angry, never inflicts

¹²Deut 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24; 24:7.

¹³Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness! He is purely and simply good.”¹⁴ Sounds good, right?

Hardly. Here’s Tertullian’s warning. *There are always hidden costs to pictures of God that eliminate challenging tensions.* Tertullian would direct our attention to the pilot light burning in the garage corner. Specifically, Tertullian points out that Marcion eliminates God’s ability to act as judge: “You allow indeed that God is a judge, but at the same time destroy those operations and dispositions by which He discharges His judicial functions.”¹⁵ For Tertullian (and many biblical texts), wrath is the emotion that animates God’s active concern for justice. Criticizing his wrath was like criticizing the instruments of a doctor. Wrath, in Tertullian’s formulation—and arguably in the Bible itself—is tied intimately to God’s exercise of justice.

Tertullian is highlighting the danger of separating God’s wrath and justice. Separating the two would be like taking the scalpel from the surgeon’s hand and saying, “You’re here to do healing work, and not cut people open!” But the Bible sees wrath in different terms. It’s the emotion that moves God to bring justice and is ultimately animated by his compassion. In Exodus 22:21-24, for instance, God warns Israel that if anyone caused the orphan or widow to cry out, “my anger will blaze” (my translation). God’s anger would blaze against Israelite oppressors like it blazed against Egypt. The point of these verses is not to be precise about the exact penalty for oppressing the weak but to express the pathos of God in the face of injustice.

For Israel, God’s wrath was bound up in the idea that he was the protective father of the vulnerable—whether the oppressors be foreigners or his people Israel. Wrath—like jealousy—was a sign of concern for the weak against any who would put them at risk or threaten God’s legitimate claim as parent. In this sense, God’s wrath toward the nations (e.g., for their mistreatment of Israel) was a deep expression of God’s love for Israel and their land.¹⁶

¹⁴Tertullian, “Against Marcion,” 1.27 in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, Ante-Nicene Fathers (1885; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 292.

¹⁵Tertullian, “Against Marcion,” 2.16.

¹⁶Mark S. Smith, *How Human Is God? Seven Questions About God and Humanity in the Bible* (Liturgical Press, 2014), 46.

For many of us, love with wrath sounds as comforting as a warm blanket of fiberglass insulation! But the Old Testament grounds love in the idea of Israel as God's covenant people (Deut 6:4-5). Love was the relational glue between covenant partners. And if we think of covenant in terms of "family substitute,"¹⁷ love was the trusting loyalty required for healthy family cohesion. God's wrath was the protective rage he aimed at threats to that family.

But we can't swing the pendulum away from mercy toward wrath, as if wrath is always an unmitigated good. Many women, for example, experience the language of protective divine wrath against the backdrop of male wrath and violence in the church or in toxic relationships. They have been encouraged to stay in abusive relationships or churches and to shun those who challenge the party line or expose abuse.¹⁸

Abraham and Moses certainly recognized the problem of divine wrath—and even pleaded with God to exercise mercy! In another part of his critique of Marcion, Tertullian urges us to weigh God's "severity" against his gentleness and observe the imbalance.¹⁹ God's character is wildly imbalanced. The coexistence of wrath and mercy is not that of equals. If we take the language of mercy versus wrath in Exodus 34:6-7 in strictly mathematical terms (love to thousands of generations versus three to four generations of judgment),²⁰ God's mercy outweighs by at least five hundred to one! We'll discuss this in chapter fourteen.

For important reasons, these verses—which are central to an Old Testament portrait of God—hold God's mercy and judgment together, even if they are imbalanced. Perhaps we lose something important when we avoid God's judgment and wrath; and perhaps we lose out by tossing aside violent texts. Maybe there is an understanding of God's character that only comes by exploring the revelatory value of the most troublesome texts and by teasing out the rich picture of God that the Old Testament offers.

¹⁷Smith, *How Human Is God*, 48.

¹⁸Thanks to Rachel Hastings for this observation.

¹⁹Tertullian, "Against Marcion," 2.17.

²⁰"Three to four generations" is a shorthand way of saying "one household," since a typical Israelite house held three to four generations, but note the modification of this in Deut 5:9-10, which declares judgment for three to four generations "of those who hate me." Deuteronomy makes clear that God holds each generation accountable. Each can turn from the sins of the past.

The subjects of wrath and violence are uncomfortable and shouldn't be taken lightly. But I suggest that *how* we handle them, and not just the topics themselves, poses the greatest danger and opportunity. We will not all land in the same place on these matters, but let's at least stop and count the cost of doing business with easy resolutions. Let's keep the roof over our heads.

But how do we address the problems of violence in the Old Testament without burning down our house? What options are available to us? The next chapter will suggest some strategies that will help us avoid a fatal combustion.

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