



God and Violence in the Old Testament

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The Old Testament has a reputation: it is a book filled with violence, including the violence of God. The New Testament commonly avoids such a charge; but it, too, is filled with violent words and deeds, and Jesus and the God of the New Testament are complicit in this violence.¹ Yes, the Bible does often promote *nonviolence*; indeed, the basic eschatological reflections of the Old Testament are marked by visions of peace and nonviolence, extending even to the animal world (e.g., Isa 2:2–4; 65:17–25)—these texts constitute a fundamental witness that violence is an unwanted intruder in God’s world. At the same time, the Bible also—and often—defends the use of violence, including capital punishment, war, and self-defense. The New Testament especially, with its talk about hell, even envisions an eternal violence, in which God is very much involved (e.g., Matt 13:36–50; Rev

¹On the much neglected theme of violence in the New Testament, see, e.g., Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence, and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997); George Aichele, “Jesus’ Violence,” in *Violence, Utopia, and the Kingdom of God: Fantasy and Ideology in the Bible*, ed. George Aichele and Tina Pippin (New York: Routledge, 1998) 72–91. Jesus’ violent language and predictions in, e.g., Luke 19:41–44 and Matthew 13:23 are illustrative. The violence of God is evident in texts such as Acts 5:1–11 and Rev 14. On the “anti-Judaism” of the New Testament, certainly a form of violence with long-term and recent violent effects, see Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible*, trans. J. Bowden (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997) 76–127. That this issue of *Word & World* has no article on violence in the New Testament might reflect a common opinion.

The Bible, in both Old Testament and New, speaks candidly about violence—both human violence and divine violence. We must take the reports of God’s violence seriously, over against ourselves, while also exercising the appropriate critique already begun by people within the Bible itself. Finally, we will see that, in everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes.

14:9–11).² My task is to reflect on some theological directions for considering the violence in Old Testament texts, especially divine violence.

The recent proliferation of literature regarding the Bible's violence and, more generally, the linkage between religion and violence is remarkable, sparked not least by the end of the millennium, 9/11, and other terrorist activities in the name of religion.³ At the same time, Stephen Stein rightly claims that "the systematic study of the relationship between religion and violence is not very far advanced." Stein's indictment of the church and other religious communities for this inattention is appropriate; he speaks of "the relative absence of self-reflection by the religious traditions on their role in generating, sponsoring, promoting, supporting, and maintaining such violence."⁴ That would include the role that the Bible has played in the perpetration of violence across the globe over the centuries.

In thinking through the violence in the Bible, the need for a closer definition of violence quickly comes into view; it must be a definition that can encompass both divine and human violence. For many people, especially in these post-9/11 days, only physical violence truly qualifies as violence. But, certainly, violence is more than killing people, unless one includes all those words and actions that kill people slowly. The effect of limitation to a "killing fields" perspective is the widespread neglect of many other forms of violence. We must insist that violence also refers to that which is psychologically destructive, that which demeans, damages, or depersonalizes others.⁵

In view of these considerations, violence may be defined as follows: any action, verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in whatever degree of intensity, that abuses, violates, injures, or kills. Some of the most pervasive and most dangerous forms of violence are those that are often hidden from view (against women and children, especially); just beneath the surface in many of our homes, churches, and communities is abuse enough to freeze the blood. Moreover, many forms of systemic violence often slip past our attention because they are so much a part of the infrastructure of life (e.g., racism, sexism, age-

²Remarkably, eternal violence is rare and late in the Old Testament (e.g., Dan 12:2).

³For a recent treatment, see John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003) 3–21, and the literature cited therein. More generally, see Stephen J. Stein, "The Web of Religion and Violence," *Religious Studies Review* 28 (2002) 103–108, for a review of seven recent books on the topic. Much attention has been given to the work of René Girard on violence; see, e.g., *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). For a recent review of his work, including essays from a biblical perspective: *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2000).

⁴Stein, "Web," 108.

⁵Robert McAfee Brown (*Religion and Violence*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987]) is correct in claiming a broad definition: anything that "violates the personhood" of another (7). Unfortunately, it does not take into account violence against the nonhuman. See also Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 13–14. The issue of spiritual violence—the use of theological and churchly matters to browbeat or threaten others—also needs attention; it has not commonly been addressed in the life of the church.

ism).⁶ If the Bible had described the course of the twentieth century, it would be a much more violent book than it is⁷—not least because there are so many more people around to be violent!

HUMAN VIOLENCE

The Old Testament certainly knows of human violence that fits our definition. This is the case, most basically, because the world of which it speaks is filled with violence, including institutionalized violence, and the Old Testament does not shrink from telling it like it is. Readers should be grateful that the Bible does not try to paper over what life is really like for individuals, families, and communities.

Violence—from robbery to rape to homicide to war—appears near the beginning of the Bible and does not let up along the way. Gen 6:11–13, reporting the violence of “all flesh” that led to the violence of the flood, tells the story of our own—and every—time: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and the earth was filled with violence.” We should be thankful that God has promised never to visit the earth in flood-like ways again (Gen 8:21)!

Besides the physical violence to which the Bible witnesses, especially to be noted is the exercise of violence through the use of words, e.g., slander, false charges, character assassination, and gossip. Such language has the capacity to promote distrust, disrespect, and enmity, which often lead to physical violence (e.g., Ps 140:3, 11; Prov 10:6, 11; 16:27–30; Jer 9:2–8; note the link between “peace” and violent speech in Ps 34:13–14). Perhaps especially uncomfortable is the extent to which violence is associated with economic issues, not least the pursuit of wealth; as Mic 6:12 puts it without qualification: “Your wealthy people are full of violence.”

The most common Hebrew word for “violence” (עָוָוָה) is used almost exclusively for human violence and is almost always condemned, implicitly or explicitly.⁸ God sharply rejects violent people: “The Lord...hates the lover of violence” (Ps 11:5), commands that Israel “do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jer 22:3), demands that violators of the command “put away violence and oppression” (Ezek 45:9), and condemns those who do “violence to the earth” (Hab 2:8, 17; see Zeph 1:9). The divinely appointed Davidic king’s “job de-

⁶People will differ on what constitutes violence, to some extent, especially moving across time and from one culture or church to another (e.g., refusals to ordain women or gays/lesbians could be considered policies of violence, but some would disagree).

⁷See Rudolf Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994). He counts 170 million *civilians* who fall into the title’s category.

⁸The verb and noun are used only 68 times in the Old Testament (and synonyms such as “oppression” are not common either); this relatively infrequent usage in view of the amount of violence reported assumes that the reader will be able to name the reality for what it is from concrete cases. Dictionary articles on violence can be misleading if they focus only on certain words. But, it is not unimportant that עָוָוָה only rarely has God as a subject (Job’s accusation, Job 19:7; Jeremiah’s lament, Jer 20:8; cf. Lam 2:6).

scription,” mirroring that of God, is to redeem people “from oppression and violence” (Ps 72:14). Knowing that God has these commitments, and expecting God to be on their side, the psalmists cry out to God for deliverance from those who are violent, from “the dark places of the land [that] are full of the haunts of violence” (Ps 74:20; see also Ps 25:19; 140:1, 4, 11). The righteous think they have a just case to bring before God and they seek to motivate God to act on their behalf by claiming that they have “avoided the ways of the violent” (Ps 17:4). And then, when they have been delivered from violent people, they sing songs of thanksgiving (2 Sam 22:3, 49; Ps 18:48). The righteous are confident that God will see to a future when “violence shall no more be heard in your land” (Isa 60:18). Such a resolute divine *opposition* to human violence is important to remember in reflecting upon divine violence. In sum: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence.

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To this interhuman violence, we must add the violence of the human against the nonhuman. It is recognized as early as Gen 9:2 that, in the wake of human sin, animals live in fear and dread of human beings. More indirectly, *interhuman* violence has a devastating effect on the environment. For example, Hos 4:1–3 establishes a clear link: human swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed have highly adverse effects upon the land, animals, birds, and fish. On the other hand, the violence of nonhuman creatures against human beings is no small matter (e.g., Gen 9:5; Exod 21:28).

DIVINE VIOLENCE

If human violence were the only story about violence in the Bible, this could be a briefer, if bloody, discussion. But that is not the case. The most basic theological problem with the Bible’s violence is that it is often associated with the activity of God; with remarkable frequency, God is the subject of violent verbs:⁹ From the flood, to Sodom and Gomorrah, to the command to sacrifice Isaac, to the plagues, to all the children killed on Passover night—and we are not yet through the book of Exodus!¹⁰ What will we make of this divine violence?

Questions raised about God’s violence in the Bible are not simply of recent vintage. The concern goes back at least as far as the second-century gnostic Marcion, who set aside the Old Testament (and much of the New Testament). He made this move at least in part because of the violence of God portrayed therein,

⁹Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (*Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 1358) notes that God is the subject of violence (some 1,000 times) much more than human beings (some 600 texts).

¹⁰For a treatment of God and violence in the prophets, see my forthcoming article in *Interpretation* (2004).

and he has had many followers through the centuries.¹¹ The church rightly rejected the approach of Marcion, but the disquiet about the Bible's divine violence has been intensifying in recent biblical work.¹² Some studies even want to set aside the references to divine violence, at least in terms of serious theological consideration, if not actually to remove from the biblical text.¹³ At the same time, and in possible reaction to such views, the church and its spokespersons have often gone to the other extreme and sought to defend the Bible's portrayal of the violence of God, of whatever kind, at all costs.¹⁴

I seek to steer between these two extremes. On the one hand, I want to claim that the Bible's talk about divine violence must be taken seriously into account in any accurate portrayal of the biblical God. Even more, divine anger and judgment, which may entail violence, are absolutely crucial to our continued reflection about God and God's ways in the world. On the other hand, some of the ways in which God's violence is depicted in the Bible should not stand unchallenged. I take a closer look at these two perspectives, though much work remains to be done.

THE THEOLOGICAL/ETHICAL IMPORTANCE OF DIVINE WRATH AND JUDGMENT

God's *uses* of violence—and that phrasing is important¹⁵—are associated with

¹¹One thinks of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Harnack. Marcion promotes “a better god, who is neither offended, nor does he get angry, nor does he take vengeance” (so Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*. 1.27). For a recent statement along this line, see Kari Latvus, *God, Anger, and Ideology: The Anger of God in Joshua and Judges* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998): “The God that deuteronomistic theologians created in their own image was the God of strict dogmatism, intolerance and fundamentalism—and, of course, the God of anger....the God of the crucified and powerless Jesus cannot be the same as the deuteronomistic God of anger” (91). Such a perspective is common among clergy and laity, evident not least in the highly selective use of Old Testament texts in preaching and teaching, prompted in significant part by lectionaries that tend to avoid judgment texts. The issue of divine impassibility is prominent in the history of reflection on this theme, but this is not a common reason for the difficulty regarding divine anger/violence today.

¹²Among more recent scholarly efforts that raise serious questions regarding the Bible's violence and God's common association with it, refusing to excuse it or to interpret it away, see Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas”; Lüdemann, *The Unholy*; David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast? Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999); several essays in David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt, eds., *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000). Female scholars and others have been particularly pointed in their critique of those texts wherein God's violence is associated with female imagery. See, e.g., Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); among many articles one might cite, that of Diane Jacobson offers a clear and well-balanced approach (“Hosea 2: A Case Study on Biblical Authority,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 23 [1996] 165–172). I have sought to work with this issue in several publications, especially “Is the Biblical Portrayal of God Always Trustworthy?” in Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Post-modern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 97–111 (reprinted: Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

¹³For example, the introduction to the Hebrew prophets by Carol J. Dempsey (*The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000]) often calls into question (rejects?) the prophetic portrayal of God in terms of violence. In speaking of Amos 2:1–3, for example, she says: “Again, God's response to violence is violence! And again, we ask, ‘Is this the way of God?’” (14).

¹⁴Indeed, an openness to critique the Bible's theological perspectives of any sort, including its depiction of God, has traditionally been considered out of bounds. See, e.g., the response of Froehlich to Fretheim in *Bible As Word of God*, 127–132.

¹⁵Wrath and violence are not divine attributes, but responses to creaturely sin, indeed the sins of violence. For discussion, see Terence E. Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002) 14–17.

two basic purposes: judgment and salvation. Sometimes the same event may have both effects; for example, Persia under Cyrus mediates salvation for the exiles in Babylon and, at the same time, passes judgment on Babylon. Such divine activity often entails God's use of agents that are capable of violence, both human (e.g., Israelites, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus) and nonhuman (e.g., clouds, darkness, waves, etc. at the Red Sea).¹⁶ Much of the divine violence in the Old Testament is associated with these contexts, but there are important exceptions, not least the book of Psalms, which is filled with violence.¹⁷

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Judgment. Divine violence seems always to be related to human sin.¹⁸ Generally speaking, if there were no human violence, there would be no divine wrath or judgment, which may take the form of violence, depending upon the agent used. Abraham Heschel has stated well what is at stake in this matter: “[Our] sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval; God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed?”¹⁹

Violent human actions lead to violent consequences. *That* there are such consequences to human violence is named divine judgment. Just how God relates to the movement from sin to consequence, however, is not easy to sort out.²⁰ Gener-

¹⁶For a discussion of God's use of agents, see Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2002) 35–39; idem, “The Character of God in Jeremiah,” in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. W. P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 211–230.

¹⁷There are over 100 references to enemies in Psalms. The lament psalms, especially the imprecatory laments, are difficult to interpret in view of the way that the psalmists call upon God to visit their detractors with violence. For an excellent study of these psalms, see Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda Maloney (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996).

¹⁸God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac seems not to be an exception, given the “test” in view of Abraham's prior sinful behaviors (e.g., Gen 20).

¹⁹Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 284–285. This volume remains one of the most cogent treatments of divine wrath.

²⁰For discussion, see Fretheim, “Wrath of God,” 19–24. Helpful resources include Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. David Stalker, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), who speaks of a “synthetic view of life” (265) in which “the retribution is not a new action which comes upon the person concerned from somewhere else; it is rather the last ripple of the act itself which attaches to its agent almost as something material. Hebrew in fact does not even have a word for punishment” (385); Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982); Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 57–87; and more recently, Gene Tucker, “Sin and ‘Judgment’ in the Prophets,” in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim*, ed. Henry Sun, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 373–388. How these judgment texts are to be related is best seen in the work of H. H. Schmid, who places them under the umbrella of creation theology: “Creation, Right-

ally speaking, the relationship between sin and the judgment of violence is conceived in intrinsic rather than forensic terms; consequences grow out of the deed itself. That is, God mediates the consequences of sin that are already present in the situation,²¹ rather than through the imposition of a penalty from without. Ezek 22:31 well illustrates the point. God declares, “I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath,” and immediately states what that entails: “I have returned [רָחַם] their conduct upon their heads.”²² Israel’s sin generates certain snowballing effects. At the same time, God is active in the interplay of human sinful actions and their effects, and God uses “third parties” as agents for that judgment (e.g., the Assyrians). Both divine and creaturely factors are interwoven to produce the judgmental result, which may include violence. Such consequences do not take place in some inevitable or mechanical way; the causal weave is complex and loose so that, for example, the wicked may prosper (see Jer 12:1–4) and room is left for chance (“time and chance happen to them all,” Eccl 9:11).²³

Remarkable correspondences exist between God’s actions and those of Nebuchadnezzar.²⁴ God will not “pity, spare, or have compassion” (Jer 13:14), because that is what the Babylonians, the instruments of divine judgment, will not do (Jer 21:7; see 27:8). The violent words/deeds appear to be used for God because they are used for the actions of those in and through whom God mediates judgment; the latter will certainly act as kings and armies in that world are known to act. *The portrayals of God’s wrath and violent action are conformed to the means that God uses.* God thereby accepts any fallout that may accrue to the divine reputation.²⁵

The ethical implications of such an understanding of divine anger are considerable. I have stated it this way: “Human anger at injustice will carry less weight and seriousness if divine anger at injustice in the service of life is not given its proper place. If our God is not angry, why should we be?”²⁶

Salvation. Violence becomes the means by which God’s people are delivered from violence. So, for example, violence *against* the Egyptians leads to Israel’s salvation *from* Egypt’s violence (e.g., Exod 15:1–3). Or, God uses the violence of the Persians under King Cyrus against the enslaving Babylonians as a means to bring

eousness, and Salvation: ‘Creation Theology’ as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 102–117.

²¹Interpreters have used several different formulations: God midwifes, facilitates, sees to, puts in force, or completes the connection between sin and consequence. Sometimes God as subject stands in a prominent position (e.g., Jer 19:7–9); elsewhere, God’s stance is passive (e.g., Hos 4:1–3) or withdrawing (Isa 64:6–7), but deism is ruled out of court.

²²There are over fifty texts in the Old Testament that link divine wrath and violence with such formulations (e.g., Ps 7:12–16; Isa 59:17–18; 64:5–9; Jer 6:11, 19; 7:18–20; 14:16; 17:10; 21:12–14; 44:7–8; 50:24–25; Lam 3:64–66).

²³On the import of divine grief accompanying divine wrath, see Fretheim, “Wrath of God,” 7–8.

²⁴For a partial list, see Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 36.

²⁵That God is not the only effective agent in these events is made clear by the divine judgment on *Babylon* (Jer 25:12–14; 50–51; Isa 47:6–7; Zech 1:15). God takes a risk that God’s name will become associated with the violence, indeed the excessive violence, of the Babylonians. See John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

²⁶Fretheim, “Wrath of God,” 3.

salvation to the exiles (e.g., Isa 45:1–8). In the first case, God uses violence to save Israel from the effects of *other people's sins*. In the second, God uses violence in order to save God's people from the effects of *their own sins*, which got them into exile in the first place. Salvation is thus comprehensively conceived.²⁷

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These two ways of speaking of God's use of violence may be reduced to one. That is, God's use of violence, inevitable in a violent world, is intended to subvert human violence in order to bring the creation along to a point where violence is no more. Walter Brueggemann says it well: “It is likely that the violence assigned to Yahweh is to be understood as counterviolence, which functions primarily as a critical principle in order to undermine and destabilize other violence.” And so, God's violence is “not blind or unbridled violence,” but purposeful in the service of a nonviolent end.²⁸ In other words, God's violence, whether in judgment or salvation, is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God's more comprehensive *salvific* purposes for creation: the deliverance of slaves from oppression (Exod 15:7; Ps 78:49–50), the righteous from their antagonists (Ps 7:6–11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exod 22:21–24; Isa 1:23–24; Jer 21:12), and Israel from its enemies (Isa 30:27–33; 34:2; Hab 3:12–13). “This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference” with respect to those who have suffered human cruelty.²⁹ In so stating the matter, the divine exercise of wrath, which may include violence, is finally a word of good news (for those oppressed) and bad news (for oppressors).

CALLING INTO QUESTION CERTAIN WAYS OF DEPICTING DIVINE VIOLENCE

As I have noted, the Bible understands that some forms of violence, both human and divine, are legitimate. Here I consider several forms of violence whose theological legitimacy has been called into question.³⁰ The above considerations should make it clear that I do not hereby intend to make the God of the Bible more palatable to contemporary taste. We are always in danger of doing this, of course, especially regarding matters of judgment; we must certainly learn to read the Bible over against ourselves, allowing the text to interrogate us, to be “in our face.” But is everything in the Bible that offends us appropriately offensive (e.g., the Bible's pa-

²⁷For detail, see Terence E. Fretheim, “Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church,” *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) 363–372.

²⁸Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 244.

²⁹Heschel, *Prophets*, 284.

³⁰See the literature cited in footnote 12 for further examples.

triarchy)? Is it not also dangerous simply to repeat uncritically those texts that denigrate the place of women and portray God as one who orders the wholesale slaughter of cities?³¹ And, if we are not critical of those texts wherein the God of the Bible engages in such violent acts and violent speech, does not that, however subtly, commend a way of life for those who follow this God?

It is important to note that an inner-biblical warrant exists for the people of God to raise questions and challenges regarding God's (anticipated) actions. Examples include the biblical laments (e.g., Ps 44); Abraham's challenge in Gen 18:25, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" and that of Moses in Exod 32:7–14. Do not such texts show the way for the important work we have to do regarding this interpretive issue? Moreover, we will be helped if we talk about a biblical center in terms of which all other texts are to be interpreted, evident most clearly in the credal formulations of both Old Testament and New (e.g., Exod 34:6–7).³² That center provides a kind of canon within the canon that means that not everything in the Bible is to be placed on the same level of importance and may provide a place on which we can stand to bring a critical word to bear regarding some portrayals of God.

At the least, we must be honest in recognizing the problems the Bible raises regarding divine violence.³³ As I have stated elsewhere: "The patriarchal bias *is* pervasive, God *is* represented as an abuser and a killer of children, God *is* said to command the rape of women and wholesale destruction of cities, including children and animals. To shrink from making such statements is dishonest." Even more, the church must recognize the long history of negative effects that many biblical texts about God have had on our life together. "With all the emphasis these days on what a text *does* to a reader, we should be absolutely clear: among the things that the Bible has *done* is to contribute to the oppression of women, the abuse of children, the rape of the environment, and the glorification of war."³⁴

Attempts are often made to explain away the force of these texts or to soften their impact.³⁵ Take the violence of the conquest as an example; Deut 20:16–17

³¹For further reflections about these matters, see Fretheim, "Biblical Portrayal of God," 100–111, where I develop several criteria for determining the kinds of violence that should be rendered problematic. See also footnote 32 below.

³²For the crucial issue of genre in determining such a center, see Terence Fretheim, "The God Who Acts: An Old Testament Perspective," *Theology Today* 54 (1997) 16–18; idem. "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 36–37.

³³This is stressed by Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas," 20. Collins concludes his article with a helpful claim that links a defense of the Bible's violence to certitude, citing Hannah Arendt's phrase regarding a "God-like certainty that stops all discussion": "The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation. Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world, is to show that that certitude is an illusion" (20–21). I have also expressed concern that "a myth of certainty about the Bible" is at the heart of this discussion ("Biblical Portrayal of God," 99).

³⁴Fretheim, "Biblical Portrayal of God," 99–100.

³⁵Such a move is driven by several points of view. An approach from the perspective of the "peace churches" seeks to lift up the role of Yahweh as warrior as the decisive factor, diminishing the human role in warfare (see, e.g.,

puts the issue squarely before us. God commands, “But in the cities of these peoples [Canaanites] that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them” (see 1 Sam 15:3). Israel carried out this command in various battles recorded in Joshua 6–11.³⁶ These divine and human activities have often been spiritualized (“put on the whole armor of God”), historically adjusted (turn the conquest into a land settlement or a primitive view that Israel outgrew), idealized (taking a utopian stand against idolatry), viewed as a metaphor for the religious life, or reduced to God’s mysterious ways.³⁷

No satisfactory “explanation” of this Israelite practice is possible, or, for that matter, of the other uses of divine violence noted above. Yet, certain considerations may help us understand such violence, if not to excuse in every respect the God who is portrayed here (nor those who carried out the divine commands).

“God chooses to become involved in violence so that evil will not have the last word. In everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes.”

(1) God works in and through human beings, with their foibles and flaws, in the achievement of God’s purposes, and God does not perfect them before deciding to work with them. God works with what is available, including such institutions in that ancient context involved in the waging of war and other governmental trappings. Violence will be associated with God’s work in the world because, to a greater or lesser degree, violence is characteristic of the persons and institutions through whom that work is done. Thus, such work will always have mixed results and will be less than what would have happened had God chosen to act alone. Moreover, God does not necessarily confer a positive value on those means in and through which God works (e.g., Isa 47).

(2) Human beings will never have a perfect perception of how they are to serve as God’s instruments in the world. Israel’s perceptions were often expressed in terms of the direct speech of God. Inasmuch as this is a phenomenon rare in the

Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980] 169–174). The effect of such an approach is ironic in that the violence is then assigned largely to God. See a critique of several theological approaches in Lori Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence: A New Historicist Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 65–70.

³⁶Israel’s rationale for its ethnic cleansing of the Canaanites is expressed in two ways: one, so they would not be led astray by their seductive religious practices (Deut 7:1–5, 16; 20:18); two, they were instruments of divine judgment against Canaanite wickedness (Deut 9:4–5; see Gen 15:16).

³⁷Appeal to mystery is too often used to stop the conversation, even though the texts themselves have a remarkably “plain sense.” For a fuller survey of these efforts, see Collins, “Zeal of Phinehas,” 4–14; Lawson G. Stone, “Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 25–36. See also the studies of Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). For an earlier formulation, see my *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 61–75.

New Testament, should we understand that Israel may have put into direct divine speech understandings they had gained through study and reflection rather than through an actual hearing of God's words? And they may not have fully or properly understood.

(3) That God would stoop to become involved in such human cruelties as violence is, finally, not a matter for despair, but of hope. God does not simply give people up to experience violence. God chooses to become involved in violence so that evil will not have the last word. In everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes. Thereby God may prevent an even greater evil. By so participating in our messy stories, God takes the road of suffering and death (e.g., Exod 3:7). Through such involvement, God absorbs the effects of sinful human efforts and thus suffers violence (not least because a divine promise of land for Israel lies behind the whole affair).

There remains a certain ambiguity of the Bible toward violence. God does not intend the violence that disrupts the life of the world, rooted as it is in the sinfulness of humankind. Again and again, God takes the side of those afflicted by violence. God so engages the divine self on behalf of those entrapped in violence and its effects that God enters deeply into the life of the world, most supremely in Jesus Christ, and shows thereby the most basic stance of divine nonviolence in the face of violence. But, in order to accomplish God's work in the world, God may respond in violent ways in and through various agents so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the life of the world. ⊕

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