

# Violence in the Bible: How do we handle it?

## Well – this is awkward!



“What can you do about all the violence in the Old Testament?  
That is the question, and we are right to struggle with it.”  
– Christopher J. H. Wright

Cynics about Christianity love to point out passages in the Scriptures which seem to paint God in a poor light – vengeful, bloodthirsty, intolerant, racist, abusive. We flinch because we know that the God we love and serve, revealed in Christ, is not like that at all. What can we do? How do we understand stories like that of Joshua's conquest of Canaan by extremely violent means, apparently commanded by God? Some approaches to the problem are easy to reach for, but prove unfruitful...

## Dead-End ‘Solutions’

We could simply say that the New Testament ‘corrects’ the Old, that the New is full of love and compassion whereas the Old reflects an era of violence. However, we are forced to admit that there is also a fair bit of ‘wrath’ and judgement in the New – and quite a lot about God's love and compassion in the Old. Plus, Jesus and the first disciples accepted the early stories as authentic (although they did move beyond them).

We could perhaps argue that the Israelites misheard God and only *thought* God told them to conquer the land. The trouble is, their ‘misunderstanding’ is repeated and supported by many other parts of the Old Testament, and even the New sees the conquest as an act of God<sup>1</sup>. So this won't do as an explanation either.

We could suggest that the stories were all an allegory – not to be taken literally – just a picture of spiritual warfare. It is certainly valid (and very common) for preachers to use the stories as an encouragement in our daily ‘warfare’ against the spiritual enemies we face today, however the



Bible portrays these stories as a genuine, literal part of the history of God's people and the plan of salvation for the world. So to treat them as mythology will not do either<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Acts 7:45, 13:19

<sup>2</sup> The genre of the conquest narratives is different to, say, the stories of creation and the garden of Eden which, though true, can be treated allegorically – see TLS on Creation.

## Factors that might help us

How do we start to frame our thinking in ways that can help?

Firstly, as with all good hermeneutics, we need to see the troubling stories in the light of the *whole Bible*. Scripture reveals God as compassionate, good, kind, loving – in both Testaments. The Bible is very ambivalent about war – often condemning it, putting strict conditions on it, promising its final end. Even David, the 'man after God's own heart', was not allowed to build the temple because he had shed blood in war, but his son Solomon, which means 'peace', was the one to build it.

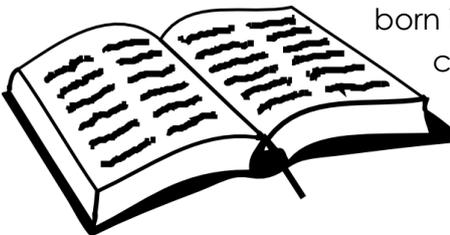


Secondly, we need to understand that the world in Joshua's day was very different to ours. Small city-states with their 'kings' and nomadic tribes marauded each other mercilessly, believing they were directed by their 'gods'. Ethnic cleansing with the threat of total destruction was practised as one tribe displaced another. Some of their movements are recorded in the Bible. This was Joshua's world. The ancient people of God could simply not conceive of the God of non-violence and pure love that Jesus would later reveal. Theirs was a primitive understanding of God and the world. But God still got involved with them, patiently revealing more of himself over the centuries. As with divorce, he allowed certain things because of their 'hardness of heart'<sup>3</sup>.

Thirdly, we should see the conquest in the light of God's ultimate purpose. He was creating space for a nation into whom he could pour his self-revelation, evolving a culture into which he could finally be born human, the ultimate image of God's true nature. Without drastic action, that culture may never have existed or been sustained so that the plan of salvation and peace for the whole world could be outworked.

## Discussion time...

The above factors may help, but they do not get God fully 'off the hook' for apparently commanding terrible things to happen (and for other events that he is recorded to have done himself, like the killing of the first-born in Egypt). How do you see things? How can we reconcile these texts with the God revealed in Christ without rejecting the Bible as God's written Word?



<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:5

## Part 2: A New Understanding of God

Calvinists<sup>4</sup> believe that God controls and wills every single action, including evil ones, and that if God commanded genocide then that makes it right and good. They affirm that God punishes sin, that after some deadline his mercy switches to judgement and time has run out – for individuals or nations. But is that really true? Many theologians are saying 'no'.



They say we must interpret all Scripture in light of Christ, reading any text that seems to present God differently through the lens of Christ as a greater revelation. Christ shows us the nature of God who does not coerce by force but transforms through the power of selfless love.

### The universe, power and causality

When God created the universe, in order to have meaningful relationship with his creatures he formed a space (within himself, as there is nowhere outside of God) where other 'wills' could be expressed apart from God's. He 'emptied himself', in a sense, giving up his right to exert his exclusive will, providing the capacity for created beings to choose for themselves, and hence also opened the door for evil (wrong choices) by both human and angelic creatures. This meant God laying down his 'rights' and giving power to others. This is often called 'kenosis', the self-emptying of God, which was dramatically demonstrated in the incarnation and the cross of Christ. The humility and laying aside of majesty by Christ was not simply a temporary means to our salvation, but it actually demonstrated what God is like from eternity past. God continually defers – within the Trinity itself, and to his creation, preferring to love and persuade rather than threaten and compel.

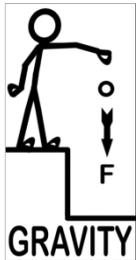
The universe was created with natural laws (like gravity), set up by God, which are allowed to operate for good or ill, and with its creatures able to make real choices. God's self-limiting means that whilst God is the *primary cause* of all things because he created and allowed them freedom there are also *secondary causes* like physical laws and human and angelic free will. So, whilst God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens, he is not *directly* to blame for the evil that happens when these secondary causes operate.

Immature faith believes that God punishes people whenever they sin. Some preachers have publicly blamed natural disasters on the sin of nations and God's retribution. That's where Job's comforters got it so wrong. Suffering is not God's punishment for sin but the result of secondary causes, such as bad choices by ourselves or others, or natural

---

<sup>4</sup> See TLS on 'Free Will'

forces operating unchecked due to human negligence or demonic influence. Jesus covers both of these in Luke 13:1-5, where he says the falling of the tower and Pilate's massacre were *not* evidence of the sinfulness of those people but secondary causes operating. The fact that



God continues to allow these forces to operate is not weakness or a lack of love but a desire to create a universe where human beings as co-rulers express his self-giving and others-preferring love on his behalf. That kind of universe cannot be created through control and force but only through the transforming power of love.

### Unfolding revelation to maturing people

Not all of the Bible carries equal weight. Some parts reveal God more fully than others. The writer to the Hebrews explains that, before Christ, the various ways God was revealed were inferior to the supreme revelation of Christ himself. The Scriptures are a gradually unfolding explanation of who God is.

You can see development in thinking of the Bible writers, for example in the two accounts of David (sinfully) counting his army<sup>5</sup>. In the earlier record of this event, God incites David to do it, but in the later one it is *Satan* who is to blame. There had been an increase in understanding that whilst God may be the primary cause of everything (hence the first account), there is actually an enemy that can act independently, so that God is not directly to blame (the second account). The theology had developed as people's understanding matured. The same is true when Paul the apostle describes in 1 Cor 10:9-11 how some Old Testament Israelites died. He is careful not to point at God, even though the original passages do. For Paul, they were killed by 'snakes' or the 'destroying angel', not God but secondary causes. Paul had received a revelation in Christ of who God is, and that it is the 'thief', not God, who comes to steal, kill and destroy.

The older passages in the Bible are much more likely to ignore secondary causes and point at God as the ultimate source of everything. But this is an oversimplification, allowed by God at an early point in history but superseded by later revelation as his people matured.

### Wrath as consent

In Romans 1, Paul recounts how people's sin incurred the 'wrath' of God. But what is this wrath? Fire from heaven? Demonic torment?

Again and again, Paul states that 'God gave them over' to the results of their sin. What afflicted them was not God's direct punishment but the



<sup>5</sup> 2 Sam 24:1 and 1 Chr 21:1

natural and inevitable outcome of their way of life and their choices. In other words, God consented to what they wanted – and they suffered the consequences, not an arbitrary punishment from heaven but sin's own inherent self-harm. There is no need for God to punish sin, because it pays its own 'wages' (Rom 6:23). The prodigal son's father did not vent wrath but allowed the consequences to bite – and rejoiced when his son came to his senses!



Built into the fabric of the universe is the principle of sowing and reaping. When we sin, we set in motion a chain of events that results in hurt. We unleash the secondary causes (whether people, natural processes or demonic forces) to wreak havoc in our and others' lives. God does not prevent this because he respects our choices out of love. The tipping point does not occur when God's mercy runs out and he switches into 'wrath mode'. Rather, it is we who flip the switch that shuts down the flow of mercy into our lives and introduces the consequences of wrath. Even then, God's mercy is still active and waiting for us to turn back!

So, 'wrath' is a biblical *metaphor* for what happens when people shut down God's best for them and open themselves to the self-destructive consequences. The early Bible writers did not yet understand this. They talked about God's wrath as an active divine choice – and indeed God's consent is his choice – but now we have come to realise that 'wrath' is simply the painful result of God letting us have our way.

When Jesus told some people that they would perish if they did not change course (the Luke 13 passage above), it was not a threat that God would send them to hell but rather a warning that if they rejected Jesus as a peaceful, not a warlike, Messiah, if they persisted with their desire to violently oppose the Romans the consequences would be their own destruction by Rome (which did happen in AD70).

### Un-metaphoring the difficult passages

This idea of wrath as consent helps us understand the Bible better, as we start to see behind the metaphor. So, when 'God' inflicts plague on Israel because of David numbering the troops, we notice it was a destroying angel actually killing people and that God was grieved over it. Perhaps David's lack of focus on God had allowed demonic infiltration? We may also recall that the alternatives given to David apart from the plague were famine or enemy invasion. Perhaps, whilst David's attention was occupied with measuring his strength, his enemies were plotting to invade, ruin the land and destroy people. A short but serious plague would certainly make a potential invader pull back long enough for David to start relying on God again and make the nation properly safe. So, whatever caused the plague (and God allowed it) the 'wrath' was turned to good in some way.



In the conquest narratives, God is seen to 'command' certain (to us) unacceptable actions. But, what if this 'command' was actually God's reluctant consent to the state of affairs and the mindset of the people at the time, which he then used to bring about salvation for the world?



Whatever the questions and problems that remain, we must hold firmly to the truth that God's way is non-violent, one of love, of refraining from control in order to win hearts. God neither actively instigates nor passively ignores suffering. He is with us in it, working to bring good out of it, despite its inherent non-goodness. In fact, at the cross, God entered our suffering in person, taking into himself all of the consequences of all our sin, absorbing, overcoming it. Did he suffer 'wrath'? Yes – but this was not God the Father punishing God the Son, but rather God in the form of the Son shouldering the weight of the results of every sin, all suffering across all time – and emerging victorious at the other side! He took the 'curse', freeing us from sin's effects, broke the cycle and made it possible for us enter his freedom! God does not punish sin with further pain; he overcomes evil through selfless love!

### Final thoughts

It is worth noting how Jesus read the Old Testament. In Nazareth<sup>6</sup>, he read from Isaiah 61: '*The Spirit of the Lord is on me...*', but instead of reading the whole paragraph, ending in '*the day of vengeance of our God*' (which his Roman-hating audience would be looking forward to!), he stopped at '*the year of the Lord's favour*'! Some would say that vengeance is for the day of judgement, however could it be that Jesus was selective in what he read because he knew their interpretation was wrong? That vengeance was a prophetic metaphor for God's salvation from the enemies of sin, Satan and death? After all, 'mercy triumphs over judgement'<sup>7</sup> – it does not have a time limit and a threat attached! We would do well to remember this in our presentation of the gospel to others. God's mercy is stronger even than the grave!

*"God may appear complicit in our violence because God allows it... In love, God bears the guilt of maintaining covenant relationships with violent people... Our blood is on God's hands, just as God's blood was on our hands. In love, God consents to undergoing and enduring our wrath on the Cross. He consents to allowing our wrath against 'Rome.' He consents to allowing Rome's wrath against us. His consent is wrath. His consent is love."* – Bradley Jersak

For further reading, see *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*, Bradley Jersak, Plain Truth Ministries, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:16-21

<sup>7</sup> James 2:13