



Apologists and Appropriators: Protestant Christian Reckoning with Biblical Violence

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Since its earliest days, Christianity has had to reckon with the violence which its sacred text contains. In very broad terms, Christians have been exercised by two main questions with regard to this issue. First, to what extent is violence in the world of the reader condemned, justified, or indeed commanded by the biblical text? Second, how is the violence of the text to be reconciled with the conventional Christian view of God as all-loving? This chapter will attempt to sketch out the contours of the modern debate within Protestant Christian scholarship, with more attention being given to the second of these questions. First, however, it is important to briefly delineate the parameters of the issue. What is the biblical witness to violence and peace in both testaments? The chapter will begin

Positionality: I write as a biblical scholar and a Non-conformist Christian minister (accredited by the Baptist Union of Great Britain).

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with a broad overview of both of these issues, and then briefly consider some of the traditional ways in which these texts have been viewed before moving on to a consideration of the contemporary debate.

VIOLENCE AND PEACE IN THE BIBLE

Contrary to popular opinion, which we will consider further below, it is not possible to distinguish the Old Testament from the New in regard to its representations of God's character. The popular imagination of an Old Testament angry God and a New Testament loving God revealed by Jesus is a gross parody. Likewise, the notion that the Old Testament is full of violence, and the New Testament is full of peace, is also an entirely unfair oversimplification. The injunction to love one's neighbour, for example, although quoted by Jesus, originates in Leviticus 19:18. Rather, both testaments reveal an overall trajectory of peace, with frequent instances of violence intruding.

Peace in the Bible: The Trajectory of Shalom

The closing chapters of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, self-consciously reflect the opening two chapters of Genesis, which portray the creation of the Garden of Eden. Eden, of course, has become paradigmatic in the popular imagination as a place of peace and harmony among humans and between humans and nature. In contrast to the extant Ancient Near-Eastern creation myths, the one offered by Genesis is remarkably irenic.¹ Rather than the earth being created through cosmic conflict, the God of the Bible creates by the simple divine fiat.² Rather than humans being created to be as slaves of the gods, as in the Babylonian *Atraharsis Epic*, for example, in Genesis, humans are recipients of divine hospitality, to whom the treasures of the earth and the fruit of the paradisaical orchards are given.³ The divine command is explicitly about human flourishing.⁴ Within this garden, humans are represented as living in non-hierarchical gender relationships,⁵ and in an intrinsically non-violent world, where

¹ For a helpful discussion of these themes, see J. Richard Middleton, *The liberating image: The imago Dei in Genesis 1*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

² Gen 1.

³ Gen 2: 10–16.

⁴ Gen 1:28.

⁵ Gen 1:27.

even the eating of animals has not yet been sanctioned.⁶ Although the Hebrew word *shalom* (weakly rendered ‘peace’ in many English translations of the Bible) is not used, this is a powerful depiction of the holistic well-being which the noun represents.

Genesis 3, of course, introduces the complications in the plot. The man and the woman take the fruit which has been forbidden to them, and as a direct result, violence enters the world. Gender relationships become disordered,⁷ the relationship with nature is disrupted,⁸ and very shortly afterwards, the first murder takes place.⁹ The flood that is unleashed upon the world shortly afterward is a direct consequence of its violence;¹⁰ note that the world is already ‘ruined’ by violence and so God chooses to ‘ruin’ it.¹¹

From here on, the biblical trajectory is aiming towards the restoration of that lost *shalom*. The Old Testament law can be understood, in part, as an attempt to model the nation along the lines of *shalom*; legislating for neighbourly co-operation,¹² the limitation of vengeance,¹³ and the maintenance of law and order, though this is sometimes effected by violent means.¹⁴ In a similar vein, though a different genre, the book of Proverbs offers advice from personified ‘Wisdom’ towards those who will listen, teaching them how to live well in God’s world with advice on matters such as gossiping, the impartiality of judges, and marital fidelity.¹⁵

The prophets have an even bigger vision for *shalom*, strongly condemning societal injustice¹⁶ and setting out a vision for an eschatological¹⁷ reign of peace. In this society, which they envision, *shalom* will once again be the norm. Their imagery is Edenic: animals will no longer prey on one another,

⁶ Gen 1:29, cf. 9:3.

⁷ Gen 3:16.

⁸ Gen 3:17–19.

⁹ Gen 4:8.

¹⁰ Gen 6:11–14.

¹¹ See L. Daniel Hawk, *The Violence of the Biblical God*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019): 30–37.

¹² E.g. Exodus 22:14–15.

¹³ E.g. Leviticus 24:19–21.

¹⁴ E.g. Numbers 35:30–31.

¹⁵ See, for example, Prov 16:28; 18:5 and chapter 5.

¹⁶ E.g. Amos 2:6–8.

¹⁷ The eschaton refers to the Christian belief of the end of the world, heralded by the return of Jesus Christ and the final judgement.

or be a threat to humanity;¹⁸ and humanity will no longer be a threat to itself.¹⁹ This paradisaical world will be inaugurated by a true king who will reign victoriously, presiding over a kingdom of peace. The prophet Isaiah, for example, envisions a king emerging from the broken family tree of King David, who will govern with wisdom, mercy, and pity for the down-trodden.²⁰ One of the great prophecies of Isaiah, which is understood by Christians to refer to Jesus and is especially quoted at Christmas, is in this vein:

To us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.²¹

This vision of peace is evident throughout the New Testament. Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount extend the Old Testament's limitation of vengeance to an appeal for enemy love and forgiveness, 'turn the other cheek'.²² He describes peacemakers as children of God.²³ When his followers try to defend him with violence, he sternly warns that those who live by the sword will die by the sword.²⁴

In addition to this ethic of human non-violence, the New Testament speaks clearly and often of the possibility of peace (reconciliation) with God. At the birth narrative of Jesus, the angels announce to the shepherd's good news of peace (from God) to those on earth.²⁵ This divine-human peace is achieved by Jesus' death on the Cross and is the means of reconciliation between former enemies. Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles, is credited with these words concerning the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the early church.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility... that he

¹⁸ E.g. Isaiah 11:6–8.

¹⁹ E.g. Micah 4:3–4.

²⁰ Isa 11:1–10.

²¹ Isa 9:6, ESV.

²² Matt 5:39–48.

²³ Matt 5:9.

²⁴ Matt 26:52.

²⁵ Luke 2:10–14.

might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.²⁶

The Book of Revelation, written within and to the early church as a persecuted minority, positions the Kingdom of God as diametrically opposed to the bloody empire of Rome. Victory, in this context, is achieved through self-sacrifice.²⁷ Finally, in the closing chapters, which foretell the New Jerusalem, the imagery returns to the Edenic paradise. The curse of Genesis 3 is undone;²⁸ the tree of life, put out of human reach in Genesis 2:33, is given for the healing of the nations;²⁹ and murderers are excluded,³⁰ showing that this is a vision of a wholly non-violent society.

Biblical Violence

But throughout this idyllic-sounding trajectory, violence continually intrudes. Indeed, arguably, it is only in Genesis 1 and 2 (pre-Fall), and Revelation 21 and 22 (post-eschaton) where it is not in view. However, not all violence serves the same purpose, and it is important to delineate the types of violence that the text is representing. I have argued elsewhere that the failure to do this results in un-nuanced reading and the application of blunt hermeneutical instruments.³¹

So, violence is frequently *portrayed* by the text, reflecting its setting in, and composition within, a violent world. Thus, we encounter stories of individual violence³² and of battles.³³ There are also a number of instances

²⁶ Ephesians 2:13–18, ESV.

²⁷ Rev. 12:11.

²⁸ Rev. 22:3.

²⁹ Rev. 22:2.

³⁰ Rev. 22:15.

³¹ Helen Paynter, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God* by Gregory Boyd: Review, 2019 [Crucifixion of the Warrior God by Gregory Boyd: Review - CSBV \(csbvbristol.org.uk\)](https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk/review-of-crucifixion-of-the-warrior-god-by-gregory-boyd/) Accessed on 15 February 2021. See also Helen Paynter, *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today? Wrestling Honestly with the Old Testament* (Abingdon: BRF, 2019).

³² E.g. 2 Samuel 20:8–13.

³³ E.g. Genesis 14:1–12.

of sexual violence.³⁴ Sometimes the narration of such violence contains explicit or implicit criticism of it.³⁵

Violence is also *implied* by the text, particularly in the so-called psalms of imprecation. In such psalms, the song-writer appeals to God for violent action against his enemies; for example, ‘Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!’³⁶ It can be argued that making such an appeal to God requires the one praying to lay down their own ambition to violence.³⁷

Violence is also *attributed* to God in both testaments, usually in the context of judgment. For instance, in Numbers 16:35, fire comes out from the Lord and burns up 250 men who had attempted to usurp the authority of Moses. In the New Testament, some of the parables of Jesus have the God-figure acting violently.³⁸ And Revelation, notwithstanding the theme of non-violence outlined above, also uses torrid metaphors of violence.³⁹

For many Christians, the most problematic type of violence encountered in the Bible is the *directive* of violence; places where God’s people are commanded to act violently. The largest cluster of such texts, and arguably the most problematic, relates to the Conquest of Canaan by Joshua and his armies.⁴⁰ This is often an aggressive war and appears, on plain reading at least, to command the slaughter of non-combatants.⁴¹

HISTORIC CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS BIBLICAL VIOLENCE

For many Christians, these texts, particularly the ones where God appears to command violence, evoke significant ethical discomfort – we will shortly consider some of the apologetics which are offered. However, this is not

³⁴ E.g. Judges 19.

³⁵ The egregious story of Judges 19 amounts to a sharp critique of the nation of Israel in the time of the Judges. See Helen Paynter, *Telling Terror in Judges 19: Rape and Reparation for the Levite’s Wife*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

³⁶ Ps 139:19.

³⁷ For example, David Firth says that the individual laments ‘reject all forms of human violence. Within the ‘I’ psalms only the violence that may be enacted by Yahweh is acceptable.’ David Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 3.

³⁸ E.g. Luke 12:46

³⁹ E.g. Revelation 17–18.

⁴⁰ This is mainly found in Joshua 1–12, and also prefigured in Deuteronomy.

⁴¹ E.g. Deut 20:16.

always the case. Historically (and still sometimes today), interpretations have sometimes been offered which instrumentalize the texts in ways which maintain an oppressive *status quo* or justify violence in the world of the interpreter. We will here consider two examples.

Some Interpretations of a Text of Sexual Violence

Judges 19 contains an appalling story of the gang rape and murder of a low-status wife who has run away from her husband. She is thrown out to a baying mob by her husband, who is himself facing the threat of rape. There is no narratorial comment to suggest that God is approving of the woman's suffering. However, this has not prevented commentators from victim-blaming her. For example, it has been used as a cautionary tale to warn prospective brides about obeying their husbands. This is from the fourteenth-century writer, Geoffroy de la Tour-Landry:

And therfor euery woman aught to restraine wrathe, and to plesse and suffre her husbonde, and he be wroth, with faire langage, and not to go away from hym, as ded that woman, of the whiche come moche sorow, as the dethe of her selff and of so gret nombre of pepill.⁴²

Regrettably, such attitudes are still to be found today. In a Bible commentary written in 2009, Keith Brooks leaps to the brutal conclusion, 'In the miserable end of this woman, we see the hand of God punishing her for her uncleanness.'⁴³

Because of the averted threat of male-on-male rape, the text has sometimes been used as part of an anti-homosexual polemic:

Here one could ask whether the old man should be excused from guilt for exposing or offering his own daughter and the Levite's wife to the lust of

⁴² In more modern English: "And therefore every woman ought to restrain wrath and to please and suffer her husband, if he be wroth, with fair language, and not to go away from him, as that woman did, of which came much sorrow, as the death of herself and of so great number of people." Geoffroy de la Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, Compiled for the Instruction of his Daughters*, transl. Thomas Wright (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1906), Chapter LXII, 94.

⁴³ Keith L. Brooks, *Summarized Bible: Complete Summary of the Old Testament* (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 2009), 55.

these impious men to avoid a more serious crime, namely the crime against nature.⁴⁴

Many further examples of historical interpretations like this could be given. In more contemporary Protestant scholarship, texts like this are read with much more sensitivity to the experience of the woman, and with an eye to the way that the text in fact criticises the violence against her.

Some Historic Readings of the Conquest of Canaan

With regard to the battles of Joshua, these texts have at various points in history been used to attempt to justify acts of violence against others. In 1095, Pope Urban II stirred up crusaders by telling them, 'It is our duty to pray, yours to fight against the Amalekites'.⁴⁵ The Amalekites were one of the chief foes of ancient Israel, intended to be subject to total extermination.⁴⁶ Here, the term is being used of Muslims.

More recently, such texts were quoted to promote the ideology of degeneracy, the fore-runner of the eugenics movement, which sought to eliminate people with 'defective' genetic traits. Massachusetts clergyman John Hayley wrote this in 1876:

Had the women and children been spared, there would soon have been a fresh crop of adult Amalekites, precisely like their predecessors. Or suppose merely the children had been saved... they might, from their hereditary disposition and proclivities to evil have proved a most undesirable and pernicious element in the nation. It was, doubtless, on the whole, the best thing for the world that the Amalekite race should be exterminated.⁴⁷

The name of another of Israel's ancient enemies, the Ammonites, was used to incite violence against the Native Americans during the White colonialization of North America. The New England Puritan minister, Cotton

⁴⁴ Denis the Carthusian, *Enarrationes in Judicum*. Quoted in Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 127 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Quoted in P. Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why we can't ignore the Bible's violent verses*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 125.

⁴⁶ E.g. Deut 25:17–19.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Jenkins, *Laying Down*, 114.

Mather, referred to them as ‘these Ammonites who perceived that they had made themselves to stink before the New-English Israel’.⁴⁸

Many other such examples could be provided. However, such appetite for violence was by no means universal in church history. In fact, during the first three centuries of the Christian church, it appears that official teaching was unanimously non-violent.⁴⁹ These remarks from the Church Father Origen of Alexandria (c.184–c.254 CE) are indicative:

We came in accordance with the commands of Jesus to beat the spiritual swords that fight and insult us into ploughshares, and to transform the spears that formerly fought against us into pruning-hooks. No longer do we take the sword against any nation, nor do we learn [the art of] war any more, since we have become sons of peace [cf. Luke 10:6] through Jesus who is our leader.⁵⁰

One of the ways in which Origen achieves this stance is by reading the Conquest narratives allegorically, to refer to the personal battle of the Christian against evil. To quote from Origen once again:

I myself think it is better that the Israelite wars be understood in this way, and it is better that Jesus [Joshua]⁵¹ is thought to fight in this way and to destroy cities and overthrow kingdoms... Would that the Lord might thus cast out and extinguish all former evils from the souls who believe in him—even those he claims for his kingdom—and from my own soul, its own evils; so that nothing of a malicious inclination may continue to breathe in me... For thus, purged from all former evils and under the leadership of Jesus, I can be included among the cities of the sons of Israel.⁵²

⁴⁸ Quoted in Jenkins, *Laying Down*, 133–4.

⁴⁹ Kalantzis, George. *Caesar and the lamb: early Christian attitudes on war and military service*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

⁵⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 5.33. Quoted in Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 136.

⁵¹ The names ‘Jesus’ and ‘Joshua’ are the same in Hebrew.

⁵² Origen, ‘Homily on Joshua 13:3’. In Franke, J. R. (ed) *Ancient Commentary on Christian Scripture, Volume IV. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 63.

CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

This very brief consideration of some of the ways that biblical texts of violence have been interpreted historically brings us to the question of the contemporary interpretation of biblical violence in Christian (Protestant) scholars. In order to limit the field of enquiry, we will focus on perspectives taken towards the Conquest of Canaan, generally regarded as the most ethically challenging texts to interpret. Four different approaches will be described, in an attempt to reflect something of the diversity of thought and the state of the contemporary debate. We begin with one approach which is sometimes expressed (usually in far less sophisticated terms than the scholarly approach described below) by Christians in the church: God commanded it, so it must be good.

Sui Generis

The term *sui generis*, which means ‘of its own kind’, can be used as a summary of a number of approaches towards the Conquest. Their argument—which has been proposed in various forms for 100 of years—is that God’s commands, and the actions of Joshua, were righteous because the Canaanites were wicked. This would be supported by certain elements of the Old Testament text, such as Deuteronomy 9:5.

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you.

By this argument, the Canaanites deserved death (and, indeed, it had been mercifully held back for generations), and so the actions of Joshua in slaying them were the righteous enactment of God’s judgment. Moreover, the Canaanites represented a serious moral threat to the incoming Israelites, and so they had to be eliminated for safety’s sake. As one proponent, Eugene Merrill says, ‘they were irretrievably lost to anti-God idolatry and was certain to proselytise Israel to do the same.’⁵³

⁵³Eugene H. Merrill, ‘The case for moderate discontinuity.’ In C.S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard and Tremper Longman III *Show them no mercy. 4 views on God and Canaanite genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003): 61–96 (83).

But modern scholars who present this perspective take care to point out that this represents a singular moment in the history of the world, never to be repeated. This is because of the particularity of Israel, as shown in the covenant promises which God had made to Abraham and his descendants, Israel.⁵⁴ Again, we quote Merrill,

Israel's role in the implementation of Yahweh war needs careful attention because *only Israel was authorised to carry it out in Old Testament times*. The reason for this dubious privilege is clear: Israel was the elect people of God, chosen not just to mediate the message of Salvation to the world but also to serve as his agent in bringing to pass his will on the earth... And even Israel could do so only when God gave special mandate and instruction in each case.⁵⁵

In the end, Merrill concedes that he has to fall back on an unresolvable tension.

The moral and ethical dilemma of Yahweh war must [...] remain without satisfying rational explanation. At the risk of cliché, all that can be said is that God if God is all the Bible says he is, all that he does must be good – and that includes his authorization of genocide⁵⁶

The contemporary Christian scholars who have explored this approach in most detail are undoubtedly Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, in their careful, almost forensic, examination of the question: did God really command genocide?⁵⁷ As is true for all of the scholars, we are examining in this chapter, Copan and Flannagan's work is far broader and more nuanced than I am able to give justice to here. They argue that the Canaanites could have responded favourably to God, or at least fled without fighting Israel, and they lay stress on the rhetorical and hyperbolic nature of the text. They also argue, partly on legal grounds, that no true genocide occurred. Nonetheless, they concede that some innocent people were killed. The heart of their argument then lies in a pair of questions, both of

⁵⁴ E.g. Genesis 15:7–15.

⁵⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, 'The case for moderate discontinuity.' In Cowles, *Show them no mercy*, 84–85.

⁵⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, 'The case for moderate discontinuity.' In Cowles, *Show them no mercy*, 94.

⁵⁷ Paul Copan, and Matthew Flannagan. *Did God really command genocide?: Coming to terms with the justice of God*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014).

which are examined carefully from a philosophical and theological, sometimes almost a judicial perspective. I set them out, in extreme summary, here.

- Question: can one *coherently* claim that [a morally perfect] God commanded the killing of innocents?

Answer: yes. Based on the argument that the killing of innocent people can, in rare cases of supreme emergency, be overridden, there is nothing inherently incoherent about this position.⁵⁸

- Question: is it *rational* to believe God commanded the killing of innocents?

Answer: yes. Even if the reasons given in the ‘annihilation’ texts are considered inadequate, they do not reveal God’s reasons, only the incentive or explanation that he offers to Israel. ‘If we can’t justifiably attribute a command to God unless we know why he commands it, then we won’t be able to attribute any commands to God, even a command to not kill.’⁵⁹ And it is perfectly reasonable to expect God to act through human mediators even though he could take direct action himself.

Copan and Flannagan then pose the rhetorical question: what if someone claimed that God commanded killing the innocent today? Like Merrill, they conclude that although God commanded it back in the time of the conquest, he never will again. Their reasons are slightly different from Merrill’s, and centre on the epistemological issue of how God can be heard to speak today. Because the biblical canon is closed, it is not possible anymore to proclaim infallibly ‘thus says the Lord’. Therefore, nobody today can satisfy the four biblical criteria of prophetic authenticity, which would be required to validate such a claim.

This approach proves satisfying to some Christians and unhelpful to others. Indeed, some would express significant antipathy to such arguments. Moving to the other extreme of the debate, then, we will now consider the approaches that seek to weaken the voice of the Old Testament in contemporary interpretation.

⁵⁸ Copan, *Did God really command genocide?*, 186–193.

⁵⁹ Copan, *Did God really command genocide?*, 210–232, quotation from p.244.

Marginalising or Relativising the Old Testament

A controversial figure in the early church was Marcion, who was active in the early part of the second century.⁶⁰ He was so offended by the representation of God that he found in the Old Testament that he rejected it entirely from the canon. He then selected a group of texts which he considered to amount to true scripture; these were Luke's gospel and ten of the Pauline epistles. Even these were subject to his editorial scissors, such that his contemporary Irenaeus described him as mutilating the text. Marcion had a dualistic cosmology, with the good god of the New Testament set against the evil god of the Old Testament. His views were vigorously opposed by many of the church fathers, including Irenaeus and Tertullian, whose arguments prevailed, and Marcion was relegated to the status of heretic.

While I am not aware of any Christian scholar explicitly resurrecting the arguments of Marcion today, driving a wedge between the Old and New Testaments is one of the solutions proposed by modern apologists. One prominent scholar who seeks to do this is Eric Seibert. Like the majority of Christian interpreters, Seibert proposes that the representation of God found in Jesus Christ is the controlling hermeneutic (interpretive tool) for all of the rest of Scripture. Seibert's approach becomes more distinctive in his solution, where he proposes that where the textual God differs from this, the reader should infer that human error has influenced the writing of the text. For instance, Seibert writes,

Old Testament portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals should be regarded as trustworthy and reliable reflections of God's character, while those that do not measure up should be regarded as distortions.⁶¹

Seibert calls this approach a 'Christocentric' hermeneutic. Similar, but crucially different, is an approach offered by Greg Boyd, which he calls a 'cruciform hermeneutic'. Boyd also sees the Old Testament texts of violence as misrepresentations of the true character of God, but he goes further than Seibert in attempting to address them. He argues that these texts

⁶⁰ A good summary of what is known about Marcion's life and theology can be found in Paul Foster, 'Marcion: His life, works, beliefs, and impact.' *The Expository Times* 121, no. 6 (2010): 269–280.

⁶¹ Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009), 185.

reveal the character of God in a different way, likening it to the way that Jesus silently suffered the false accusations at his trial and then the punishment for them. A similar humility towards the maligning of his character has led God to allow himself to be utterly misrepresented in parts of the Old Testament text, and in these false representations, we see the gentle meekness of God revealed.⁶² This leads, then, to the paradoxical suggestion that '[t]he more a scriptural accommodation conceals God's true nature on its surface, the more profoundly it reveals God's true nature in its depths'.⁶³

Both Seibert and Boyd wish to be clear that they are not advancing a Marcionite hermeneutic. Indeed, Eric Seibert is a professor of the Old Testament. On this matter he says,

Rather than rejecting the Old Testament, I have proposed an interpretive approach that can help us evaluate the appropriateness of various portrayals of God in the Old Testament... Just because we find some portrayals of God problematic, we should not repeat the mistake of Marcion. Marcion treated the Old Testament as though it came from one cloth, so to speak, equally bad and problematic from start to finish. In doing so, he robbed himself of many valuable and unobjectionable insights that can be derived from the pages of the Old Testament.⁶⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these methodological approaches have been welcomed and condemned in equal measure among Christian scholars. It is fair to say that centralising the life and death of Jesus Christ as a hermeneutical principle for the whole of Scripture is a standard approach for Christian scholarship.⁶⁵ However, what this actually means is far more diversely understood. Both Seibert and Boyd have been criticised for

⁶² Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Volumes 1 & 2*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2017), 502.

⁶³ Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 651.

⁶⁴ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 211.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Gospel-centered hermeneutics: foundations and principles of evangelical biblical interpretation*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 296–317.

centralising certain aspects of Jesus—the ‘meek and mild’ elements of his character—to the neglect of others.⁶⁶

The relationship between the Old Testament and the New, and the force which Old Testament commands have for Christians, is a source of ongoing debate among Protestant scholars. A good example of this with regard to the Conquest of Canaan is found in a book published in 2003, where four Christian scholars each offered a different perspective on the question.⁶⁷ At one end of the spectrum of thought is CS Cowles. Writing much earlier than Seibert and Boyd, he offers what might be considered an early version of their argument, in what he describes as ‘The Case for Radical Discontinuity’ between the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁸

At the other end of the spectrum, Tremper Longman III argues for ‘spiritual continuity’ between the testaments, outlining five phases of holy war in the Bible. The Conquest of Canaan falls into the first phase, where God fights the flesh-and-blood enemies of Israel. Later in the story, however, God is prepared to fight *against* Israel, by means of human agents, when they are disobedient to him. Longman’s third phase is the Old Testament prophets’ vision of God as an eschatological warrior, who will one day arise majestically to free his oppressed people. Moving into the New Testament, Longman points out the spiritualization of the language of ‘enemies’, with passages such as these words of Paul’s; ‘We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’.⁶⁹ Here, Jesus Christ is the warrior who defeats those powers and authorities, not with the weapons of war, but by his death and resurrection. The fifth phase is the eschatological battle of, for example, Revelation 19:11–21, which represents the final judgment and the beginning of the age of peace. Longman locates the narratives of the Conquest of Canaan in the first of these phases.

⁶⁶ For a critique of Seibert along these lines, see John Anderson, ‘Eric A. Seibert, Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God’, *Review of Biblical Literature* [<http://www.bookreviews.org>] (2011) Accessed on 16.02.21. For a similar critique of Boyd, see Paul Copan, ‘Not Cruciform Enough: Getting Our Hermeneutical Bearings in the Wake of a Boydian Reinterpretation’ in Helen Paynter and Trevor Laurence (eds) *Hermeneutics of Violence* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2022).

⁶⁷ We have already considered Eugene Merrill’s contribution to this book.

⁶⁸ C.S. Cowles, ‘The case for radical discontinuity.’ In Cowles, *Show them no mercy*, 13–44.

⁶⁹ Eph 6:12.

While in the Old Testament the Israelites were often used by God as an instrument of his judgment, it is now a betrayal of the gospel to take up arms to defend or promote the interests of Christ. However, this discontinuity is not absolute. There is also continuity, especially as we look to the New Testament's picture of the final judgement... All *herem*⁷⁰ warfare, spiritual and physical, derives from the conflict anticipated in the curse against the serpent at the time of the Fall [Genesis 3:15].⁷¹

For Longman, then, the Conquest is the physical precursor of the spiritual triumph of good over evil at the eschaton.

Historically Minimising Approaches

The rise of the historical-critical method in the nineteenth century opened up a more sceptical approach to scripture. Narratives were no longer understood to be, per se, accurate representations of underlying events. Indeed, the discipline of history studies was itself undergoing a revolution, and all of this fed into scholarly approaches to scripture, which started asking questions about the events which lay behind the text. Some of these questions related to the literary sources which had been spliced together to form the final text. More pertinently to our question, some of those questions lay around the historical accuracy of the traditions.⁷²

With regard to the events of the book of Joshua, there is little extra-biblical material to support the stories. An Egyptian victory memorial called the Merneptah Stela, dated to around 1230 BCE, lists 'Israel' as one of several city-states in Palestine at that time. However, the archaeological evidence for the sort of *Blitzkrieg* Conquest event which the book

⁷⁰ *Herem* is the one of the Hebrew words used in the conquest accounts. It is sometimes translated 'utterly destroy' but more accurately could be rendered 'devote to the deity'. It neither mandates nor precludes death as an outcome. See Paynter, *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today?*, 128–9.

⁷¹ Tremper Longman III, 'The case for spiritual continuity.' In Cowles, *Show them no mercy*, 161–187 (187).

⁷² For a balanced, representative analysis of some of the issues by a confessional scholar, see David M. Howard, 'History as history: the search for meaning.' In David A. Howard and Michael A. Grisanti (eds) *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Apollos, 2003), 25–53.

of Joshua appears to describe is largely lacking.⁷³ Some theories suggest, then, that Israel was part of the indigenous population, which gradually displaced the other people groups, rather than scorching through the land as the text appears to claim.

While more conservative Christian scholars normally tend to resist the de-historicising move,⁷⁴ there is something in this argument which appeals to many of those charged with providing an apologetic for the Canaanite Conquest. Further evidence for a lack of ‘photographic’ accuracy can be adduced in the obvious rhetorical structure of the text, which conforms to Ancient Near-Eastern forms of battle rhetoric. K. Lawson Younger gives an example of such hyperbole, from Egyptian archive material.

All the ground was ablaze with his fire; he burned all the countries with his blast... He took no note of the millions of foreigners; he regarded them as chaff... His majesty slew the entire force of the wretched foe... as well as all the chiefs of all the countries that had come with him... I was after them like a griffin; I defeated all the foreign countries, I alone. For my infantry and my chariotry had deserted me; not one of them stood looking back.⁷⁵

However, such arguments have their limitations. The apologetic, which argues that the actual death count of the Conquest was lower than the biblical narrative implies, fails to address some important issues, not least because for many Christians, one such death is one too many. Further, in historical terms, any ‘behind the text’ reconstruction of events that we attempt will necessarily be conjectural, and therefore form an unreliable foundation for building hypotheses upon.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the *Christian* (as opposed to the secular) scholar will typically be attempting to draw theological conclusions from the text; that is, she will be attempting to listen to the theological message that the text is seeking to communicate. And this, axiomatically, cannot be deduced from a reconstruction—accurate or otherwise—of the events underlying the narrative. As L. Daniel Hawk suggests,

⁷³ A notable exception is the city of Hazor, where there is a clear burn layer in the 13th stratum, consistent with the biblical account in Joshua 11:10–11. Ben-Tor, Amnon. “Who Destroyed Canaanite Hazor?” *Biblical archaeology review* 39, no. 4 (2013), 27–36, 58.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Kenneth Kitchen, *On the reliability of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

⁷⁵ K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A study in Ancient Near Eastern and biblical history writing* (JSOT Press, 1990), 245.

Although I practice historical-critical interpretation and agree that we can detect biblical authors' intentions to a certain extent, I do not believe that historical criticism can bear the theological weight placed on it by these and similar studies... It is one thing to draw upon the fruit of historical research to elaborate aspects of the world presented by the biblical text. It is quite another to construct a hypothetical historical scenario in support of a theological reading, to set that scenario over against the biblical narrative, and then to use it to judge the theological witness of the biblical text as plainly rendered.⁷⁶

The situation is more complex than the mere enquiry about 'what actually happened', however. In addition to its undoubted rhetorical flourishes, the book of Joshua itself appears to represent more than one view of the Conquest. The *Blitzkrieg*-type account mentioned above is only one part of the story. At times, the text feels as if it is constructed in the dialogue between a polemical, 'totalising' narrator and a more cautious, moderate one. Take, for example, the two accounts of the fate of the inhabitants of Debir, which occur in two halves of the same verse:

When Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking them with a great blow until they were wiped out, and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities...⁷⁷

When the claims of the text are being evaluated for their ethical significance, the *polyphony* of these voices should be allowed to play. Polyphony is a term coined by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to describe divergent voices which debate within a text, with neither having the privilege of the final word. It is a tool which some biblical scholars are beginning to use, and which may continue to enlighten our reading of texts such as Joshua.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Hawk. *The Violence of the Biblical God*, 14.

⁷⁷Josh 10:20, ESV.

⁷⁸Anthony Thiselton, 'Polyphonic Voices in Theological Fiction: Job, Eliot and Dostoyevsky on Evil' in Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout (eds). *The promise of hermeneutics*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 172–182. Much of the pioneering work in this field has been performed by the Dominican scholar Barbara Green.

Comparative Approaches

A fourth apologetic approach to the question of the Conquest can be termed the comparative approach. Some of the best work in this area has been done by John Walton. Walton is interested in the history, archaeology, literature and language of the Ancient Near East, because it provides a window into the shared cultural worldview in the region. Israel's sacred literature is at certain times a product of this worldview, and at other times a reaction against it.⁷⁹ We have already seen that Ancient Near Eastern Conquest accounts generally followed a stylised, hyperbolic pattern, and that this provides insight into the ways in which the biblical writers are framing their own discourse.

In a book co-written with his son, J. Harvey Walton, John Walton offers some careful work around the meaning of a particular Hebrew word, *herem*, which is one of the chief ways that the actions of Joshua and his soldiers at the Conquest are described. *Herem* is often translated as 'utterly destroy',⁸⁰ and therefore taken to be the equivalent of mass slaughter. English Bibles vary in the way that they handle this word. Compare these three translations of Joshua 8:26, where the translation of the word *herem* is rendered in bold.

But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had **devoted** all the inhabitants of Ai **to destruction**. (ESV)

For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had **utterly destroyed** all the inhabitants of Ai. (NRSV)

Joshua kept his spear pointed at Ai and did not put it down until every person there had been **killed**. (GNB)

By means of the technique of comparative studies and building on the work of philologists, the Waltons show that the root meaning of *herem* relates to the removal of an object from normal use.⁸¹ This is why it can also be translated as 'devote to the deity'. Designating an object *herem* means that it is either taken into the sanctuary or destroyed; it is not

⁷⁹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the conceptual world of the Hebrew Bible*. (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 15–28.

⁸⁰ E.g. Deut 20:17

⁸¹ John H., Walton, and J. Harvey Walton. *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 169–194.

available for everyday purposes. With regard to the exercise of this verb upon people groups, the Waltons argue that it is the *identity* of the people which is to be expunged, not necessarily the people themselves. This is why the Canaanites are not eligible as marriage partners, because this would be a 'normal' means of interaction.⁸² So Walton and Walton write,

The combination of the hyperbolic rhetoric with the successful *herem* of the city does not mean "they didn't really kill all of them, but they left some of them in the city". Rather it means "they decisively cleared them all out of the city, one way or another".⁸³

They offer a helpful example of how they believe *herem* was viewed in the character of Rahab. Rahab is a Jerichoite, which means that she is subject to the *herem* order against her city.⁸⁴ However, she does not die, but is brought into the heart of the nation of Israel, and ultimately into the ancestry of Jesus Christ.⁸⁵ The Waltons argue that Rahab is not *exempted* from *herem* by these means, but that by being absorbed into the nation of Israel, she experiences *herem* just as truly as those who die experience it.⁸⁶

The reason that the Canaanites are subject to the *herem* order, according to Walton and Walton, is that they are viewed in the same way that most ancient societies regarded people groups who existed on the margins of their experience: as demiurges, abominable others, who represented the chaos that was continually pushing back against the created order.⁸⁷ There is therefore a mythic element to the events of the book of Joshua, whereby, in the ancient mind, the people of Israel are participating with their deity in clearing aside chaotic otherness in order to participate with God and establish a new world. The events of the Conquest, the Waltons' argue, are charged with new creation imagery.⁸⁸

As with the other readings, the extent to which the Waltons' theories have proved satisfying to Christians troubled by these texts is various. It is probably fair to say that they may have reframed the questions that the Conquest poses, but for most readers, they have not removed them.

⁸² See Deuteronomy 7:1–6, which legislates for herem and against intermarriage.

⁸³ Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 177.

⁸⁴ Josh 6:17.

⁸⁵ Josh 6:22–25; Matt 1:5.

⁸⁶ Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 212–4.

⁸⁷ Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 137–156.

⁸⁸ Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 157–168.

A different type of comparative approach is offered by William Webb and Gorde Oeste, in their book *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric: Wrestling with Troubling War Texts*. This is building upon a methodology previously published by Webb alone, where he demonstrates the existence of what he calls ‘redemptive trajectories’.⁸⁹ He argues that the ethical standards of the Old Testament laws are advancing the practice of the nation of Israel in comparison with the nations around them. However, this ethical advance does not represent a final destination, but a step on the way toward a perfect ethical standard. The Old Testament ethics should not, therefore, be evaluated against modern ethical standards (since we are—generally—further advanced along the trajectory), but against what they would have been without the restraint of the law.

In their book on war texts, Webb and Oeste examine the practices of the other Ancient Near-Eastern nations, with particular attention to their treatment of male and female prisoners of war. They conclude:

Israel’s war measures would have been considered mild or comparatively moderate within its larger ancient context. Repugnant as the biblical war texts are for modern readers (we cannot escape our ingrained Hague/Geneva horizon), they were markedly restrained in their day. To put it another way, the clear movement away from well-known war atrocities of the ancient world betrays significant incremental movement in a good, redemptive direction.⁹⁰

Rather than the Old Testament being a text that glories in bloody warfare, Webb and Oeste represent the God of the Old Testament as an ‘uneasy war God’, providing a detailed analysis of the ways in which militaristic patterns are subverted by the Old Testament text.⁹¹ One such example is found in 2 Kings 6:8–23, where the plans of an attacking group of Arameans are thwarted by the prophet of God. Through a burlesque series of events, the prophet leads the Aramean army into the court of the King of Israel. But rather than ending in battle or slaughter, there is an

⁸⁹ William J. Webb, *Slaves, women & homosexuals: Exploring the hermeneutics of cultural analysis*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁹⁰ William J Webb, and Gordon K. Oeste. *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?: Wrestling with Troubling War Texts*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 285.

⁹¹ Webb, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?*, 288–316.

unexpected feast, and the Arameans are sent on their way in peace. This is one of a number of examples offered by Webb and Oeste in defence of their argument that the God of the Old Testament is highly reluctant to go to war.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to sketch out a broad view of some of the key contemporary Protestant Christian responses to the ethical problem raised by the conquest of Canaan in the biblical book of Joshua. It is fair to say that the range of opinions in the churches will be at least as broad. Speaking personally for a moment, when I went on a lecture tour around the country a few years ago speaking on this subject, I encountered the range of opinions at close hand. I met people who shrugged and told me that the conquest did not challenge their view of the goodness of God, with about the same frequency that I encountered people who were ready to tear the Old Testament out of their Bibles. And in between were a whole range of Christians who had come to their own accommodation with the issue.

The matter is of relevance to the church today for two important reasons. First, Christian leaders are increasingly concerned about a lack of confidence in the Bible in some circles. This is not necessarily referring to the question of biblical inerrancy (though there will be a range of opinions about that, too), but rather to a general reduction in biblical literacy, and in some places, a reduced confidence in Scripture's value to address the present. It is this concern which drives much of the scholarship that we have considered above.

The second reason lies in Scripture's capacity to inspire contemporary violence when it is interpreted carelessly or cynically. We began with some historical examples where biblical violence had been used to endorse violence in a more modern setting. Such abuses continue today; the Capitol riots of 6th January 2021, with their highly visible use of Christian symbolism and practice, prove the point. For these reasons, it is imperative to Christian scholars that we continue to wrestle with these texts. It does not appear that the conundrum will be resolved any time soon.

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