

5. Violence-of-God Traditions in the New Testament



And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . . He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:46–47, 51–53)

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. . . . His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matt 3:7–8, 10, 12)

We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:17–18)



ASSESSING THE VIOLENCE-OF-GOD TRADITIONS in the New Testament is complicated by two factors. First, many biblical scholars and many Christians deny the extent to which violent images of God dominate the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian New Testament. Most Christians haven't read the Bible cover to cover. Many say that Jesus fulfills promises made in the Hebrew Bible, but they minimize the degree to which those promises and Christian rituals associated with them presume God's violence. Few take the time to try to understand how, when, why, or where a Jewish Jesus affirms, revolutionizes, or breaks with his tradition, including his challenge to the violent images of God that dominate the exodus, exile, and apocalyptic story lines discussed previously. To the degree that violence is an issue, many Christians conclude that the God of the Old Testament is violent, wrathful, and judging, and that the God of the New Testament is loving, forgiving, and graceful.

The passages just cited and many more undermine this view. Mary, consistent with the promises of Isaiah, announces a long-awaited reversal in historical affairs as the result of God's liberating power. John the Baptist, like the apocalyptic writer of Daniel, divides the world into distinctive camps of good and evil and announces the imminent violent coming of God to judge, punish, and reward. The author of the book of Revelation rejoices that "Almighty God" has initiated the end time as promised in the book of Daniel and has "begun to reign," so that those who fear God can be rewarded and those who don't can be destroyed.

A second obstacle to assessing the violence-of-God traditions is a clash in perspectives that divides the historical Jesus from the New Testament writers.¹ The Gospel writers interpret the meaning of

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection through the lens of their own deeply held apocalyptic views, while leaving evidence imbedded in their accounts that the historical Jesus was nonviolent and rejected violent images of God. They paint Jesus, for example, as both apocalyptic and not apocalyptic. Both portraits can't be true.² In *Jesus against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*, I make the case that the New Testament writers betray Jesus because they interpret the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection in light of violent images of God and expectations of history that Jesus himself rejected.

The present chapter argues that the violence-of-God traditions embedded in the exodus, exile, and apocalyptic story lines of the Hebrew Scriptures are central to the New Testament as well. At the heart of these traditions is the desire to explain historical problems or to appropriate God's power in service to one's objectives. God the holy warrior will fight with us or send us a Messiah to liberate us and defeat our enemies. If we are in bondage, in exile, wiped out, or dominated by foreign empires, then God the punishing Judge is rightly punishing us for our sins; or in the apocalyptic worldview, God the violent, apocalyptic Judge is battling cosmic evil and is therefore preoccupied but will come soon to wipe out our enemies and reward us at history's end.

The violence-of-God traditions interact and overlap with each other so thoroughly throughout both the Old and New Testaments that it is difficult to isolate one from another. *God's liberating, punishing, or apocalyptic violence is the named or unnamed assumption behind nearly every passage, story, and theological claim in the New Testament.*

PUNISHING VIOLENCE

Violence-of-God traditions embedded in the key story lines of the Hebrew Scriptures presume that God is powerful, punishing, and in control of history. God the liberator punishes (defeats) enemies; God the ruthless Judge punishes the disobedient people of God; God the apocalyptic avenger of wrongs punishes evildoers at the end of

history and rewards the faithful. The presumption of God's punishing violence also lies at the heart of the Christian New Testament that claims Jesus as Savior and understands the death of Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice. From what, we should ask, does Jesus save us? The classic answer is that Jesus saves us from the consequence of our sin. God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to die for us. Believe this and be not condemned (John 3:16–17).

Many Christians see in these words a gracious God who loves us enough to send his only son to die in our place so that we might avoid our deserved punishment, go to heaven instead of hell, and have eternal life. Brutal images of God remain hidden behind these rose-colored interpretations. If we believe that Jesus died for us so that we will not be condemned, then we should ask, "Condemned by whom?" The answer is, God. What remains unstated in classic Christian statements of faith is that Jesus dies in order to save us from God, not from sin. More precisely, Jesus' sacrificial death saves us from a violent God who punishes sin.

The idea that God sent Jesus to die for our sins makes sense only if we embrace violent and punishing images of God featured prominently in the Hebrew Scriptures. The violent God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian New Testament requires appeasement, sacrifices, and holiness. Regina M. Schwartz argues that the "sacrifices of Cain and Abel suggest . . . an offering to ward off divine wrath, to encourage the deity's favor, to invoke his blessings of prosperity."³ The image of Yahweh is not loving or compassionate but violent and unpredictable. Offerings and sacrifices are human attempts to appease a wrathful deity, but success is by no means assured. Abel succeeds. Cain fails. The text doesn't say why. It gives the impression that God is violent, petty, arbitrary, and to be feared.

Priestly writers say God orders disobedient children to be murdered (Lev 20:9, Deut 20:18–21) and a man who gathers sticks on the Sabbath to be stoned to death (Num 16:32–36) because they believe these actions are necessary to appease a violent deity. The overwhelming preoccupation with holiness in the priestly writings is rooted in fear that God will "vomit" unholy people out of the land

(Lev 18:24–25). Ezra, the priestly writer who may have been the redactor who gave final shape to the Torah, took the premise that God requires strict holiness—including separation from all that defiles—to its logical and troubling conclusion. After the Persian Empire allowed the Jewish ruling class to go home, Ezra explained that exile was a consequence of mixed marriages:

[The officials said,] “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands. . . . For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.” . . .

[I said,] “From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.” (Ezra 9:1b, 2, 7)

The scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement, known as Yom Kippur, became a prominent frame of reference for sacrificial interpretations of Jesus’ death. It is described in Leviticus 16 and became one of the most important of all Jewish festivals. The ritual involved two goats. One goat was slaughtered as a “sin offering” “for the LORD” (16:9, 15). The other goat was sent away “for Azazel” (a desert demon) and called “a scapegoat” because it was allowed to escape into the wilderness after having the sins of the people transferred onto it (16:8, 10 KJV). The scapegoat carried the sins of the people out of the holy land:

When he [the high priest] has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar [by sprinkling on it blood from the sacrificed goat], he shall present the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of

Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. (16:20–22)

The Day of Atonement was a priestly response to exile understood as God's just punishment for sin, including insufficient holiness. This "annual observance [of Yom Kippur], so important in post-exilic Israel, is never mentioned in the pre-exilic literature."⁴ In other words, Yom Kippur was a desperate attempt to appease a punishing God in the context of exile. The consistency of violence-of-God traditions throughout the Bible is clear when we remember that the New Testament writers present Jesus as the ultimate sacrificial lamb or as the scapegoat on whom the sins of the world are placed. Jesus stands between a wrathful deity and sinful humanity. His death substitutes for our own.

The Christian Eucharist also presumes the punishing violence of God. The language "body" and "blood" of Christ places the Lord's Supper in a sacrificial context, reinforcing the continuity in violence-of-God traditions between Old and New Testaments. The Jews were saved from divine slaughter in Egypt by marking their doorposts with the blood of a perfect sacrificial lamb so that a violent deity could identify and pass over their houses. Christians too will be spared God's wrath by the perfect blood sacrifice of Jesus. Understood in a sacrificial light, the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, ritualizes appeasement of a bloodthirsty, punishing deity. It commemorates Jesus' blood sacrifice in which Jesus stands between sinful humanity and God's violent judgment.⁵

Augustine employed a similar logic in arguing that the virgin birth had to be understood literally. Jesus, in order to appease a punishing deity, had to be born of a virgin in order to break the cycle by which women through childbirth passed on sin from generation to generation. Without the virgin birth, the sacrifice would not have

been perfect because Jesus would not have been born without sin. The rift between God and humanity, therefore, would not have been mended. When it was finally discovered that women had eggs and were more than divine incubators, the Catholic Church insisted, for the same reasons as noted above, that Mary had herself been immaculately conceived.⁶

Violent, punishing images and expectations of God infect the New Testament in other ways as well. God, who in the Exodus story is a capable land thief, in the book of Acts is a petty murderer. God kills Ananias and Sapphira because they withhold part of the proceeds from a voluntary land sale. Their generosity isn't rewarded. God wants all the money. By keeping some of it for themselves, they are guilty of putting "the Spirit of the Lord to the test" (Acts 5:9). You shouldn't put the Spirit of the Lord to the test any more than young boys should call a prophet "baldhead." After Ananias is told that he lied to God when he withheld part of the proceeds from the land sale, "he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it" (5:5).

The Gospel writer known as Matthew frequently places threatening and hateful words on the lips of Jesus. Like the prophet Muhammad who saddled Muslims with an unrelenting violence-of-God tradition (see chapter 6), Matthew can't seem to imagine people doing the right thing without warnings of violent judgments hanging over their heads, including threats of hell. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, and visit the imprisoned, and receive a heavenly reward. Fail to do so and you "go away into eternal punishment" (25:45–46). Matthew's Jesus consistently uses heavily apocalyptic imagery when warning the people of the imminent judgment to come:

Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (13:40–42)

Matthew is often an unreliable witness to Jesus. In his parables Jesus repeatedly exposes key actors in the oppressive system, only to have Matthew present those exposed as “God figures” that Matthew blesses with the authority of Jesus’ voice. These “God figures” consistently send people to the torturers or to other terrible punishments. Jesus’ favorite activity, according to Matthew, is to threaten people with violent punishments, using his preferred phrase, “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” “Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ ” (22:13). Then “the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (24:50–51). “But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! . . . As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ ” (25:26a, 30).

THE APOCALYPTIC AND MESSIANIC SEESAW

The strength of Roman imperialism (Rome dominated Palestine from 63 B.C.E. until well after the books of the New Testament were written), Jesus’ violent death (likely 30 C.E.), and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple (70 C.E.) led New Testament writers to reinforce and reshape the violence-of-God traditions at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Gospel writers, as we saw above, reaffirmed the tradition of God’s punishing violence when they interpreted Jesus’ death in light of atonement, blood sacrifice, and sin-bearing, scapegoat rituals. Equally prominent, however, were New Testament affirmations that Jesus life and death could best be understood in continuity with the violence-of-God traditions rooted in apocalyptic and messianic expectations.

Apocalyptic and messianic expectations ebbed and flowed throughout the historical period framed by Daniel’s articulation of

the apocalyptic worldview in response to Antiochus (approximately 165 B.C.E.) and writings of the New Testament (50–100 C.E.).⁷ Antiochus was overthrown by Jewish freedom fighters (the Maccabees) after a protracted guerrilla war. In stark contrast to new exodus expectations and prophetic promises, however, victory did not lead to liberation, peace, and prosperity. The post-Antiochus reality on the ground in Palestine was far removed from the old Davidic promise of everlasting kingship, restated by Daniel as a promise of “everlasting dominion” (7:14), and it was equally distant from Isaiah’s imperial pretensions of a historical reversal in which Israel would “possess the nations as male and female slaves” (14:2b). The Seleucid empire was defeated, but evil persisted. Following the Jewish triumph, repression, inequality, and brutal factionalism between Jewish priestly groups deepened. Evil was alive and well, but with the independent rule, it wore a transparently Jewish face.

Jewish groups interpreted the defeat of Antiochus in two distinctive ways, with each interpretation reinforcing a different violence-of-God tradition. Antiochus’s defeat for some rekindled the belief in liberating violence, holy war, and salvation understood as defeat of enemies. According to Marcus Borg, the victories of the Maccabees provided “empirical verification for the claim . . . that Yahweh gives victory to the chosen people, [and] demonstrated that resistance was reasonable, even when it seemed foolish on more pragmatic grounds.”⁸

Others understood things differently. Ongoing injustices and deepening hostility between different Jewish priestly factions drove the Essenes into the desert. This priestly, apocalyptic, monastic community saw the line of priest-kings associated with the Maccabees as illegitimate. The defeat of Antiochus and rise of the Maccabees didn’t verify holy war. Maccabean-led injustices, according to the Essenes, were an affront to God that confirmed the historical pessimism inherent in the apocalyptic worldview. They couldn’t imagine resolving differences with others within society or within history, and so the Essenes withdrew and prepared for a new violent coming of

God, at which time the present leaders of the temple would be destroyed. When Rome took control of Palestine in 63 B.C.E., the Essenes expanded the targets of God's violence to include their Roman oppressors."

The Essenes "saw themselves as the only Jews who were truly faithful to Yahweh's commands," and they observed "strict regulations of purity and obedience."¹⁰ They taught hatred of enemies and prepared for a "climactic battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness."¹¹ *Their Rule of the Community* (1QSa) stated that the "man of understanding" is expected to "hate all that He (God) has despised." Members of the community were to "love all the sons of light, / each according to his lot in the Council of God; / and . . . hate all the sons of darkness, / each according to his fault in the Vengeance of God." "These are the norms of conduct for the man of understanding in these times, concerning what he must love and how he must hate. Everlasting hatred for all men of the pit because of their spirit of hoarding."¹² According to Uta Ranke-Heinemann:

This hatred will break out in the approaching eschatological war. The end of the world, which the Qumran sect expected to come soon, would be preceded by a war of revenge and retribution, the war of the "sons of light" (the Qumran community) against the "sons of darkness." This war is described in detail in the *War Scroll* (1QM). . . . It will go on for forty years. In the first twenty years, all the foreign nations will be conquered; in the following twenty, all other Jews.¹³

Perhaps because the apocalyptic end was slow in coming, a resurgent expectation of a Davidic Messiah flowered near the time of Jesus' birth. Richard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman describe how in "the decades immediately preceding the birth of Jesus, a wide variety of messianic visions grew more fervent and vivid among the People of Israel." These visions, like their apocalyptic counterparts, were shaped by historical failures. Because "the members of the royal house of Judah and the later Hasmonean [Maccabean] kings had

proved themselves utterly powerless to live up to the responsibilities of their office and defend the people of Israel against the relentless advance of foreign empires [the latest being the Roman Empire], a radically new vision of the character of Israel's true messiah arose."¹⁴ At this juncture historical problems temporarily led away from apocalypticism as visions of an idealized earthly ruler were revived and refined. The new vision, according to Horsley and Silberman, centered on "the arrival of a messianic figure, a new son of David, who would finally lead Israel to regain its former glory and establish the Kingdom of God."¹⁵

Many Jews believed that the long-awaited messianic moment had arrived following the death of Herod the Great, a Rome-appointed client king who had ruled Palestine from 37 B.C.E. until 4 B.C.E. There were rebellions throughout Palestine, and initial successes allowed the people to appoint popular kings or messiahs. The success of these "sons of David" seemed to verify the views of those who had refined the visions of an idealized Davidic ruler and seemed to confirm Isaiah's promise that God would help Israel to triumph over the nations.

Messianic fantasies came crashing down as Roman soldiers slaughtered Jews, burned cities, and lined roads with crosses on which decaying corpses became food for birds and wild animals and served to discourage future rebellions. The destruction of popular kings and messianic claimants who fought against Rome and its client regimes following Herod's death would have had devastating consequences beyond the carnage of war. It marked another failure of historical promise and of theological vision. Bad news once again, however, proved to be fertile ground for apocalypticism. Rome's triumph set the stage for John the Baptist's historically pessimistic apocalyptic movement. John warned the people of "the wrath of God" soon coming. God, with "winnowing fork . . . in his hand," was ready to "clear his threshing floor," "gather his wheat into the granary," and burn the chaff with "unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:12).

John's apocalyptic promise went unfulfilled, and he was executed by one of Herod's sons. Instead of undermining apocalyptic fantasies,

John's death, Jesus' execution, and Jerusalem's destruction, like other historical crises, deepened expectations of God's violence and led to a recasting of the apocalyptic worldview itself. Seeds of apocalyptic thought were watered by bitter tears from many crushing defeats: the failure of Daniel's vision to be realized (neither the end time nor the end of injustice materialized), injustices linked to the Maccabees, the rise of Roman power, the oppressive client-king rule of Herod, the crushing defeat of "messiahs" at the hands of Roman soldiers, and John's death. Jesus, another declared Messiah, was crucified, and Roman soldiers later burned Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

In this context, New Testament interpretations of Jesus were rooted firmly in apocalyptic expectations that reaffirmed God's violent power. The Gospel writers were caught up in a groundswell of apocalyptic expectation for three key reasons. First, their hero Jesus had been crucified, and apocalypticism offered them a way to make sense of his death. One common explanation for Jesus' violent death was to present him as the apocalypse personified. Daniel had spoken of one like a human who would rule on God's behalf (7:13–14). The Gospel writers presented Jesus as a specific apocalyptic figure, the Son of Man, who would return soon as cosmic judge. Apocalyptic Daniel had reconciled God with brutal but temporary historical setbacks. The crucifixion was presented as an unexpected or even anticipated instrument in God's divine plan. Jesus' resurrection was the first fruit of the general resurrection anticipated by Daniel. Paul and the Gospel writers claimed that Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of the end time. Jesus was the apocalyptic "Son of Man," the cosmic judge who would return soon and oversee a final judgment. Ironically, Jesus the atoning sacrificial Lamb of God, who stood between a wrathful deity and sinful people, would return to wipe out most of humanity. Jesus, the Lamb, or returning Christ, became God's murderous apocalyptic accomplice, who would violently judge and crush enemies and evildoers at the end of history:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb." (Rev 14:9–10)

A second reason why the Gospel writers embraced apocalypticism is that between three and four decades *after* Jesus' murder and shortly *before* the Gospels were written, the Jewish temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in the Roman-Jewish war of 66–70 C.E. Apocalypticism offered a framework in which the destruction of temple and city could be understood as divine punishment for Jews rejecting Jesus.

A third reason the New Testament writers offered an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus is that by the time the Gospels were written many Jews had rejected Jewish Christian claims that Jesus fulfilled God's promises as laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures. Apocalypticism served as ideological window dressing for growing Christian hatred and desired revenge. Those who repudiated Jewish Christian interpretation of Jesus did not fare well in Gospel accounts. They were blamed for the murder of Jesus, and their rejection of Jesus was used to explain Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. It was only a small step to make God's punishment permanent. Those who rejected Jesus would face the same harsh fate as all enemies of God: they would spend eternity in hell.

The above analysis should make it abundantly clear that violence-of-God traditions lie at the heart of both the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian New Testament. Unfortunately, God's violent pathology is similarly reinforced throughout the Quran.

NOTES

1. Some examples of historical Jesus scholarship include Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); Robert W. Funk et al., *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 1993); and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus against Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001).

2. For a discussion of whether or not Jesus was apocalyptic, see Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 2001).

3. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

4. Raymond E. Brown, ed., et al., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 77.

5. For a description and critique of various atonement theories that have emerged throughout church history, see Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 161–70.

6. John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 94.

7. Paul's genuine letters were probably written between 50 and 62 C.E.; most other New Testament books, including three Gospels, the book of Acts, and Revelation, were written in the three decades following the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple. The Gospel of Mark may have been written between 66 and 70 C.E. and 2 Peter around 150 C.E. See Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (5th ed.; Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 353–54.

8. Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 55.

9. The compound of the Essenes was destroyed in 68 C.E. by the Romans, but not before the community hid its library. In 1947 and later years, the library was found hidden in caves near Qumran, just northeast of the Dead Sea.

10. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 20, 40.

11. *Ibid.*, 40.

12. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Away Childish Things* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 259.

13. Ibid.

14. Richard A. Horsley et al., *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grossett/Putnam, 1997), 15.

15. Ibid., 14–15.



Is Religion Killing Us?

Violence in the Bible and the Quran



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