

‘Destroy Them Totally’ – Towards An Understanding Of Violence Passages In The Bible

Philip Duncan Peters

Minister,
Free Church of Scotland/ PhD Candidate
University of Edinburgh
duncanpeters12@icloud.com

Abstract

Many modern readers of the Bible are shocked at the depictions of violence found in certain passages within its pages, and their dismay is confounded by the apparent Divine sanction given to some of this violence. Other readers, past and present, have used these ‘violence passages’ to justify their own violence in the name of religion. This article will focus on passages in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, which present the most extreme cases of ‘Biblical violence’, portraying God commanding the Israelites to destroy totally the inhabitants of the lands they are about to possess, and the Israelites implementing this command. We will attempt to dig beneath the surface of these texts to understand them in their historical and literary contexts and also how they function within the framework of the wider body of Scriptures of which they form a part. We will endeavor to present a more nuanced and sophisticated reading of these texts. Lastly, we will attempt to demonstrate that these passages can never be used as justification for religious-based violence today.

Keywords: Religious violence, biblical warfare, Israelite conquest, book of Joshua, book of Deuteronomy, biblical ethics

Introduction

Any reader working their way through the Bible will encounter a considerable amount of violence and warfare. Much of this is perhaps inevitable given that the Bible recounts long histories of ancient peoples and particularly of one people, the ancient Israelites.¹ However, what may surprise or shock many readers is that some of this violence appears to be Divinely sanctioned – God apparently commands violence and warfare, including in some cases, the killing of whole populations.

This paper will focus on what is arguably the most extreme episode of violence in the Bible: the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan.

The Biblical Narrative

To set the context, we will briefly outline the narrative as recounted in the first six books of the Bible. God chose Abra(ha)m and commanded him to leave his homeland in Ur and go to the land of Canaan. God promised blessing, including descendants and possession of the land in which Abraham lived as a nomadic herder. Many years later, during a famine, Abraham's grandson Jacob and his family went to live in Egypt where there was grain. There they increased in number and became a nation - the Israelites. After some time, they were enslaved by the Egyptians.

Some generations later, God appeared to Moses in the flames of a desert bush and commissioned him to go and lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the land God had promised their ancestors. God through Moses sent ten plagues on the Egyptians and led the Israelites out of Egypt, taking them through the sea and the wilderness to Mount Sinai. There God made a covenant with the Israelites which included laws

¹ In this paper, I use terms like 'Israelites' and 'ancient Israel' to distinguish clearly from the modern state of Israel.

and regulation concerning how to live as God's people and how to approach God in worship. God promised that he himself would drive out the current occupants of the land he would give them.

Due to the Israelites' rebellion against God, they were made to wander in the wilderness for forty years until that generation died out.² They were then brought to the borders of Canaan, where God reiterated and expanded his laws and regulations, including the command to destroy totally the current inhabitants of the land. The book of Joshua narrates this command being carried out, recounting the wide scale slaughter of the peoples of the land.³

Key Bible Passages

Deuteronomy 7:1-6

When Yahweh your God brings you into the land you are about to enter to take possession of, he will clear away many nations from before you – the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - seven nations more numerous and powerful than you. And when Yahweh your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must destroy them totally. Do not make a treaty with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons and do not take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your children away from following me, and they will serve other gods. Then Yahweh's anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you quickly. This is what you must do to them: break down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, hew down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen

² See Qur'an 5:21-26

³ Joshua (Arabic, Yūsha') is mentioned albeit not by name in Qur'an 18:60. He features in some Islamic traditions (Ibn Kathīr, 2003, 455-63)

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.⁴

Later in Deuteronomy, amid regulations for waging warfare, we find this paragraph:

Deuteronomy 20:16-18

However, in the cities of the peoples Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not let anything that breathes remain alive. You must destroy them totally – the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – just as Yahweh your God has commanded you. This is so that they will not teach you to do all the detestable things which they do for their gods and sin against Yahweh your God.

It should be noted that this is the exception to the normal rules of warfare. The norm was not to kill whole populations; indeed, it was to seek peace as a first resort (Deuteronomy 20:10-15, see Wright, 1996, 230). “Destroy them totally,” “Do not leave alive anything that breathes.” These commands of total slaughter were given by God himself. The book of Joshua describes the Israelites implementing these commands. Here is a sample:

They destroyed totally all who were in the city (Jericho) with the sword: men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys (Joshua 6:21).

Joshua captured Makkedah on that day. He struck down its king with the sword and totally destroyed everyone in it. He left no survivors (Joshua 10:28. See also 10:30, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 14).

In each of the above passages, I have marked with an asterisk a term which is a cognate of the Hebrew word *hērem*. The New International Version (NIV) footnote says, ‘The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to

⁴ Translations from the Bible are my own unless noted otherwise.

the LORD, often by totally destroying them.’ However, there are occasionally non-military contexts where destruction is not involved, as in Leviticus 27:28 (Moberly, 2013, 85). Moberly (2013, 75) cautions,

A translation such as “put under the ban” or simply “ban” is surely preferable, as it has the merit of being somewhat opaque in the kind of way that prevents the contemporary reader from too readily assuming that the meaning of the word is understood.

Wright (1996, 109) suggests that the *ḥērem* word group be understood as ‘an absolute and irrevocable *renouncing* of things or persons, a refusal to take any gain or profit from them.’⁵

Readers’ Reactions

For many contemporary Bible readers, this divinely sanctioned slaughter of whole nations sounds uncomfortably like genocide, something which blights our modern world and is widely regarded rightly as a monstrous evil. For many who are committed to believing the Bible as the word of God, as Divine revelation, these passages can raise questions which are deeply disturbing and seem insurmountable. On the other hand, there are readers who have made use of such passages to justify their own violence, warfare and genocidal actions in the name of religion. It has proved all too easy to identify one’s own side with the Israelites, ‘with God on our side’, and one’s enemies with the Canaanites and other nations who were condemned to destruction. Still other readers have reacted to these passages by dismissing the Bible as a primitive and barbaric book that has nothing to teach us in today’s world (e.g. Dawkins, 2006, 279-81). Is there a way ahead when faced with

⁵ See also Earl, 2010, 94-112, who deals with some of the complexities surrounding *ḥērem* language.

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

these huge challenges? How are we to understand these passages? Can we make any sense of them?

Understanding the Challenge

To begin with, it may be helpful to identify the nature of the challenge. The challenge, or challenges exist at several levels, and these are complex and interconnected.

Ethical. Do these passages legitimize or promote violence and even genocide in the name of God?

Theological. What kind of God do these texts portray?

Historical. There is evidence both external (Bimson et al, 1985, 38-39) and internal to the Bible that some of the wide scale violence that a surface reading of the text suggests, did not in actual fact take place.

Canonical (looking at Scripture as a whole). Within Jewish Scripture (what Christians term 'Old Testament'), there are many passages that view foreigners and non-Israelites positively and urge kindness and mercy towards such people. In the New Testament (NT), this ethic of love for neighbour, and even enemy, is further emphasized. In addition, there are passages that appear to reject violence as a means of defending or promoting religion. How are these teachings to be reconciled with the passages that describe divinely sanctioned violence?

Dead-End Solutions

Discard the Old Testament (OT)

One approach in facing these challenges that has surfaced frequently among Christians is in one way or another to discard the OT. An early extreme example of this was the second century CE teacher, Marcion, who argued that the God of the OT was a different being from the God revealed in the NT, although Marcion also discarded much of the NT as being too reflective of Judaism. Many less extreme

versions of this view have been advocated, which regard the accounts of warfare in Deuteronomy and Joshua as something ancient Israel thought or claimed they had divine sanction for, but in actual fact did not (e.g. Cowles, 2003, 11-46).

The problem with this from a Christian perspective is that Deuteronomy, Joshua and other parts of the OT present the order and implementation of the destruction of the Canaanites as divinely commissioned and sanctioned. In the key passages from Deuteronomy quoted above, the command is presented as coming from God. When we come to the NT, it is evident from every part, that the NT writers saw themselves and the whole Jesus-Messianic movement as being founded on Jewish Scripture and as the fulfillment of those Scriptures. The Israelite conquest of Canaan is mentioned with no hint of embarrassment or disapproval. In Acts 7:45, Stephen, in a speech surveying Israelite history, says, 'Our ancestors... took possession of the land of the nations whom God drove out before them.' The NT book of Hebrews, in a long list of examples of faith says,

By faith the walls of Jericho collapsed, after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab was not destroyed with those who were defiant because she welcomed the spies in peace (11:30-31)

The NT writers regard the conquest as part of sacred history, and not something to be disowned (Wright, 2009, 77).

Spiritualize the Narratives

Another approach is to spiritualize the conquest narratives, to treat them as lessons for moral and spiritual battles that individuals or communities face. Now there may be many spiritual lessons and principles that can be gleaned from books such as Joshua, but the primary function of Joshua is not to provide spiritual allegories but to record Israelite history, bearing in mind some of the rhetorical issues which we will examine in due course. As Christopher Wright (2009, 84) says,

‘The people in the stories are not allegorical fictions but are presented as historical. *It was not allegorical Israelites who attacked or allegorical Canaanites who died.*’⁶

The subtitle of this paper is ‘*Towards* an understanding of violence passages in the Bible.’ The word “towards” is important. We don’t claim to solve all problems and resolve every difficulty; we do attempt to move forward in understanding some very difficult and challenging parts of the Bible.

Agents of God’s Judgement?

The justice and judgement of God is a major theme throughout the Bible. There are accounts of God very directly bringing about the deaths of large numbers of people as a punishment. Prominent among these are the flood at the time of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the killing of the firstborn son in every Egyptian family at the time of Moses. These accounts may be problematic for some, but in the Bible, these narratives are placed in a framework of God giving life in first place and being the only One with the right to take life away, which God does in the case of everyone at their death. If life ultimately belongs to God, he has the right to take it at a time and in a manner of his choosing. In one sense, every death is a Divine judgement from a Biblical point of view – ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23). On the other hand, some deaths of individuals or groups are presented as particular Divine judgments as in the cases mentioned above. Indeed, it can be argued that a worldview that leaves vengeance in the hands of God liberates people from resorting to violence themselves (Volf, 1996, 301-4).

The Torah presents the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites as a judgement on the peoples of the land by God for their wickedness, including the practice of child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9-10, 2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chronicles 28:3). In Genesis 15, centuries before the conquest, Abra(ha)m is promised that his

⁶ Emphasis Wright’s.

descendants will inherit the land, but that for four generations they would be slaves in a foreign country, and only then brought into the land. The reason given for this delay is that ‘the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure’ (Genesis 15:16, NIV). This implies that God knew that by the time of the conquest, the sin of the Amorites would have reached full measure deserving of judgement.

The book of Exodus speaks of God driving out the inhabitants of the land with no mention of any part the Israelites might play. ‘My Angel will go before you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will destroy them’ (Exodus 23:23. See also 23:28; 33:2; 34:11). These passages make no mention of any activity on the Israelites’ part. Similarly, at the end of the book of Joshua, Joshua, now a very old man, relays a message from God, ‘I sent the hornet ahead of you, and it drove them out before you... *It was not by your sword or your bow*’ (Joshua 24:12).

If we accept the Bible’s own framework which presents God as the judge of all the earth who will do what is right (Genesis 18:33), then we may be able to understand that God may sometimes decide that a whole nation or group of nations is deserving of judgement. Wright (2009, 92) observes, ‘The action of Israel against the Canaanites is never placed in the category of oppression but of divine punishment operating through human agency.’ Some have used the terminology of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ in relation to the Israelite conquest.⁷ However, a closer look at Jewish Scripture will show that these terms do not accord with how the Biblical writers understood the conquest. There are warnings that if the Israelites abandon Yahweh and reject his laws, they will suffer the same fate. Leviticus 18, after a long list of prohibited sexual perversions, warns,

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled... if you

⁷ See the title of Grundy (Ed.), 2003

defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you' (v24-28, see also 20:22-24)

This speaks not of ethnic cleansing; the issue is to do with ethics rather than ethnicity. Indeed, Jewish Scripture records the Israelites later suffering a similar fate and interprets this as God's judgement against the Israelites for breaking the covenant (e.g. 2 Kings 17:5-23).

Rhetoric

It appears from the Bible and other ancient sources that when speaking about warfare and conquest, a degree of heightened rhetoric or exaggeration was common linguistic currency.⁸ This exaggeration applies both in prospect – for example in orders for conduct in warfare, and in retrospect – in accounts of battles fought. This is not to infer that the Bible or other ancient sources are false; it was how warfare was spoken of, and everyone understood the rhetoric (Earl, 2010, 89-93; Lynch, 2023, 148-9; Wright, 2009, 88).

A modern example of similar rhetoric occurs in sporting contexts. In English, there are commonly used phrases such as, 'We totally annihilated the opposition', 'Our team will slaughter them', 'We obliterated them in the first half'. Of course, the opposition team are still alive at the end of the game, but it is a manner of speaking, particularly when there is a contest. What is the evidence that language such as 'you must destroy them totally' (Deuteronomy 7:2), 'do not leave alive anything that breathes' (Deuteronomy 20:16), were rhetorical and not to be taken literally?

One of our key passages, Deuteronomy 7:1-6 contains such evidence. Verse 2 says,

And when the Lord your God gives (the seven nations) over to you and you defeat them, then you must destroy them totally. Do not make a treaty with them and show them no mercy.

⁸ See Webb/Oeste, 2019, 136-50 for examples from other contemporary ancient sources.

That seems to imply the wholesale killing of the entire populations of those seven nations. But then immediately in the next two verses, it goes on to say,

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons and do not take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your children away from following me, and they will serve other gods.

This forbidding of intermarriage implies that there would be people from those nations still alive after the ‘total destruction’, with whom there would be the possibility of intermarriage (Moberly, 2013, 75). Put simply; you can’t marry a corpse. This instruction to ‘destroy totally’ the inhabitants of the land envisages a considerable number from these peoples remaining alive. The instruction seems to be focused on repudiating the worship of their gods. The reason given for the ban on intermarriage is that husbands and wives taken from these nations would lead Israelites astray to worshipping their gods (Deuteronomy 7:4). In line with this, Moberly (2013, 81) identifies a collective repentance from intermarriage in Ezra 9-10 as engaging specifically with Deuteronomy 7:1-6, but what is missing is any suggestion of putting the other peoples to death.

The instruction, ‘This is what you must do to them: break down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, hew down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire’ (Deuteronomy 7:5), had the same purpose as the prohibition on intermarriage. Items that enabled or symbolized worship of and allegiance to gods other than Yahweh had to be removed. Moberly (2013, 75) argues that *hērem* consisted of these two commands: to avoid intermarriage and to destroy items associated with worship of other gods.

A further feature of the book of Joshua is that it records significant exceptions to the ‘total destruction’ policy, despite the lack of any exemptions in Deuteronomy. Joshua 2 narrates the story of Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute and inhabitant of Jericho. From the book’s perspective, that doesn’t sound promising, yet Rahab

shelters Israelite spies and declares her faith, ‘Yahweh your God, is God in the heavens above and on the earth below’ (Joshua 2:11). Rahab ‘with her family and all who belonged to her’ are spared and are eventually incorporated into the Israelite community (Joshua 6:25).⁹ The Israelite spies make a treaty with Rahab in apparent contravention of the command to make no treaty with the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:2, Butler, 2014, 48), yet the book of Joshua presents them as obedient to God’s law (24:31). In Joshua 9, a Hivite city, Gibeon, is spared. Joshua 8:30-35 describes a covenant renewal ceremony. For our purpose, what is significant is that we are told, ‘Both the foreigners living among them and the native born were there’ (v33 NIV), and that Joshua read all the words from the book of the Torah ‘to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them’ (v35 NIV). Who were these ‘foreigners’? It seems likely they included people from the lands they were conquering who had joined the Israelites.¹⁰

Later Biblical history records the continued existence of the peoples the Israelites had been instructed to destroy totally (Judges 1:19, 21, 27-36, 1 Kings 9:20-21). During the leadership of the prophet Samuel, there was peace between the Israelites and the Amorites (1 Samuel 7:14). Warfare seems to have continued intermittently for generations. It is not until the time of David that the Jebusite city of Jerusalem is conquered (2 Samuel 5:6-7). However, David, whose reign is seen as a high point in Israelite history, does not appear to carry out a campaign to exterminate the Jebusites. Later in his career, David has positive dealings with Araunah the Jebusite, buying property from him (2 Samuel 24:18-25, 1 Chronicles 21:18-30). The Hittites were another nation to be destroyed, but in the narratives of David’s life, we

⁹ In Matthew 1:5, Rahab is honored as one of only five women listed in the genealogy of the Messiah.

¹⁰ For numerous further examples of hyperbole in the context of warfare from the books of Joshua and Judges, see Webb/Oeste, 2019, 151-173.

encounter Ahimelek the Hittite (1 Samuel 26:6) and Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11), both loyal companions of David. It seems these Jebusites and Hittites had been assimilated as Israelites rather than exterminated. Much later, in the NT, Jesus encounters a ‘Canaanite’ woman. Far from seeking her destruction, he heals her daughter and commends her great faith (Matthew 15:21-28, see France, 2007, 592).

Lynch (2023, 164-5) draws comparisons between the *hērem* language of Deuteronomy and Joshua on the one hand and some of the rhetoric that Jesus used on the other: ‘If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away’ (Matthew 5:29-30). Few if any have ever taken Jesus literally on this command; rather we interpret it as a command to be deadly serious about getting rid of sin in our lives. Similarly, the original readers of Deuteronomy and Joshua understood the rhetoric.

This is how I’m suggesting we read the *herem* commands to totally destroy. Like the radical and shocking call of Jesus upon his followers, the enduring challenge of Joshua is to forsake all competing loyalties, in fact, to destroy idols and altars, to show *them* no mercy! (Lynch, 2023, 165).

Divine Accommodation

The Bible tells the story of God’s engagement with the world he created, and especially his dealings with the ancient Israelites, entering a covenant with them to be their God. The Torah presents God giving many laws and regulations to the Israelites to order their society and relations with each other, with non-Israelites, and with God. One important principle of interpretation when reading the Torah is that of Divine accommodation. What this means is that ancient Israel was not some ideal society to whom God gave a set of ideal laws; it was rather a deeply flawed society that emerged in a very particular cultural and historical context – that of western Asia in the late bronze and early iron ages. Biblical theology presents God as One

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

who accommodates problematic cultural patterns, habits, behaviour and institutions that were so deeply ingrained that they would not realistically be changed in a short space of time. God accommodates these aspects of the culture even though they may fall very far short of God's ideal for humankind but he regulates them to restrict their worst excesses. As Wright (2009, 89) says, 'Old Testament law has to strike a balance between the ideals of God's creational standards and the realities of fallen human life'.

We could regard this Divine accommodation as 'harm-reduction.' A human example of harm-reduction would be a programme to provide drug addicts with a less harmful substitute drug in a safe environment. It is recognized that this is not ideal, but it may reduce the harm caused by a more toxic drug taken in an unsafe environment, where for example, needle sharing poses a severe risk of spreading infectious diseases, and where in the short term, expecting all addicts to overcome their addiction is unrealistic. Similarly, many regulations found in the Torah are dealing with the real, not the ideal situation of ancient Israel. The clearest example of this Divine accommodation principle is found in words of Jesus in relation to divorce regulations in the Torah recorded in Mark 10.

Some Pharisees came to test Jesus and asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'

'What did Moses command you?' he replied.

They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a divorce certificate and dismiss her.' (v2-4)

This permission is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The question and answer about what Moses commanded or permitted was actually a shorthand for what Jews believed God had commanded or permitted through Moses. Mark 10:5-9 continues,

Jesus replied, ‘It was because your hearts were hard that he wrote this law for you. But at the beginning of creation, God “made them male and female”. “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, let no human separate what God has joined together’.

In this passage, Jesus claims that the permission to divorce contained in the Torah was never ideal. It was rather a provisional law given to regulate and contain the worst effects of a situation that was far from ideal – a situation that was due to the hardness of people’s hearts. It was a harm-reduction law. Jesus then contrasts this far-from-ideal situation with how things were at the beginning when God created man and woman. He quotes from Genesis 1-2, God ‘made them male and female’ (1:27) and ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ (2:24), and he reasons that God’s original intention for marriage at creation was a permanent union.

This principle of God accommodating human hardness of heart may have some relevance to the commands to violence we encounter in the Torah. The ancient Israelites inhabited a world where warfare, wide scale slaughter and extreme brutality were commonplace (Moberly, 2013, 70; Bimson et al, 1985, 48; Webb/Oeste, 2019, 263-87). Perhaps, immersed in that world and themselves products of that world, the only way to gain any land in which to settle and fulfil their ultimate purpose of being a blessing to all nations was by a certain degree of violence against those who lived there, who also happened to be under God’s judgement (see above). Wright (2009, 89) tentatively suggests,

Is it possible... that in a fallen world where struggle for land involves war, and if the only kind of war at the time was the kind described in the Old Testament texts, this was the way it had to be if the land-gift promise was to

be fulfilled in due course? If anything along these lines can be entertained... then we might be dealing with something God chose to accommodate within the context of a wicked world, not something that represented his best will or preference. In view of his long-term goal of ultimately bringing blessing to the nations through this people Israel, the gift of land necessitated this horrific historical action within the fallen world of nations at the time.

Jesus' comments about how it was in the beginning, and about how God's intention at creation takes precedence over provisional laws given for the Israelites at the time of Moses are also highly relevant (Mark 10:5-6, Lynch, 2023, 97). In the creation account at the beginning of the Torah, we read that God created humankind in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). This is later appealed to as a basis for the dignity and value of every human life (Genesis 9:6, James 3:9). This teaching about humans being made in God's image and likeness and the consequent sanctity of every human life takes ethical precedence over regulations given for very particular temporary situations found in Deuteronomy.

Biblical Frameworks

The Bible is a collection of books written over many centuries, and it loosely follows a chronological order. Christian theologians speak of progressive or cumulative revelation (Macleod, 2002, 28), by which they mean that God did not reveal everything he wanted to reveal at once, but gradually, bit by bit, building on revelation already given. Most Christian theologians would see a fuller revelation of God, his ways and will in the NT. However, even in Jewish Scripture, the dominant overarching themes seek the peace and blessing of all nations. A pivotal passage in the entire plot line of the Bible is God's call and promise to Abra(ha)m in Genesis 12:1-3, which climaxes with the promise 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (v3). The importance of this promise is emphasized by its frequent repetition, particularly to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14, Psalm

72:17, also Acts 3:25, Galatians 3:8). This tells us that God's ultimate intention in choosing the ancient Israelites was to bring blessing to all the nations of the world (Wright, 2009, 99). There are numerous stories in Jewish Scripture of God's blessing moving beyond the Israelites and reaching people of other nations. Jewish Scripture presents an ultimate vision of nations at peace:

The LORD will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. (Isaiah 2:4, NIV, Micah 4:3)

In line with this, Deuteronomy, the same book which commands the 'total destruction' of the Canaanites, also commands love for foreigners, because God himself loves foreigners (10:18-19. See also Exodus 23:9, 12, Leviticus 19:10, 33-34; 23:22, Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:14, 17, 19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19), (Wright, 2009, 103). The plan to bless all nations is in keeping with God's character repeatedly emphasized in Jewish Scripture,

the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, transgression and sin. But he does not leave the guilty unpunished... (Exodus 34:6-7, repeated in varying forms in Numbers 14:18, 2 Chronicles 30:9, Psalm 86:5, 15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, Nehemiah 9:17).

New Testament Framework

The NT portrays Jesus as having the highest regard for the Torah, Psalms and Prophets (Matthew 5:17-20, Luke 16:17; 24:25-27, 44, John 10:35). However, he also gave his own radical and authoritative interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus summed up the requirements of God's Torah thus:

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” The entire Torah and the Prophets hang on these two commandments’ (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus was not unique in this understanding (Luke 10:27). However, he did expand the category of neighbour in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and in the Sermon on the Mount, even to the extent of including one’s enemy (Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:35). Jesus repudiated the way of religious violence in an incident recorded in Luke 9:52-55. Jesus and his disciples were passing through a Samaritan village where, as Jews on their way to Jerusalem, they were not welcomed. Two disciples ask Jesus if they should call down fire on the village to destroy them, perhaps recalling an occasion in Jewish Scripture where the prophet Elijah called down fire on some soldiers the king had sent to arrest him (2 Kings 1:9-12). However, Jesus rebukes his disciples, rejecting the path of religious violence. He ‘will not accomplish God’s will through force and violence, but through weakness, even suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection’ (Edwards, 2015, 298-9, see also Rowe, 2006, 126-7).

Most importantly, it is the suffering and death of Jesus at the hands of his enemies that repudiates the way of religious violence. Jesus claimed to be the King-Messiah and announced the kingdom or reign of God as having drawn near in his own person. His disciples thought in terms of fighting to defend and advance the Messiah’s kingship and cause. But when he was arrested near Jerusalem, Jesus rebuked a disciple for seeking to defend him with a sword: “Put your sword back in its place; for all who draw the sword will be destroyed by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). A short time later, at his trial before Roman Governor Pilate, Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my servants would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders’ (John 18:36). This emphatically denies the

possibility of using warfare and violence to defend or advance the Messiah's kingdom, and all who have attempted to do so violate Jesus' own teaching.¹¹

Conclusion

We will try and summarize our findings and demonstrate why religiously motivated violence can never be justified today in ten points:

1. In Jewish Scripture, the conquest is presented as a unique episode and is not repeated.¹²
2. Jewish Scripture presents the Israelites as agents of divine judgement in the conquest. The Israelites were also warned that if they broke the covenant with Yahweh by following other gods, they too would suffer the same fate, which Scripture records as actually happening.
3. Jewish Scripture uses rhetorical hyperbole when speaking about warfare, and there is abundant evidence internal to the Bible itself that many Canaanites remained alive after being 'totally destroyed.'
4. Many regulations in the Torah represent God accommodating deeply ingrained sinful tendencies of ancient Israel in its wider cultural context rather than God's creational ideal, which presents every human being as made in the image of God, and thus accorded high dignity and sanctity. According to Jesus, God's creational ideal takes precedence over regulations given for temporary situations in Deuteronomy.

¹¹ Space does not permit me to deal with how Christian traditions have applied NT teaching to warfare in defence of a nation. Two broad positions emerged: one is pacifist; the other has developed what is called the Just War Theory, which states that war is justified only when certain conditions are met – that the war is defensive, is declared by a legitimate authority, has a reasonable chance of success, is proportionate and discriminate. Just War Theory in the Christian tradition has been compared with regulations for warfare in Islamic *shari'a* (Dagli, 2015, 1805; McCallum [Ed.], 2018, 11).

¹² The one exception being a Divinely commissioned war against the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15, see Webb/Oeste, 2019, 204-30)

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

5. Deuteronomy is complex in its view of other nations. It commanded Israelites to love the foreigner because God himself loves foreigners.
6. Compassion, mercy, slowness to anger, love and forgiveness are the foremost characteristics of God presented in Jewish Scripture.
7. In the era before the Messiah, God's people were focused almost exclusively on one nation, ancient Israel. As a nation, they sometimes engaged in warfare. In the era after the Messiah, according to the NT, God's people are made up of people from all nations and no one nation is identified as the people of God.
8. God's ultimate purpose is to bring blessings to all the nations of the world. This is an overarching theme of the whole Bible and the NT presents this as being fulfilled through the Messiah Jesus in his coming and ultimately in his future return.
9. The New Testament presents an ethic of love for neighbour where 'neighbour' includes those of other races and religions and even includes one's enemy.
10. Jesus emphatically repudiated violence to advance or defend his cause and kingdom.

References

- Butler, T. C. (2014). *Word biblical commentary/volume 7B* Joshua 13-24. Word biblical commentary.
- Cowles, C. S. (2003). *Show them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. Zondervan.
- Dagli, C. K. (2015). Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran. *The Study Quran. A New Translation and Commentary*, 1805-1817.
- Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. London: Random House.

- Earl, Douglas S. (2010). *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*. Penn State University Press.
- Edwards, James R. (2015). *The Gospel according to Luke - Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament). Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007. *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses*, 88(3), 366-366.
- Grundy, Stanley N. (Ed.). (2003). *Show them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV). (2011). London: Biblica.
- Ibn Kathîr. (2003), *Stories of the Prophets*, English translation, Rashad Ahmad Azami, Riyadh, Darussalam.
- Lynch, Matthew J. (2023). *Flood and Fury: Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- MacLeod, Donald. (2002). *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus.
- McCallum, Richard (Ed.). (2018). *Hikmah Study Guides: Christians, Muslims &... War*. Oxford: Centre for Muslim Christian Studies.
- Moberly, R. W. L. (2013). 'Election and the Transformation of *Hērem*' in Gary A. Anderson, Joel S. Kaminsky (Eds.) *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Rowe, C. Kavin. (2006). *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Volf, Miroslav. (1996). *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Duncan Peters: Violence Passage in the Bible

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

Wright, Christopher. (1996). *New International Biblical Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.

Wright, Christopher J. H. (2009). *The God I Don't Understand: Reflecting on Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.