

Making Sense of the Bible

“Violence in the Bible”

[Exodus 32:27-29](#)

“What?!? Did God really order people to kill their own family members, friends, and neighbors?” I am sure you could not help but ask this question while you were listening to the scripture Jordan read for us. This is one of the many scriptures we find to be very difficult to accept is actually in the Bible. In challenging passages like this, God is often angry and vengeful. God is portrayed as condoning and even commanding violence, as we have just heard.

Let me tell you briefly the background of today’s text, as recorded both in Exodus (32:1-25) and Deuteronomy (9:6-21). The context of the bloodshed is the migration of the Israelites from Egypt to the land of Canaan. While they were staying in the Desert of Sinai, their leader, Moses, went up to Mount Sinai from time to time to talk with God on the holy mountain. One time, he was gone for a long time, 40 days and 40 nights, leaving his people under the leadership of his brother, Aaron. People became impatient with Moses’ delayed return and asked Aaron to make gods for them to worship. So, Aaron collected golden jewelry from them and made a calf for them to worship.

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what was going on, he was furious. He took the golden calf, burned it in a fire, ground it to powder, scattered it in water and made his people to drink it! And, today’s scripture is what he did next. He ordered the Levites, one of the 12 tribes of his people, to kill others. And he told them that God had commanded them to do it. So, they did. They went out with their swords and killed their own people. Then, Moses told the Levites that God blessed them for killing their own people. And, that was not all. At the end of chapter 32, we are told that later God punished the Israelites directly by striking them with a plague (32:35). Borrowing from one of the children’s books written by Judith Viorst, this is indeed a terrible, horrible, no good, and very bad scripture!

Yet, in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, we find many other stories of violence, done in the name of God, ordered or done by God. Here are just a few examples:

In the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites were told, “If your very own brother, or your son or daughter or the wife you love or your closest friend entices you, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods,’ show them no pity. You must certainly put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death... Stone them to death” (13:6-10).

And later, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gave the Israelites instructions to kill their enemies. He said, “Do not leave alive anything that breathes.... Completely destroy them... as the Lord your God has commanded you” (20:16-17). In the book of Joshua, you can see how this killing order was carried out when they entered Canaan, the Promised Land. The Israelites killed all the indigenous inhabitants of the land, the people who had been living there before they got there. They systematically wiped out each city they conquered, killing everyone living there, both men and women, young and old, even their babies and animals.

In the book of Second Samuel, King David had Joab, the commander of his army, take a census of the people in Israel. And God was not happy about it. We do not know exactly why what David did was considered sinful. In those days, to take a count of something meant having a claim of ownership over it. So perhaps it was anger over David's presumption that it was his people and not God's people. Whatever the reason, God sent a pestilence on Israel. And as a result, 70,000 people died (24:15).

We all know the story of Noah as a cute story with all the furry animals on his ark. It's a wonderful story of Noah and his family being saved from the big flood. It's a beautiful story of the rainbow as a sign of God's promise. But, when you think about all the others in the story, both the people and the animals who were not on the ark and drowned in the flood, it is quite a disturbing story, isn't it?

These stories of violence at the hands of God and God's people in the Bible leave us with moral and theological dilemmas: How do we reconcile the loving, compassionate and kind God of the New Testament with the angry, jealous, and vengeful God we find in the Old Testament?

Actually, we are not the first ones to raise such a heavy question. This is the question every Christian generation has struggled with. In the second century, Marcion, a prominent Christian leader, tried to resolve the dilemma by suggesting that the God of the Old Testament and the God Jesus Christ introduced to his followers were two different gods. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament, who was jealous, harsh, wrathful and genocidal, was a separate and lesser deity. He believed that the Hebrew God created a world which was defective and became a place of suffering. Then, the greater and true God, who is loving, kind, compassionate and forgiving, was revealed to humanity through Jesus Christ. However, Marcion's idea of two different Gods and dismissing the Old Testament altogether was quickly rejected by the church.

Then, how do we resolve the moral and theological dilemmas we face in the terrible and horrible scenes of violence we encounter in Scripture? As I read many articles written on this subject of violence in the Bible, there seemed to be two different types of answers to this question.

Here is the first answer: These challenging scriptures are telling us the stories that really happened in history, and God actually committed such violent acts and commanded the Israelites to do likewise. Advocates of this view speak of God's sovereign power and ultimate authority to give and take life at will. In their explanation of God's violence in the stories of the Israelites' conquering the land of Canaan, they point out the moral wickedness of the Canaanites. They argue that the culture of the Canaanites were deeply sinful, more wicked than any other peoples' culture in the ancient world, to the point that God decided to wipe them out, as it had been done through the big flood in the time of Noah. And, about the deaths of innocent children, they argue that no human being, regardless of their age (including infants), is innocent because of Original Sin.

Someone even said that it was better for the Canaanite children to die before they reached the age of moral accountability, so they could go straight to heaven. If they had lived into adulthood, like their parents, they would have been condemned to hell, influenced by the corrupted world. What an appalling justification for the horrible acts of violence in the Bible! I wonder if they would say the same thing to the parents who had lost their child.

Then, what about the second answer to the question of violence in the Bible? In his book, *"Making Sense of the Bible,"* which inspired this sermon series, Adam Hamilton says, to fully understand the stories in the Bible, we must "recognize the Bible's humanity." In other words, we have to accept that "the Bible was written by human beings whose understanding and experience of God was shaped by their culture, their theological assumptions, and the time in which they lived" (p.213).

Most of the big names in the Old Testament, like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and King David, were all warriors, who lived in times when violence was seen as part of God's way of accomplishing God's purposes. In the ancient world, saying that God had directed them to go to war and that they were leading people into war at the will and with the help of God was a common way of justifying war and inspiring people to join them in battle. Hamilton further writes in his book, "the Old Testament passages of violence and war thus tell us more about the people who wrote them and the times they were living in than about the God in whose name they claimed authority to do these things" (p.214).

Plainly speaking, God did not order the Israelites to kill their own family, friends, and neighbors because they worshipped other gods. God did not order the Israelites to kill all their enemies because their sins were worse than any other peoples' sins. People committed acts of violence in the name of God, and it was the way people lived back then. Sadly, this has been repeated over and over again throughout history.

Crusaders marched into battle and killed Muslims in the name of Jesus Christ. Colonists claimed America for Christ, killing the original inhabitants already living in the New World. Nazis shouted "God is with us," as they killed the Jews. Nations and organizations of Christian and other religious faiths have gone to war and committed acts of violence, invoking the name of God. Unfortunately, we see this still happening in our world today.

Despite the negative images of God portrayed in the troubling scriptures, we also see that God is manifested as the God of grace and mercy, love and peace in all 66 books of the Bible. Throughout Scripture, God is kind and compassionate, gracious and merciful, forgiving and reconciling. Throughout Scripture, God cares about the least, the last and the lost in the society — orphans, widows, slaves, and foreigners; the poor, the neglected, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Throughout Scripture, God is with the violated, the displaced, and the suffering. These are the images of God we find in Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught his followers to love not only their neighbors but also their enemies, to turn the other cheek, to forgive those who wronged them, and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:38-48). And his life was an example of what he taught, even until his death on the cross. The Apostle Paul affirmed Jesus' emphasis on non-violence in the letter he wrote to the church in Rome: "Bless those who persecute you; Bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:14).

The depictions of violence we see in Scripture of God and God's people remind us how easily we, the people of faith, can invoke God's name to justify our own acts of violence. May the life and teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ liberate us from our human condition and lead us to the path of non-violence and peace! Let me close with the lyrics of the song we will soon sing together, "O Day of Peace That Dimly Shine."

O day of peace that dimly shines through all our hopes and prayers and dreams,
 Guide us to justice, truth, and love, delivered from our selfish schemes.
 May swords of hate fall from our hands, our hearts from envy find release,
 Till by God's grace our warring world shall see Christ's promised reign of peace.
 Then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb, nor shall the fierce devour the small;
 As beasts and cattle calmly graze, a little child shall lead them all.
 Then enemies shall learn to love, all creatures find their true accord;
 The hope of peace shall be fulfilled, for all the earth shall know the Lord. Amen.