

How Do We Reconcile the Violence of the Hebrew Bible and the Character of God?

A Short Essay

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The question of violence in the Bible is a multi-level problem. One of those levels is the problem of authorship, which is also to say the problem of inspiration. The way a person views the inspiration of a biblical text shapes how someone understands the ramifications of the ethics and politics of that text. If someone has a high view of inspiration (e.g., God supernaturally dictated the words to someone to write down), those folks place a much higher value on the permanence and acceptability of the actions of certain biblical figures than someone who has a particularly low view of inspiration (e.g., someone writing a story for a community). In my work these days, I'm pouring over the scholarship of Joshua (as well as other parts of the Deuteronomistic History [the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings]) and the ways in which people read Joshua are fascinating. Some folks are certainly uncomfortable with the genocidal commands from God to wipe out the Canaanites but find ethical solace knowing that the archaeological record doesn't positively confirm it ever occurred, meaning that Joshua can be appreciated on an allegorical level without having to worry about *actual* material slaughter. Other folks (those who I would wager have an incredibly high view of inspiration) find little to no problem with the genocide of the Canaanites simply because "God commanded it." They'll readily admit that, in any other context, killing other humans is wrong. Yet, in the context of Joshua, the killing of Canaanites was permissible (even "necessary" according to a few) because of the threat posed by the Canaanites to the incoming Israelites (in terms of how the Canaanites might have corrupted the Israelite religious beliefs, cultural practices, etc.). But therein lies the crux of the issue: how a person reads determines how they interpret the violence in the Bible.

Addressing the problem of violence in relation to the character of God (throughout biblical texts) is the problem of hermeneutics – the aspect of knowledge that deals with interpretation. This essay is about to zoom extremely far out but bear with me for a moment. The way in which you engage with reality is by “reading.” In other words, you know things because you “read” them a certain way – you cross-check, you talk with other people (experts, friends, etc.), you consult studies, you watch videos, you gather information. This process is how we interpret what we read.

Here are some questions I’ve been asked over the last year:

- What do we do with the violence in Joshua?
- How do we reconcile the violence there as something directly commanded by God with the love of God that can be so easily found in so many other places in other biblical texts?
- Why is there such a disparity between the God of Joshua and the God of Genesis?

As it always seems to be, there are no easy answers. I take the position that it is necessary to treat each text as a singularity – a truly unique entity that cannot be categorized. I reject categories for the most part (even as I understand why they can be useful) because they tend to bring about a type of tyranny in the analysis. Even if similarities exist between texts, no two texts are identical. In such careful (perhaps *too* careful) treading in my reading of texts, I address a text in the bounds of that text itself. The God that orders the destruction of Canaanite cities and every living thing inside them in the book of Joshua is now walled off, far away from the God of the Psalms or the God of Genesis or the God of Isaiah. The God of Joshua is my focus and my focus alone. This allows me to investigate a text on a number of levels and ask a different set of questions than if I were reading intertextually. I can ask the question of reception history (how it’s been read through time): “why would it have been important for God to be a divine conqueror for the community that would have heard/read this text?” I can ask the question of canonical criticism: “Why doesn’t any other book in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament ever reference the events of Joshua?” This type of investigation starts to pull apart the threads of interpretation to uncover some unsettling contents in a biblical text that would never be questioned if, say, I held a view that assumed the text of Joshua is fully true and accurate given its inclusion in canon of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

But this problem is larger than simply the book of Joshua. Many different parts of the HB/OT contain divine violence (or violence sanctioned by God/The Divine). Part of this can be explained by a general understanding of monotheism. In a strict monotheistic framework, there is only one deity – one deity total. This means that everything – good, bad, and everything between – comes from that deity. There is no war between rival cosmic powers. Just one powerful being that metes out both the good and the evil. Though I’m making this far more reductive for the purpose of this essay, the world of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was more-or-less monotheistic by the time of the Second Temple Period (the time period which most scholars think the majority of the HB/OT was written/edited [530 CE-70 CE]). The writers of biblical texts understood what was happening to them through this monotheistic lens – God was the sole source of goodness *and* evil. This means that violence and wrath are very much part of God’s character in a monotheistic system because *there is no outside force to introduce evil into the system*. This probably does not put anyone at ease but, for the ancient Israelites, it was how the world made sense.

Reading is the way we make sense of knowledge, and it is through thinking about what we have read that we begin to interpret what we know to be true. The violence of God in the HB/OT is troubling, but as I demonstrated above, there are some contextual questions to help understand why it might show up in a text. What has always fascinated me about God’s violence are the times that God “relented” [נָחַם] (“repented” is a better translation but most translators are leery about claiming that God had to perform a 180° turn like a human, especially given how frequently it is used to describe an action that repents of sin). In those passages (Ex 32:14, 2 Sam 24:16, Jer 18:8, 10, etc.), God decides to turn from the destruction planned upon the people (or a city). While counter-passages exist that claim that God is not like a “mere mortal” who changes their mind (1 Sam 15:29), this only strengthens my claim. Different communities wrote different things about God for different reasons. I argue, then, it is the context that drives the questions. For the times when we read about how God consigned whole cities full of living creatures to death, we also read about how God decided not to wipe out God’s newly minted people in their recent escape from Egypt. Looking to biblical texts to discover who God is reveals the sheer difficulty in discerning the character of God even as they help us understand something about God.

So much of what I've written here will only be helpful if you have what might be called a low(er) view of inspiration. I look at the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as a "faithful collection of witnesses" (to quote a former OT prof). The texts are significant for what I believe, but I do not believe they were directly inspired by God. They are some of our best links to God/The Divine and are rightly cherished in that regard, but I have no reservations about condemning the acts of divinely legitimated violence as something entirely separate from what we might call "the word of God." As the Rev Dr. Wil Gafney has said, "The word of God is in the text but everything in the text is not the word of God." I hold the same position – that we must actively discern the text every time we read it. When dealing with violence in the Bible, we must do two things: 1) account for the history and subsequent violence inspired by texts of terror; 2) interrogate the text to dismantle its violence. This is why I cannot accept the view that the violence in Joshua is irrelevant for our world today, that the violence described in the first twelve chapters doesn't matter because the archaeological record proves it did not happen. On the contrary, the violence of Joshua is intensely relevant. The Doctrine of Discovery (and its descendant, Manifest Destiny) exist because folks in power interpreted texts like Joshua in a certain way. Palestine continues to be depopulated in part because of the ideological currency in texts like Joshua that have funded the aggressively violent interpretations of Zionists like the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion. These "readings" have been happening for centuries and continue to happen today. The violence in the text is not something you need to accept as the truth of God but it is something that we must actively resist and dismantle if we want to work toward a more just world