

# THE MORE DIFFICULT OPTION: SOME BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR PEACEMAKING

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*Part of our problem in this debate is the Bible itself. If we stick to the New Testament, as many churches now do, then we can avoid some of the most glaring issues about the Bible and violence. But can we do better than this? Patricia McDonald takes us on a brave tour of the Scriptures and encourages us to embrace the complex and diverse realities of the Bible. She points to new resources for peacemakers and encourages us to let one text subvert another.* CS

The urge to behave violently is a near-universal component of human nature. Violence is the easy option, a kind of default setting, for those who see their interests threatened. “When in doubt, fight” or (more subtly) “do whatever you can get away with to ensure that others give priority to your welfare and satisfy your needs”. In a world of limited resources, violent or manipulative behaviour has enabled individuals and groups to increase their chances of survival and their influence over future generations. Yet whenever violence or manipulation occurs, someone is damaged. As human beings become ever more interconnected, our awareness of the harm we do to each other is increasing and its consequences are ever more feared, but the spiral of violence continues.

What can be done to reset the default? This image from information technology is itself misleading because we are not automatons but people, whose patterns of behaviour are complex and deeply rooted. Coercion will not work because it is precisely the problem. Rather, we must find ways of imagining more viable alternatives for ourselves. We need habits of being that establish in us a profound and abiding conviction that our own best interests are served when we are, at least in principle, concerned for the good of all. Contemporary peace movements, religious and secular, attest to the variety of ways in which our imagination can be stimulated to work for a more peaceful world. I believe that, for Christians at least, serious and sustained contact with the biblical text, and particularly with its narratives, can provide important theological resources for the complex process of making peace and sustaining it.

The Bible has not always been used in this way. Over the centuries many biblical texts have been co-opted for promoting or justifying violence. For example, a Boston Congregational minister named Cotton Mather (1663–1728) apparently regarded Native Americans as Amalekites (see Ex 17.14–16), whose extermination was in accordance with God’s will.<sup>1</sup> Imposing peace by annihilating enemies is certainly problematic, all the more so when the prime agent is the deity, portrayed as

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## NOTES

1. See Roland H Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), pp. 168–69.
2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (3rd edn.; London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 70.
3. For an English translation of the *Enuma Elish* see EA Speiser, “Akkadian Myths and Epics,” in JB Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Text* (rev. edn.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1955), pp. 60–72.
4. I shall use “Old Testament” rather than “Hebrew Bible” because, despite the large extent of shared text that it has with Tanak, the book sacred to Jews, the two scriptures are distinct because of the contexts in which they are read. See Patricia M McDonald, *God and Violence: Biblical Resources for Living in a Small World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), pp. 19–20.
5. In Revelation 19.21, the “killing” by the sword from the mouth of the mounted warrior refers to conversion by the Word of God (see vv. 13–15), not to actual bloodshed.
6. It actually began in Exodus 1.9–10, with an oppressive move against the Israelites on the part of Pharaoh. See McDonald, *God and Violence*, ch. 5, “The Exodus and the Warrior God”, pp. 73–97.
7. Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 10b in I Epstein (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed in Four Volumes* (London: Soncino, 1938), 4:59. See also *Sanhedrin* 39b (ibid., *Seder Nezikin in Four Volumes*, III. *Sanhedrin*, [London: Soncino, 1935], p. 251). The basis of the midrash is Exodus 14.20, just before Moses parts the sea for the Israelites (and then the Egyptians) to cross over.
8. For a development of these ideas, see McDonald, *God and Violence*.

► successful iron-age warrior. One could, perhaps, argue that the verbal violence of biblical stories is sometimes cathartic: a harmless substitute for the real violence that people would inflict on their enemies if they could. Even that, though, is not a positive contribution to peace.

Rather than taking stories individually, we need to consider their wider context, either the Hebrew Bible or its two-Testament Christian counterpart. Such a perspective would suggest that supporting violence, even in a good cause, is inconsistent with the best traditions of the Jewish or Christian community that holds these writings as sacred. Here, “best” means something like “life-giving” in the widest possible sense.

#### THE CONTEXT: FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

A peaceable view of the world is in accord with the Bible itself. This is evident from the opening and conclusion of the Christian canon. In the creation story of Genesis 1.1—2.4, an all-powerful artist God uses nothing but words to create a complete and integrated world that is “very good” (1.31). Seeing the world as a divine work of art resonates with our own experience of its intricacy and beauty: we too are sometimes aware of the “dearest freshness deep down things” that Gerard Manley Hopkins sensed amidst the grime and stunted lives of the English industrial revolution.<sup>2</sup> The account of God’s activity in Genesis 1 also resonates with the deep satisfaction that artists experience from their creative work.

To sixth-century Israelites exiled in Babylon, this narrative was a calm but radical denial of the local version of the world’s origin and nature, the *Enuma Elish*, which they heard annually as part of the Babylonian New Year celebrations. Genesis 1 testifies to the exiles’ refusal to accept that the world was constructed after a protracted and bitter family conflict, using as raw material the body of Tiamat, a defeated goddess who had made war on her own children.<sup>3</sup> Nor did they think of humans as made by another god out of different material, the blood of the disgraced Kingu, Tiamat’s creature and consort. The circumstances of the exiled Israelites may have seemed bad, as they “sat and wept” by the rivers of Babylon (Ps 137), but not *that* bad. As Genesis 1.1—2.4 shows, they were still able to see the essential goodness of the created world.

The Christian canon concludes with the revelation of the new heaven and the new earth, and the descent of the New Jerusalem, in which people’s needs are satisfied (Rev 21—22). Admittedly, there is much violence between Genesis 1 and Revelation 22, chiefly in

connection with claims about the immediate or ultimate defeat of those forces that oppose the community to which the authors belong. Yet we could argue that this violence is not primary, if it is understood as coming from humans’ response to their inability to cope with the circumstances in which they find themselves. Such a response sometimes includes a deeply disturbing projection onto God of the violence that impotent humans wish they could do to those more powerful than themselves.

I do not deny that there is violence in the Bible, or that parts of Scripture offer readers unhealthy ways of handling our human inadequacies. Rather, my claim is that these texts of violence are embedded in a longer narrative that can (and should) be used to subvert them. Taking up this task presumes a serious commitment to the Bible as revelatory: a text given to humanity that reflects and challenges our view of God, the world and ourselves in ways that are often subtle and complex.

#### THE FAITHFUL GOD

Biblical interpretation is no simple matter, in part because of the number and variety of writings that make up the canon, and the centuries-long process of its production. This is particularly the case with the books that Christians traditionally call the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> Especially with regard to biblical attitudes to violence, we are sometimes tempted to regard the Old Testament as a “difficulty” that is “resolved” by its completion in the New. Over the last two millennia, this has had dire consequences for the way that Christians have related to the Jewish people from whom Jesus took his humanity. A negative attitude to the Old Testament is also theologically incoherent: if God is faithful (as in the tradition that Christians received from Judaism), such a stance cannot be true to the divine self-disclosure found in Scripture.

#### UNEXPECTED RESOURCES FOR PEACE

How, then, are we to read the biblical narratives? Sometimes the immediate literary context suggests that particular violent passages should function as counter-examples, not as models for emulation. Such a reading is surely intended in the book of Judges. Here, the stories up to and including the final chapter are of ever-increasing insensitivity and brutality. Judges also traces a deterioration in leadership that is so ruinous that leaders eventually disappear altogether, at which point the people behave even more badly than before (see Judg 19—21). The book concludes with a final observation from the narrator, “[A]ll the people did

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what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 21.25 NRSV). Given the impact of the previous narrative sequence, no evaluative comment is needed, and the vivid descriptions of violence that appeared in the earlier parts of the book are shown in quite a different light.

Elsewhere, stories that apparently promote or justify aggression are really about something else altogether, but readers may not realise it because violence exerts such a stronghold on our imagination. There are many examples in the book of Revelation. Here, “conquering” usually means “dying”, and the sword is the Word of God, not anything that would literally draw blood when used. It is, however, difficult to remember that this is how John uses language and that his primary witness is to the one who conquered by being slain, not by killing others (Rev 5).<sup>5</sup> The reader’s task is not made easier by the seer’s vivid choice of imagery and his conflicted attitude to the Roman Empire and its benefits. John cannot accept the imperial claims and is therefore excluded from many aspects of created reality that he sees as fundamentally good and desirable, but in thrall to demonic powers (Rev 1.9; 18.11–23; 21.1–7, 18–26; 22.1–5). So although Revelation presents the basic Christian teaching that evil is overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [Christians] testimony” (Rev 12.11), it conveys at the same time a salutary example of the dehumanising possibilities that can accompany a powerful religious commitment. At one time or another, a peacemaker will surely need to be attentive to each of these truths.

There is also the matter of how a given narrative interacts with others. Each biblical story has its own integrity, but its meaning can be enlarged or otherwise modified as more stories are read. Thus, Cain’s fratricide draws attention to the dangers of ignoring the powerless (see also the books of Isaiah, Amos and Micah) and of acting out of fear. In the latter respect, the response of Pharaoh in Exodus (e.g. 1.8–10) is very similar to that of Cain, with disastrous results for the Egyptian army (Ex 14). So these stories (and others like them) should raise questions about how we treat those in our power and whether we act freely or out of fear.

They can also raise further questions. Founding event though it was for Israel’s relationship with God, the Exodus has had very problematic consequences for biblical interpretation. At this point of deliverance for the Israelites, God first appears as a warrior (Ex 15.3), and the dangerous course of events that is taken up in Exodus 17.8–16 begins.<sup>6</sup> The later Jewish tradition had

problems with the triumphalism of the people’s response to their rescue by God (Ex 15). Thus, the Babylonian Talmud (completed by the early sixth century CE) gives in two places the following homiletic expansion of the Israelite-Egyptian encounter at the Sea: “The ministering angels wanted to chant their hymns, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘The work of my hands is being drowned in the sea, and shall you chant hymns?’”<sup>7</sup> This humane response to the biblical story is heard much less frequently than the story itself, however. Present-day Christians may listen to the liturgical reading of Exodus 14–15 year after year without a qualm. I did so myself for decades, until one year I found myself seated next to an Egyptian acquaintance at the Easter vigil service. It has never sounded the same since then.

If the first part of Cain’s story provokes us to thinking about our use of power, his subsequent activities raise different questions. He founds a city that he names after his son, and later generations of his descendants keep livestock, make tools, and are increasingly violent (Gen 4.20–24); the tradition is very clear that he is not an ancestor of Abraham (Gen 4.25–26). So this part of Cain’s story offers reminders of the ambiguities of human culture, as do Isaiah of Jerusalem, all four evangelists and the seer of Revelation.

Other parts of the Bible yield different but comparable riches when considered as possible resources for more peaceable and sensitive living. Here are four examples of the kind of thing I mean: (1) The stories of the Patriarchs in Genesis 12–37 can be read as proposing that those who trust in God need not be belligerent, a theme that is expressed much more radically by the evangelist Mark. (2) The Patriarchs also provide positive examples of conflict resolution, as do Abigail (1 Sam 25), David (in part!), the “Good Samaritans” of 2 Chronicles 28, and the Synoptic Gospels. (3) By contrast, the dangers of demonising the “other” are very evident in Israel’s treatment of some of its enemies, and, as we saw above, in parts of the Apocalypse. (4) Issues of leadership and personal integrity are prominent in the books of Joshua and Judges, and in many books of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

### CONCLUSION

My view is, therefore, that despite its reputation for violence, the Bible can be a rich resource for peacemakers. Its credibility depends on its presentation of a God who somehow overcomes evil by submitting to it. The idea that greatness comes through service and

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► life through following the crucified One runs counter to all our normal expectations, and such an outlook is scandalous by the standards of common sense. Yet this is the God that the New Testament offers us, a portrait that is consistent with large sections of the Old Testament.

One final point: throughout the Bible, there is a presumption that, although people have responsibility for the world and receive it as gift, their propensity for getting things wrong is unending and frequently catastrophic. Humbling as it may be, making an ungodly mess of things is part of the human condition. Nevertheless, God's fidelity remains, and forgiveness is a possibility for those who will accept it. Thus violence is not a "problem" to be solved but an integral part of the much wider and more complex issue of how people can be more fully human in God's world. ■

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