

THE VIOLENCE OF SCRIPTURE

Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy

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The theme of God's bloody vengeance occurs in the Old Testament even more frequently than the problem of human violence. Approximately *one thousand passages* speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishments by death and destruction, and how like a consuming fire he passes judgment, takes revenge, and threatens annihilation. . . . No other topic is as often mentioned as God's bloody works.⁵

Although one does not find blood dripping from every page, the pervasiveness of violence in the Old Testament is undeniable. In the words of Athalya Brenner: "The legacy of violence . . . permeates the whole of the Hebrew Bible."⁶

The Old Testament's Appraisal of Violence

At the risk of grossly oversimplifying the complex representation of violence in the Old Testament, and with full acknowledgment that language is ambiguous, texts are indeterminate, and authorial intent is often difficult to discern, I want to suggest that the vast amount of violence in the Old Testament is portrayed in one of two ways: positively or negatively. I will refer to violence that is portrayed positively and approved of in some way as "virtuous" violence.⁷ This violence is portrayed as being appropriate, justified, and perhaps even praiseworthy. It is sanctioned and sometimes celebrated in the text. Those who engage in acts of "virtuous" violence enjoy God's blessing and are understood to be acting in ways that are congruent with God's intentions. "Wrongful" violence, on the other hand, is violence that is portrayed negatively and disapproved of in the text. Wrongful violence includes violent acts the text portrays as being inappropriate, unjustified, and condemnable. It is unsanctioned and unacceptable, and those who engage in such behavior do so without divine approval.

A cursory look at violent texts in the Old Testament reveals that the difference between wrongful and "virtuous" violence is not simply based on the *kind* of violence being done. For example, while taking another person's life is sometimes strongly condemned, as in the case of Cain killing Abel (Genesis 4), other times it is highly praised, as we see when Jael kills Sisera (Judges 4–5). Similarly, while Israel's participation in war is often regarded as an act of faithful obedience (Josh. 11:21–23; 2 Sam. 5:25), this is not always the case (Num. 14:36–45). Thus, what renders an act of violence as good or bad in the Old Testament often has less to do with the kind of violence involved and more to do with who does it, to whom, and why.

Obviously, some violent Old Testament texts do not fall neatly into one category or the other. In these instances, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine how ancient readers were expected to view the violence in question. Still, the fact remains that a considerable amount of violence in the Old Testament is portrayed as either good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.

This chapter will focus primarily on various examples of “virtuous” violence in the Old Testament. These texts, which commend, condone, and celebrate acts of violence, have frequently been used to harm others and thus bear much responsibility for the Old Testament’s troubling legacy. In what follows, we will differentiate more carefully between wrongful violence and “virtuous” violence, look at some representative passages in which violence is portrayed positively, and consider why “virtuous” violence is so pervasive throughout the Old Testament.

Wrongful Violence

Two of the most well-known stories of wrongful violence in the Old Testament are the story of Cain and Abel and the story of David and Bathsheba. According to Genesis 4, Cain and his brother Abel bring an offering to the Lord corresponding to their respective livelihoods. Cain, the farmer, brings some fruit; Abel, the herdsman, brings a lamb. For reasons not entirely clear, God accepts Abel’s offering but not Cain’s, and Cain becomes “very angry.”⁸ God then confronts Cain and cautions him, saying, “Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:7b). Cain fails to heed the warning and kills his brother Abel when they are out in a field. Once Abel is dead, God’s displeasure is clearly evident. God curses Cain and informs him of what is to come: “When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen. 4:12). In this way, Cain’s violent behavior is clearly condemned, and he is punished for it. There can be little doubt that readers are to regard Cain’s murder of Abel as an act of unsanctioned, or wrongful, violence.

The same kind of conclusion is easy to draw with regard to David’s dishonorable—and deadly—dealings with Uriah in 2 Samuel 11. After David commits adultery with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, and tries, but fails, to cover his tracks, he issues a lethal executive order that amounts to murder-by-proxy. David commands Joab to put Uriah in a vulnerable position in battle to ensure he will be killed, and this is precisely what happens (2 Sam. 11:15). At the end of this sordid story, we read the following narrative comment: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:1). This perspective is confirmed by the prophet Nathan, who confronts the wayward king and asks, “Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?” (2 Sam. 12:9a). God’s severe displeasure over David’s dastardly deeds is unmistakable in the text. David has surely done wrong.⁹

In addition to numerous Old Testament narratives like these that clearly condemn certain acts of violence, other texts speak more generally about God’s disapproving attitude toward violence. God is described as one who “hates the lover of violence” (Ps. 11:5) and the “hands that shed innocent blood” (Prov. 6:17).¹⁰

Numerous prophetic texts also condemn violence. Judah's violence raises God's ire (Ezek. 8:17), and Jeremiah tells the people not to do violence to the alien, orphan, and widow (Jer. 22:3). Various prophets proclaim that foreign nations who are violent toward Israel can expect very harsh consequences in return (Joel 3:19; Obed. 1:10; Hab. 2:8). In these instances, and others, certain acts of violence are clearly portrayed as sinful and wrong.

Whenever the Old Testament condemns acts of violence, most readers readily agree. After all, who wants to come to Cain's defense and argue that killing his brother was virtuous? Or who—except perhaps Machiavelli—would judge David's plan to eliminate Uriah as the right course of action? We naturally—almost instinctively—recognize these violent acts as immoral and have no difficulty embracing the text's negative evaluation of such behavior. The wrongness of these acts is so obvious that, in many cases, we quickly and easily align our perspective with the text's.

If violence was *always* regarded as an undesirable activity in the Old Testament, and if violent acts were *always* condemned in the text, the Old Testament's legacy would be very different indeed! But the unfortunate reality is that the Old Testament does *not* always censure violent acts or violent individuals. On the contrary, the Old Testament often sanctions and blesses them. Through the years, these violence-friendly texts have exerted considerable influence over the way Christians—and others—have thought about the morality of violence.

“Virtuous” Violence

As we will see momentarily, the notion of “virtuous” violence is conveyed in many ways throughout the Old Testament. But before looking at a number of Old Testament passages that portray violence positively, I want to say a brief word about the use of the word *virtuous* to describe this kind of violence. I realize that using this designation carries some risk since it might give the impression that I actually regard some of the Old Testament's violence as “virtuous.” That is *not* the case. I am only using this designation descriptively, to identify violent acts and attitudes that find approval within the pages of the Old Testament. I am *not* using it to indicate my agreement with the text's positive assessment of violence in any of these instances. To keep this important distinction in mind, I will consistently place the word *virtuous* in quotation marks when referring to “virtuous” violence.

A Hammer and a Slingshot: Celebrating Two Killers

To begin, I want to focus on two narratives that contain obvious examples of “virtuous” violence. In both passages, one person kills another, and in both passages, this

violent act is regarded as praiseworthy. The first story, found in Judges 4–5, involves a conflict between Israelites and Canaanites. Having been oppressed by the Canaanites for twenty long years, the Israelites cry out to God and are assured that help will come, though not through conventional means. Accompanied by the Israelite prophetess Deborah, Barak goes to battle against the Canaanite commander Sisera.

The battle is a complete disaster for the Canaanites under Sisera's command, and Sisera makes his escape by abandoning his chariot and running away from the battlefield (Judg. 4:12-16). He takes refuge in the tent of a Kenite woman named Jael, presumably assuming this would be a safe place to hide given the friendly relations that existed between Canaanites and Kenites. Before the exhausted commander falls asleep, he instructs Jael to stand guard at the entrance of her tent and to tell anyone who might ask that nobody is inside. But Jael has other ideas.

Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple. (Judg. 4:21-22)

Of special interest for our purposes is the praise heaped upon Jael for her bold and bloody deed. In a song of victory, Deborah and Barak exclaim:

Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. . . . She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet . . . where he sank, there he fell dead. (Judg. 5:24-27)

Jael's actions, violent and treacherous though they be, are considered worthy of celebration. The text exhibits no hint of disapproval with her behavior. Rather, Jael receives nothing but unqualified praise and admiration for slaying Sisera. As the text portrays it, her act of violence is “virtuous.”

The second story, that of David and Goliath, is one of the most well-known in the entire Old Testament (1 Samuel 17). This story is a study in contrasts. David, a young shepherd boy who is not even part of the Israelite army, plans to fight Goliath, a seasoned Philistine warrior who is armed to the teeth. In fact, when David first proposes fighting Goliath, King Saul discourages him by saying, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth” (1 Sam. 17:33). David is not deterred. He confronts this mocking Philistine and declares:

You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand. (1 Sam. 17:45-47)

Then, with sling in hand, David lodges a stone in Goliath's forehead, causing him to fall down. David then quickly takes Goliath's sword, cuts off the Philistine's head, and carries it to Jerusalem.

The literary context of this story suggests we are to view David's actions as being pleasing to, and empowered by, God.¹¹ Prior to his encounter with Goliath, David had been anointed by the prophet Samuel at which point we are told "the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). Then, when David confronts Goliath, he claims that God will give him the victory when he boldly declares: "This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand" (1 Sam. 17:46). The text suggests God stands behind David's victory over Goliath, and most readers tend to agree. Most people believe God wanted David to kill Goliath and enabled him to do so, and most interpreters describe David's actions as admirable, indicating no discomfort with his behavior.¹² By doing so, they reinforce a key ideological assumption undergirding this captivating story, namely, that violence can be "virtuous."

These two stories of "virtuous" violence raise a lot of important questions. Should we applaud Jael's use of deception and lethal violence to eliminate an enemy of Israel? Should we commend her for her death-dealing blows? Should we agree that killing a Canaanite commander makes her "most blessed of women"?¹³ Likewise, should we praise David for killing Goliath? Is David's violent victory over this Philistine the kind of act we should celebrate? Does it make David a heroic figure, worthy of our admiration and respect, or does it make him a murderer with bloodstained hands?

More generally, these stories cause us to reflect on the impact violent texts have on modern readers. What do texts like these do to us when we read them? How do they influence our views about violence? How do they shape our attitudes about others? These are very important questions, and we will return to them later.

Divine Involvement in "Virtuous" Violence

Many Old Testament narratives, prophetic texts, and laws contain examples of "virtuous" violence that are directly related to God's activity. In these instances, we can

distinguish between violence God *commits* and violence God *commands*. Whenever God is portrayed as the sole agent (or essentially the sole agent) of a violent act, we can refer to that as an act of divine violence. Whenever *people* commit acts of violence God has ostensibly authorized, we can describe that as divinely sanctioned violence. Obviously, some violent acts in the Old Testament involve *both* divine violence and divinely sanctioned violence. In the conquest of Canaan, for example, divinely sanctioned violence (God commands Israel to exterminate all Canaanites) goes hand in hand with acts of divine violence (God fights with Israel by knocking over walls and hurling down hailstones from heaven). Since God's involvement in acts of "virtuous" violence are so pervasive throughout the Old Testament, it is worth considering a number of examples of both divine violence and divinely sanctioned violence to further illustrate how Old Testament writers sanctioned various acts of violence.

DIVINE VIOLENCE

Some of the most dramatic examples of "virtuous" violence in the Old Testament are those in which God kills countless numbers of people in overwhelming acts of divine violence. A few of the most notorious examples include the flood narrative, in which God depopulates the planet (Gen. 6:9—8:22); the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which God kills virtually every inhabitant (Gen. 19:12–26); and the devastation of Egypt, in which God destroys plants and animals, kills every first-born Egyptian, and drowns the Egyptian army (Exod. 7:14—12:32; 14:26–31). In various ways, each of these narratives suggests that God's actions were fully justified ("the earth was filled with violence," the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were terribly wicked, and the Egyptians had enslaved and oppressed the Hebrew people).

In some cases, God's violent behavior is explicitly praised. For example, after God drowns the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, the Israelites—who are safe on the other side—see the bodies of dead Egyptian soldiers washing up on shore (Exod. 14:30). They respond by singing a song of praise to God for this unprecedented act of divine violence.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries." (Exod. 15:1, 6–7a cf. vv. 19–21)

The writer displays no uneasiness with this overwhelming act of divine violence and regards God's behavior as completely praiseworthy.¹⁴ It constitutes an example of "virtuous" violence that is hard to miss. But is it really appropriate to rejoice over the death of one's enemies? Is mass murder ever cause for celebration?

Of course, God's violence in the Old Testament is not limited to mass killing and large-scale slaughter. Sometimes God is portrayed as being directly responsible for the death of a particular "sinner." Such acts of divine violence include the execution of Er and Onan (Gen. 38:7-10), the incineration of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), the smiting of Nabal (1 Sam. 25:38), and the elimination of Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6-7). Regardless of whether God's behavior is explicitly justified in the text, most readers regard such divine violence as "virtuous" simply because God is the one doing it.

DIVINELY SANCTIONED VIOLENCE

In addition to numerous passages containing divine violence, many others contain examples of divinely sanctioned violence. Some of this violence is prescriptive in nature, such as the roughly forty Old Testament laws that stipulate death for various offenses: kidnapping (Exod. 21:16), cursing a parent (Exod. 21:17), working on the Sabbath (Exod. 31:15), adultery (Lev. 20:10), bestiality (Lev. 20:15), sorcery (Lev. 20:27), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16a), and murder (Lev. 24:17), among other things. Since all these laws were purportedly given by God, killing offenders would be considered divinely sanctioned in these cases and, therefore, "virtuous."

Many other examples of divinely sanctioned violence in the Old Testament involve the practice of war. Whenever God commands Israel to fight, readers are expected to regard Israel's warfare as "virtuous" because God willed it. Likewise, whenever the text claims God gave Israel victory in battle, readers are expected to agree that the Israelites fought and killed their enemies with God's blessing and approval.¹⁵ Many divinely sanctioned wars, such as Israel's war against the Midianites (Num. 31:2) and later against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:2), are described as divine judgment upon foreign nations for their transgressions.¹⁶ Other wars, like many of those in the Book of Judges, were ostensibly sanctioned by God in order to liberate Israel from their oppressors. God appointed "judges"—military deliverers like Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah—to lead the people of Israel in battle and free them from oppression.¹⁷ In all these examples, warfare and killing receives divine approval in the text.

The most extreme form of divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament called for the utter annihilation of a particular group of people. The conquest of Canaan is the most notorious example. According to the book of Deuteronomy, God commanded the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites, leaving no survivors. Consider these chilling instructions given to the Israelites just prior to entering Canaan:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you . . . then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. (Deut. 7:1-2)

As for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them . . . just as the LORD your God has commanded. (Deut. 20:16-17)

Every Canaanite—from the oldest to the youngest—was to be killed. As the text portrays it, Israel's indiscriminate slaughter of Canaanite men, women, and children represented "virtuous" acts of obedience to God (see also Josh. 11:16-23).

Portraying acts of genocide as "virtuous" should be particularly disturbing to modern readers, especially in the wake of more recent atrocities like the Shoah (Holocaust), the Rwandan genocide, and the genocide in Darfur. As we have seen, Old Testament texts portraying divinely sanctioned genocide have had a nasty after-life and have been used to sanction an enormous amount of violence and killing. We will need to revisit these texts later to consider how we might avoid perpetuating their violent legacy.¹⁸

The Old Testament also contains numerous examples of divinely sanctioned violence against Israelites who worshiped "other gods." One particularly memorable story appears in Numbers 25 when the people of Israel are camped on the plains of Moab, just prior to entering the land of Canaan. When some Israelites begin having sex with Moabite women and worshipping their gods (Num. 25:2), the divine response is swift and severe:

The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the LORD, in order that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." And Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." (Num. 25:4-5)

As soon as Moses finishes speaking, an Israelite man named Zimri brings a Midianite woman named Cozbi "into his family" and does so "in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites" (Num. 25:6). This prompts Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, to leap into action. With spear in hand, he follows them into a tent and thrusts the spear "through the belly" of both of them (Num. 25:8). This violent act not only stops a plague—one that had already claimed twenty-four thousand lives (Num. 25:8-9)—it elicits a very positive reaction from God, who says to Moses:

Phinehas . . . has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, "I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites." (Num. 25:11-13)

According to this text, God is so pleased by Phinehas's decisive act of violence that God decides to reward Phinehas for it!

Another example of divinely sanctioned violence related to the worship of other gods is found in 2 Kings 10. This chapter describes certain events that took place during the reign of Jehu, an Israelite king who ruled during the latter part of the ninth century BCE. After annihilating the entire dynasty of Ahab in a series of massacres (2 Kgs. 10:1-17), Jehu invites all the worshipers of Baal to come to a "great sacrifice" (2 Kgs. 10:19). But they are invited under false pretenses. Little did they know they were the ones to be sacrificed!

Jehu sent word throughout all Israel; all the worshipers of Baal came, so that there was no one left who did not come. They entered the temple of Baal, until the temple of Baal was filled from wall to wall. . . . As soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, Jehu said to the guards and to the officers, "Come in and kill them; let no one escape." So they put them to the sword. (2 Kgs. 10:21, 25a)

The narrator clearly approves of Jehu's purge. This is indicated by the summary statement following this episode which reads: "Thus Jehu wiped out Baal from Israel" (2 Kgs. 10:28). This positive evaluation is contrasted to Jehu's failings in other matters in the following verse (2 Kgs. 10:29). The narrator's perspective appears to be in line with God's since the text seems to suggest God also approved of this massacre.¹⁹

The LORD said to Jehu, "Because you have done well in carrying out what I consider right, and in accordance with all that was in my heart have dealt with the house of Ahab, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." (2 Kgs. 10:30)

God commends Jehu for killing Baal worshipers—and Ahab's family—in a chapter replete with "virtuous" violence.

In addition to narratives like these, there are legal materials providing divine sanction for killing Israelites who tried to persuade fellow Israelites to worship other gods. Prophets and diviners who tried to lead others astray in this way were to be "put to death" (Deut. 13:5), as were family members or close friends. In fact, if family or friends tried to lead you astray, you were instructed to execute them yourself!

Show them no pity or compassion. . . . You shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God (Deut. 13:8b-10a).

Deuteronomy 13 also speaks of “scoundrels” who might lead an entire town astray, in which case Israelites were instructed to “put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it—even putting its livestock to the sword” (Deut. 13:15). Encouraging Israelites to worship other gods was very dangerous business! Doing so could get you killed since God commanded it.²⁰

While many Christians probably resonate with biblical texts stressing the importance of exclusive devotion to God, the idea of killing those who worship a different God—or who try to persuade others to do so—is problematic, to say the least. Even though most Christians do not regard these texts as mandating them to kill their Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist neighbors, such texts can easily encourage attitudes of suspicion and distrust. They invite us to regard those who worship other gods as dangerous people to be avoided at all costs. In this way, such texts have the potential to foster a climate of hostility rather than hospitality toward those whose religious convictions differ from our own. In a world that is already riddled with too many accounts of religiously motivated violence, texts like these need to be handled very carefully.

Structural Violence as “Virtuous” Violence

So far, the examples of “virtuous” violence we have considered involve sanctioned killing of one kind or another. The reader is expected to agree that the death of this person or that group was necessary and right. But the notion of “virtuous” violence in the Old Testament is much broader than this. It is not confined to specific acts of lethal violence. If that were the case, our task would be somewhat more manageable. We could simply identify and isolate all the offending texts. In reality, things are far more complex.

Earlier, I defined “virtuous” violence as violence that is regarded as appropriate, justified, and sometimes even praiseworthy. Some of the most basic structures and practices of ancient Israelite society would fall under this definition since they were inherently violent yet regarded as completely acceptable. Slavery and patriarchy are two noteworthy examples. It was considered normal for Israelites to own slaves and for men to dominate women in various ways. This was simply the “natural” order of things, the way things were. While some Old Testament texts contain legislation regulating the practice of slavery, for example, none directly challenges the morality of it. Slavery was simply a given in ancient Israel.

Likewise, Israelite society was thoroughly patriarchal, and this too was regarded as perfectly acceptable. Time and again, Old Testament texts endorse patriarchal perspectives that are, to a greater or lesser degree, inherently violent. Even though some of these texts do not describe physical acts of violence against women, they are violent just the same. In fact, some of the texts that have done