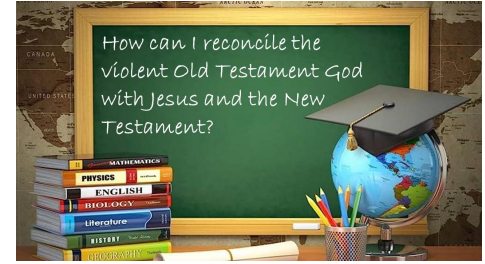


It's Up to You 2023 (Week 4): How can I reconcile the violent Old Testament God with Jesus and the New Testament?

Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less



- 1) We tried to let this complicated question stay complex instead of oversimplifying, and that led us to offer six important guidelines for reading the Old Testament, especially the most difficult parts (like its occasional claims that God commanded violence).
- 2) The 1st guideline is that we misread Old Testament historical narratives - they are ancient histories written according to the standards and norms of their times, not ours.
- 3) Ancient histories regularly exaggerate, and often talk about present situations or struggles as if they're past history (both of these apply directly to a more informed understanding of Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land).
- 4) The 2nd guideline is that we tend to fixate on the few hard passages in the Old Testament that talk about divinely-ordained violence, and miss that the Old Testament is a groundbreaking document, advocating for a morality and spirituality unheard of elsewhere in the Ancient Near Eastern world.
- 5) The 3rd guideline is that we often mistake God's restorative justice for retributive justice: God never punishes for the sake of punishment, but always with the goal of redeeming, even in regard to Israel's enemies like Egypt or Babylon (see Isaiah 19 or Psalm 87.4-6, for example).
- 6) The 4th guideline is that we ought to remember that the Old Testament represents theology in process or dialogue; over the course of its pages, we get to watch Israel work out its own beliefs, refining them as they go.
- 7) The 5th guideline is that the Old Testament is a "tutor" (Galatians 3.19, 22) about the human condition and sinfulness - our good, our inconsistency, our bad, and our very, very bad.
- 8) As United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton writes, "If we take the Bible's humanity seriously, we find the possibility that the violence of Scripture is a reflection of the values and the theological and moral vision of some of its human authors, not of the God they sought to serve."
- 9) The 6th, final, and most important guideline is that Jesus Christ is, according to The Confession of 1967, "the one true sufficient revelation of God," not the scriptures, which are a witness to Him; as such, Jesus Christ becomes the litmus test and filter by which we read everything else in the Bible.
- 10) To not read the Old Testament according to the guidelines above is make the Bible impossible, and perhaps worse yet, open the door for some using it as justification for their own violent intentions (for example, as did the Puritans when they labeled the Native Peoples "Canaanites" and drove them from the land).

Quotes Worth Pondering

On how to understand the conquest of Joshua as an ancient historical text: The first writing of the (conquest) story was likely in the 600s BCE during the reign of Josiah. Josiah sponsored the writing of the first draft of the history in order to support his religious and political reforms...The story took final form while Israel was in exile in Babylon. In other words, the story of Israel's sweeping conquest of Canaan was not told by people seeking to conquer the land of another. Rather, the story emerged from efforts to create an identity in that land for the people of God, who in the last stages of telling the story themselves had no land. As such, the story urges reliance on God, not on military action. (Jerome Creach, in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia)

On God's restorative, not retributive, justice: Instead of removing God from that violence, however, the Old Testament shows God reacting to the violence of humans with corrective measures. That means that sometimes God kills or destroys or uses human instruments to do so as a way of counteracting violence. Acts of divine destruction, however, are not associated with cruelty or wanton destruction. God's ultimate purpose is for correction and redemption. (Jerome Creach, in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia)

On a warrior people hearing warrior messages from a supposed warrior God: So one possible resolution...is that Moses, Joshua, and David were warriors living in times when violence was seen as part of God's way of accomplishing his purposes. They attributed to God words, commands, and deeds that they believed God would have authorized or done. What I am suggesting is that Old Testament passages about 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. (Adam Hamilton, in Making Sense of the Bible)

On reading the Old Testament as a warning against religious violence: ...Perhaps the most important reason for reading the violent stories of the O.T. is to remind us of how easy it is for people of faith to invoke God's name in pursuit of violence, bloodshed, and war...If we take the Bible's humanity seriously, we find the possibility that the violence of Scripture is a reflection of the values and the theological and moral vision of some of its human authors, not of the God they sought to serve...Ultimately the violence-affirming passages of the Old Testament serve as a reminder of how easily we might still be led to invoke God's name as a justification of violence in our world. (Adam Hamilton, in Making Sense of the Bible)

On reading the whole Bible with Christ as its center and interpretive lens: Seeing Christ as central (to the Bible) compels us to always try to make sense of everything we read in any part of scripture in light of our larger knowledge of who God is in Jesus Christ...We do not read the scripture as a vast collection of infallible propositions whose meanings and implications can be understood on their own...terms. We only, always, and everywhere read scripture in view of its real subject matter: Jesus Christ... For Christians, Christ is the center, the inner reason, and the end of all scripture. From the Bible's account of the creation of the world in Genesis to its final consummation in Revelation, it is all and only about the work of God in time and space in the person of Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world. (Christian Smith, Notre Dame University)

On the Bible as an unfolding narrative in a broken world: Turn the Bible back into what it is, not a look-it-up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham, to a new way of life. (Brian McLaren, in A Generous Orthodoxy)

On reading the Bible for the purpose of growing in love: Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought. (St. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.36.40)

Explore More this Week

Big subject yesterday, you can pick what you'd like to drill down on this week:

- Reread The Confession of 1967 and its wise guidance about how to understand and approach scripture (sections 9.27-9.30): [confess67.pdf](#)
- Curious about the groundbreaking morality of the Old Testament compared to its Ancient Near Eastern neighbors? Check out this 30 minute podcast from The Center for Hebraic Thought, an dialogue between a Jewish rabbinic scholar and Christian Old Testament scholar: [Biblical Ethics in the Ancient Near East | The Biblical Mind](#)
- Three short videos from a moderate evangelical Old Testament scholar on the violent passages in the Old Testament, i.e. the conquest under Joshua, and how we need to hear them in their cultural context (this link will take you to the first; the 2nd and 3rd links are on this page): [Violence in the Old Testament \(Part 1\) Lawson Stone](#)
- A wide-ranging 30 minute podcast on the violence in the Old Testament, like how there's a big difference between justified force and wanton violence and how our violence affects creation (from The Center for Hebraic Thought): [Understanding Violence in the Old Testament | The Biblical Mind](#)
- Biblical scholar N.T. Wright describing the art of ancient history, the limitation of thinking of the biblical historical narratives as true or false, how that affects our understanding of biblical authority (4 min. video): [N.T. Wright on the Authority of the Bible 7](#)
- What does it mean that the Bible is "inspired" if it's also an ancient written by humans within a particular cultural setting and point of view? Listen to Old Testament scholar Peter Enns tackle that in a very down to earth way...while also playing with his cat Marmalade, no less. (16 min. video): ["But How Can the Bible Be Inspired If..."](#)
- Two longer, more in depth resources on violence and the Old Testament for those interested - the first is the entry on that subject in The Oxford Research Encyclopedia and the second is from Yale O.T. scholar John J. Collins: [Violence in the Old Testament | Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion](#) and [The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence | Reflections](#)