

# Redeeming Violent Verses

*A Guide for Using Troublesome Texts  
in Church and Ministry*

Eric A. Seibert

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## PART I

# Understanding Why the Church Should Not Ignore Violent Verses

# A Violent Bible and Vanishing Verses

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## *Introducing the Problem*

One of the greatest challenges the church faces today is to interpret and explain passages in the Bible that seem to promote or encourage violence.

—Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture*<sup>1</sup>

Hardly a book in the Old Testament, and very few in the New Testament, does not contain explicit references to violence in one form or another. There are accounts of cannibalism, child sacrifice, kidnapping, enslavement, incest, murder, rape, and dispossession. Politically motivated killings are not uncommon, and stories of warfare and slaughter occur with alarming frequency. Violence is so prominent in the Old Testament that one scholar has suggested it “is a central, if not *the* central, issue for the entire text.”<sup>2</sup> And passages recounting the beheading of John the Baptist, the crucifixion of Jesus, the stoning of Stephen, and the gruesome death of King Herod remind us that violence is often present in the New Testament as well.<sup>3</sup> There is no denying it. Violent verses run throughout the Bible. So why don’t they appear more often in church?

### **WHERE HAVE ALL THE VIOLENT VERSES GONE?**

In the course of a regular Sunday morning, most churchgoers are unlikely to encounter very many violent biblical texts. They will probably never hear about the mutilation of Adoni-bezek (Judg. 1:1–7), the kidnapping of Shilonite women who were then forced to marry their abductors (Judg. 21:15–24), the

gruesome slaying of King Agag (1 Sam. 15:33), the beating and incarceration of Jeremiah (Jer. 37:11–16), or the bone-crushing destruction of men, women, and children in the lions’ den (Dan. 6:24). Nor will most churchgoers be introduced to imprecatory psalms that wish harm upon their enemies, hoping their children will become orphans who “wander about and beg” with none “to pity” them (Ps. 109:9–10, 12). Likewise, many of the most terrifying judgment oracles, like this one from Jeremiah, seldom get any airtime:

Thus says the LORD: I am about to fill all the inhabitants of this land—the kings who sit on David’s throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem—with drunkenness. And I will dash them one against another, parents and children together, says the LORD. I will not pity or spare or have compassion when I destroy them. . . .

I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert. . . .

I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. (Jer. 13:13–14, 24, 26)

Texts like these are not welcome in church.

When was the last time you heard a sermon about the woman from Thebez who mortally wounded Abimelech by throwing a millstone on his head, which crushed his skull (Judg. 9:53)? Or have you ever heard someone preach about the slaughter in Samaria when Jehu treacherously massacred scores of Baal worshipers (2 Kgs. 10:18–27)? Likewise, sermons about Judas committing suicide (Matt. 27:1–10), or about an angel of the Lord mortally striking Herod, who is “eaten by worms” (Acts 12:20–23), are not standard fare in most churches. Preachers tend to avoid these texts like the plague.

Similarly, most Sunday school classes, even *adult* Sunday school classes, won’t touch certain parts of the Bible. Who wants to talk about the book of Nahum, a short prophetic book that gleefully anticipates the total destruction of the Ninevites? How many Sunday school teachers are interested in embarking on a prolonged study of the conquest narrative, with its merciless stories of devastation and the systematic annihilation of the entire Canaanite population (Josh. 6–11)? Very few.

As a result, large portions of the Bible never see the light of day in most congregations. Of course there are exceptions—the pastor who decides to preach through the Minor Prophets, or the Sunday school class that undertakes a study of the book of Exodus, plagues and all. But by and large, the majority of churchgoers rarely encounter violent verses on Sunday morning.

This creates real difficulties for people who attempt to read and study the Bible on their own. They find themselves ill-equipped to interpret these troubling texts in responsible ways and are left with little or no guidance for using

them constructively. This is precisely what happened to Canadian professor of historical theology Randal Rauser. He writes:

When I grew up I was given absolutely no direction to read these violent narratives. And so I learned to overlook or avoid them, and I got really good at it. As a result I remained blissfully ignorant of much of the violence that fills the pages of Scripture. . . . My pastors and teachers growing up simply didn't equip me to grapple with the diversity, intensity, and frequency of violence within the Good Book. I had no tools even to *recognize* it let alone to figure it out.<sup>4</sup>

Like Rauser, many people have very little significant contact with violent biblical texts in church. This leaves them unsure how to handle violent verses and deprives them of an opportunity to learn from them. It also creates a potentially dangerous situation. Without instruction, people are liable to misappropriate these verses, and some may even use them to justify violent behavior toward others. Unfortunately, church history bears this out.<sup>5</sup>

## SANITIZING AND JUSTIFYING VIOLENT VERSES

To be sure, not every violent passage is absent on Sunday morning. Some well-known stories of death and destruction are frequent guests in Sunday school classes and pulpits: Noah's ark, Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, David and Goliath—to name just a few. Yet more often than not, when these violent stories do appear in church, they are not handled particularly well. Very little attention is paid to the brutality they contain, much less to problems this violence raises for many readers. Instead, when these stories (and others like them) are used, ministers routinely sanitize them or justify the violence they contain.<sup>6</sup> This does not serve the church well.

### Sanitizing Violence in the Bible

When violent biblical passages are sanitized, the troubling parts of the story are omitted or mentioned only briefly in passing. There is no real discussion of the violence they contain or of the kind of problems that violent verses raise for modern readers. The horrors of bloodshed and killing are conveniently kept at a safe distance, and our attention is directed to the “happy” parts of the passage. What results is a sparkling clean version of the story that feels sort of like a family-friendly G-rated Disney film.<sup>7</sup>

Take the story of Noah's ark, for example. Usually, when this story is used in church, we are meant to be encouraged by God's deliverance of Noah, his

family, and a boatload of animals. We are not normally invited to consider the fate of those stranded *outside* the ark. Typically, they are not even mentioned. Similarly, when the story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho shows up on Sunday morning, we are expected to celebrate Israel's victory, not to inquire about the fate of the terrified inhabitants slaughtered inside the city walls. Instead, pastors and Sunday school teachers direct our attention to Israel's obedience to God—marching around the walls of the city, blowing trumpets, and shouting—and to God's miraculous intervention that results in city walls collapsing. But what about Joshua 6:21?

Then they [the Israelites] devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

This verse is seldom mentioned. Most ministers do not invite us to imagine the terror these city dwellers felt. They do not encourage us to linger over the carnage, let alone feel any compassion for the countless lives lost in this bloody massacre. Instead, they say, in effect, “Move along, move along. Nothing to see here.” But there *is* something to see. And we *should* look. Indeed, we *must* look. While some degree of sanitizing is understandable when teaching violent stories like these to preschoolers or young children, it is inadequate when talking about these texts with teens and adults.<sup>8</sup> Sanitizing violent texts conceals their problematic nature and fails to help us come to terms with the moral and ethical difficulties they raise.

### **Justifying Violence in the Bible**

The other thing that often happens when violent verses appear on Sunday morning is that pastors and lay leaders try to justify the bloodshed. This is especially true when the violence is condoned in the text or at least appears to have the writer's approval. For example, when God is portrayed behaving violently, many ministers take it upon themselves to defend God from charges of wrongdoing by explaining why it was *right* for God to engage in this kind of behavior. They “explain” *why* it was necessary for God to kill virtually every living thing in a worldwide flood, and they offer justifications for why God commanded the people of Israel to slaughter Canaanites without mercy. They do so in order to make violent biblical texts more palatable, to convince churchgoers that despite appearances to the contrary, these acts of violence are morally acceptable.

But apologetic efforts like these come at a high price. On the one hand, they reinforce the notion that God is violent and that God uses violence to achieve divine purposes. While some Christians have no problem with this



view of God, others find it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile it with other portrayals of God in Scripture.<sup>9</sup> In addition, efforts to justify violence in the Bible have the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the idea that violence is appropriate and even commendable in certain situations. Again, while some Christians may not be troubled by this, others believe violence is *not* a virtue and should be rejected by all who follow the nonviolent way of Jesus. While sanitizing and justifying biblical violence often make people feel better about violent verses, these practices sidestep the real issues and fail to grapple seriously enough with the text.

Rather than ignoring violent passages, or trying to whitewash or defend the violence they contain, it is important to address them honestly and openly, acknowledging their problematic dimensions while exploring their positive possibilities.<sup>10</sup> To that end, the primary purpose of this book is to help religious practitioners—pastors, priests, church leaders, Christian educators, lay leaders, and ministers of all stripes—find constructive ways to use violent biblical texts responsibly when preaching, teaching, and leading worship.<sup>11</sup>

## WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

In the past fifteen years or so, a number of books from different perspectives have been published to help people make sense of “God’s” violent behavior in the pages of Scripture. I myself have contributed to this growing body of literature.<sup>12</sup> Yet not much has been written about how to use these—and a host of other—violent biblical texts in church. This leaves those who minister at a real disadvantage. What should they do with stories that sanction genocide or praise individuals for killing others? How can they use these texts in sermons, liturgies, Christian education classes, and elsewhere *without* promoting the violent ideologies they contain? Very little attention has been given to questions like these.

*Redeeming Violent Verses* seeks to remedy this undesirable state of affairs and is designed for *all* who serve in church and ministry. It is for both clergy *and* laity, for those in paid positions and those in volunteer roles. If you use Scripture to preach, teach, lead Bible studies, give devotionals, or facilitate worship, this book has been written with you in mind. In the pages that follow, you will find helpful insights and practical suggestions that will enable you to use violent biblical texts in creative and responsible ways.

While clergy and lay leaders are the primary audience for this book, others engaged in various forms of ministry will benefit as well. Many of the examples and suggestions offered here are easily adaptable to other contexts, such as parachurch organizations, Christian secondary schools, and Christian institutions of higher learning such as colleges, universities, and seminaries.

In addition, since violent biblical texts trouble a broad range of individuals, anyone who is bothered by all the killing and bloodshed in the Bible, or has struggled to find anything beneficial in these violent verses, will be rewarded by reading this book.

## THE VALUE OF USING VIOLENT VERSES IN CHURCH AND MINISTRY

As I have suggested, ministers and lay leaders who ignore violent biblical texts leave them open to misinterpretation and misappropriation. Without guidance or instruction, people are more likely to use these passages in harmful ways, to justify violent behavior or to conceive of God as an angry judge, ready to punish sinners at a moment's notice. Ignoring these verses also deprives churchgoers of the many benefits that result from using these passages constructively. This is unfortunate, to say the least, since so much good comes from reading these verses responsibly.

The pages that follow are filled with helpful hints and creative strategies for using violent biblical texts in positive, faith-affirming ways. This provides a helpful new perspective on violent verses in the Bible, one that regards them as valuable texts to be explored, not just problems to be solved. It also reminds us that *all* parts of the Bible can be spiritually edifying, even those parts that might initially seem most troubling and intimidating.

I am convinced that significant benefits come from using violent verses responsibly in worship services, Christian education programs, and other ministry settings. Pastors and lay leaders can demonstrate their value and usefulness by incorporating them into sermons and by talking about them in Sunday school classes. For example, many violent biblical texts vividly demonstrate the destructive and harmful nature of violence. Texts like these can be used in efforts to persuade people to avoid violent “solutions” and to seek nonviolent alternatives instead. These verses also serve as an excellent starting point for in-depth conversations about various forms of violence in the modern world—capital punishment, suicide, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and so forth. Violent biblical texts provide a natural entrée into discussions about sensitive topics like these that ministers are often hesitant to broach. Exploring these verses also provides opportunities to encourage people to develop compassion for victims of violence in the pages of the Bible. This can have a profound impact on the way we see people, even our enemies, and how we treat them.

These ideas (and others) are developed more fully in chapter 2, where I make a more extensive case for the importance and value of using violent

verses in church and ministry. Suffice it to say for now, there is much to be gained by bringing violent biblical texts out of the shadows and using them creatively.

## THE BIBLICAL TEXTS UNDER CONSIDERATION

This book focuses almost exclusively on texts from the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> My decision to concentrate on this part of the Bible is not meant to imply that there are not many violent texts in the New Testament, or that those which do appear are surprisingly easy to interpret. Violent biblical texts pose a formidable challenge regardless of where they reside in the canon. I have chosen to focus on the Old Testament because that is where the problem is often most intensely felt and because that is my area of specialty. Happily, many of the suggestions offered throughout this book apply equally well to difficult verses in both Testaments, and those who wish to use violent passages from the New Testament in ministry will find it easy to adapt much of what follows.

Throughout the book, I will use phrases like “violent biblical texts,” “violent passages,” and “violent verses” interchangeably. For our purposes, it is unnecessary to establish a precise definition of violence that allows us to determine exactly which verses qualify as *violent* verses and which do not. This would be important if we were undertaking a comprehensive study of violence in the Bible, but that is not the purpose of this book. Instead, I am interested in exploring Old Testament texts that contain actions which few people, if any, would question as being violent.

Specifically, I am interested in considering Old Testament texts that describe *physical* violence. Though violence takes many forms—psychological, emotional, relational, verbal—most of the texts discussed here depict, or envision, some form of physical violence that causes injury or harm, and that may result in death.

I am keenly aware that many biblical texts contain violent ideologies (e.g., patriarchy, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism) which are not always manifested in the text as *physical* violence. I am also painfully aware that many Old Testament texts have a long and violent history of interpretation, regardless of whether the text itself describes an act of violence or contains the threat of violence. While I am gravely concerned about the way these kinds of texts are used (and misused), they are not the primary focus of this particular study.<sup>14</sup>

My decision to concentrate primarily on biblical texts that contain physical acts of violence is largely a practical consideration. It provides focus and

coherence and helps keep the book within manageable proportions. It also addresses biblical texts that initially tend to create the greatest problems for the majority of readers.

The Old Testament texts considered here primarily describe violence that is done to, or directed toward, *people*. Obviously, the effects of violent behavior are not limited to people alone. Many Old Testament texts describe violence against animals and the environment. Given the way human behavior has often had very negative consequences for the animal kingdom and the natural world, we would be wise to consider carefully how we might use these texts to inform our attitudes and actions going forward.<sup>15</sup> The way we treat the world around us matters immensely—a point that has become unmistakably clear as we routinely witness the deleterious effects of climate change in our world.<sup>16</sup> Still, since the most significant problems many people have with the Old Testament come from texts describing violence toward human beings, these passages will be our focus.

## VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to make a few general comments about the scope and nature of violence in the Old Testament. No matter how you measure it, the sheer amount of violence in the Old Testament is staggering.<sup>17</sup> Professor Mark McEntire believes that “human violence is the *primary* factor which shapes the biblical story.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Raymund Schwager contends that “no other human activity or experience is mentioned as often” as violence in the Old Testament. By his count, there are “over *six hundred* passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others.”<sup>19</sup> The number is even higher when considering passages containing acts of *divine* 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.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, Schwager claims that “in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people.”<sup>21</sup> That means there are more than seventeen hundred violent passages in the Old Testament!

### Divine Violence and Human Violence

One way to categorize violence in the Old Testament is to differentiate between (1) divine violence, (2) divinely sanctioned violence, and (3) human-initiated violence. Strictly speaking, divine violence is something that God performs *without* direct human assistance. When God annihilates virtually all

the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24–25), puts Er and Onan to death (Gen. 38:7, 10), obliterates the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exod. 14:26–31), and kills many Israelites by sending venomous snakes (Num. 21:6), God works alone. Humans are not involved in these acts of smiting and slaying.<sup>22</sup>

Divinely *sanctioned* violence, on the other hand, refers to human acts of violence that God explicitly commands or condones. For example, after God reportedly commands Moses to “avenge the Israelites on the Midianites” (Num. 31:2), we are told “they did battle against Midian, as the LORD had commanded Moses, and killed every male” (v. 7). In another instance, the text portrays God issuing this command to King Saul: “Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Sam. 15:3). In both cases, God ostensibly commands one group of people to kill another, thus sanctioning the violence that ensues.

Divinely sanctioned violence also includes acts that appear to have God’s blessing and approval even when it is not explicitly given. Examples of this are Jael’s murder of Sisera (Judg. 4:17–24; 5:24–27) and David’s triumph over Goliath (1 Sam. 17). Jael receives no word from God instructing her to drive a tent peg through Sisera’s skull, but the text regards her death-dealing blow as an act of faithfulness. Likewise, David is not given a divine directive to slay Goliath, but all indications from the text seem to suggest that killing this man pleased God.

In addition to divine violence and divinely sanctioned violence, the Old Testament also contains numerous examples of human-initiated acts of violence. People engage in a wide range of devastating acts without divine authorization or approval. Cain kills his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8–11). David orders Joab to ensure Uriah is killed in battle (2 Sam. 11:14–17). Amnon rapes his half sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–22). The Jezreelites unjustly convict Naboth and stone him to death (1 Kgs. 21:11–13). There is no indication of God’s blessing or support in any of these instances.

These distinctions between divine violence, divinely sanctioned violence, and human-initiated violence are important to keep in mind as we move through the book. As we will see, Old Testament passages that fall into one of the first two categories present unique challenges and require special attention.<sup>23</sup>

### **Wrongful Violence and “Virtuous” Violence**

When reading violent Old Testament texts, it is often possible to distinguish between what I refer to as wrongful violence and “virtuous” violence.<sup>24</sup> Wrongful violence is violence that is portrayed negatively and disapproved of

in the text. It includes violent acts regarded as being inappropriate, unjustified, and condemnable. Wrongful violence is unsanctioned and unacceptable, and those who engage in such behavior do so without divine approval.

“Virtuous” violence, on the other hand, is portrayed as being appropriate, justified, and perhaps even praiseworthy. It is sanctioned and sometimes even celebrated in the text. Those who engage acts of “virtuous” violence enjoy God’s blessing and are understood to be acting in ways that are congruent with God’s intentions.

Most modern readers easily recognize that the murder of Abel (Gen. 4), the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13), and the stoning of Naboth (1 Kgs. 21) are examples of wrongful violence. These violent acts, motivated by jealousy, lust, and greed, are presented in ways that are critical of them. But other violent accounts, like the slaughter of the Canaanites (Josh. 6–11) and the annihilation of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15), find approval in the Bible, making them examples of “virtuous” violence.<sup>25</sup>

When referring to “virtuous” violence, I have placed quotation marks around the word “virtuous” to indicate that this refers to the *biblical writer’s* perspective about the act in question. It does not reflect my views. Personally, I do not think violence is ever virtuous. I believe it is always harmful, even when it is used in an attempt to help others. I have written about this in my book *Disarming the Church: Why Christians Must Forsake Violence to Follow Jesus and Change the World*.<sup>26</sup> I believe Jesus lived nonviolently and called his followers to do the same.

For our purposes here, it is *not* necessary to agree with me on this particular point to benefit from what is to come. Even if you believe followers of Jesus can (or even should) use violence for certain reasons—to protect innocent lives, for self-defense, to prevent a terrorist attack—that does not change the fact that many biblical texts describe people engaging in acts of violence we routinely condemn. We still need to figure out how to use these texts carefully and constructively, in ways that do not perpetuate harm against others.

Recognizing the distinction between wrongful violence and “virtuous” violence is helpful when considering how to use violent verses in church. As we will see, biblical texts that *condemn* violence are often much easier to use than texts that *condone* it.

## A SHORT SUMMARY OF WHAT LIES AHEAD

Finally, allow me to offer a brief word about the structure and content of this book. It has three parts. The first of these, “Understanding Why the Church Should Not Ignore Violent Verses,” sets forth the problem (chap. 1) and makes

a case for why it is so vitally important to use—rather than ignore—violent biblical texts in church (chap. 2).

Part 2, “Finding Ways to Use Violent Biblical Texts Responsibly in Church,” begins by offering seven ways to use a violent biblical text constructively (chap. 3). This is followed by three chapters dealing with the use of violent verses in different facets of ministry: Christian education (chap. 4), worship (chap. 5), and preaching (chap. 6).

The final part of the book, “Exploring Sample Texts and Talking about Violent Portrayals of God,” contains three chapters. Chapter 7 applies some of the suggestions made earlier in the book to a few selected Old Testament passages. This demonstrates how certain strategies work with specific biblical texts. In chapter 8, the focus is exclusively on Old Testament texts containing divine violence. It is helpful to have a separate chapter devoted to this issue because many people find it especially challenging to know how to handle texts that portray God behaving violently. The last chapter of the book (chap. 9) offers some final words of practical advice to those who accept the challenge and heed the call to use violent verses in church and ministry.

## CONCLUSION

Though I am not sure what led you to read this book, I am very glad you are here. Maybe you are a pastor who has struggled to preach from violent Old Testament texts. Perhaps you are a Sunday school teacher concerned about how you should retell violent Bible stories to children in age-appropriate ways. Or maybe you are a churchgoer who has been seeking a better understanding of violence in the Bible, given all the problems it raises for many people. It is also possible that you are reading this book because your college or seminary professor required it for class. Or maybe you just found this book while browsing online or wandering through a bookstore and it piqued your curiosity. Whatever the case may be, I sincerely appreciate your willingness to journey with me in the pages that follow. I hope you enjoy this book and trust you find it helpful as you seek to use violent biblical texts creatively and constructively in church and other contexts.