What Does the Bible Say About...?

Violence

"What Does the Bible Say About...?" Series
Ronald D. Witherup, PSS
Series Editor

Published volumes:

Angels and Demons
John Gillman and Clifford M. Yeary

Animals
Jaime Waters

Education
Allison Gray

Forgiveness
Mary Ann Getty

Friendship
Laurie Brink, OP

Good and Evil
Michael Patella, OSB

Inclusion
Don Senior

Life and Death
John Gillman

Old Age
Ronald D. Witherup, PSS

Slavery and Freedom
Catherine Upchurch

Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees
vănThanh Nguyễn, SVD

Women and Men
John and Florence Gillman

Creation
David G. Monaco

What Does the Bible Say About...?

Violence

Craig E. Morrison, O.Carm.

NCP
NEW CITY PRESS
Enkindling the Spirit of Unity

To Quinn Conners in gratitude
for years of fraternal support

Published in the United States by New City Press
136 Madison Avenue, Floors 5 & 6, PMB #4290
New York, NY 10016
www.newcitypress.com

What Does the Bible Say About Violence?
Craig E. Morrison, O.Carm.

Cover design and layout by Miguel Tejerina

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024953099

ISBN: 978-1-56548-644-7 (paper)
ISBN: 978-1-56548-645-4 (e-book)
ISBN: 978-1-56548-697-3 (series ISBN)

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about…?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

"prooftexting"—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore "what the Bible says about VIOLENCE."

Introduction

Michael Gerson was a speech writer for President George W. Bush and later became a weekly columnist for the Washington Post from 2006 until his death in 2022. His deep faith often shone through his political commentary, a faith with eyes wide open on society. At a 2014 Faith Forum that focused on religion and politics, Elliott Abrams, with whom Gerson had worked in the White House, criticized President Bush for saying that Islam was a "religion of peace." Gerson offered Abrams a corrective: "Every tradition, religious tradition, has forces of tribalism and violence in its history, . . . and every religious tradition has resources of respect for the other."[1] Gerson said in a nutshell what this book wants to take up. How can we understand today the biblical passages that express tribalism and violence? What are we to make of them?

The History of the Bible and Violence

Leonard Bernstein, a prophet in his own time, confronted the question of violence and the Bible in his *Mass*, performed for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC (September 8, 1971). During the performance, the first reading was taken from the Book of Genesis—"God said, 'Let there be light'"—and then shifted the audience's attention to religious violence:

God made us the boss
God gave us the cross
We turned it into a sword
To spread the Word of the Lord

This was 1971(!), long before questions of violence and the Bible were openly addressed as they are today. Bernstein set to music some of the biblical questions that really bothered many religious people, including that audience at the Kennedy Center, as the Vietnam War raged on. Why is there religious violence? How could the Crusades have happened? What could have allowed the violence of the Inquisition? Why are there divinely sanctioned wars in the Bible? How did the cross become a sword?

"The Church of Reconciliation" stands at the far end of the Dachau concentration camp. To reach it you have to walk the length of the camp, a walk through Nazi terror. A memorial plaque at the entrance acknowledges the Lutheran Church's silence before Nazi terror—the inaction that offered up the famous pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer for martyrdom. Where were the Dutch Christians on August 4, 1944, when eight Jews were marched out of their secret annex at Prinsengracht 263, where Anne Frank left behind her treasured diary? How were Dutch pastors reading their Bible in this time of inconceivable violence and an unimaginable betrayal of God's word? These are some of the questions that I wish to reflect on in the pages that follow.

Disturbing Violence in the Bible

Each year I find the Exodus reading during the Easter Vigil ever more unsettling. During this sacred moment that celebrates Jesus' rising in the night after the violence of the cross—a celebration of life, not death—we hear the account of the ancient Israelites' liberation from Egypt. That reading closes with a terrifying image: "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore" (Exodus 14:30). The liturgy continues with a selection of verses from Exodus 15 that celebrate soldiers and horses sinking like stones into the depths of the sea. Our Easter Vigil that celebrates Jesus' passage from death to life also remembers the Egyptian soldiers who went from life to death at God's hands. The dissonance is unescapable.

We want God to reject all forms of violence explicitly. We expect the Bible to address the question with a unified voice. Instead, we get multiple voices with divergent, even opposing, perspectives. Isaiah proclaims that there shall be no harm on God's holy mountain (Isaiah 11:9), but God orders Saul to slaughter the Amalekites, sparing no one (1 Samuel 15:3). David goes to war to destroy the Ammonites (2 Samuel 12:29), but the prophet Zechariah dreams of a new king who will destroy war altogether (Zechariah 9:10). Jesus who ascends a mountain to proclaim: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44) is the same Jesus who tells a parable about wicked tenants whom the owner puts "to a miserable death" (Matthew 21:41). Where is that singular divine voice, that lesson, that moral clarity that we expect from the Bible? That question is addressed in this book.

Asking Questions of the Bible That Our Ancestors Never Imagined

When the prophet Samuel is getting on in years (1 Samuel chapter 8) and the Israelites need to decide on his successor, they reject Samuel's sons. They want a king, not a prophet, as their leader. Samuel is unhappy, but not because he thinks that the Israelites should have asked for representative government or democratic reforms. Should God also have insisted on a democratic republic for the ancient Israelites? Such questions are never asked.

King David sends Joab to attack the Ammonites (2 Samuel chapter 11), and the narrator never questions the ethics of this war or war in general. The prophet we know as Second Isaiah would not have agreed with King David. Rules for keeping slaves are outlined in the Bible, but the actual question of whether slavery should be abolished is never raised. Even Paul, in his Letter to Philemon, intercedes for the freedom of the slave Onesimus but does not question the institution of slavery itself. The many questions we might want to pose to the Bible illustrate our distance from the world in which the Bible was written and remind us that we need to know the historical context in order to understand some of the most perplexing biblical passages.

Violence: An Evolving Concept

Among the challenges to addressing violence and the Bible is the meaning of the term "violence" itself. Our understanding of what constitutes violence is expanding these

days. We know obvious examples: war, racism, sexual abuse, robbery, carjacking, gang war, and so forth. But there is a growing awareness that violence can be much more subtle and insidious. An employer's power over an employee can become exploitative, from low pay to sexual innuendos and demands for inappropriate favors. This reality was depicted in the 1980 movie *9 to 5*: a boss who treats his female workers as personal servants and demands sexual favors. The film's truths were wrapped in comedy, but today some of the scenes are not funny at all; in fact, we recognize that they witness to violence against women.

Today we understand how bullying extends from children's schoolyards to the university (though in academia bullying is usually cloaked in smug language). Violence in our health care system provides better access for some and less access or none for others. How does the Bible respond to these newly recognized forms of violence?

The Violence Within

We encounter violence in our world and in ourselves. Esau's desire for revenge on his usurping brother Jacob is not entirely alien to us (Genesis 27:41). Peter avenges Jesus' arrest by cutting off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave (John 18:10). As we shall see, biblical characters feel jealousy and seek revenge.

In 1995, when Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (author of the renowned book *On Death and Dying*, 1969), was interviewed by Daniel Redwood for Health World Online, she

described her visit to the extermination camp of Majdanek (with its seven gas chambers) just after the camp's liberation. There she met a Jewish girl who said to her: "If you would only know that there is a Hitler in every human being!"[2] The statement shocked the then-19-year-old Kübler-Ross, as it shocks me today. But the words of this young survivor of the Shoah (also called the Holocaust) compel me to reflect on the violence in the Bible not as a bystander, but as if I am looking through a window into my world and into my soul. We are interested in the question of violence in our sacred texts because we encounter it in the world and, above all, in ourselves.

The Courage to Address a Disturbing Question

Marilynne Robinson, author of *Gilead* (winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize), spoke at the Trinity Form in July 2020. In this interview she was asked about the challenges of being a Christian writer who writes for a secular audience. She responded passionately: "There's something very, very wrong when so many people who claim to be religious act as if they have to hide out, as if their understanding of things couldn't support daylight."[3] She is right! We *can* engage the question of violence in the Bible in the daylight, even if some answers to our questions will make us uncomfortable. Trying to avoid it or explain it away will no longer convince a contemporary audience in our evermore-educated society.

I am often asked about the violence in the Bible by church-going Christians. Some biblical texts bother

them, and their sincere query is a sign of their investment in understanding their faith. They want to learn how to understand the violent passages in the Bible. This book is addressed to them. These questions spur us forward toward an ever-deeper reflection on the Bible, on God, our world, and on ourselves. Just as our understanding of violence is evolving, so our understanding of the Bible's response to these questions is evolving.

Therefore, this book is not intended to offer a hand-waving explanation about violence in the Bible. Even less will it offer absolute answers to such concerns. It will, however, point the way forward. We can responsibly hold the conversation and contribute to the ongoing reflection on violence in our sacred texts—how the cross became a sword. In the afterword, I consider how the Bible reveals the path to overcoming our human tendency toward factionalism and violence.

Chapter One

Where Does Violence Come From?

Steven Pinker, in his 2011 best-selling book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, reviews the most notable scenes of violence in the Bible—biblical battles with their hyperbolic numbers of the slaughtered. Admitting that some of these battles are "artistic reconstructions," he claims that, "Whether or not the Israelites actually engaged in genocide, *they certainly thought it was a good idea*" [italics mine].[4] This shocking oversimplification is presented by a respected contemporary philosopher in a popular book.

Pinker expresses the opinion of many who jettison the Bible because of its violent scenes. He replays the often-cited battle in 1 Samuel 15, where God orders King Saul to massacre the Amalekites, a scene I will address. But Pinker neglects to inform his audience that the Bible speaks with diverse voices. Who are those Israelites who thought genocide was a good idea? Are they the Israelites in the community of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied that God would bring foreigners to the holy mountain (Isaiah 56:7)? Are they Jesus' disciples, who embraced his teaching of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1–12: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9)? Pinker's unnuanced comment on

biblical violence—perhaps a commonly held opinion—begs for a response.

But before going any further, we have to address a basic question: What is violence?

Violence Refuses a Simple Definition

Defining violence is an "unenviable task," wrote Johan Galtung in his influential essay, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."[5] We know what it is, but identifying its philosophical dimensions is a challenge. Hannah Arendt's classic essay, "Reflections on Violence," published in *The New York Review of Books* (February 27, 1969), argues that violence is closely linked to power. It is an instrument of change, but the result is often a more violent world. Martin Luther King, Jr., would agree. In his address before the annual meeting of the "Fellowship of the Concerned" on November 16, 1961, he maintained that "the means must be as pure as the end, that in the long run of history, immoral destructive means cannot bring about moral and constructive ends."[6] Again and again King insisted that violence does not solve problems but only creates new, more complicated ones.

In his speeches and articles King rightly presumed that he and his audience knew what violence is, since many of them were survivors of the same racist oppression. But in an article published in October 1959 in *Liberation*, King laid out three different approaches to violence:

- The rejection of violence
  (King's personal option for nonviolence)

- Violence in self-defense
- Violence "as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously"[7]

The Bible contains examples of all three of these approaches to violence, but it is the third approach where King and Arendt share a similar understanding, and that is part of my focus in this book.

Community vs. Faction

We are social animals, and the groups we create can become communities or factions. A community shares a common vision, a common hope for humanity. A faction shares a common enemy. A community rejects violence to further its vision, whereas a faction engages in violence against its enemy (imagined or real) to further its program and prove its superiority. As the faction prepares to face its enemy, the first foe to be eliminated are those within the faction who do not buy into its unnuanced doctrines, those who refuse to hate the invented enemy that the faction's leaders insist is a threat.

The faction indoctrinates its followers to believe that the members of other factions, or those who do not belong to any faction, are unredeemed and evil—nonpersons. Once all the members of the faction have swallowed this propaganda, violence against nonmembers becomes possible, even necessary. Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman, rejected the Nazi propaganda about the Jewish threat, refusing to join the Nazi faction. Her family harbored six Jews

in their home in Haarlem; they were eventually betrayed, arrested, and imprisoned (her father and sister died during their imprisonment). Her stirring autobiography, *The Hiding Place*, records her story. Today Corrie ten Boom is recognized by the Yad Vashem Remembrance Authority in Israel as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations."

This faction mentality, the violent exploitation or elimination of some for the benefit of others, is dismantled by community. In the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Edith Stein, "the Other" is not a member of an opposing faction to be exploited for my own benefit, but someone for whom I am responsible, someone for whom I have empathy. *I am, indeed, my sister's and my brother's keeper.* Levinas identifies "the Other" (capitalized to signal its special meaning) whom we encounter in the world according to biblical categories: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. These "Others" are to be discovered in their own unique transcendence. For Stein, my responsibility for "the Other" is captured in the parable of the Good Samaritan. When "the Other" becomes my brother or sister, the human community that is created bursts through factional mentalities and dismantles the violent, exploitative ambitions of the human heart.

The biblical authors engaged this question of the roots of violence not with philosophical propositions but with stories and human experiences. They faced the question of the origins of violence immediately in the opening chapters of the Old Testament and in the first scenes of the New Testament. The question was a priority in their minds.

The Origins of Violence According to the Bible

We are only a few pages into the Bible when a fight breaks out between brothers and one of them is murdered (Genesis 4:3–16). The famous story, mistitled "Cain and Abel," is essentially about Cain. He invites his brother Abel for a walk in a field, to an isolated place where there will be no witnesses, especially God. Once alone, Cain makes his move, and we are left to imagine Abel's body lying out in the open country. No one will know what happened.

The biblical story is vexingly obscure as to Cain's motives, a gap that draws us into the scene and bids us to fill it in. Just prior to the murder, Cain and Abel offer their sacrifices and God accepts Abel's but not Cain's; somehow Cain figures this out and becomes angry. To resolve his anger, Cain could have confronted God for an explanation. After all, it was God who rejected Cain's sacrifice, not Abel. Instead, Cain's resentment toward God is transformed into jealousy of his brother (see chapter 6, "Jealousy: The Violence Within," in the present volume), even if this is not explicit in the biblical passage. God recognizes Cain's anger and counsels him in one of the most cryptic biblical verses. Cain should avoid the temptation toward sin: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). God's question and warning go unanswered and the scene ends abruptly. We are left to wonder how Cain might have responded to God.

God gave Cain a choice, and when Abel is murdered the biblical narrator ensures that we know it was Cain's (not God's) choice. He opted to follow his resentment and jealousy, ultimately choosing violence. With Abel dead, Cain assumes the story is over. But it is not over for God.

God Is Not Oblivious to the Violence in our World

God is immediately *engaged* by this first act of violence and does not remain a bystander or pretend to ignore it or explain it away. "Where is your brother Abel?" God demands. "I do not know," Cain retorts (Genesis 4:9). Cain lies directly to God. This additional offense is stunning. Can he pretend that the violence against Abel never happened—even to God? Does he hope that God will fall for it? Can we pretend that the violence in our world does not happen—even to God? Can we explain it away, hoping that God will fall for our explanations?

What is Cain's understanding of God? Does he presume that God is indifferent to human violence? Does he imagine that God will take his side and support the murder of Abel? What was Cain thinking?

In this short scene at the beginning of human history, our Bible responds to a fundamental question: How did violence originate? Where does it come from? The short answer is: from us and not from God. God had intervened before Abel's murder to encourage Cain to resist his jealousy and resentment. For the Genesis author, if we want to

find the source of violence in our world, we only have to look within ourselves.

The Bible further develops its study of human violence in Genesis chapter 6, where God observes human wickedness: "that every inclination [Hebrew *yezer*] of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). The Hebrew word *yezer*, weakly translated as "inclination" ("compulsion" might be better), has intrigued Jewish and Christian writers for centuries. What is this *yezer* in the human heart, this impulse or attraction toward good or evil, a tendency toward the benefit or exploitation of others, a desire to create a community or a faction? Genesis chapter 6 reaffirms the central message of Cain's story: Our inclination toward violence does not come from God. Thus, when I shake my finger at God and demand an answer about Auschwitz, God points the divine finger back at me and demands the answer from me, just as God interrogated Cain at the dawn of human history.

A New Testament Perspective

The New Testament, too, immediately engages the question of violence. Our Christmas carols sing of the first Noel, a silent night, and three kings journeying from the Orient. We imagine the birth of the Messiah with heralding angels heard on high—the wonder of Christmas. But these hymns do *not* reflect the birth of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" does not lie still for very long after Jesus' birth. No verse in that carol

replays the screams of Bethlehem's innocent children who are slaughtered. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is born into a ferociously violent world, personified in King Herod.

Matthew opens his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah . . ." (Matthew 1:2). Such a perfectly ordered world: "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations" (verse 17). The rhythmic recitation of the genealogy conveys its meaning: God has oriented all human history toward the birth of the Messiah. History is not a random collection of disordered, meaningless events. It is under the direction of divine providence. Enter King Herod.

Herod plots to disrupt the divine design for human history. His violence is driven by a perceived threat to his power (confirming Martin Luther King's and Hannah Arendt's link between violence and power). Matthew deliberately juxtaposes Herod as "king" with Jesus as "king of the Jews" (2:1–2). Thus, there are two kings in the land, and Herod fears his rival. The threat is purely in his imagination—the child lying in the manger in Bethlehem poses no danger to his reign at all. But that is not the point. Herod's imagined threat to his power provokes him to excessive violence. The "slaughter of the innocents," as it is called, is depicted in religious art from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance so that we see and hear the cries of the babies and their parents. Our joyful Christmas

carols are interrupted by Herod's fanatical violence. God intervenes to save Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but the children of Bethlehem are slaughtered.

Where Am I in These Biblical Scenes?

The Bible holds up both a window and a mirror. It is a window into an ancient world and its peoples. At the same time it is a mirror that reflects our world and ourselves. We may say to ourselves, thank goodness there are no King Herods in our world, but perhaps we are not looking hard enough.

The Sicilian magistrate Rosario Livatino was beatified on May 9, 2021. He was born into the world of the Mafia, a world like Herod's. He studied law and in 1979 became a magistrate in the court of Agrigento, Sicily. He was involved in the *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action), a lay movement that sought to actualize the gospel in every aspect of life. The movement espoused concrete values that can be lived out each day: sincerity, collaboration, transparency, detachment from personal prestige, honesty, and generous service for justice—values that build communities and destroy factions like the Mafia.

Livatino incarnated *hope* in its most biblical sense. Optimism is the sense that things will turn out well. Hope is rooted in the trust that the kingdom of God, announced by Jesus in the Beatitudes, is our destiny. When I live in Christian hope, I live each day as if the new world, the new community, announced in the Beatitudes has already been

realized. Then the person beside me on the subway is not just another person plodding their way through rush hour and who just beat me to a seat. That person is my sister or brother in Christ, whose life story is worthy of my respect and love. Then the factions we create dissolve into the community of our human family, and violence is uprooted.

By incarnating these values as a magistrate in Sicily, Livatino became a threat to his Mafia-dominated world, as Jesus threatened Herod's world. He wrote that at the end of our lives we will not be asked if we were believers (*credenti*), but if we were believable (*credibile*). This dictum captures the hope that guided Livatino's life.

On September 21, 1990, at the age of 37, as he drove to court without an escort, Rosario Livatino was assassinated in a cold-blooded Mafia execution. At the time, he was prosecuting Mafia bosses and fighting the structures of bribery endemic in Sicilian society. He lived in a world ruled by a Herod and there was no escape to Egypt for him. On the day of his beatification, the shirt he was wearing on the day of his murder was brought into the cathedral in Agrigento, Sicily—a shirt soaked with a martyr's blood.

The Bible and the Origins of Violence

The Bible contains scenes of violence and war that lead some people, like Steven Pinker, to toss it aside. But both Old and New Testament authors were keenly aware of human violence and addressed its origins in their open-

ing scenes. They found its source in the human person, in people such as Cain and Herod. They illustrated how God became enraged by Abel's murder and Herod's act of terror. *God does not remain a silent bystander when humans opt for violence*.

The counsel God offered Cain is offered to us all: Resist resentment and jealousy and refuse to be mastered by sin. We observe how when Herod did not resist his desire to dominate the perceived threat in Jesus, he caused terrible violence. But it is possible to live according to God's plan for humanity, as shown in the lives of Rosario Livatino, Corrie ten Boom, and the other saints of the twentieth century. The Bible puts the choice before us—faction or community—and reminds us that the final judgment of the violence we do to one another belongs to God.

For Reflection:

- What does Cain's lie to God reveal about an honest reflection on violence today?
- Who are the Herods of our own time? How would you describe their acts of violence?
- Do the communities to which you belong also have some factional characteristics?

FOCOLARE MEDIA

Enkindling the Spirit of Unity

The New City Press book you are holding in your hands is one of the many resources produced by Focolare Media, which is a ministry of the Focolare Movement in North America. The Focolare is a worldwide community of people who feel called to bring about the realization of Jesus' prayer: "That all may be one" (see John 17:21).

Focolare Media wants to be your primary resource for connecting with people, ideas, and practices that build unity. Our mission is to provide content that empowers people to grow spiritually, improve relationships, engage in dialogue, and foster collaboration within the Church and throughout society.

Visit www.focolaremedia.com to learn more about all of New City Press's books, our award-winning magazine *Living City*, videos, podcasts, events, and free resources.

NCP

NEW CITY PRESS