

The Way of Peace and Grace

How Paul Wrestled with Violent Passages in the Hebrew Bible

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THE DIVINE COMMANDS to commit genocide found in the Old Testament are some of the most difficult and disturbing parts of scripture. Consider God's decree against the Amalekites: "Totally destroy everything ... Do not spare them; put to death ... children and infants" (1 Samuel 15:2-3). Such passages have been used repeatedly to justify bloodshed in the name of God, beginning with the Crusades and continuing right up through U.S. history, where texts were used in sermons to justify the slaughter of American Indians.



In seeking to defend the Bible, many well-meaning commentators have become inadvertent advocates for these atrocities. But do we really need to defend and justify violence in God's name in order to remain faithful to scripture? Is that what God desires of us? I'd like to propose that there is a better way—a way found in learning to read our Bibles as the apostle Paul read his.

To understand how Paul read scripture, it is important to first understand his conversion to Christ, which Pauline scholar James Dunn describes as a conversion from a version of religion characterized by "zealous and violent hostility." In other words, Paul did not see himself as rejecting his Jewish faith or Israel's scriptures, but rather as rejecting his former violent interpretation of them. While Paul could boast that his observance of the Torah was "faultless" (Philippians 3:6), at the same time he describes himself as "the worst of all sinners" and "a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13, 15). He confesses painfully, "I do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9).

In other words, Paul's great sin, as he came to see it, had been participation in what he understood as religiously justified acts of violence motivated by religious zeal. Paul did not see himself as converting from one religion to another. Paul continued to regard himself as a Jew. His conversion was a conversion away from the religiously justified violence he had formally embraced. It was not a rejection of his faith, it was a recognition that his former embrace of violence in God's name was not in fact an act of faithfulness, but a grave sin. Before his conversion, Paul had read his Bible and concluded that he should commit violence in God's name. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul completely reassessed how to understand scripture, leading him to a radically different understanding.

IN ROMANS 15, for example, Paul quotes several scriptural passages to illustrate how Gentiles "may

glorify God for his mercy” because of the gospel (verse 9). Highly significant is what Paul omits from these passages:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: “I destroyed my foes. They cried for help, but there was no one to save them—to the LORD, but he did not answer ... He is the God who avenges me, who puts the Gentiles under me ... Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.” [quoting Psalm 18:41–49]

Again, it says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.” [Deuteronomy 32:43]

Paul has removed the references to violence against Gentiles, and recontextualized these passages to instead declare God’s mercy in Christ for Gentiles. This constitutes a major redefinition of how salvation is conceived: Instead of salvation meaning God “delivering” the ancient Israelites from the hands of their enemies through military victory (as described in Psalm 18, above), Paul now understands salvation to mean the restoration of all people in Christ, including those same “enemy” Gentiles.

In Romans 12:19-21, Paul again quotes Deuteronomy 32, citing the Lord’s declaration “it is mine to avenge” to argue that we should not seek vengeance, but rather work to “overcome evil with good.” In its original context, however, this passage was a celebration of vengeance: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay ... I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders.” This passage, which originally advocated vengeance and violence, is now used to promote enemy love.

Remarking on this pattern in Paul, New Testament scholar Richard Hays once joked that Paul would have surely flunked a seminary class in exegesis. But, as Hays himself argues, Paul was in fact intimately familiar with the original context of these passages, as were his readers. This is no case of sloppy exegesis. Paul is deliberately reversing the meaning—turning the tables in order to provoke his audience.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY evident in Romans 3:10-18, where Paul paints a picture of human fallenness, weaving together several passages from the psalms and prophets:

As it is written,

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” [quoting Psalm 14:1–3]

“Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” [Psalm 5:9]

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.” [Psalm 140:3]

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” [Psalm 10:7]

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.” [Isaiah 59:7–8]

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” [Psalm 36:1]

Note that Paul's list of sins is focused on acts of hatred and violence: deceit and poisonous words, cursing and bitterness, killing, misery, and the behavior of those who don't know "the way of peace."

Read in their original context, these first three psalms each make a clear distinction between outside "evildoers" and the "righteous" in-group. For example, in the verse immediately following Paul's first quotation, Psalm 14 continues, "Will evildoers never learn—those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on the Lord? There they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous." This is the complete opposite of the point Paul is making, which is that all of us are sinners, and thus have no room to judge. In contrast, the next psalm Paul quotes specifically calls out for judgment— "Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall" (Psalm 5:10)—and again contrasts "the wicked" (verse 4) with "the righteous" whom God favors: "For surely, O Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield" (verse 12).

Paul is making a very different point from the original intent of these psalms. In fact, he is making the opposite point—we should not cry out for God's wrath and judgment, because we are all sinners in need of mercy.

Paul's conclusion demonstrates his awareness that he has radically changed the meaning of these passages: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (Romans 3:19). In effect, Paul says: Now we know of course that this was originally said of Gentile outsiders—but really what the law says, it says to those of us on the inside. So these verses are in fact speaking to us; we are no better.

This is not a case of careless, out-of-context proof-texting. Paul has artfully and deliberately reshaped these psalms from their original cry for divine violence into a confession of universal culpability, highlighting our need for mercy.

This same pattern can be found throughout Paul's letters. Paul is not simply finding references to Christ Jesus in Jewish scripture: He finds radical new meaning in these texts to show the way of Jesus, the way of overcoming evil with good, the gospel of grace. Just as Christ Jesus has transformed and redeemed Paul, Paul conforms these texts to Christ and his way of nonviolent love.

IT WOULD BE possible from all of this to get the impression that there are two conflicting narratives: the New Testament, which has a message of love, and the Old Testament, which promotes violence in God's name. That conclusion is, however, far too simplistic. Of course, we do find texts in the Hebrew Bible that promote violence, but we also find those that promote mercy and compassion toward foreigners. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to these competing narratives as different "witnesses" in a court—each claiming to be the correct view, each claiming authority.

We see, for example, the narrative demanding unquestioning obedience to God exemplified in the genocide command of 1 Samuel 15, but elsewhere we see the opposite: Over and over, we see the heroes of the Hebrew Bible disputing, lamenting, and questioning divine-sanctioned violence. This narrative of protest can be seen in Abraham's challenge, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25), and also in Moses' pleading for God not to act in violence against Israel (Exodus 32:7–14). We see such protest throughout the psalms and prophets as well.

Questioning is also a typical characteristic of Jewish exegesis, exemplified by the rabbinical debate

found in the Talmud. In fact, the very name “Israel” means “wrestles with God.” So a transformational reading of scripture that faithfully challenges violence in God’s name is not only characteristic of Paul’s epistles and other New Testament use of the Hebrew Bible: It is also a deeply Jewish way to read scripture.

Paul’s conversion from religious violence to the way of grace in Christ became the interpretive lens through which he subsequently read all of scripture. This enabled him to sort through the Hebrew Bible’s competing narratives, rejecting the way of violence he had formerly held, and zeroing in on the scriptures that pointed to God’s grace revealed in Christ.

If we wish as Christians to adopt Paul’s way of interpreting scripture, then we need to learn to read our Bibles with that same grace-shaped focus. This is not a matter of picking and choosing which verses one likes, but rather of coming to have the mind of Christ—spending time with Jesus, and growing to care about the things he cares about. Through this relational formation—not only studying the words of Jesus, but living them—we learn to recognize what reflects Christ and Jesus’ way of cruciform love.

To those of us who have found ourselves troubled by divine-sanctioned violence in the Bible, this is good news. Wrestling with scripture in this way may not be an expression of doubt at all, but an act of faithfulness—both to scripture and to the God revealed in Christ Jesus that it points to (Romans 10:4).

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