

Why is the Biblical God So Violent?

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[Slide 1: Title]

The problem of violence in the Bible needs little introduction. The death penalty for disobeying parents, God commanding the genocide of the people of Canaan, bloodthirsty religious zealots killing the unfaithful – all of these can be found in the pages of the Bible. Many people dismiss the Bible as irrelevant for life and ethics because of such violence.

In this lecture, I want to put off the question of ethics raised by this biblical violence – I am not here to discuss whether we should be violent people or not. Rather, I want to look at the root of the problem: is the God we find in the Bible violent? And if so, *how* so? And how should we think about God's violence?

Let me first break my title down into three pieces.

[Slide 2: the God of the Bible]

First: Who is this God of the Bible? How does he relate to other gods we might imagine?

[Slide 3: Violent]

Second: Is the biblical God *violent*? I will go ahead reveal my answer: Yes, the biblical God can be violent; not always, not randomly, not without purpose, not his predominant feature, but yes, he is willing to use violence.

[Slide 4: Why So Violent?]

Third: *Why* is the biblical God *so* violent? Is there something we can do besides thoughtlessly accepting what God does or thoughtlessly rejecting what we have not carefully considered? The question is why?

[Slide 5: Orientation]

Since everyone comes from a particular perspective, it might be helpful for you to know mine. I am a Christian, an American, a scientist (physics and computer science), and a biblical scholar. My focus of study is the Old Testament, so that will be our focus this afternoon. And just to be clear, our concern is the personal violence of the biblical God against his own people. This means that I won't look at God's violence towards other people. And I won't consider violence between people. Human violence, whether portrayed in the Bible or justified by people who point to the Bible, is a topic for another day. This afternoon's question concerns *God's* violence against his own people.

[Slide 6: A Violent World]

Before we begin, I want to remind you of something for which we unfortunately need no reminder: The world we live in is a violent place.

[Slide 7: Iran]

As an example, Iran's election of President Mahmoud Ahma-DIN-ejad and his hard-line stance on Iran's nuclear program and Israel has caused great concern around the world. In October last year, the Iranian president said, "Our dear Imam (referring to Ayatollah Khomeini) said that the occupying

regime [of Israel] must be wiped off the map and this was a very wise statement.” Although there is disagreement about what exactly he meant by this, his refusal to take a peaceful stance toward Israel is troubling. To complicate matters further, it was discovered in 2003 that Iran had carried out secret nuclear activities for 18 years in breach of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran’s refusal to limit its nuclear activities to peaceful purposes led to the UN Security Council taking up the issue last week. American president Bush said this week that Iran poses “a serious threat.” He went on to say, “I’ve made it clear and I’ll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally Israel.” But world opinion is deeply divided over how to approach Iran, with no particularly attractive options on the table. It should be clear in any case that violence is in the air.

[Slide 8: Jean Charles de Menezes]

A second example from our violent world. On July 22nd last year, Jean Charles de Menezes was shot dead by police at the Stockwell tube station in London. The shock and outrage of this killing of an innocent man have forced Britons to rethink the use of lethal force by police. Sir Ian Blair, commissioner of the metropolitan police, raised some serious questions in a lecture several months later. We want police to use minimal violence, but to provide maximal protection. As he put it, “90% of the Met, for instance, remains unarmed - I want to keep it that way. I imagine you do too but you should not underestimate the raw courage which that represents. At the same time, you want us to deal with terror, with murder, with kidnap, with rape. You want us to be many things.” The question is, how does one deal with murderers except with violence? Sir Ian called for a rethinking of how the police works: “We need particularly to examine the use of force inside a liberal democracy and the balance between protection against terror with long held civil liberties.”

[Slide 9: New Orleans]

A final example. In August last year, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans with tremendous force and destructive floodwaters. Shortages of water and food, and lack of sufficient police presence led to a certain degree of chaos, looting, violence, and lawlessness. This picture strikes me as poignant – almost ironic – as soldiers with weapons ready to threaten and kill, provide bottled water to victims. Anyone who has dealt with disaster relief knows that food and weapons often need to go together.

My point is this: the peace of the world sometimes relies upon the threat and even the use of violence.

[Slide 10: Who is God?]

I now turn from the reality of our world to the question of the nature of God. Let’s look at a couple of alternatives before we look at the biblical God.

[Slide 11: The Philosophical Gods]

First consider the gods of the philosophers. These are the gods that spring forth from the mind, from human thought about the way things must be. An early Christian, Lactantius, wrote a treatise on the biblical God and his anger to defend this God against the philosophers. He remarks in his introduction:

“I have often observed . . . that many persons hold this opinion, which some philosophers also have maintained, that *God is not subject to anger*; since the divine nature is either *altogether beneficent* [Stoics], and that it is inconsistent with His surpassing and excellent power to do injury to any one; or, at any rate, *He takes no notice of us at all* [Epicureans], so that no advantage comes to us from His goodness, and no evil from His ill-will.” [Lactantius (d. AD 330), *A Treatise on the Anger of God*]. The biblical God has little to do with such an imagined God of sweetness or remoteness.

[Slide 12: The Polytheistic Gods]

If you believe in multiple gods, the world’s troubles are easy to understand: the gods are in conflict with each other and humans get caught up in their trouble. For instance, in the Babylonian creation story, the gods get tired of working so hard, so they create people to do their dirty work for them. In the Babylonian flood story, the gods then get tired of how much noise people make so they decide to destroy them. But one god can’t allow his favorite human to be destroyed so helps him to survive. When the other gods find out, a lot of trouble follows. So with the polytheistic gods, humanity gets caught up in the intrigue and violence of the gods.

[Slide 13: Biblical God]

Like the polytheistic gods, and unlike the philosophers’ gods, the biblical God is personal and relational. He has character. He has likes and dislikes. He does not live in a vacuum, but is in relationship with the people he has created. He is not disinterested, but passionately involved and holds a stake in how things are going in the world. He is not distant, but interactive with his creation. These are also qualities of the polytheistic gods. But the biblical God is not caught up in conflicts with other gods – the drama is played out between God and people.

So the biblical God has no one comparable to him. The monotheistic God has no serious challengers. For this reason, it is difficult to understand the troubles of the world. For the polytheists, we are caught up in the interpersonal struggles of the many gods with their own distinct desires. But in a world with one God, where does evil come from? Why is there conflict if the one unchallenged God is in charge?

This is not our question for this lecture, but I suggest that the biblical God is willing to give humanity considerable freedom in our affairs – enough rope to hang ourselves – and yet he is unwilling to let us go completely off the rails. We know evil and conflict because we generate a lot of it. But the personal, passionate and interested God of the Bible is willing to engage us on our own terms as we struggle to live well.

[Slide 14: The Old Testament Story]

Rather than go on talking in generalities, let’s actually consider the biblical story – watch the biblical God in action, so to speak.

I'm going to tell the story by walking through these various bubbles, from Creation to Babylon. The bubbles go up and down as the fortunes of God's relationship with his people goes up and down. As much as possible, I'll try to avoid whitewashing the story.

[Slide 15: Creation]

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." The biblical Creation account is one of uncontested power. What God says happens. What he wants...becomes reality. The Hebrew shows it well – you can see it in the letters. God's command ("Be light!") is reflected letter-by-letter in what happens ("light was").

[Slide 16: Commission]

In the last step of this account of creation, God creates humanity. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen 1:26-28). What's remarkable here is that God commissions humanity to use his power. People are to rule. People are to create. Though God is perfectly able to make everything exactly the way he wants it, he chooses to give people freedom and power to rule and create as they see fit. It doesn't take much imagination to see that this is where the trouble starts.

[Slide 17: Cain]

Things quickly go bad at this point. Murder enters the scene. When Cain became upset at his brother Abel, "Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!' (Gen 4:8-10). As a result of Cain's crime, the LORD punishes him to be a wanderer. Cain becomes distraught that he will be vulnerable to be killed himself. So the LORD does an interesting thing: he lets it be known that he will take vengeance on anyone who kills Cain: "The LORD said to him, '...Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him." (Gen 4:15).

Note what happens here: God is willing to threaten violence, but he uses this threat to protect a murderer from violence.

[Slide 18: Flood]

The story now turns much darker. Violence and corruption spread across all humanity. God's creation deteriorates. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'" (Gen 6:5-7). The biblical story does not focus on the suffering of those who drown in the flood—though artists have reflected on it as this picture shows, but the Flood was a great act of violence by God. He was unwilling to let his creation continue to go wrong. As he draws with his creative pencil, he can blot out with his destructive eraser.

[Slide 19: Abraham]

After the world is repopulated, God decides to work with humanity by forming a special relationship with one family. "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" (Gen 12:1-3). The focus of the Bible shifts at this point from the whole world and all people to this one family who God chooses for his special attention. Abraham's children will become as numerous as the stars in the sky.

[Slide 20: Moses]

As the story continues, Abraham's family does indeed grow. But they also become enslaved as a people in Egypt and are subjected to cruel violence at the hand of the Egyptians. God intervenes with his violence. He defeats the Egyptian army and rescues his people. He then gives them the ten commandments. He is passionately interested in how his people will use the new life he has given them. He says to them, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." (Exod 20:2-3). Yes, he tells them not to murder, not to steal, not to have illicit sex, and so on. But his first command is that his people are to take him as their leader, their God. He demands to be taken seriously. When he says, "You shall have no other gods before me," he means that his people must give him their highest loyalty.

[Slide 21: Blessing or Curse]

Because he knows how people are, God promises good to his people if they will be responsive to him and warns them that he will harm them if they will not. On the face of it, this is no different than any other government: if you obey the laws you will have a happy life and the government will take care of you. If you violate the laws, you will suffer the violence prescribed by the law.

As God settles his people into the land he provides for them, he promises that it will be a rich and bountiful place if they will live according to his ways, but a desolate place of death if they choose otherwise. He offers them a choice between blessing and curse.

Moses tells them: “If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; ... The LORD will make you abound in prosperity...to bless all your undertakings....” (Deut 28:1-14)

But Moses also warns them: “But if you will not obey the LORD your God ... then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.... The LORD will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle.... It shall besiege you in all your towns.... In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you...even the most refined and gentle of men among you will begrudge food to his own brother, to the wife whom he embraces, and to the last of his remaining children.... Although once you were as numerous as the stars in heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God. And just as the LORD took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the LORD will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction....” (Deut 28:15-68).

I left out the more gruesome details, but I give you the reference in the book of Deuteronomy in the handout if you care to read them. The gist of it is that God’s people will suffer terribly if they turn away from God’s ways.

[Slide 22: Israel Falls]

As one might imagine, the warnings do little to prevent God’s people from sliding away into going their own way. The nation splits into two parts, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel is not loyal to her God. She begins to worship a bull god and with it becomes a nation built on power politics, military strength and terror. In 721 BCE, Sargon II the king of Assyria besieges Samaria, its capital, and defeats it. Archaeologists have discovered his own official record of the war, where he declares: “I surrounded and captured the city of Samaria; 27,290 of the people who dwelled in it I took away as prisoners” (Arnold, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 146). The Assyrians were famous for mercilessly destroying nations who crossed them. Indeed, at this point the people of the northern kingdom of Israel disappear from the pages of history, never to be heard from again.

It is remarkable that the biblical God takes credit for this destruction. He says it wasn’t Assyria who destroyed his people, but he did it himself. God declares, “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation [meaning Israel] I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (Isaiah 10:5-6). The biblical God is willing to use tremendous violence.

[Slide 23: Judah Falls]

135 years later, despite seeing her sister nation destroyed, the southern kingdom of Judah puts her trust in the military might of her allies rather than in God's protection. She then suffers the same fate, though this time at the hand of the Babylonians. We have the official Babylonian account of the early stages of the war, "In the seventh year, the month of Kislîmu, the king of Akkad [that is, Babylon] mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land [that is, Judah], and besieged the city of Judah and on the second day of the month of Addaru he seized the city and captured the king" (Babylonian Chronicles). Ten years later another clash occurred with Babylon besieging Jerusalem for an extended time, causing massive suffering, starvation and eventually taking the city, killing many of the inhabitants, and systematically tearing the city apart and burning it. Judah suffers terribly for being disloyal to her God.

Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, pictured here according to Rembrandt, witnessed this horrible destruction and wrote about it. He had warned the people of Jerusalem that this would happen if they kept rejecting God. He again gives "credit" to God for the suffering. He writes, "The LORD has done what he purposed, he has carried out his threat; as he ordained long ago, he has demolished without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you, and exalted the might of your foes. . . . Look, O LORD. . . . The young and the old are lying on the ground in the streets; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; in the day of your anger you have killed them, slaughtering without mercy." (Lamentations 2:17-20).

But not everyone is killed. The elite of the city are taken to Babylon. The story of God's people continues, but I think we'll leave it at this point. Is the biblical God violent? Yes, he can be terribly violent. He threatens violence and he carries out his threats.

[Slide 24: A Modern Perspective]

The violence of the biblical God is horrible. It is bad enough to make many turn away and say that he is unworthy of being god. I don't want to trivialize the problem. But I do think it is worth putting things into some perspective. The modern world is held together by threats of violence and real violence. We would all obviously prefer to live in peace and security. Some dream that we should all just learn to get along, but so far we are nowhere close to that. In the 20th century, it is estimated that governments killed somewhere between 100 million and 200 million people. Why all of this killing?

[Slide 25: Who Shapes Society]

Government violence tends to take a few different forms. First, police threaten citizens who violate the norms of the society. If you violate the laws, you may have your money taken by force, or you may be coercively confined in prison. Second, governments use their military violence to stop other governments who threaten their way of life. Third, citizens who commit treason, those who seek the destruction of the government itself are particularly harshly treated.

It is this third category that is of particular interest. What does a nation do with its disloyal citizens? God has commanded that his people are to have no other gods before him – he jealously

demands their highest loyalty. In the modern world, governments demand the loyalty of their citizens in similar fashion. You can disagree with your government. You can speak out against your government. You can vote for a new government. But you cannot seek to replace it with an entirely new form of government. If you do so, you are a traitor.

Treason best fits what we've seen of the story of the biblical God's violence. His people were flagrantly disloyal in their desire to toss aside God's will and build a nation around their own desires. What is to be done about those who want to destroy God's sovereignty? The biblical God, like modern governments, forcefully resists when his people put another sovereignty ahead of his. To put the biblical God into modern perspective, we should ask how modern governments respond to treason.

[Slide 26: Hobbes & Leviathan]

Thomas Hobbes was instrumental in developing the idea of modern government. After witnessing the horrors of the English civil war where about ten percent of the population died, Hobbes laid out a plan for how peace could be restored to the land. He envisioned the population creating a government, the great Leviathan, who would rule over them. Leviathan brings peace to the realm as everyone submits to its authority to make and enforce laws.

But what about people who don't like the Leviathan, who would prefer a different sovereign? For Hobbes, the government is all that protects us from the chaos of civil war. So anyone who would undermine the government's authority must be stopped. As Hobbes wrote, "The severest Punishments are to be inflicted for those Crimes, that are of most Danger to the Publique; such as are those which proceed from malice to the Government established...."

The modern Western world follows Hobbes' advice. When a government feels gravely threatened, anyone who threatens the government faces the government's violence. I offer two examples from modern history.

[Slide 27: American Taliban]

One example is the case of John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban." He was born and raised in America, converted to Islam as a teenager, and traveled to Pakistan to study the Qura'an. Brought under the influence of the Taliban, he went to Afghanistan to fight against the Taliban's enemies there, the Northern Alliance. He trained in Osama bin Laden's camps and met that anti-American leader. After Bin Laden's attack on Sept 11, 2001, America's military joined the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to oppose the Taliban. In the fighting, John Walker Lindh was captured and discovered to be an American.

Unlike the other prisoners of war, Lindh was brought to trial as an American citizen who was accused of being disloyal to his country. He was indicted for, among other things, attempting to kill American citizens, for which he could have received the death penalty. In the end, a plea bargain led to his guilty plea to a lesser charge and a penalty of 20 years in federal prison with no chance of parole.

The American attorney general described it well when he said, “History has not looked kindly upon those that have forsaken their countries to go and fight against their countries.” Choosing a shape for society that opposes your government is a dangerous choice, even if (as Lindh maintains) he never intended to oppose his country. The biblical God says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The modern country says, “You shall put no loyalty higher than the one you owe your country.”

[Slide 28: Nuclear Spies]

Consider a final example, the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, two American citizens. During World War II, they disagreed with the American policy of keeping its nuclear weapon technology to itself. They thus worked to send nuclear secrets to Russia. After World War II ended, the Cold War began and Russia became an enemy of America. At this point their spying was discovered. They were convicted of espionage. When the judge sentenced them, he said, “I consider your crime worse than murder. Plain deliberate contemplated murder is dwarfed in magnitude by comparison with the crime you have committed. In committing the act of murder, the criminal kills only his victim. . . . But in your case, I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb. . . . has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. Indeed, by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country.” He sentenced them both to die in the electric chair for their subversion of America. “You shall have no other gods before me.” You shall not aid another country in opposing your own.

[Slide 29: Concluding Thoughts]

Some concluding thoughts. The world is a violent place. Sovereigns of nations threaten and use violence to create and maintain their governments. Modern society endorses violence when it faces a grave threat. The biblical God likewise has threatened and used violence. He is often criticized rather quickly without much consideration of the issues. If I may draw an analogy, there are many people who quickly say that various aspects of the current war on terror are wrong-headed and immoral. I would certainly agree with many of these criticisms. But I think we should consider the threats our leaders face and the responsibility they carry for society.

Likewise, it is easy to criticize the way the biblical God has handled the threats to his world. I cannot help being critical myself. But I suggest we be careful not to do so too hastily, without facing reality, considering things in perspective, and asking ourselves what we think God should do instead. Should he simply speak helpful advice and hope we listen? Should he take away the freedom he’s given us to shape the world ourselves? Should he withdraw and simply let the powerful ones wield their power?

I need to emphasize that the reality of the biblical God’s violence does not imply that those who are committed to him should be violent. I have only considered God’s own violence here. The question of human violence is an important but different topic. I only suggest that God’s willingness to

use violence in order to shape the world may free his people from the need to use violence themselves. Throughout the biblical story, God has repeatedly insisted that his people trust in his strength rather than their own.

In closing, I should add one more bit of the biblical God's history. According to the Christian story, God's ultimate act of violence was one that he threatened and carried out upon himself.

[Slide 30: Christ]

As the apostle Paul describes it, "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). The biblical God is not beyond joining his world in suffering.

[Slide 31: The End]