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When God Smites: Talking with Students about the Violence of God in Scripture

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When God Smites: Talking with Students about the Violence of God in Scripture.

This article emphasizes the need for religious educators to address the issue of divine violence in Scripture with students, and it offers various pedagogical strategies for doing so. The focus is on violent Old Testament texts, with special attention given to the issue of Canaanite genocide. A general framework for structuring class time around divine violence in Scripture is proposed which includes (1) encouraging students to encounter violent biblical texts firsthand, (2) helping them understand why people find these passages problematic, and (3) offering various options for dealing with the potential problems these passages raise. In the second half of the article, significant attention is devoted to a number of practical considerations that should be taken into account when talking about this sensitive issue in class. A brief word about assessment is offered at the end.

Teaching problematic scripture passages; Canaanite genocide; Christian higher education; conquest narrative; divine violence; Old Testament; portrayals of God; violence; managing personal disclosure of religious beliefs

Imagine you are teaching a Bible survey course, diligently making your way through the large amount of material you need to cover, when Jacqueline, a typically quiet student in the back row, raises her hand.[1] Jacqueline is troubled by what she read last night in 1 Samuel 15, especially the part about God commanding Saul to slaughter all the Amalekites. "Why would God order the Israelites to kill every last man, woman, and child – including babies?" Jacqueline protests. "That's awful!" Before you can formulate a response, Jacqueline presses on: "And why would God command one group of people created in 'his' image to kill another group of people also created in 'his' image? Doesn't God love Amalekites too?" As you look around the room, you get the impression many other students are wondering the same thing. In the uncomfortable silence that follows, all eyes are fixed on you, awaiting your reply.

Introduction

Teaching the Bible in higher education involves making a great many choices. This is particularly true in introductory and survey courses designed to cover the entire Bible, or significant parts of it, in a single semester. The Bible is simply too big and too unwieldy to deal with all of it in a few months. Decisions must be made about which books to cover, what questions to ask, which critical approaches to privilege, what relevant non-biblical materials to include, and so forth. My hunch is that many of us decide what to cover – and how to cover it – based on our own particular interests and areas of expertise. While there are always objectives that need to be met, decisions about how these are met are typically left to the discretion of the professor.

Obviously, there are some parts of the Bible that must be discussed in order to adequately cover the material at hand. It is impossible to imagine teaching an Old Testament survey course, for example, without talking about the Exodus narrative given its central importance in Israel's story. Similarly, it seems to me there are certain issues that should be addressed when teaching a general survey of the Bible. One issue I believe is especially important to discuss, but which is often neglected, is the issue of divine violence in the Bible. Students should be given some guidance about how to read and interpret passages that portray God behaving violently and commanding others to do likewise.

Admittedly, given the vast amount of material that needs to be covered and the many important topics and themes that could be addressed in a survey course, some might question the value of taking time to discuss an issue as complicated and controversial as the violence of God in Scripture.[2] Would it not be better to bypass this issue and simply ignore these texts? I think not.[3] In what follows, I will make a case for the importance of talking about divine violence in the Bible. I will then provide a basic framework for structuring this conversation and will offer numerous pedagogical suggestions about how to facilitate this conversation most effectively. While my comments will be especially relevant for those teaching such classes in Christian higher education, most of what I say has much broader applicability. Finally, I will say a few things about how educators might assess their efforts to determine how students are responding.

When I speak of "the issue of divine violence" in Scripture in this article, I am referring to violent acts the biblical text portrays God performing (divine violence proper) and to violent acts the text portrays God commanding (divinely sanctioned violence). Typically, I will not make a distinction between these two, but will treat them together. My focus here will be on divine violence in the Old Testament (my area of specialty), though it should be noted that numerous New Testament texts also seem to implicate God in acts of violence.[4] This is particularly true of passages referring to eschatological judgment and to certain parts of the book of Revelation, especially when these texts are read very literally.[5]

This article is geared toward those who teach introductory level Bible courses, though it is also applicable to those who teach more advanced courses in biblical studies as well as to those who teach theology and religion. I assume that many professors who teach upper-level Bible courses already address the issue of divine violence in their classes (how could you teach a course on the book of Joshua, for example, and not discuss this issue?).[6] Those who teach entry-level Bible courses, on the other hand, may need to be convinced of the importance of dealing with this issue since there are so many other topics they could focus on instead. Yet, depending upon how the curriculum is structured, an introductory level Bible class may be the only biblical studies course many students are required to take. Therefore, if the issue of

divine violence in Scripture is not addressed in this particular class, these students may never have a formal opportunity to deal with it during their academic experience.[7]

Why Bother Having This Conversation?

There are many reasons why I think it is exceedingly important to devote class time to considering the issue of divine violence in Scripture. One of the most compelling reasons is simply because there is so much of it. Divine violence, and divinely sanctioned violence, appears repeatedly in the pages of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. According to [17] :

The theme of God's bloody vengeance occurs in the Old Testament even more frequently than the problem of human 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. ... No other topic is as often mentioned as God's bloody works (2000, 55, emphasis in original).[8]

Although it would be an overstatement to say there is blood dripping from every page, the pervasiveness of divine violence in the Old Testament is undeniable. The sheer number of texts that contain divine violence, or are interpreted that way, should compel religious educators to say something about them. To do otherwise is to neglect large portions of the Bible.

Second, it is important to talk about divine violence in Scripture because many students are genuinely perplexed by these texts and do not know what to do with them. The scenario that I presented at the beginning of this article, though hypothetical, is very real. Anyone who teaches the Bible to undergraduates or seminarians is sooner or later faced with the kind of questions Jacqueline raised. Images of God slaughtering, smiting, and slaying do not correspond very well with what many people believe about God. As one of my students noted after reading a selection of violent Old Testament passages:

So even after just two days of class, I find myself struggling with the image of God in the Old Testament and the image of God in the New Testament. The same God seems like two completely different people to me. On the one hand, God is this vengeful, merciless, unforgiving God but on the other hand, I have always understood Him to be a forgiving, compassionate, and merciful God. These war stories seem to utterly contradict the image of God in the New Testament.[9]

This student is not alone. Many are dismayed by all the violence and bloodshed in the Old Testament and struggle to make sense of God's behavior. As religious educators, we have a unique opportunity – and I would say responsibility – to come

alongside these students and help them navigate the moral and theological challenges these texts raise.

Third, and related, helping students grapple with violent texts is important since it enables them to develop an informed response to people who use these texts to discredit the Bible and deride Christianity. Christians (and others) who have never thought much about divine violence in Scripture can find it very unsettling to be confronted by a person who is hostile to the Christian faith with these texts. By discussing these texts and the way Christians have responded to the challenges they raise, students will be able to respond more intelligently when they find themselves in uncomfortable conversations like these. Obviously, it is much better for a student's first engagement with this issue to be in a supportive academic environment than in a heated debate with someone antagonistic to Christianity.

Fourth, it is important to discuss passages containing divine violence in an effort to prevent these passages from being used to harm others. Tragically, this is precisely how these texts often have been used. People have appealed to violent Old Testament texts to justify various acts of violence, oppression, and killing. Specifically, these texts have been used to legitimate such things as warfare and genocide, violence against women, child abuse, religious intolerance, capital punishment, slavery, bigotry, and racism.[10] It is important to make students aware of this troubling legacy. Hopefully, this will help them avoid mistakes of the past and encourage them to read these passages responsibly in the future. This is especially needed in our post 9/11 world riddled with so much religiously inspired violence. We should reexamine our sacred texts, consider how they have been used to inspire, legitimate, and justify violence, and redouble our efforts to find better ways of reading them going forward.

In light of this, it is unfortunate that many religious educators have had little – if any – formal training about how to discuss violent verses in the classroom. Most seminaries and doctoral programs do not give much attention – if any at all – to the problematic dimensions of violent portrayals of God in Scripture. This leaves educators ill-equipped to respond to questions students might raise about these biblical texts. Since many professors have not worked through these issues for themselves – let alone had any formal training about how to talk with students about them – questions about God's violent behavior in the Bible become difficult to handle in the classroom. Hopefully, what follows will remedy that situation, at least to some degree.[11]

My Institutional Context and Objectives

I teach at a Christian liberal arts college where the vast majority of students come from theologically conservative church backgrounds. Many students are evangelicals and most have a very high view of Scripture.[12] These demographics obviously impact the way I deal with the issue of divine violence, and this will be evident, to a greater or lesser degree, in what follows.

There are several things I hope to accomplish by addressing this issue in the classroom. Since I want students to be informed readers of Scripture, I want them to know what is actually in the Bible. I want them to realize the Bible contains numerous passages that portray God engaging in acts of violence and sanctioning others to do likewise, and I want them to see the violence for what it is without superficially glossing over it. I also want students to understand the difficulties these violent texts raise for many readers, and I want them to be aware of the explanations Christians have offered to ameliorate these difficulties in an effort to make sense of God's behavior. I believe it is crucial for students to be introduced to a wide range of different options so they can weigh and evaluate their relative merits. Ultimately, I want students to think critically and to form their own conclusions as they consider which of these approaches they think holds the most promise and potential. Although it is not important they think like me about this issue (nor is that my goal), it is exceedingly important that they think seriously about divine violence in Scripture so they can deal responsibly with it.

Talking about divine violence in Scripture is a sensitive issue in my context, as I imagine it is for many educators at faith-based institutions. This is largely due to the fact that dealing with this issue inevitably involves examining one's core convictions about the nature of Scripture and the character of God. Exploring texts that portray God behaving violently naturally raises questions about God's goodness, Scripture's theological veracity, and biblical authority. Because students often feel passionately about a particular view of Scripture and their understanding of God, this can be unsettling. Therefore, I proceed carefully. I do not want to unnecessarily offend the religious sensibilities of students who think it is inappropriate to raise certain questions about the Bible or to critique the way God is portrayed in its pages.

Structuring a Conversation about Divine Violence in the Old Testament

While there are many ways to structure a conversation about divine violence, I would like to propose a general framework that includes three basic components. Students need to (1) have time to encounter violent biblical texts for themselves, (2) understand why people have found these texts to be problematic in various respects, and (3) be given several different options for dealing with the potential problems these texts raise.

Look at Examples of Divine Violence in Scripture

Those students who have never read through the entire Old Testament are often unaware of the many violent traditions about God it contains. This is frequently true even if they are regular church attenders. Passages containing divine violence are typically not included in the lectionary readings or used as sermon texts. Curiously, even those who do encounter violent texts in their personal reading or in public worship often fail to see the violence in them.

This is a phenomenon I refer to as “textual blindness,” a phrase I have adapted from Don Everts ([12] , 27).[13][12] , who writes about “home blindness,” says, “Whether we're talking about a picture hanging on the wall, the patterns of tile in the bathroom, or the color of a chair, we all have items we've become ‘home blind’ to. We see something so often that our brains stop taking note of the details” (2005, 27). A similar thing happens for many people who encounter violence in the Bible. They have heard certain Old Testament stories so many times they fail to notice how violent and bloody they really are. Since the way these stories are often retold focuses on “positive” aspects of the text (such as God's great deliverance), their more violent dimensions tend to get ignored. This conditions people to see these stories from a particular angle of vision, one that does not really pay attention to the violence contained within them. Part of our job as educators is to help students see what is really there, and this can be achieved in a number of different ways.

Assign Old Testament Passages Containing Divine Violence

Perhaps the most obvious way to help students see divine violence in Scripture is simply to have them read it. Part of the first assignment students complete in a 200-level Bible course I teach dealing with issues of war, peace, and justice involves reading Numbers 31, Joshua 6–11, 1 Samuel 15, and 2 Kings 18–19. After reading these four Old Testament passages – each containing one or more examples of divine violence – they are required to write a brief response that includes answering questions such as, “How would you describe God's behavior in the assigned biblical passages? How comfortable are you with these images of God?” Despite previous encounters students may have had with these stories, a simple exercise like this is often enough to help some see what they have never seen before. As one student wrote:

I have read through the Bible before and am familiar with the Old Testament war stories, using the word “familiar” loosely here. However, I can honestly say that ... reading these specific passages in this sequence has been very eye opening. It is astounding that I have never before remarked on how troubling these stories are. The most ... disturbing passage that we have read thus far has to be Joshua 6–11. Sunday school class very innocently retold this battle as a mighty story of triumph of the Israelites over the city of Jericho. ... As a child, I never stopped to wonder why exactly Joshua was waging war with this city. The only context in which this story is given is that God told them to do so. Then we learned that the almost crazy actions of the Israelites ... led them to victory and the “walls came tumbling down.” ... Never would we delve into Joshua 6:21, where God instructs the Israelites to destroy any man, woman, or child within the walls of Jericho. Perhaps our Sunday school class would not have found this to be such an appealing tale after all.[14]

By reading the passage with an eye toward God's behavior, this student was able to see violent dimensions of the story that had previously gone unnoticed.

Use Humor to Expose Divine Violence

Another way to help students see divine violence where it might otherwise be overlooked is through the use of humor. In my Old Testament survey class, I have used a brief video clip from Christian comedian Tim Hawkins who acknowledges the violent side of the story of Noah's ark. Hawkins says (and this is much funnier when you actually hear him say it):

So like I'll never understand parents who will paint Noah's ark on their kids', little kids' bedroom walls. It doesn't make sense. Noah's ark is a great story but it's just out there man. It's like,

"Daddy what are you doing?"

"I'm painting Noah's ark on your wall sweetheart. My favorite story. You know where God sends a worldwide flood to kill every living thing. Yeah, I love it. It's awesome. Hey grab a brush and paint some screaming people on that rock for me just to make it look –. It's going to be great." (Hawkins [14])

Although this video clip is only about a minute long,[15] it may, for the first time, help students realize the story of Noah's ark is not as kid-friendly as previously assumed. This story is not just about divine deliverance, it is also about divine destruction – on a massive scale!

Show Artistic Renderings of Violent Stories

Another way to introduce students to divine violence in the Old Testament is to help them visualize it. One way to do this is to show them artistic renditions of violent stories in the Bible. You could, for example, use pictures from the nineteenth-century engraver Gustave Doré to illustrate what is going on outside the ark in the flood narrative. Among other things, he (presumably) portrays parents desperately trying to get their children to higher ground as the flood waters rage around them, rising higher and higher. It is not a pretty picture. Or you might consider using pictures from the Brick Testament which uses Lego constructions to illustrate biblical stories.[16] Many of these emphasize the violent dimensions of Old Testament texts. In one scene, an Amalekite man and woman are in the corner of a room with three children and an infant behind them. King Saul, along with Israelite soldiers, stands before them with sword drawn. The Amalekite couple pleads with him: "Please, not the children," says the man. "Not the children," says the woman. Underneath the picture, 1 Samuel 15:8 is cited and paraphrased: "He carried out the curse of destruction, killing all the people with the sword" (Smith [20]). According to the story, Saul does this because God commanded him to "kill both man and woman, child and infant" (1 Samuel 15:3).

One helpful resource that visually illustrates the broad scope of divine violence in the Old Testament is a three-minute YouTube video clip (atheist48 [2]). This clip

shows many artistic renderings of violent Old Testament stories including the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 12:29), the massacre of Midianites (Numbers 31:17–18), and the annihilation of Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:7), to name just a few. Each picture is shown with a corresponding Bible verse(s) that identifies the act of divine violence being depicted.

Encourage students to read Old Testament stories from the victim's perspective

Educators can also help students pay attention to the violence in these texts by inviting them to read certain Old Testament stories from the perspective of the victims. I assign a brief story called “The Jericho Woman” written by German theologian Ulrike Bechmann (from Epp-Tiessen [10] , 64–65). Bechmann writes a fictional first-person story in the tradition of “biblical autobiography” (Davies 2000) about a woman named Nachla living in the city of Jericho the day before the Israelite attack. Nachla is a very likeable Canaanite with three children; her oldest is twelve and her youngest is three. Bechmann's creative story encourages readers to consider both the violent dimensions of this familiar narrative and the morality of a divine directive requiring people as lovely as Nachla and her three beautiful children to be slain.

In addition to reading a story from the perspective of the victim, students could be asked to write a story from that perspective. Like Bechmann, they too could write a first-person account from the point of view of someone who experienced or witnessed divine violence in the Old Testament. For example, what might an Egyptian father say upon hearing that all three of his sons drowned because God threw “horse and rider ... into the sea” (Exodus 15:1, NRSV)? Or what might one of David's wives say about God forcing her to have sex with another man (2 Sam 12:11)? How would an Amalekite child react to seeing armed Israelites slaughtering her people and eventually coming to kill her (1 Samuel 15)? What might one of the foreigners living in Samaria say about seeing friends and neighbors devoured by lions God sent because they did not know God's laws (2 Kings 17:24–28)? Writing from the perspective of the victims not only enables students to explore the human tragedy in these stories, it also encourages them to grapple with the morality of divinely sanctioned violence in these Old Testament texts.

Explain Why People See Divine Violence in Scripture as Problematic

Once students have had numerous direct encounters with Old Testament texts that portray God behaving violently, they are ready to consider what makes these texts morally and theologically problematic for many people. A good place to begin this conversation is to invite students to discuss the extent to which they themselves may be troubled by these passages – if at all – and to explain why. For example, when I discuss Canaanite genocide (Joshua 6–11) in my introductory level Bible class, I begin by reading Deuteronomy 7:1–2 and 20:16–17. These passages essentially contain

Israel's marching orders, stating that they are to make no covenants, show no mercy, and take no prisoners. I also read a brief summary statement of the conquest narrative (Joshua 6–11) recorded in Joshua 10:40: "So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (NRSV, emphasis mine). I then draw a continuum on the board that contains five points of reference. These represent different attitudes people may have about God's behavior in this story. From left to right, these reference points move from "deeply disturbing" to "very upsetting" to "a wee bit worrisome" to "mostly OK" to "completely fine." I ask students to tell me where they are on the continuum and why, and I put hash marks on the continuum to represent their positions. They are free to choose any of the designated points along the continuum, or they can place themselves anywhere in between these points.

I have found using a continuum to be a very effective way to facilitate this kind of conversation. One of the many benefits of this exercise is that it helps students clarify their beliefs, which is one of my objectives for the course. In order for students to respond – and I never lack for responses – they must be able to articulate where they stand on this issue and to explain why. If their explanation seems vague or lacks specificity, asking follow-up questions can help students further clarify and articulate their beliefs. For example, students who say they are partway between "mostly OK" and "completely fine" could be asked what keeps them from going all the way and being "completely fine" with God's behavior here. Or, students who find divine violence in the conquest narrative to be "deeply disturbing" could be asked whether they can see anything positive about God's behavior in the conquest narrative. As students share their thoughts and perspectives, I work diligently to reflect what I hear them say without judging or evaluating. I want students to feel heard and respected regardless of the views they hold.

Using a continuum is also beneficial because it creates space for multiple voices and diverse perspectives to emerge. Plotting different positions on the continuum gives students permission to adopt any one of these perspectives. While I generally get a nice spread of responses across the continuum, if the responses seem to be congregating on one side, I ask if there are those who might wish to speak on the other side. Invariably, there are. Hearing various perspectives allows students to see the broad range of opinions represented by their fellow classmates. In my context, it also helps them realize that good, sincere Christians hold a variety of different views about this issue. This is a valuable insight since it broadens their view of Christianity and helps them recognize not every Christian thinks the same way. It also demonstrates the fact that even if they themselves are not troubled by divine violence in Scripture, others are.

Educators could then build upon this conversation to highlight a variety of potential problems that arise from these passages. Here one might talk about the way violent portrayals of God can distort a person's view of God (are we really to envision

God as one who slays children?), hinder people from believing in God (who wants to worship a God who commands one group of people to kill another), and cause people to discount the Bible as a moral guide (how can we derive ethics from the Bible if one part tells us to love our enemies while another praises people for killing theirs?). Additionally, students should be aware that violent biblical texts, particularly those containing divinely sanctioned violence, have been misused over the centuries to justify war, legitimate colonialism, support slavery, encourage violence against women, harm children, and condemn gays and lesbians.[17] Even students not personally bothered by Old Testament images of a violent God tend to be troubled by the way people have used these texts to justify violence against others. Helping students understand various ways these texts can be – and have been – problematic is a very important part of this conversation. They need to realize how dangerous these texts can be and how much harm has been done with them, regardless of their personal views about them.

Present Multiple “Solutions” to Problems Associated with Divine Violence in ...

After students understand the potential problems associated with these violent texts, they should be given a broad array of interpretive options for addressing these concerns. These “solutions” should include both conservative and more liberal approaches and should be presented as accurately and objectively as possible.

In my introductory Bible class, I describe seven different ways of dealing with God's behavior in the conquest narrative over two class periods (about two hours total). In order to demonstrate how these are presented and to speak more specifically about the pedagogical significance of offering students with multiple views, allow me briefly to summarize what I do in class. I begin with two approaches that both operate on the assumption that the Bible sometimes portrays God behaving in ways that are not good. One of these approaches, championed by Marcion in the second century CE, rejects the Old Testament as having any authority for Christians. This effectively eliminates any problems this image might raise for Christian readers. The other approach, which resides at the far opposite end of the spectrum, accepts what the Bible says about God to be true, even if that means acknowledging that God sometimes behaves unfairly, unjustly, and immorally (see Roncace 2012, 80–84). In my context, most students are not attracted to either of these options.

Next, I present four approaches situated between these two extremes, each of which attempts to defend God's behavior (for extensive discussion see **Seibert** [18] , 71–83). These approaches, which I label for the sake of convenience, are the divine immunity approach (whatever God does is right and we have to accept it even if we do not understand it), the just cause approach (God was fully justified in punishing Canaanite wickedness), the greater good approach (God needed to destroy the Canaanites to preserve Israel's spiritual purity), and the “God acted differently in the Old Testament” approach (which appeals to progressive revelation or to the notion that

a theocracy like Israel necessitated God's involvement in the messy business of warfare and killing). I present these approaches without evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses, and students do not know if any of these views represent my own (unless they have already done the assigned reading for the next class period). These four options reflect various ways conservative Christians have grappled with this issue, and all four are easily compatible with more traditional understandings of the doctrine of inspiration and the authority of Scripture.

At this point, I allow time for class discussion. "To get the discussion going," writes Ken Bain, "the best teachers usually pose a question and ask students to spend a few minutes collecting their thoughts on paper ... before talking" (Bain [3] , 130).[18] I have found this approach to work very well. After introducing students to the views described thus far, and before inviting students to discuss where they stand on this issue, I give them time in class to write. I ask them to write about the view (or views) they find most helpful and to explain why. If they do not find any of these views satisfying, they can write about that as well. The process of writing before speaking prepares the way for the conversation to follow. After students have written their responses, I ask them to share their thoughts with someone else in the class, preferable someone who holds a different view than they do. Once again, this provides students with an opportunity to clarify and articulate their beliefs. We then regroup as a class to talk about this, and some good class discussion typically ensues. Many students resonate with one or more of the attempts to defend God's behavior, while some are unsatisfied with all the options presented thus far.

At the end of the class period, I indicate that all four approaches defending God's behavior operate with a very powerful assumption that governs the way this issue is addressed. All assume God actually said and did what the Old Testament claims. I then raise the delicate question of whether this assumption is well-founded. What if God did not actually command the Israelites to slaughter all the Canaanites? If so, what other interpretive possibilities might emerge? Students are left to mull this over until the next class period.

In the next class I present one final option: the "God did not actually do it" approach. Adherents of this approach do not believe God ever commanded the Israelites to kill Canaanites, despite what the text says. After discussing some reasons that lead people to this conclusion, I emphasize the need to distinguish between the way God is portrayed in the Bible and God's true character. People of faith who take this approach believe some biblical portrayals of God accurately reflect what God is like, while others do not. The challenge is finding a principled way to differentiate between the two. I introduce students to a Christocentric hermeneutic which uses the God Jesus reveals as the standard by which all other portrayals of God are judged.[19] Portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals are regarded as theologically trustworthy, while those that conflict are not. Since the portrayal of God commanding Israelites to slaughter Canaanite men, women, and children is clearly at odds with the God Jesus

reveals, it is safe to conclude that God, the living God, never issued such a horrible divine decree.

Obviously, there are ways to present the “God did not actually do it” approach without recourse to Jesus, and these will be more persuasive in certain settings. Randal Rauser, for example, offers several reasons why he believes God did not sanction the slaughter of Canaanites, none of which involves using a Christocentric hermeneutic (2009, 27–41). For Rauser, the immorality of killing babies and the harm that killing does to the perpetrator is strong evidence that God would never sanction such terrible things (2009, 33–37). I mention both of these ideas when explaining why some people conclude God did not sanction Canaanite genocide despite the Bible's apparent claims to the contrary.

Presenting students with various approaches for addressing violent portrayals of God in the Bible is extremely important for a number of reasons. First, if students are to develop an informed opinion about an issue as fraught with moral and theological significance as this one, they need to have a wide range of options at their disposal. They need to see the lay of the land so they can weigh and evaluate various possibilities.

Introducing students to a broad range of options is also helpful because it encourages students to engage in critical thinking. It allows students to compare and contrast the various approaches and the assumptions underlying them. Examining assumptions is particularly important since it is crucial for critical thinking. As Stephen Brookfield puts it in *Teaching for Critical Thinking*, “You cannot think critically ... without trying to uncover assumptions and then trying to assess their accuracy and validity” ([6] , 7). If students are going to think critically about the issue of divine violence in Scripture – and this is a desired outcome – they need to evaluate the assumptions underlying these approaches before deciding which is best.

Suggestions for Conducting a Constructive Conversation

Having considered a general framework that can be used to structure a meaningful conversation about divine violence in Scripture, I would now like to suggest several ways educators can enhance their effectiveness in dealing with this difficult issue.

Adopt an Appropriate Classroom Style

In their recent book *Invisible No More: Religion in University Education*, [15] helpfully discuss “three classroom styles” – anonymity, transparency, and advocacy – that demonstrate the degree to which educators can mask, or manifest, their own personal convictions in the classroom (2012, 132–134). As they describe it, anonymity “seeks, as much as possible, to keep the professor's own convictions hidden from view”

while transparency “encourages ... teachers to reveal their personal views without forcefully trying to persuade students their views are right” (132–133). Advocacy happens when “the professor's convictions are projected fully and forcefully into the classroom” in the hopes that students will adopt these convictions as their own (2012, 133). According to the Jacobsens, these three models “represent the full spectrum of pedagogical approaches that professors have available – there really are no other options” (134).

When addressing a sensitive issue like divine violence in Scripture, both anonymity and transparency work very well. Both of these approaches are nonjudgmental, and that is very important in this kind of conversation. As [21] observes, “Many students enter theology/religion courses with strong goals for their own spiritual and religious development. In some ways, they need the teacher to stay out of the way and let them wrestle” (2008, 89). This happens when educators adopt either of these classroom styles.

In the first class devoted to God's behavior in the conquest narrative, students do not know whether I embrace any of the particular views I present that day (anonymity).[20] Students come to the second class having read a chapter from my book. Therefore, assuming they have done their reading, they know where I come out on the issue. Still, even when I present this approach in class, I do so without advocating for it. Students are completely free to agree or disagree with it, and there is no pressure to adopt my view as their own. Were I to engage in shameless advocacy, vigorously critiquing opposing positions while strenuously defending my own, it would undoubtedly raise defenses and alienate students, particularly those who felt their own beliefs and convictions threatened.

I have discovered that students really value having multiple approaches presented in an even-handed way with no expectation to adopt a particular position as the “right” one. This gives them the space they need to make up their own minds without being unduly influenced by me. This balanced approach is one of the things students most appreciate about my classes.

Strategically Plan the Timing of This Conversation and the Time Devoted to It

It is important to think carefully about when a discussion of this topic will work best during the semester. In my introductory Bible class, I do not approach the issue of divine violence until well after the midpoint of the semester. By then we have already dealt with a number of other important (and sometimes sensitive) topics such as how the Bible was formed and how to interpret various literary genres in the Bible. We will also have spent some time talking about why interpretations differ and will have considered some common interpretive errors people make. In addition to building a knowledge base that helps facilitate a more constructive conversation, waiting until

later in the semester gives students plenty of time to get to know me and, more importantly, trust me. More on this momentarily.

Additionally, when planning the course schedule, it is necessary to decide how much class time to devote to this issue. Given the complexity and importance of this topic, I believe a concentrated block of time should be devoted to it. It is not an issue that can be dealt with easily in just ten or fifteen minutes. At the very least it deserves one full class period (fifty minutes) though two or more is preferable. I realize how difficult it is to carve out this kind of time in some courses, especially general survey courses designed to cover the entire Bible or large parts of it. Still, since the presence of divine violence in Scripture is so pervasive and potentially problematic, taking a class period or two to discuss it is time well spent.

Allowing adequate time to discuss this issue is especially important when the course is directly related to the Old Testament. In my Old Testament survey course, certain days later in the semester are devoted to discussing how to deal with violence in the Old Testament. This is clearly indicated on the course schedule students receive at the beginning of the semester. Having time set aside for this discussion keeps the class from getting bogged down by the issue early on and allows questions about divine violence to be deferred until later. Designating a block of time like this has the added advantage of giving instructors more control over how this topic is presented. It enables them to discuss the issue in a more thoughtful and systematic way, something that is especially important given the delicate nature of the conversation.

Allow Plenty of Time for Class Discussion

Class discussion is a vital part of any conversation about divine violence and educators should be sure to allow ample time for it. Students need to have numerous opportunities to talk with each other, and to talk together as a class, as they work through this issue. It is important for students to discuss strengths and weaknesses of various perspectives and to voice whatever questions and concerns they might have along the way.

The significance of class discussion in student learning is emphasized in [21] survey of over 1,300 students in forty-eight "Highly-Effective" classes. She writes, "'Discussion' is the single most frequent item mentioned by students as helpful to their learning. In their anonymous prose writing, students expressed over and over again that they wanted to talk, they wanted to hear other peoples' ideas, and they wanted a chance to express their own" (2008, 91). Walvoord also notes that according to this study, a number of students cited discussion as something that helped them clarify "their own thoughts" (91). Drawing on another set of data, Walvoord found that "more discussion" was the most frequent suggestion when students were asked what they wanted to change about the class (92).

Providing opportunities for class discussion allows students to hear different perspectives, sort through options, voice their own opinions, and consider various ways of understanding divine violence in Scripture. It is an essential part of the learning process for grappling with such a complex issue.

Build Trust and Create a Safe Space

Perhaps the most important thing we can do to facilitate a successful conversation around this issue of divine violence is to develop a trusting relationship with our students. Developing trust with students increases their willingness to engage in conversation and to think critically. In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain observes that building trust is characteristic of very successful teachers. [3] writes, “‘The most important aspect of my teaching,’ one instructor told us in a theme we heard frequently, ‘is the relationship of trust that develops between me and my students’” (2004, 140). Bain observed that “trust and openness produced an interactive atmosphere in which students could ask questions without reproach or embarrassment, and in which a variety of views and ways to understand could be freely discussed” (142). This is precisely what is needed to enable students to explore various ways of thinking about divine violence in Scripture and to consider the implications of adopting one approach over another.

Building trust goes hand-in-hand with the idea of making the classroom a safe space. Throughout the semester educators should work hard to treat everyone respectfully and to present diverse viewpoints fairly. This helps students realize the classroom is a safe space where difficult questions can be asked and sensitive issues can be addressed without fear of condemnation or ridicule. This is crucial to having a good conversation. If students do not trust us, or if they do not think the class is a safe space, they are unlikely to voice their own views – let alone critically examine them!

Adequately Prepare Students for This Conversation

In addition to what has already been said, there are a number of other things educators can do to prepare students to deal with this issue constructively. One of these is to consider carefully which topics should be covered before addressing the issue of divine violence. For example, since conversations about violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament are inextricably linked to the way people view the Bible, it is helpful to have a discussion about the nature of Scripture before dealing with divine violence. In the first unit of the introductory Bible class I teach, we consider four views of the inspiration of Scripture (verbal/plenary, conceptual, general, and no inspiration)[21] along with four different understandings of the nature of Scripture (inerrancy, infallibility, neo-orthodox, and liberal).[22] This lays very important groundwork for the conversation we have about divine violence later in the semester. Other topics that might be beneficial to discuss before engaging the issue of divine violence include the historicity of biblical narratives, Israel's theological worldview, and sources for doing

theology. Some educators might find it very useful to help students understand why Israel portrayed God in certain ways before considering what those portrayals may, or may not, suggest about God's character.

Another way to prepare students to participate in this conversation more fruitfully is to assign readings that explore this issue from various perspectives. Unfortunately, many standard textbooks have little, if anything, to say about this topic. Students in my introductory Bible class are required to purchase a course pack that includes, among other things, four readings that deal with the issue of divine violence in Scripture.[23] Two of these readings help them reflect on the conquest narrative from a vantage point that is likely to differ from their own. One is from a Native American perspective, and the other is sympathetic to the way Palestinian Christians often read this narrative. Students are also required to read a chapter from [21] book, *The God I Don't Understand* (2008). This serves as an excellent example of an evangelical attempt to wrestle with the divine decree to slaughter Canaanites, and many of my students are helped by this reading. The final reading, from my book *Disturbing Divine Behavior* (**Seibert** [18]), introduces students to a Christocentric hermeneutic and provides an alternate way to understand violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament. Whatever readings are chosen, they should represent a range of different perspectives, some which confirm what students already believe, and some which challenge those beliefs. This prepares students to encounter various ways of reading these texts.

Assigning reading response questions would further enhance the usefulness of these readings. For example, you could ask students to write about the strengths and weakness of each of the positions they encountered. Or, you might ask students to discuss the view they found most compelling and to explain why. Written assignments like these, which help students evaluate various positions and formulate their own opinions, keep them from coming into the conversation "cold."

In addition to assigning specific readings, educators might choose to prepare a select bibliography of books and articles from a wide range of scholarly positions on this issue. This not only helps students recognize that numerous options are available to them, it provides them with additional resources to consider if they wish to pursue a particular approach further. Making a handout like this available has the extra advantage of once again emphasizing that students are free to choose from a range of options, and that there is no expectation that they adopt a certain point of view.

Communicate Respect for the Bible and Christian Faith

Since any discussion of divine violence in the Old Testament involves focusing on some of the most difficult and unsavory portions of the Old Testament, there will undoubtedly be students who are uncomfortable with this conversation. Some might even feel threatened by it and regard it as an attack on their faith and/or the authority of the Bible. This is especially true among theologically conservative students who may

not appreciate having certain kinds of questions raised about the Bible and the nature of God. Therefore, it behooves religious educators, particularly at faith-based institutions, to reassure students that carefully examining these passages and raising questions about them is an act of faith, not faithlessness. As [5] observes, “So often, students shun critical ideas and difficult questions because they fear that a loss of faith inevitably lies somewhere around the corner. When they are invited to see first-hand that true faith and critical thinking can live nicely together, their defenses begin to fall” (2004, under the heading “D: Malleability”).

Throughout the semester, educators should communicate a deep respect for the Bible and the Christian faith. While this is particularly true for those in Christian higher education, it applies to educators in other contexts as well. If students suspect you are raising this issue to ridicule their view of the Bible or to undermine their faith, they will either tune you out or become defensive. Neither is desirable since you lose any chance to engage them in genuine dialogue or to help them think critically about this topic. On the other hand, if they realize that your concern to help them read violent biblical texts responsibly grows out of your own commitment to Scripture and your appreciation for the Christian faith, they are much more likely to engage this issue constructively.

Part of the challenge for educators involves knowing how to communicate their respect for the Bible and Christianity in ways that are natural and authentic. I suspect this happens naturally throughout the semester for many educators, as students observe how they interpret and apply the Bible. In my introductory Bible class, I do a number of things that demonstrate the applicability and relevance of the Bible for today. For example, I suggest various ways students can apply Old Testament laws to their lives. I consider what Genesis 3 might imply about the nature of temptation. I discuss insights derived from the Psalter about the way we worship and pray – and so forth. In these and many other ways, I demonstrate my respect for Scripture and my belief in its profound usefulness for Christian life.

I sometimes also read a couple autobiographical pages from my book, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, that describe both my love for the Old Testament and the difficulties I have with it (**Seibert** [18] , 3–4). In these pages, I speak very positively about how influential the Old Testament has been in my life over the years. This helps students realize that the challenges I have with violent portrayals of God in Scripture arise out of my passion for the Old Testament and my serious engagement with it. This sort of spiritual autobiography can be very powerful since it invites students to be honest about their own questions while encouraging a deep appreciation for the biblical text.

Assessing Your Efforts

Since classroom conversations about divine violence address core beliefs and have the potential to be unsettling, it is helpful to develop some assessment measures to determine how well these conversations are being received. For my introductory

Bible course, I created a one-page evaluation that I use in addition to the standard IDEA evaluation. This one-page evaluation is more course-specific than the IDEA evaluation and includes a variety of questions directly related to what I actually do in the classroom. Two items, in particular, relate to the issue of Canaanite genocide. They are as follows:

When we dealt with controversial issues (for example, theories of inspiration, women in ministry, Canaanite genocide, questions about the historicity of Jonah) did you feel the way these issues were handled in class was balanced, or did you feel a certain perspective was being forced upon you?

Do you feel it was appropriate to discuss these issues in an introductory level course, or do you think it would be better to wait until an upper-level course to address topics like these?

Student responses to these questions help me gauge how this material is being received and how appropriate it is for an introductory level Bible course.[24]

I am especially interested to know what kind of impact the course may have had on students' faith, so I ask them to reflect on this in the final assignment for the course. They are required to write a two-page paper responding to the following:

Discuss how taking this course has affected your Christian faith. Do you feel it has strengthened your faith? Weakened your faith? Be sure to explain. If you do not profess to be a Christian, discuss whether this course has made you feel more or less positively toward Christianity. Discuss how you think this course will change the way you read the Bible in the future.

Like the evaluation, this paper provides valuable feedback from students about how they experience the course. While the overwhelming response is that the course has strengthened their faith, there are some who struggle. I follow up with each of those students by email and offer to meet with them to discuss their concerns if they like. Extending this invitation provides an additional opportunity to communicate my care for them and for their learning.

While neither of these assessment measures is scientific, they do provide helpful (and immediate) feedback.[25] Given the sensitive nature of these conversations, it seems wise to develop some kind of evaluative tool(s) to indicate how students experience what happens in the classroom. That way, necessary adjustments to our pedagogy can be made sooner rather than later.

Conclusion

Questions about violent portrayals of God in the Bible have been around for a long time, and they are not going away anytime soon. As religious educators, we have

a unique opportunity to journey with students and to help them deal responsibly with these texts. We must help them see what is actually in the Bible – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and should offer various ways of addressing the potential problems violent biblical texts raise.

Although these conversations can be challenging, they should not be avoided. Rather, they should be conducted with great care and skill. Hopefully, this article has provided some idea of how that can be done. While there is no way to guarantee students will always appreciate delving into the issue of divine violence, I have found them to be grateful for the opportunity to talk about this in class. Many students want to know how to handle difficult texts. All they need is some guidance and support to help them along the way. That is precisely what we can offer them as we carefully structure our classes to help them encounter the Bible in all its wonderful beauty and complexity.

Footnotes

1 I wish to thank two peer reviewers for valuable feedback and comments on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Pete Powers for reading and commenting on a couple drafts of this piece. Finally, I would like to thank Tom Pearson for his patience with me, his continued interest in this article, and his willingness to see this through to publication.

2 According to Janet Everhart, one benefit of dealing with "difficult texts" in class is that it "provides much fodder for helping students achieve essential learning outcomes that many of our colleges have adopted" (2012, 191).

3 For various reasons why these violent texts should not be ignored, see Jenkins (16, esp. 18–23).

4 For example, Matthew 22:1–10; Luke 19:42–44; 21:21–24; Acts 5:1–11; 12:20–23.

5 For example, Matthew 25:14–46; Revelation 19:11–16.

6 I realize that this may be overly optimistic and suspect that even many professors who teach upper-level Bible classes shy away from these issues.

7 Obviously, this is more likely in colleges and universities, though even many seminaries do not give much attention to this issue.

8 Schwager also notes that "aside from the approximately one thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executioner of violent punishments, and the many texts in which the Lord delivers the criminal to the punisher's sword, in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the

command to kill people" (2000, 60). For an attempt to quantify how many people God kills in the Bible, see Wells (23).

9 *This is from an assignment written by a student in my 2007 January term course, "Issues of War, Peace and Social Justice in Biblical Texts." A more extensive citation from this student's assignment can be found in **Seibert** (18, 2).*

10 *For a more extensive discussion of how violent verses have been used to harm others, see **Seibert** (19, 15–26).*

11 *To my knowledge, not much has been explicitly written about how to teach violent biblical texts. For some discussion, see Darr (8, 97–117) and Cottrill (7, 192–198). For a much older treatment, see Benedict (4, 163–184, esp. 181–184).*

12 *Individuals who believe God exercised a significant degree of control over the formation of the Bible and its content sometimes claim to have a "high view of Scripture." Their view of God's involvement in this process typically leads them to conclude that the stories in the Bible actually happened and that the descriptions of God in the Bible accurately reflect God's character.*

13 *The following discussion of "textual blindness" is adapted from **Seibert** (19, 75).*

14 **Seibert** 19, 62. *This comes from a student's journal submitted for my 2009 January term course, "Issues of War, Peace and Social Justice in Biblical Texts."*

15 *The entire video clip includes a little more than what I have reproduced here. I am grateful to Jessica Jasitt for introducing me to this clip.*

16 *These can be found online by googling "Brick Testament."*

17 *This list, which is certainly not exhaustive, comes from **Seibert** (19, 16–23).*

18 *Using the rubric "think/pair/square/share," Bain discusses a similar – though somewhat more involved – process than the one I describe in this paragraph.*

19 *This Christ centered method of interpretation is based on two assumptions: (1) Jesus most fully and clearly reveals God's moral character, and (2) God's moral character does not change over time. See **Seibert** (18, 183–207).*

20 *I recognize that some students certainly come to class with some awareness of my views based on what they have heard from others. This limits the degree of anonymity I can have when discussing this issue.*

21 *For a discussion of these four views of inspiration, see **Seibert** (18, 263–275).*

22 For a discussion of various views of inspiration and the nature of Scripture, see Gnuse (13) and Achtemeier (1).

23 The readings are as follows: Epp-Tiessen (10, 62–74); **Seibert** (18, 183–207); Warrior (22, 235–241); and Wright (24, 86–108).

24 The vast majority of students respond by saying they are glad we dealt with these issues and that they feel the issues were handled in a balanced way.

25 Names are optional on these, and I inform students that I do not look at these until after I submit the grades in the hopes that they will be as candid as possible with me.

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