

Violent Christian Texts: A Response to Khalil Meek



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Noted Christian apologist Jay Smith recently debated Muslim apologist Khalil Meek at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.¹ In Smith's opening statement he said, "I'm not going to spend much time in the Old Testament today because there is no reason to, because I do not follow the Old Testament today. I follow the New Testament . . . It's foundational to understand the Old Testament . . . I only accept what's in the New Testament as to how I'm to live today." During Meek's closing statement, he responded to Smith by saying:

Jay conveniently just took the Old Testament and threw it in the trash, said "I don't need it I got the New Testament, I'm walking with Christ and it's all love and affection." But it was the same God that wrote the Old Testament, I'm assuming. Is that correct? Well, he inspired it. So we have the same God that had some laws and if you read them, I could do the same chapter-verse. Okay, look at this, look at this, kill these people. "Oh, but I

¹ A transcript of the debate has been printed as the opening piece in this issue of the journal.

throw that part in the trash. My God doesn't do that." Well, your God did that, right? Now if he got over it, grew out, he got a different vision, that's impressive, right? But he applied a law for a long time, and that law is so similar.

Smith responded by saying:

I don't throw away the Old Testament. I didn't say that tonight; get me right. Of course we don't throw away the Old Testament. We have Old Testament scholars in the audience tonight. We have to go to the Old Testament, but we leave it in 1400 BC . . . He, God gave us a whole new covenant and that covenant is a covenant that is full, basically has no more rules and regulations . . . God does not regress, he progresses. God doesn't change, we do.

Meek brought up a legitimate point in his critique. How do Christians deal with the violent texts of the Old Testament? If we leave the Old Testament in 1400 BC then why do we not leave the New Testament in the first century AD? Smith's statements point to the idea of a radical dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments that is foreign to the minds of the New Testament authors. Therefore Meek's critique of Smith has some validity, and we must address the implications of divinely ordained violence in both the Old Testament and the New. To this end, we will examine some notorious texts relating to violence in the Old Testament (Israel's conquest of Canaan and imprecatory Psalms), then analyze what the New Testament says about violence in order to develop a biblical theology relating to divinely sanctioned violence. In the end, we will see that these violent texts, as part of the Christian canon and as "profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness"² can only be appropriately applied to our current situation as part of an overarching biblical theology. Methodologically a series of relevant questions will be put to the selected texts, which will yield a framework with which to interpret and apply these difficult passages.³

² 2 Tim 3:16 (HCSB). Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

³ See R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939): 37–38. Cf. D. P. Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics* (PTMS 107; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009): 44.

VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT*Israel's Conquest of Canaan*

Perhaps the most touted examples of biblical violence are the narratives that command and detail Israel's conquest of Canaan. There is little doubt that these texts pose difficult hermeneutical issues that must be addressed in order to integrate them into a comprehensive biblical theology. The texts are numerous, but we will limit our discussion to one illustrative example.⁴

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, and He drives out many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and powerful than you—and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you and you defeat them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your sons away from Me to worship other gods. Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and He will swiftly destroy you. Instead, this is what you are to do to them: tear down their altars, smash their standing pillars, cut down their Asherah poles, and burn up their carved images.

For you are a holy people belonging to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be His own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD was devoted to you and chose you, not because you were more numerous than all peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But because the LORD loved you and kept the oath He swore to your fathers, He brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the place of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps His gracious covenant loyalty for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commands. But He directly pays back and destroys those who hate Him. He will not hesitate to directly pay back the one who hates Him. So keep the command—the statutes and ordinances—that I am giving you to follow today. (Deut 7:1–11)

⁴ For example, see Exod 33:1–3; Num 21:1–35; 33:50–56; Deut 2:26–3:29; Josh 6:20–21; 10:28–40; 11:10–23; etc.

***What is Israel's relationship to Yahweh,
and does any other nation have a
similar relationship?***

We know from Exodus that after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt, Israel consistently rebelled against Yahweh, yet in the above passage we learn that they are a holy people, chosen by God from all the other nations. Their relationship with God is unique—unlike any relationship that any nation has had before or since. In fact, the nation of Israel at this point is a theocracy—ruled by God. This is demonstrated by the fact that when Israel later asks God for a king, he states that the people have rejected him as their king (1 Sam 8:7). God does plan for Israel to receive a king but that king is to rule over them as Yahweh's subsidiary, whose primary task is to be an example to the people of how to live in relationship with him.⁵ Clearly, in the opinion of Deuteronomy, the nation of Israel was in a unique relationship with God that afforded them a unique role in human history.

Whom is Israel Commanded to destroy and why?

In the text from Deuteronomy 7, as well as others, Israel is commanded to destroy nations that have consistently rebelled against Yahweh. Long before that nation of Israel stood on the borders of the Promised Land, God told Abraham that “the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:16). It would be more than 400 years before the scales were tipped. The destruction of the Amorites is the outworking of God's judgment after a lengthy period of grace.⁶ Yahweh does not allow Israel to commit violence against anyone based on her (Israel's) own assessment or desire. The Israelites are the tool of punishment in this case but the judgment comes from God. Indeed, the Israelites are prohibited from committing murder—the selfish, unjustified killing of another human being—in Deuteronomy 5, merely two chapters before the text under discussion. The commanded destruction is God's just judgment of the Amorite nation after a prolonged period of clemency, not capricious violence. God does not advocate wholesale, nonsensical violence. Instead, Yahweh uses Israel to judge the nations that have consistently rebelled against him. Yahweh

⁵ See Deut 17:14–20.

⁶ The Amorites seem to be synonymous with the Canaanites here. Israel and Judah both experience similar judgment from God by the Assyrians and Babylonians. God's judgment, then, is not prejudicial.

does not command Israel to destroy *all* non-Israelites, that is, non-believers. In fact, Israel is actually *prohibited* from destroying some nations (Edom, Moab, and Ammon).⁷ The fact of the matter is that God's judgment on the Amorites follows a regular pattern in the way He deals with the nations. Each nation apparently receives an extended forbearance before they reach a terminus that tips the scales resulting in divine judgment. The punishment of God that follows is usually enacted by the hands of another nation, whether that nation understands its role or not.

Israel is no exception to this rule and actually receives punishment earlier than pagan nations, ostensibly because of their special relationship with God and the resulting higher level of responsibility.⁸ For example, Yahweh sends ten plagues on Egypt, each of which is increasingly destructive. The final plague, the death of every firstborn in Egypt, comes only after a lengthy period of grace during which the Egyptians could have repented, thus averting the disaster.⁹ God also allows 400 years of rebellion before he destroys the Amorites, and even sends Jonah to preach repentance to Nineveh and, much to Jonah's chagrin, refuses to destroy them after they repent. God's judgment in almost every case is preceded by an incredible level of grace and longsuffering.

A second reason that Israel is commanded to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan is that their mere presence would tempt Israel to turn from Yahweh and commit idolatry (Deut 7:4). The people's relationship with Yahweh was of extreme importance, so they must take their holiness seriously. In order to do this, it was necessary to rid the land of false worshipers.¹⁰ In fact, the land of Canaan was to serve as a second Garden of Eden in which the Israelites would have fellowship with God. Therefore disobedience would not be tolerated and Israel is commanded to enact Yahweh's judgment, through violence, against particular people groups for particular sins. They are not given *carte blanche* to commit violence against whomever they please. Indeed, the destruction of the Canaanite groups should have been a warning to the people of Israel themselves.

⁷ See Deut 2. P. Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 179.

⁸ See for example the Book of Habakkuk wherein Judah faces imminent judgment from God, and relatively more wicked Babylonians are the tool that God uses to enact the judgment.

⁹ Indeed, the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites for some time, seemingly without penalty, before God sent Moses and then unleashed the plagues.

¹⁰ See D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (WBC 6A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), 159–60. Though he reads this text figuratively, his comments on the importance of the holiness in Israel are helpful.

Much like Adam and Eve, failure and disobedience on the part of the Israelites would result in exile and death. For example, when Israel was about to purge the Canaanites of Ai, Achan disobeyed the Lord and took some of the *verboden* material plunder from Jericho. The resulting judgment on the Israelites was immediate. They lost the initial battle with Ai at the cost of many lives and Achan and his whole family had to be put to death before peace with God could be reestablished. Whereas the Canaanites had been given a 400 year grace period, the Israelites, who were bearers of greater revelation and responsibility, faced more immediate judgment. This idea of the extreme responsibility of the children of God is not left in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Jesus cites the metaphor of the leaven to warn of the negative influence of certain religious and secular leaders on the disciples' relationship with God.¹¹ Paul, seemingly picking up on this metaphor, notes that sin has a detrimental effect on the whole body.¹² In a similar vein, Jesus uses the stark image of tearing one's eye out rather than committing sin with it.¹³ While this picture is hyperbole, the principle of extreme sacrifice rather than facing complete judgment remains the same. The loss of an eye is preferable to the fires of Hell.

We will see below that there exceptions to Yahweh's command to destroy, but it is helpful here to demonstrate some differences between biblical commands to enact violent judgment and the Quran's call to *jihad*. The Quran advocates violence against anyone categorized as "infidel," that is an unbeliever. For example, speaking of unbelievers who refuse to convert to Islam, Surah 4:89 states, "but if they do not turn away, seize them and kill them wherever you find them and take not from among them any ally or helper."¹⁴ Speaking of *jihad* in another place, the Quran indicates that those who practice it are free from blame: "And you did not kill them, but it was Allah who killed them" (Surah 8:17).

It is important to note both the similarities and differences with the biblical mandates to commit violence. First, Surah 4:89 does allow for conversion to Islam as a way for unbelievers to escape death, which parallels, in a limited way, the grace that Yahweh extends to those who repent and follow him. However, this is where the similarities end, and the differences are significant.

First, it must be noted that the conversion that Islam seeks from infidels is fundamentally different from Yahweh's offer of grace to those

¹¹ Matt 16:6ff.

¹² 1 Cor 5:6.

¹³ Matt 18:9.

¹⁴ All Quranic quotations are taken from <http://quran.com>.

who repent and follow him, which signifies change in one's life and heart rather than mere conversion to avoid death. Second, the Quran does not advocate jihad as a means for executing judgment for sin, as is the case in Yahweh's judgment. Third, though the Quran indicates that the death was at Allah's hands, it always comes in the form of humans committing violence against other humans. There are multiple instances in which Yahweh uses supernatural means to enact his violent judgment, as was the case with the Egyptians. Fourth, the Quran does not allow for a period of grace in which "infidels" can repent. Only the biblical account presents a God who is longsuffering, patient, slow to anger, and eager to forgive. Fifth, Yahweh's chosen people are not exempt from his violent judgment if they also rebel against him, but the Quran indicates that only infidels need fear violent judgment. Sixth, the Quran's mandate for jihad encompasses all people at all times and is still valid for Muslims. In contrast, the Israelites were not given carte blanche to destroy any and every unbeliever. Biblical accounts of God's violent judgment are against specific nations, for a specific time. Furthermore, Christ's sacrificial death significantly changed the landscape of biblical faith, a concept that will be developed further below.

***Are there exceptions to the command to destroy everything?*¹⁵**

Israel is God's special people, a billboard to the nations in a way similar to the description of God's people in the New Testament—they "are to some a scent of death leading to death, but to others, a scent of life leading to life" (2 Cor 2:16). To those like Rahab and Ruth, who choose to forsake their national and familial allegiances and follow Yahweh, Israel is a scent of life leading to life. As Yahweh's special people, they show the nations how to have a relationship with God. Rahab and Ruth, members of nations that are to be destroyed, each receive mercy from Yahweh. This shows that the command to destroy everything is not necessarily absolute—allowances are made for those who choose to follow Yahweh.¹⁶ Furthermore, even those who do not respond with repentance are given long periods of grace prior to the enactment of judgment.¹⁷

¹⁵ For an excellent analysis of Yahweh's differentiation in judgment in the book of Jeremiah see R. J. R. Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: T & T Clark, 2008).

¹⁶ See Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 178–79.

¹⁷ For example, the Amorites (Gen 15:6), Nineveh (Jonah), Babylonia (Habakkuk).

Does the New Testament change the role of the people of God?

To bring this text to bear on the Christian, we must now ask whether the New Testament changes the role that believers play in the violent judgment of nations. The answer, of course, is that there are significant differences that change the way that Christians interact with nonbelievers. First, it is important to note that there is no longer a single political entity that has Yahweh as its ruler. During Jesus' ministry, he states that his kingdom is not a kingdom of this earth (John 18:36–37). Instead, he came to take the violent judgment of God on Himself so that people might finally have a right relationship with God. Because of this salvific action, the people of God are now members of many different nations scattered throughout the world. Second, the Church is now God's ambassador to the nations. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 28 to go "and make disciples of all nations." The church accomplishes this through preaching the gospel. Like Jonah, the church is to go to the nations, but unlike Israel, it is not to enact His violent judgment upon them. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a command for Christians to commit violence against those who reject God.¹⁸ God still oversees the nations, but his servants do not enact his earthly judgment in the way that Israel did.

Understanding the reason for the non-violent role of the church is crucial. God is not inconsistent. His requirements for the punishment of sin remain steadfast even in the New Testament. The difference between the Testaments lies in the fact that God takes the violence of His judgment on sin upon Himself at the cross.¹⁹ The failures of mankind are put upon the person of Jesus, God incarnate, so that those who accept Him may have fellowship with God. However, God still demanded violent judgment. The church is the beneficiary of God taking violence upon Himself and therefore the church reflects this willingness to absorb violence from others.²⁰ Yet, even this form of grace has limits for those who refuse to accept the gift of Jesus' suffering for their sake. Even as Achan and his family paid the death penalty for their disobedience within the community of faith, Ananias and Saphirra were struck down for their deception concerning the things of God.²¹ Likewise, the Canaanites had a

¹⁸ The disciples are told in Matt 10:14 to "shake the dust off your feet when you leave that town" as a sign against the town that it has rejected the gospel. They are not, however, told to enact God's judgment against them; that is reserved for the end of time.

¹⁹ Phil 2:7; Col 1:20; 2:14.

²⁰ Matt 10:38; 16:34.

²¹ Acts 5:1–11.

lengthy period of grace followed by judgment when they refused to change their ways. So too will those who refuse the gift of the Son of God eventually pay the price of violent judgment. The Book of Revelation focuses on the salvation of the faithful and the violent punishment of the wicked after the period of God's longsuffering comes to an end.

Christians, then, must recognize that the violence commanded in the conquest of Canaan was a unique command for a unique time and a unique people. While God does still enact judgment, because of the cross he does not use the people of God in the same way as he did during the time of biblical Israel.²² Based on the differences between the biblical context and modern context, it would be inappropriate to use the Old Testament texts as a justification for Christian violence, though they remain beneficial for building up the Church and a warning to all that God is consistent in His demands. Restored fellowship with God is always the goal in both the past and present. Consistent refusal of this fellowship did, does and will have a terrible price.

Imprecatory Psalms

Imprecatory psalms also pose a particularly difficult problem for interpreters of the Bible. How are we to deal with outright requests for violence against others? How does this fit into a biblical theology of violence? Again, we will treat only one example of this type of literature.²³

Remember, LORD, *what* the Edomites said that day at Jerusalem: "Destroy it! Destroy it down to its foundations!"

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who pays you back what you have done to us.

Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.
(Ps 137:7–9)

To whom is the Psalmist speaking?

Probably the most important aspect to keep in mind when dealing with imprecatory psalms is that they are prayers from an individual to the living God, asking him to act on their behalf. The Psalmist is speaking out of a prior relationship with Yahweh, which a crucial aspect in

²² "If a disaster occurs in a city, hasn't the LORD done it?" (Amos 3:6).

²³ For other imprecatory Psalms, see Pss 55, 58, 69, and 109.

interpretation.²⁴ This is not a text written by an unbeliever who is railing against his enemies. Instead, it is a believer who is struggling with the injustices that he sees, and is thus seeking a way to cope with his *feelings* of violence. Note, that the writer does not enact violence against others; he requests God to do so, then leaves God to perform righteous judgment. A request for judgment in the form of violence is vastly different from actively enforcing vigilante justice.

Does the New Testament change one's application of this Psalm?

This text, while startlingly violent, does not require the same type of hermeneutical effort as the previous passage because it neither commands nor records actual violent acts. The example of the New Testament accords with the approach of this Psalmist. For example, when someone rejected the disciples' message, Jesus told them to perform a sign against them (shaking the dust from their feet), and that their judgment would be worse than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 10:14). The judgment itself is not carried out by the disciples, but they do, in a way, request that God enact judgment against those who reject him. In the same way, Psalm 137 does not enact violence, but asks God to act on behalf of the one who has been wronged. This, then, is an appropriate way for Christians to respond. It would be wrong for them to commit violence, but it is entirely fitting for them to ask God to act on their behalf. Since Christians are now recipients of the grace of God by his enacting violent judgment against us on the cross, they must be willing to show that same grace to others. Therefore, while they are justified in asking God to act on their behalf, they are expected to extend to others the same grace that God has extended to them.²⁵ God may extend grace when the guilty parties repent and like Jonah, believers need to accept this because they themselves have benefitted from just such grace.

This text, along with the Deuteronomy text, helps to round out our biblical theology of violence. So far, we have seen that violence is justified when God commands a nation to use violence as his judgment against another nation. This is a unique situation that does not carry over into the life of New Testament believers because their relationship with God as their ruler is quite different. This is also not meant to imply that the government is not justified in enacting judgment on individuals (Rom

²⁴ W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (2nd ed.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 353.

²⁵ For a stirring examination of this Psalm, see J. Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 3: Psalms 90–150* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; ed. T. Longman III; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 599–614.

13:4). God currently uses government to enact violent judgment, both on individuals and on other nations; however, Christians must recognize and affirm the mystery of God as Lord of history—while governments ideally should use biblical truth to guide their decisions, they can no longer claim that God has commanded them to destroy other nations, as was the case with Israel. In much the same way as the nations that surrounded Israel, modern governments are under the authority of God and will answer to Him whether they currently recognize this fact or not. There is certainly a tension present in the life of the believer—one may long for justice, but must extend grace and leave the judging in God’s hands, who may choose to extend to others the same grace he has extended to us.

(NON)VIOLENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The relationship of God to his people is quite different in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. Accordingly, God does not use his people to bring about the violent judgment of others in the same way that he did with Israel.

A New Kingdom

There are two instances in John’s Passion Narrative (John 18–19) that help Christians to understand the relationship that we now have with God as our king. First, when Jesus is being taken into custody, Peter draws his sword and cuts off Malchus’ ear. Jesus reprimands Peter’s act of violence: “Sheathe your sword! Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given Me?” (John 18:11). According to our modern sensibilities, Peter had every right to defend his Lord against unjust arrest and the violence that was to follow, but instead Jesus stays his hand, choosing instead to receive the cup of suffering that Yahweh had allotted him. This is consistent with Jesus’ earlier command to “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). Rather than enacting God’s judgment against others, Christians are to wait for God himself to enact that judgment and recognize that their judgment has fallen unjustly on Jesus.

Second, when Jesus stands before Pilate, he makes it clear that he is establishing a heavenly kingdom: “ ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’ said Jesus. ‘If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. As it is, My kingdom does not have its origin here’ ” (John 18:36). This forms a crucial part of the distinction between New Testament believers and the people of Israel—Yahweh is still our king, but our citizenship is not of the current earthly order. Rather, Christians are now citizens of a transnational, spiritual

kingdom whose goal is the spread of the gospel and the inauguration of the New Heavens and the New Earth. If we were still citizens of a fallen earthly kingdom, like Israel, then we would be justified in enacting God's judgment at God's command. However, we are citizens of a heavenly, borderless kingdom. Because of this, Christians are not commanded to enact God's violent judgment like Israel did, though governments still retain the sword for that very purpose (Rom 13:4). Members of God's international kingdom (that is, Christians), though, must be willing to forego administering God's justice themselves, and extend the same grace to others as God extended to us on the cross.

Is the God of the New Testament Only a God of Love?

Based on a cursory reading of the New Testament and the passages we examine above, it may be easy to assume that God as revealed in the New Testament is only a God of love. After all it is the love and grace of God, demonstrated on the cross, which allows believers to have access to God through faith in Christ. Khalil Meek asserted that the God revealed in the Old Testament is the same as the God revealed in the New Testament; we could not agree more. We saw earlier that God extended grace to non-Israelites in the Old Testament (Ruth, Rahab, even the Amorites and Ninevites!). We also saw that God enacted violent judgment in the New Testament, specifically on his Son, Jesus Christ, who bore God's wrath for the sins of humanity. Beyond this, though, the book of Revelation also indicates that God's violent judgment will once again come upon those who rebel against him (e.g., Rev 8:1–9:21; 11:1–19; 19:11–21).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that these texts must be incorporated into a larger biblical theology of violence that demonstrates that God desires "all to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). So, to answer Khalil Meek, yes, Christians do have violent texts. However, none of these texts advocate wholesale, undifferentiated violence against others, and all contain a significant element of grace. As noted above, the cross was an extremely violent act of God's judgment on His Son in order to clear the guilty and pay the price they deserve. The Book of Revelation is full of violent judgment on those, who, after a prolonged period of grace and chance to repent, refuse to change their ways and submit to God. God is consistent. He shows tremendous grace but punishment is also consistently enacted. In the Old Testament punishment came primarily but not exclusively at

the hands of other nations.²⁶ In the New Testament the violence of God's punishment came at the cross and will come again at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Noting the consistency of God's character in both mercy and judgment is the Good News and warning that all people, including Muslims, need to hear.

²⁶ Sodom and Gomorrah for example were destroyed directly by God.