

The Bible Strange but True: “A History of Violence?”

In Joshua chapter 10 verse 28 we read:

“That day Joshua took Makkedah. He put the city and its king to the sword and totally destroyed everyone in it. He left no survivors. And he did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho.”

Joshua 11:12 – 15:

“Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. ¹³ Yet Israel did not burn any of the cities built on their mounds—except Hazor, which Joshua burned. ¹⁴ The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed.”

Judges chapter 3 verses 12 – 23;

“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. ¹³ Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴ The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

¹⁵ Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit^[d] long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. ¹⁷ He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. ¹⁸ After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way those who had carried it. ¹⁹ But on reaching the stone images near Gilgal he himself went back to Eglon and said, “Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you.”

The king said to his attendants, “Leave us!” And they all left.

²⁰ Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his palace and said, “I have a message from God for you.” As the king rose from his seat, ²¹ Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly.

²² Even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.

²³ Then Ehud went out to the porch, he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.”

Judges 4 verses 16 – 22:

“Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera’s troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.

Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.”

So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

“I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.”

She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

“Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone in there?’ say ‘No.’”

But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted.

She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him.

“Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.”

So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple – dead.”

2 Samuel 20:9 – 10:

⁹ Joab said to Amasa, “How are you, my brother?” Then Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him.

¹⁰ Amasa was not on his guard against the dagger in Joab’s hand, and Joab plunged it into his belly, and his intestines spilled out on the ground. Without being stabbed again, Amasa died. Then Joab and his brother Abishai pursued Sheba son of Bikri.”



So this morning we are looking at Bible stories that are not just unusual, strange, odd *but also violent...* but true.

Some years ago I attended a Parachute Music Festival which featured along with the bands and live music had Christian speakers covering all sorts of topics. One advertised his talk with the words, “Sex and Violence: Two reasons to read the Old Testament”.

Passages like these – *and there are others* – are often used by atheists and skeptics to say that behind all the Christians claims of God of love and peace and kindness is actually a bloodthirsty, brutal, tyrannical god.

And you can understand that on cursory reading it can appear that way. You have the story of Joab, David’s chief commander, and Amasa.

This wasn’t simply a quick stab in the abdomen.

Joab, being an experienced military man of his day, knew exactly how to intentionally disembowel a person, and he did so.

This was a vicious act.

These are not the kind of stories we tell in Sunday School.

This is not a new issue either.

In the Second Century AD a Christian named Marcion couldn’t stand the seeming contradiction between the Old And New Testaments.

His answer was to reject the entire Old Testament as being part of Scripture. He only accepted the New Testament as being God’s Word.

But can anyone see the problem with that approach?

The problem with that is that Jesus Himself acknowledged and referred to the Old Testament in His teaching.

So do the rest of the New Testament writers.

But the question for us is this:

“If you had to explain the violence in the Bible to a seeker or new believer or even a sceptic, what would you say?”

For one, it is a reality that even if we don’t wrestle with it, others do.

So here is my own small way to address this.

For one there are ***Expectations and Reality***.

Often it’s the expectations we bring to the Bible, to Scripture.

So for some, it’s like the Bible is this “holy” book and for them to be a “holy” book it should always be a “nice” book.

In fact some Christians have added an 11th commandment – “Thou shalt be nice.”

In fact for some they come to Scripture as if should be a book of rainbows and butterflies and daisy-chains – it should be “nice”.

Or it is a book of moral and ethical story telling.

In other words, every page should give us the ethical underpinnings of how to live our lives.

So people are genuinely shocked and repulsed by what they find in places.

I remember after speaking on this topic, I talked with a church member afterwards and for her it was too much. Although she was a solid Christian, she didn’t want think about it.

One author, a lecturer in Biblical studies, wrote:

A former student shared with me the sad story of his father, a dedicated lay leader of an evangelical church, who set out to read the Bible through [from beginning to end] for the first time. He was first surprised, then shocked, and finally outraged by the frequency and ferocity of divinely initiated and sanctioned violence in the Old Testament. About half-way through the book of Job, he shut the Bible never to open it again and has not set foot inside a church since. ¹

¹ Stanly N. Gundry (Series Ed.) *Show Them No Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 97.

The Bible records things as they occurred – the good, the bad and the ugly – warts and all, and this is especially true of the book of Judges. As much as it is a divinely inspired book, it is a very human book as well.

Descriptive not Prescriptive

A great fear is that if we accept these passages as God's Word, then anything is justifiable.

If Israel did this – with God's approval – then we can do the same.

If we read the Bible as a guide for how we should behave then these stories can become moral examples to follow and God *does* appear to be a blood thirsty maniac.

And we may even end up justifying the behaviour of biblical characters, even when they act in terrible ways.

When you read closely that's not actually the case.

What you do discover is that these acts are not all divinely sanctioned; they are not endorsed by God at all.

There is no, "Go and do likewise command."

There is no, "And God was pleased with their actions."

What the writers are doing, as recorder of Israel's history, is being *descriptive*, as opposed to being *prescriptive*.

Do we know the difference?

To be *prescriptive* is to speak of what should or must happen.

The Ten Commandments are prescriptive.

In being *descriptive*, the writer is telling us of events as they happened, describing what took place.

The Book of Judges is a case in point.

What the book of Judges ultimately describes is Israel's descent into chaos, violence and self-destruction because of its idolatry and unfaithfulness to God.

The final story we read is one of sexual assault and murder, which leads to dismemberment and Israel's first civil war, and it is very disturbing.

Judges is a low-point for Israel.

This distinction is a helpful one to hold in our minds when we survey the whole of Scripture, especially the Old Testament.

Yes, God does use these mixed and messed up people along the way; He remains faithful to Israel.

But he doesn't approve of all or any of their decisions.

All he has to work with are these increasingly corrupt people and so work with them He does.

In fact, far from endorsing the violence and destruction found in different part of Scripture, later prophets look back on this time and condemn it. ²

Hyperbole and Exaggeration

As we heard in our readings from Joshua there are times when Israel are said to have destroyed everyone.

The thing is, it doesn't mesh with the facts.

Not everybody actually was destroyed, let alone women and children.

How do we know that?

We read in Deuteronomy 7 verse 3:

“Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons...”

How could the Israelites intermarry with the Canaanites if they were totally destroyed?

What is happening is that to a certain degree the language used here is one of exaggeration and hyperbole.

We use language like that too, don't we?

If we want to really emphasise a point.

“The All Blacks annihilated the Italians!

“”The Spring Boks obliterated the Scots!”

“It was a massacre!”

² See for example, Hosea 9:9; 10:9.

It's language that's hardly accurate in a literal sense.
It's language that punches home a point.

And when you do the research, you find it was common way for Kings to speak to in the day.

It shouldn't surprise us because this kind of language occurs again and again throughout the Old Testament.

Groups of people are described as being utterly destroyed, only to reappear a couple of pages later.

Disturbing and Disturbed

But if God doesn't endorse what is happening, why *does* the violence of Judges appear in Scripture at all?

Why not describe Israel's history without the gory details?

Why not gloss over the graphic stories?

And thing is, these stories *are meant to disturb us*.

They are meant to unsettle us and make us sit up and pay attention.

It's meant to make us ask, "What is going on here???"

And what we discover is behind many places in Scripture that feature violence and corruption and carnage, *is the growing absence of God*.

God is no longer the primary character.

He has not disappeared altogether but is only given lip service rather true worship and love.

God does not abandon Israel; Israel abandons God.

Paul says that what happened to ancient is an example to us – a warning.³

The book of Judges says – alongside other places in the Old Testament – this violence and abuse and carnage and corruption – this is what ensues if you abandon Yahweh.

God calls Israel to be a holy people, set apart for himself, different from the perverse nations around them.

³ 1 Corinthians 10:6 – 11.

Israel as an ancient kingdom fails in that calling.

Of course, that was then and this now.

So, I have my thoughts to close with, but what would be your takeaways this morning?

What can be said is that when the people of Israel were far from God that did terrible things.

They often prayed to be rescued from their enemies.

God raised up deliverers, prophets and kings who were far from perfect and did things that were far from perfect.

Even in Jesus' time they were looking for they were looking for a conquering king who would overthrow their oppressors through war and violence.

Yet Jesus comes and says more than anything, you need to be rescued from yourself.

Human nature hasn't changed.

In the wrong conditions we're still capable of great evil, of brutality, of violence.

Jesus came to rescue us from ourselves.

Jesus greatest act of rescue was suffering a cruel death on a Roman cross, forgiving our sins.

And died for our sins he rose again so that we could receive new life, a changed life, a life of peace

In turn we can offer that peace to others.