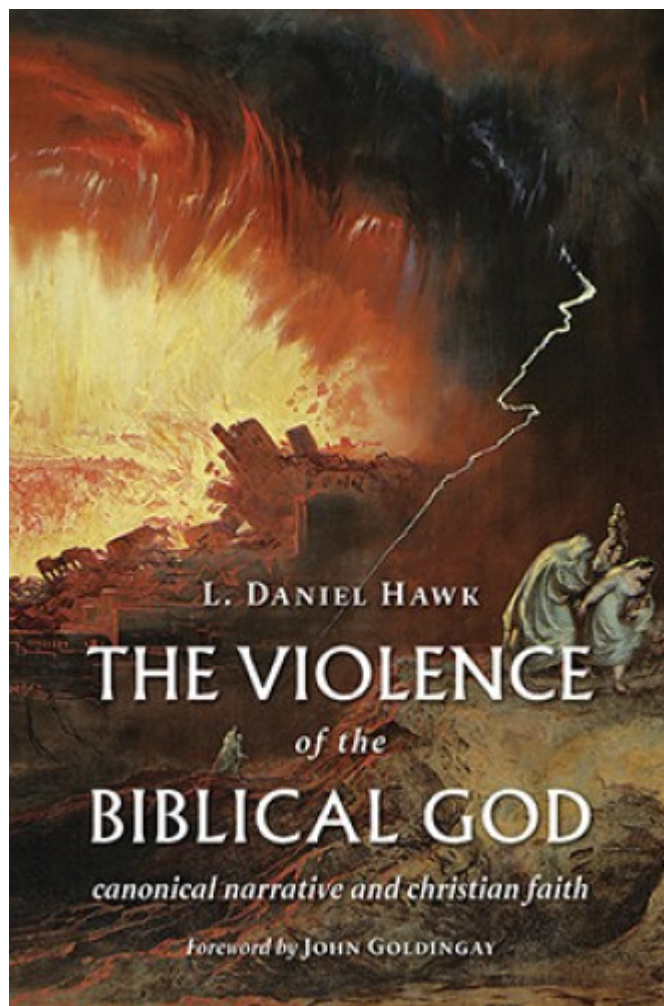


Does God command genocide in the book of Joshua?

Daniel Hawk avoids easy responses to violence in the Bible—but then enters some troubling territory.

by [Shai Held](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Violence of the Biblical God

Canonical Narrative and Christian Faith

By L. Daniel Hawk

Eerdmans,

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How can a good God command—and engage in—unspeakable horrors? To take perhaps the most salient example from the Bible, readers both ancient and modern have been perplexed by the notion that God commands the Israelites “not to let a soul remain alive” among the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 20:16). How does a God who is “good to all” and “whose mercy is upon all his works” (Ps. 145:9) command killing on such a massive scale?

Bible scholar Daniel Hawk is uniquely qualified to tackle the issue of biblical violence. He has spent the bulk of his career wrestling with the book of Joshua, arguably the Bible’s most troubling book, with its account of the conquest of the land. Hawk’s full-length commentary on the book, *Joshua: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (2000), is a model of close literary and theological exegesis. He now widens his lens to consider the question of violence more broadly.

Hawk doubts that “a definitive, all-encompassing explanation” of divine violence is available to us, and he thus makes no pretense of “solving” the problem of divine violence in the Bible. On the contrary, to his enormous credit Hawk rejects what he rightly sees as overly facile approaches to the problem.

Some historical critics place the Bible in an evolutionary framework and argue that older texts are “primitive expressions of Israel’s religious consciousness” which gave way, over time, to “a more mature ethical and theological perspective.” According to such approaches, the stories about the flood and the exodus and the command to slaughter the Canaanites can be dismissed as coming early in Israel’s life.

Hawk rightly reminds us that dating biblical texts is a notoriously slippery enterprise and that evolutionary interpretations therefore stand on shaky ground. Hawk also observes that some of the most violent imagery in the Bible is found in texts that all historical critics agree are late (for example, Isa. 63:1–6). When it comes to our ethical problems with the Bible, historical criticism will not save us.

Some Christian scholars read the Bible through a “Christocentric hermeneutic,” according to which “the God Jesus reveals should be the standard, or measuring rod, by which the Old Testament portrayals of God” are to be assessed (Eric Seibert). Such scholars maintain that since Jesus purportedly spurns violence, violent descriptions of God in the Hebrew Bible must be seen as false. Writers taking this approach sometimes offer highly conjectural reconstructions of ancient Israelite history.

For example, one scholar tells us that although God intended to remove the Canaanites from the land of Israel nonviolently, Moses and the Israelites misunderstood God’s intention as a result of their “low spiritual state.” Readers can thus rest assured that “the violence that God’s people engaged in as they entered [the land] originated not in the will of God but in the fallen desires of Moses” (Gregory Boyd).

Rejecting this approach too, Hawk warns against “construct[ing] a hypothetical scenario in support of a theological reading . . . set[ting] that scenario over against the biblical narrative, and then . . . us[ing] it to judge the theological witness of the biblical text as plainly rendered.” Moreover, he rightly observes that the unique status of Moses as God’s prophet is foundational to the Pentateuch. It seems odd to consider a text scripture while denigrating its leading figure as primitive and benighted.

Since Hawk is gentler than I, let me simply say: whatever their intentions, such approaches are unremitting in their Christian triumphalism—“Thank God we have Jesus to redeem us from the hopelessly unenlightened Old Testament!” The ghost of Marcion and the legacy of anti-Judaism hover over (and arguably animate) such interpretations.

Hawk wants Christian readers to wrestle with the violence of the Bible rather than offering overly neat (and theologically troubling) solutions to it. As he asks, “Does not the sheer scope and ubiquity of God’s violence in the Bible demand that it be taken seriously as a significant element of God’s interaction with a violent world?” Why, then, is the God of the Bible sometimes so violent?

Let’s start with the conquest and then move on to the Hebrew Bible writ large.

Hawk reminds readers that God’s giving the land to Israel is, first and foremost, a manifestation of God’s faithfulness and commitment to Israel. Time and again the

land has been promised to Abraham and his descendants, and now it will finally be theirs. But what about the Canaanites? In promising the land to Abraham, God had told him that his descendants could not inherit the land yet because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:16). Almost all Bible scholars take this to mean that God will not disinherit the indigenous inhabitants of the land (generically referred to here as Amorites) until they are wicked enough to deserve it.

Hawk implausibly insists that God’s granting the land to Israel “does not mean divine judgment on the indigenous peoples.” Although God finds the practices of the peoples “repulsive,” Hawk maintains, God “makes no direct declaration of judgment.” And yet Deuteronomy states explicitly that God dispossesses the native peoples because of their “wickedness” (9:4). Hawk’s attempts to deny this are not convincing.

Hawk shines, however, when he engages with the conquest narratives of the book of Joshua. Drawing on his earlier work, he notes the many cracks within the text itself. After presenting an extensive catalogue of defeated kings (Josh. 12:1–24), the text then moves to God’s declaration to Joshua that “a good deal of the land remains to be possessed” (13:1). Side by side with pronouncements about total conquest and utter devastation stand admissions that indigenous populations do in fact remain (e.g., Josh. 13:13, 16:10, 17:12–13). Wisely rejecting attempts to harmonize the conflicting perspectives presented by the text, Hawk chooses instead to embrace the disjointed narrative as it stands. “The narration of this story,” he says, “speaks with multiple voices. There is a narrative and a counternarrative, and fragments of other narratives, each of which vies to give a perspective that must be told.” Instead of dissolving the complexity of the narrative, he celebrates it.

But is the book of Joshua about genocide? In light of the many internal contradictions within the text and the highly stylized ways killing is described, Hawk concludes that rhetoric about mass killing “contains more style than substance.” Like other recent scholars, he appeals to Deuteronomy 7. If God really wants the Israelites to “wipe out” the inhabitants of the land completely (7:1–2), then why does God immediately follow up with a commandment not to intermarry with them (7:3)? The Israelites presumably will not marry nations they have already slaughtered. The command to kill the nations of the land, then, “does not appear to be concerned with eliminating them so much as keeping Israel at a distance from them.”

The hyperbolic rhetoric of Deuteronomy and Joshua ultimately underscore Israel's commitment to radical separation from the land's native inhabitants. The rhetoric is about mass killing, but the actual commitment is to something different—unadulterated commitment to God. The fact that indigenous people who embrace the God of Israel are incorporated into the community without a protest from God would also seem to show that the rhetorical flourishes of the book of Joshua are not meant to be taken literally. The text does present a story of comprehensive military triumph, but it also pokes abundant holes in that very story.

Does this solve the problem of genocidal language in the text? I don't think so, and I doubt that Hawk does either. What it does do, however, is to remind us to read closely and calmly and to pay careful attention to the ways the text itself often struggles with the same questions we do.

In Hawk's account, the biblical God is resolutely focused on renewing a world gone bad. God enters human affairs in the hope of repairing them, but things do not quite go as planned. Having entered "the maelstrom of a violent, chaotic world," God grows "entangled . . . within mechanisms of violence that configure the warped system that rebellious humanity has created." Step by step, God gets pulled more and more deeply into the world's brutality.

Filled with "sorrow" over humanity's violence and "lawlessness" (Gen. 6:6), God tries a different tack, establishing a covenant with Abram. As God had first blessed Adam (Gen. 1:28), so now God blesses Abraham (Gen. 12:2). As Hawk sees it, God "identifies" with Abraham and chooses to take part in his world. Intervening on Abraham's behalf (saving Sarah from Pharaoh, for example) means that God has to "enter into and work within the structures and customs that configure Abraham's world and appropriate them" to advance God's own concerns. God enters the world and finds Godself, at least to a degree, playing by its rules.

It is one thing for God to defend an innocent; it is quite another to support a man who has gone astray. As Hawk understands it, Abraham's decision to deceive King Abimelech into thinking Sarah is his sister rather than his wife (Gen. 20) is unjustifiable in light of what the former has learned of God's power and faithfulness. And yet even though Abraham refuses to take responsibility for his own deception, God stands by his side and thus appears "little different from the capricious deities" with which Abimelech was familiar.

As Hawk describes it, God's decision means that God is "willing to be seen as other than [God] really is": instead of a God of righteousness, the God of Genesis 20 comes across as "a deity less concerned about doing what is right than defending a favored servant." The implication of this is that loyalty to Abraham will sometimes lead God to act in ways that do not accurately represent God's true nature.

Responding to the groaning of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, God decides to save them—and God sees "the raw exertion of power, and the violence that emanates from it" as necessary means for bringing about the salvation of the Israelites. In Hawk's account, God also faces a dilemma of sorts: God wants to be known as the true God in a world where reputation is bound up with having and displaying power, so God "finds it necessary to utilize violence to bring recognition of [God's] universal supremacy."

In relegating Israel to the past, Hawk commits an implicit act of violence.

And so it goes, with God entering ever more deeply into human affairs. As Hawk tells it, God's engagement with the people's life in the world time and again entails compromise with God's own ideals. When Israel demands a king and God reluctantly agrees, the nation is forced to conform at least in part with the very system it had defined itself against. God had freed the people from oppressive monarchy in Egypt and had envisioned a different way for Israel. But now, instead of constructing an alternative to royal pretensions, God must engage with them. God's objectives now have to work "in tandem with national objectives, which is to say *royal* objectives." From Hawk's perspective, this spells trouble: "By agreeing to Israel's demand for a king, [God] is drawn into the contests of power and violence that define the ends and means of monarchies."

Put simply, this means that God will have to tolerate no small measure of the type of injustice God detests. With the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, God goes "all in," identifying Godself with the king and his royal city. In Hawk's words, God thus "colludes with the very entities of arrogance and destruction that [God] opposed and defeated in Egypt."

To put it mildly, this strategy does not bear fruit. The seductions of this-worldly power prove too much for Israel's kings; apostasy and immorality rule the day. Hawk concludes, "The Israelite monarchy, when all is said and done, does not prove to be a vehicle by which Israel can bless the nations." God's decision to enter into a world

saturated with violence has failed; far from renewing or redeeming the world, God has been drawn into “the very systems and practices of violence that [God] has intended to overcome.” In Hawk’s telling, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile bring the story of God’s entanglement in worldly affairs to “a dismal end.” God steps away, and the people are back where they started: slaves to a foreign king.

On one level, what Hawk offers represents a significant improvement over the approaches he rejects, if only because he takes the Hebrew Bible seriously on its own terms. Rather than offering a speculative historical reconstruction against which to measure the received text, or positing a theology whereby Moses mishears God again and again, Hawk presents the Hebrew Bible as a poignant divine drama, a picture of a world in which lofty divine aspirations collide with the recalcitrant realities of human nature.

Yet on another level, Hawk’s approach is also profoundly troubling. In his account, God’s attempt to remake the world from the inside ends in “disaster,” and so, too, therefore does the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Turning to the New Testament, Hawk discovers a God who is still committed to working with kings, only this time from “outside the system.” Since God has discovered that the world cannot be restored through divine embrace of “violent, broken systems,” God “now steps outside the systems and refuses to participate in their operations or with their functionaries.”

Note carefully what happens next: according to Hawk, having chosen to work through “the person of Jesus Christ,” “God is no longer encumbered by the necessity of defending and promoting the welfare of a nation.” It seems, in other words, that God has abandoned Israel. Since the project of renewing the world from the inside “proves futile,” Hawk writes, God “give[s] up working through the covenant and its kings and . . . reengage[s] by constructing an alternate and opposing system with the Son of God at its head.”

Hawk goes on to offer a provocative (and decidedly moderate) interpretation of Jesus’ nonviolent ethic, but we ought to pause to ask: In this day and age, is it really acceptable for a Christian writer to assert that God’s covenant with Israel has ended in failure and that God has therefore chosen Christ and his followers as an alternative? Supersessionism dies hard.

Hawk evinces no awareness of, let alone sensitivity to, what claims like these in the hands of Christians have historically meant for Jews. To put the matter crudely, proclamations like these have led to the deaths of innumerable Jews and have corrupted countless Christians.

It's also worth observing that Hawk nowhere engages with Paul's insistence that God's covenant promises to Israel do indeed endure. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul asks, "Has God rejected his people?" and answers emphatically: "By no means! . . . for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:1, 29).

At moments, Hawk seems to soften what he's saying. At one point he declares that "God's decision to reenter the world in opposition to its violent systems can be interpreted as an implicit rejection of the former project altogether, in favor of a better means of redemption." He then hedges by adding, "In the New Testament, God still identifies with Israel but primarily with its travails and sufferings." I am not sure this last statement is consistent with the rest of Hawk's argument, but it is in any case troubling on its own terms: God identifies with Israel only when it suffers? This comes perilously close to implying that not only was Christ a Jew, but that if the Jews want God's ongoing identification, then they must suffer like Christ. Is this really an argument that a Christian should be making after thousands of years of Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism?

Hawk insists that God's moving to the outside need not entail a total abandonment of working within corrupted human systems. Christians can "appropriate" the Old Testament, he says, to learn how to engage with the broken systems of earthly power and politics. In other words, Christians can see the Christian canon as putting forward an array of different depictions of how God works in human society.

But if that's the case, then why does Hawk feel compelled to argue that God turns away entirely from God's initial approach and replaces it with another (thus opening the door, intentionally or not, to supersessionism)? What emerges from all this is a theology that seems rather odd: God has turned away from Israel because working within history proves futile and hopeless, yet Christians can still learn from God's now-abandoned strategies in making their way through the world.

From a Jewish perspective, I cannot overstate how troubling this is. The lessons of the Old Testament may be alive, though Hawk is ambivalent about them, but as for the people of the Old Testament, God (or at least Hawk) has left them (us) behind. In

a book about violence, the implicit violence of relegating Israel (my people) to the past is nowhere acknowledged, let alone confronted.

Disparaging the Hebrew Bible, as some contemporary Christian writers do, is one sort of theological problem, but so, assuredly, is imagining that God has moved on from God's covenant with Israel. It is long past time for Christians to internalize this lesson.

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