

# 1 LIVING WITH UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

## This study expands some of the themes of chapter 3

‘What about the places where God *commands* violence?’ If there is one question in this subject area that exercises everyone, it is this one. We might be glad that violent actions are recorded; we might feel content with some of the explanations I have offered for violence that is implored of God or for the violence of judgement. But in the end, we come to this question: how can we come to terms with the places, particularly in Deuteronomy and Joshua, where God appears to *command* the killing of men, women and children? I promised in the introduction to this book that I would indicate where I am dissatisfied with the answers I offer, and I have to say I have not fully managed to resolve this problem to my own satisfaction.

From chapter 8, ‘Violence commanded’, p. 125

### Opening question

Read Psalm 131.

This psalm is a song intended to be sung by pilgrims as they journeyed towards the temple in Jerusalem. It expresses a willingness to live with unanswered questions. How comfortable are you with mystery?

### Case study

Read 2 Kings 10:1–7. This is part of a longer narrative describing Jehu, king of Israel, and his bloody purge against the house of Ahab, his predecessor. What are your initial responses to this account?

Now read 2 Kings 9:6–8. God, through Elisha, is commissioning Jehu to conduct this purge. What is the reason given? (Compare verse 8 with 1 Kings 21:21.)

And now read Hosea 1:4–5. Here the prophet has quite a different take on the events of 2 Kings 9–10. What are your thoughts about this?

### Digging deeper

On pages 132–34 I show that there are at least two ‘voices’ in the book of Joshua, which have different stories to tell about the conquest. In today’s study we have seen two ‘voices’ describing the massacre conducted by Jehu. Similarly, on page 20 I write, ‘God speaks through the book of Job when the different voices are listened to in dialogue with one another and with the divine voice at the end. God speaks through the whole.’

What is your response to the idea that sometimes scripture speaks with more than one voice about the same event? Can you think of other examples where we find this in scripture? Why do you think God might have arranged it this way?

### For further study

When we encounter unanswerable questions, what are our options to approaching them?

- We began with one approach, in Psalm 131. Compare this with Paul’s response to a difficult question in Romans 9:20.
- A second approach is modelled by Jeremiah 20:7, a similar attitude to the psalmist in Psalm 44:23.

Which of these approaches do you favour, if either? Do you think they are contradictory or complementary?

Read Genesis 32:22–32. Does this provide a way forward? Note, in particular, verse 26.

How will this shape the way that you approach the studies in the weeks to come?