

## 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?

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## **2 Violence described**

This study expands some of the themes of chapter 4.

'Because it is so deeply rooted in the story of people groups and societies, we should expect the Old Testament to include description of acts of violence: interpersonal violence, group violence and national conflict. The key things we have to do, as interpreters of the Bible, are first to notice when violence is being described but not endorsed, and then to identify the purpose the story is serving in the narrator's wider theological intention.'

*From chapter 4, 'Violence described', p. 66*

### **Opening question**

Do you agree that it is important for scripture to portray violence that happened? Why, or why not?

### **Case study**

Read 1 Kings 21:1-16.

What is your immediate response to Jezebel's actions? What clues can you detect in the story to help?

### **Digging deeper**

Our narrator gives us a number of clues to help us decide whether or not this violence is endorsed by God. We'll look at them one at a time.

### **1 Characterisation of Ahab**

While it is Jezebel who directly acts to cause Naboth's murder, the text is curiously silent about what Ahab thought about it all. Read verses 7 and 15-16 again. Do you detect any hints?

Now take a look at 1 Kings 20:43–21:4. How does Ahab seem to you?

### **2 Characterisation of Jezebel**

Read verse 8. Here, we need to suspend the 21st-century commitment to gender equality and imagine how this would seem when read by the original audience. How do you think they would have viewed Jezebel's actions?

### **3 The law**

There are several laws which touch upon this story. First, read Exodus 20:16 and Deuteronomy 19:16-21. How does this story relate to these laws?

Now read Leviticus 25:8-15, 23. Does this shed any light upon Naboth's refusal to sell?

### **4 Reading beyond the text**

I deliberately asked you to stop reading at verse 16. But if we read on, it becomes clear that God is very displeased with Ahab. Read 1 Kings 21:17-24.

Not all texts have such a clear response by God so immediately. But even if we didn't have this conclusion, there are clues in the wider scripture to help us. In passages before and after this one, Jezebel is clearly shown to be wicked. Look at 1 Kings 18:13 and 2 Kings 9:7.

And in the wider Bible, read Revelation 2:20. Here 'Jezebel' is used as a metaphor - a code, really - for unfaithfulness to God. The New Testament writer does this because his readers would have widely understood that Jezebel was wicked.

Sometimes these connections are hard to make. This is where a good study Bible or a commentary can come in useful.

Now you are in the position to think about the second question. Why do you think this story is given to us in scripture? What is the narrator doing with it?

Can you think of other instances of violence in the Old Testament which are described but not endorsed?

### **For further study**

Not everything that is reported in scripture is being endorsed. This is even true for characters that we might generally consider 'heroes'. You might like to think a bit more about this. For example, consider David's dying words in 1 Kings 2:8-9 (the background is in 2 Samuel 16:5-10 and 19:18-23).

How will this shape the way that you read scripture?

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### 3 Violence implored

This study expands some of the themes of chapter 5.

*'The psalms of imprecation are psalms which call upon God to inflict vengeance - usually expressed in violent terms - upon the psalmist's enemies... We tend not to use them in church, or else we skip over the offending sections... But are these psalms really evil? Is it always inappropriate to say such things to God?'*

*From chapter 5, 'Violence implored', pp. 76-77*

#### Opening question

What are your initial responses to the questions I pose above?

#### Case study

Read Psalm 3. What emotions do you think are being expressed in the following sections?

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7
- 8

How well do you feel that this mirrors the sort of conflicted emotions that we experience in times of crisis?

#### Digging deeper

This psalm is a helpful one to study because at the top we are given its setting. 'A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom' (NIV). Absalom was one of David's sons, perhaps his favourite. Does this surprise you?

What made David write such a psalm about Absalom? Read 2 Samuel 15:10-16, 30.

Take a few minutes to try to inhabit the story. Imagine what emotions David might have been feeling as he left Jerusalem that day. Are any of these feelings invalid? Do any of them shock God?

Does this change the way you read verse 7 of the psalm?

It is also helpful to consider the metaphors being used. Here are some other places where a wicked person's teeth are described: Job 29:17; Psalm 57:4; Proverbs 30:14. What do you think 'breaking the teeth of the wicked' implies?

I would suggest that the prayer to 'break the teeth' is not the equivalent of a voodoo curse to cause toothache, but rather a specific request that the weapons of the enemy be ineffective.

Finally, we can glean some more insight into the motivations that do and do not lie behind the psalm by reading of David's response to Absalom's death. Read 2 Samuel 18:5, 24-33.

Can you reconcile the psalm with David's reaction?

### **For further study**

Is a prayer like Psalm 3 inconsistent with loving one's enemies? Why or why not?

On pages 83-85 of the book I suggest some ways that we can use the psalms of imprecation today. Do you find these helpful? For what situations in the news today might they be appropriate?

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## **4 Violence as divine judgement**

This study expands some of the themes of chapter 7.

*Justice matters. Judgement is a positive thing. I thank God that he is neither indifferent nor capricious; more than that, he is compassionate.*

*From chapter 7, 'Violence as divine judgement', p. 105*

### **Opening question**

What are your initial responses to these words? Are there parts of scripture that make them hard for you to agree with?

### **Case study**

Read Hosea 11:5-11. (It might help to understand that 'Ephraim' is the prophet's way of referring to Israel.)

Notice how verses 10-11 'undo' verse 5. What is the reason given in verses found towards the centre of the passage?

I think of this passage as showing God's conflicted heart for his people. Do you agree? If so, how does this help us understand his actions against them?

### **Digging deeper**

We might not be too surprised if God feels conflicted about punishing Israel. But this is not confined to those we might consider 'his people'. Read Isaiah 19:1-17. What sorts of disasters do you think Isaiah is describing? Why would God be angry with Egypt?

Bearing in mind that when Isaiah was writing, there were two arch-enemies of Israel: Egypt and Assyria, now read verses 18-25. What surprises you in this passage?

Take another look at verses 22 and 25. Is there a contradiction between them, with regards to God's attitude to Egypt? Why or why not?

What has surprised you in today's study? How might this affect the way that you read other passages about the judgement of God?

### **For further study**

Read Isaiah 64. What is the prophet's attitude towards God's judgement, in the following verses?

- 1-2
- 4-5a
- 5b-7
- 8-12

Does the prophet regard God's judgement as a 'good thing'? Why or why not?

Is there a place in the present day for praying for God's judgement to come?

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## **5 Violence commanded**

This study expands some of the themes of chapter 8.

'For the modern reader, the whole of the book of Joshua is unexpected... It feels alien and very disturbing. But in order to be fair to the text, we need to try to read it in relation to its ancient context. How would it have sounded to its first readers or listeners?... But where it deviates from [what they expect], we should really sit up and take notice. Because this is what the author is really trying to draw our attention to. This

is the intended focus of communication.’  
*From chapter 8, ‘Violence commanded’, p. 136*

### Opening question

How long have you been reading the Bible for? In what ways does it still surprise or shock you?

### Case study

Read Joshua 5:13-15. In what ways was Joshua surprised? In what ways do you think this might have surprised its original readers?

On page 140, I suggest that everything that follows in the book of Joshua should be read in the light of the man’s reply in verse 14. Can you think of other places in scripture where we see God’s neutrality demonstrated, or where God appears to fight *against* Israel?

### Digging deeper

We will look at a few such places.

- A generation earlier than the story we just read, on the borders of the same land, *this* happens: Deuteronomy 1:22-33, 41-46. See in particular verse 42.
- The Bible talks a lot about the land of Canaan being God’s gift to Israel, but note Deuteronomy 2:2-6, 9; 32:8.
- Joshua 7:1-5
- Leviticus 18:26-28
- Deuteronomy 28:15, 25, 49-52, 63-65

What are the themes that emerge from these readings? Does anything surprise you? How do you think these should shape our understanding of the conquest of Canaan by Joshua?

### For further study

Read Matthew 8:28-34 and pages 146-51 of the book.

Matthew’s gospel so far has shown many parallels between the story of Jesus and the story of Israel. Following his baptism (like the Red Sea), he spent 40 days (like Israel’s 40 years) in the desert, following which he went up a mountain (like Israel at Mount Sinai) and delivered a new interpretation of the law given at Sinai (the sermon on the mount). In this passage we may have a parallel to the conquest of Canaan, and particularly the conquest of Jericho.

- There is a strong theme of impurity and uncleanness (death, demonisation, pigs; see p. 147).
- Jesus has entered hostile territory, and this places of uncleanness and threat obstructs his journey (v. 28).
- In Matthew, the two demonised men (unlike the accounts in Mark and Luke, where their

suffering is emphasised) represent sheer, raw threat to Jesus.

- Jesus consigns the demonised pigs to the abyss – chaos to chaos. This is a new-creation event (compare with p. 95).

If this story is indeed intended to be read as a parallel to the conquest accounts, there are at least two important differences. How does Jesus conduct the conquest? And what happens to the ‘conquered’ men?

How will this shape the way that you read Joshua?

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## 6 Towards shalom

This study expands some of the themes of chapter 9.

‘The description of the exclusion of murderers from the [New Jerusalem] (22:15) shows that this is a wholly non-violent society, for everything has been made new (21:5).’

*From chapter 9, ‘Shalom: God’s great plan’, p. 161*

### Opening question

Near the end of the book of Revelation, the Spirit and the bride (the church) say to Jesus, ‘Come’ (22:17). The reader is invited to join them in their prayer, and the writer of the book adds his own voice to it in verse 20.

Does your heart join with these voices, or do you have reservations? Why, or why not?

### Case study

Read Micah 4:3-4. This is the prophet’s great vision of the future that God has in store. What themes do you notice here? What would the world be like if everyone sat under their own vines and fig trees (v. 4)?

### Digging deeper

Now read Isaiah 9:1-7, another great vision of the future. We often read these words at Christmas, but tend to skip over verses 3-5. This is a pity, because it means we miss some important themes. There are three great lights (v. 2) that will cause God’s people to sing for joy (like a harvest celebration, or like the song of battle triumph; v. 3):

- The end of oppression – just as God saved his people from slavery in Egypt or used Gideon to shrug off oppression by the Midianites (v. 4).
- Not just the ending of a war, but the ending of all war, with the destruction of military





apparatus

(v. 5).

- The birth of the baby whose arrival will institute these things (v. 6).

How do these 'hidden verses' enrich our understanding of what God is doing in sending his Son?

### **For further study**

Read Revelation 22:1-5. How many themes from Genesis 1—2 can you identify?

When Jesus says, 'Behold, I am making all things new' (Revelation 21:5, ESV). What does that include?

How will this shape the way that you pray?

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