

ENCOUNTERING VIOLENT TEXTS IN SCRIPTURE

A STUDY IN COMMUNAL HERMENEUTICS

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Introduction

In a Christian congregation, pastors have a unique role as teachers and interpreters of scripture. Many denominations require specialized education for pastors that includes training in biblical scholarship, and pastors have a special responsibility as a result of their call and training. But all disciples of Jesus are called to be deeply engaged with scripture, so pastors cannot be the only readers and interpreters of the biblical texts in their communities. How, then, can pastors use their training in biblical scholarship to help equip lay persons to be active interpreters¹ of scripture as well? In this paper, I argue that a pastor trained in biblical scholarship can expose lay persons to careful, accessible exegesis, focusing on putting a biblical text in context and exploring relevant features of a text can strengthen a congregation's confidence in their ability to do the work of interpretation as a community.

Setting for the Project

Christ United Methodist Church is a congregation of approximately 1,000 people in Franklin, Tenn., an affluent suburb of Nashville. The congregation was planted in 1987 as an intentional alternative to both mega-churches that felt too big and impersonal, and small "family chapel" congregations where it can be difficult to break in to a closed, exclusive culture.² The congregation's motto is "It's about relationships: with God, with each other, and with God's hurting world." The congregation is approximately 87% Caucasian, mirroring the affluence and lack of ethnic diversity in Williamson County. The congregation leans progressive both theologically and politically, although there is more diversity in this respect than in skin tone.

¹ Anyone who reads the Bible and seeks to discern meaning from it is, by definition, engaged in interpretation, whether they realize it or not.

² "Our History," Christ United Methodist Church, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.christumcfranklin.org/about-us/history/>.

The genesis of this project came about when the children’s ministry performed its annual musical during worship. “Moses and the Freedom Fanatics”³ presented the story of the Exodus as a very successful labor strike. Befitting a children’s program⁴ it treated the violent nature of the plagues in Exodus very lightly, but I began to wonder if we in the church ever go beyond such limited engagement with violence in scripture. An informal survey of adults revealed that their engagement with these stories did not go far beyond that which they had experienced as children (if they grew up in the church), mostly due to a sense of discomfort with difficult texts. Several reported that reading about God killing children (the death of the firstborn in Exodus 10 and 11) made them not want to read the Bible at all, so they just didn’t think about it much, preferring to concentrate on the more pleasant parts.

These conversations led me to wonder if only focusing on the more “pleasant parts” of the Bible shields us from having to ask deep questions about what we believe the Bible really is. Every Sunday, many congregations conclude the reading of scripture in worship by saying, “the Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.” But do we really mean that when stories about genocide, rape, and the spontaneous deaths of thousands of children occasionally creep into the lectionary? Such stories cause us not only to ask what we believe the Bible is, but how we believe it is authoritative, and how it participates in our process of ethical decision making.

As I was pondering how I as a pastor could help people engage more deeply with the less pleasant stories in the Bible, I was also wrestling with how to help people actively engage in interpreting scripture for themselves. Living in a community where many people are skilled

³ Hal H. Hopson, *Moses and the Freedom Fanatics: A Musical Dram for Young Voices* (Dallas: Choristers’ Guild, 1979).

⁴ It is worth noting that as early as 1796, Bibles produced specifically for children did not water down descriptions of mass death such as the Great Flood in Genesis 8. Perhaps this is more of a commentary on modern attitudes toward children. See Russell W. Dalton, *Children’s Bibles in America: A Reception History of the Story of Noah’s Ark in US Children’s Bibles* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 11.

professionals, we are used to hiring other professionals to perform various tasks. This assumption has bled over into religious life, and when confronted with the question, “what do *you* think this particular passage means?” people will often refer to the notes in their study Bible or repeat what they have heard a pastor or other professional say. How can I help them form their own opinions?

I began to think these two issues might be interrelated and perhaps best addressed in tandem. Can a pastor walk people through close engagement with difficult stories in the Bible, exposing them to careful and accessible exegesis of the text, and helping them gain a good sense of what the text *says*? And can that engagement serve to increase their perceived ability to do the work of hermeneutics, and form opinions for themselves about what a text *means*?

I believe that pastors can, in fact, do so by focusing their teaching on putting biblical texts in context and focusing on features of the text that are relevant to the topic of the study. In doing so, pastors can help increase their congregation’s confidence in its ability to read and interpret scripture as a community.

Structure of the Project

In the Fall of 2016, several adult Sunday School classes at Christ United Methodist Church came together for four sessions to study four different violent episodes in Exodus. Each session featured a basic introduction to the topic and purpose to see if, through our exegetical “deep dives”⁵ would help us become more confident communal interpreters of scripture. Each session’s “deep dive” featured two main components: putting the text in context, and highlighting features of the text relevant to our study: in this case, exploring how these violent episodes in scripture inform our thinking about issues of violence in our world. Laying out the

⁵ “Deep dive” is the term used for exegesis to avoid having to define too many new terms to a lay audience.

larger context in which the text was written: the original audience, how the text functions in that community, structure, etc., highlights other important aspects that often get lost when one focuses on the more sensational aspects of a story. Likewise, highlighting relevant features of a text can bring about nuances that were more apparent to original audiences than modern ones, and to introduce issues and questions that might also not be readily apparent to modern readers. The last fifteen minutes of each session were devoted to small group discussion on questions related to the type of violence encountered in each story.

The texts explored in each session, respectively, are the death of the firstborn in Exodus 11:1-10 and 12:21-42; passing through the Sea in Exodus 14:1-31; the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-19; and the battle with Amalek on the way to Sinai in Exodus 17:8-16. A booklet was given to each participant with the entire text of Exodus 11-17, the passages we didn't directly consider printed in italics. The purpose was to have the text in front of the participants so they could reference it without taking the time to read it out loud, and for them to see the connection between the pericopes we were exploring and those that were skipped.

The specific texts used to test the correlation between exegesis and perceived hermeneutical capacity were chosen precisely because they make us uncomfortable, and force us to ask questions about what we really believe scripture is, how (if at all) we believe it to be authoritative, and how these stories factor into our ethical reasoning regarding violence in our own world. These four stories in Exodus were chosen because, while they feature violent acts by both God and humans that can make us uncomfortable, these stories are central pieces of the identity-forming narratives for both Jewish and Christian communities.⁶ Their centrality makes them less easy to dismiss as isolated, in the way that some Christians treat the conquest

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 37-38.

narratives in Joshua. For Jewish communities, these stories are the crux of the Passover story. For Christian communities, the Passover celebration is the backdrop for the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. For both traditions, the stories found in Exodus 11-17 are central to their understanding of how God saves God's people, so how we understand and interpret the violent episodes in these texts is crucial to our understanding of who God is.

At the outset of each session we also acknowledged that in these four weeks we would not be able to answer all the big questions we were raising, such as how to understand the whole Bible, and how to react to all incidents of violence in the world. Neither would we walk away with all of our questions answered. Instead, our goal was to come out on the other side of these four weeks with better questions than those with which we started.

In each session we provided a clear definition of violence as “physical, emotional, or psychological harm done to a person by an individual (or individuals), institution, or structure that results in injury, oppression, or death.”⁷ We then identified three key questions that would guide our approach in each session: What is the Bible? How is the Bible authoritative for us? How does the Bible participate in our process of making ethical decisions? Like our previous acknowledgement of other big questions, we noted that we would not solve them once and for all, but that these questions would guide our study of the text and our work of communal interpretation.

Notes on Method

A few notes on the methodology used for preparing the exegetical presentations to the congregation are in order. First and foremost, it was important to be extremely clear on what the goal of each session was, and select the details for the exegetical presentations accordingly. The

⁷ Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 9.

wealth of scholarly work on these texts is vast, and while a seminary-trained pastor has some familiarity with that body of work, lay persons do not and can easily tune their pastor out if the purpose is not clear from the beginning. With this need for clarity in mind, the primary sources selected were ones that are written for a broader audience, and many of them can be accessed easily in local libraries. Commentaries such as the New Interpreters' Bible⁸, Anchor Bible⁹, Eerdmans' Critical Commentary¹⁰, and New Cambridge Bible Commentary¹¹ series were the most frequently consulted, with other scholarly works referenced as supplemental material. I also made the choice to use an intentional pattern for each lesson, so each theme would be easily recognizable as we explored them each week, with the hope of empowering the participants to recognize recurring motifs such as the highly liturgical patterns of violent episodes for themselves as they read other biblical texts.

While some biblical Hebrew was explored several sessions, its use was tightly focused on how it informed the questions the groups discussed. The primary source of information on the original Hebrew is BlueLetterBible.com's Interlinear feature, which allows users to search original language terms using Strong's Lexicon reference numbers.¹² A supplemental purpose of exploring Hebrew terminology was to remind us that the biblical texts were written in linguistic and cultural contexts far different from our own, and that interpretive choices went into the translation of the texts. All English biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB*: 1.

⁹ William H.C. Propp. *Exodus*, 2 vols., AB 2-2A (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁰ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

¹¹ Carol Meyers. *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹² For example, see a search on all the instances of "fight" (*lachim*)- Blue Letter Bible. "H3898 - lachim - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV)" Blue Letter Bible Lexicon. Accessed 22 Feb, 2017, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H3898&t=NIV>.

Text in Context

Less Helpful Interpretive Strategies

In Session 1 we began by identifying a number of ways that churches often deal with violent texts in scripture that are understandable, but have their shortcomings. These strategies include (but are certainly not limited to): avoidance, trivializing, Marcionism, dismissing due to questionable historicity, and using the text to legitimate violent acts on our part.¹³

Avoidance is what Thomas Jefferson did when reading the gospels. He took a razor and cut out the supernatural parts that he believed did not conform to the laws of nature as his Enlightenment mind understood them, but kept the ethical teachings he found. When confronted with a violent act in scripture that makes us uncomfortable, we may not physically cut the section of text from the page, but we read around it.

Trivializing is similar to avoidance, in that it does not wrestle with the violent acts, but it does mention them. In the children's musical, "Moses and the Freedom Fanatics," the plague of frogs (Exodus 7:25-8:15) is portrayed in a ballet called "The Dance of the Frogs," and comes off as cute rather than highly disruptive to the agriculture and economy of Egypt,¹⁴ and certainly not as part of the pattern of "undoing creation"¹⁵ in the sequence of plagues. The death of the firstborn is briefly mentioned in another song, but again, the impact of this plague is not emphasized. While this is not a bad thing in a children's musical, it becomes problematic when adults do not go any further.

¹³ While this list of categories I have generated based on my own pastoral experience, it is influenced by reading John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1978). Jerome F.D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*.

¹⁴ Hopson, *Freedom Fanatics*, 27-30.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:739.

Marcionism comes from Marcion of Sinope—an early second century interpreter of scripture who was unable to reconcile the short tempered, vengeful deity he saw in many Old Testament stories with the endlessly patient and forgiving God revealed in Jesus Christ and canonized in the documents that became the New Testament. Marcion reasoned that these could not be the same deity.¹⁶ While Marcion’s views were declared heretical and the average church goer would not likely argue that there are two separate gods described in the respective testaments, many Christians hold supercessionist views that riff on Marcion’s heresy¹⁷. I have lost count of how many conversations about scripture have included the phrase, “well, that was the God of the *Old* Testament, so it doesn’t really matter.”¹⁸ Over a third of the respondents in the pre-course survey¹⁹ responded that the violent episodes in scripture either “no longer apply” due to their being in the Old Testament, or that they are more indicative of the violent time in which they were written than the true will of God.

It became clear in the first session that the highly questionable *historicity* of the Exodus narrative²⁰ was, for many participants, a reason not to worry about the implications of the violent acts in the story, particularly regarding the death of the firstborn in Exodus 12. If it didn’t really happen, why consider the implications? In the subsequent sessions it was emphasized at the beginning that these stories primary purpose, as Brueggemann, Craigie, and Meyers (among

¹⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Continuum, 1977), 57-58.

¹⁷ Rein Bos, *We Have Heard that God is with You: Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 6-8.

¹⁸ One needs only point out the story of Ananias and Sapphira from Acts 5:1-11 to argue against such a neat dividing line between the Testaments.

¹⁹ See the Appendix for raw survey data

²⁰ Scholarly argument for a plurality of sources and evidence of various redactions and edits over time call the story’s historical reliability into question. See Suzanne Boorer, “Source and Redaction Criticism” in *Methods for Exodus*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95-130. Also Meyers, *Exodus*, 2-12.

others) suggest, is not to relate events exactly as they happened²¹ (which is a very modern concept²²), but to tell future generations who their God is and who they are as a people.²³ If violent acts are at the heart of our identity-forming narratives²⁴ (particularly given their proximity to identity forming liturgical instruction²⁵), then we have to consider how the violent acts in these narratives shape our response to violence in our own time and place, regardless of whether an episode is completely factual.

The final strategy discussed as widely used in churches but highly problematic is perhaps the most dangerous and destructive one—*using violent episodes in scripture to legitimize violent, aggressive actions on our part*. From the Crusades in the Middle Ages²⁶ to the westward expansion of the United States and subsequent genocide of Native American populations²⁷ to the current War on Terror,²⁸ different violent episodes in scripture have been used as justification for engaging in violent acts towards others, saying that they are consistent with the will of God. The problem with this approach is not that it concludes that any use of violence is ever appropriate, but that it takes the use of force as an *a priori* conclusion for which scripture serves as a kind of proof text. Such readings usually say more about the interpreter than the text itself²⁹, and

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:690.

²² Propp, *Exodus*, 1:347-348.

²³ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 9, 97-100. Meyers, *Exodus*, 10-11.

²⁴ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1997), 330.

²⁵ Meyers, *Exodus*, 101-102.

²⁶ Scott M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 134-135.

²⁷ Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?*, 23.

²⁸ “Letter to President Bush,” Richard Land, et al., Dr. Richard Land, accessed December 27, 2016, <http://www.drland.com/press/entry/the-so-called-land-letter>. Cited in Daniel R. Heimbach, “Distinguishing Just War from a Crusade: Is Regime Change a Just Cause for Just War?” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens, eds. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 81.

²⁹ Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, 49-51.

confronting them head on leads communities to recognize and take responsibility for their role as interpreters of scripture.

Central Conflict in the Story

Another way of putting the text in context is to ask what parties are involved in the central conflict in the story, because that has direct bearing on how communities approach the text in their ethical reasoning. If the principal combatants are Israel and Egypt, led by Moses and Pharaoh, then the central conflict is between two human kingdoms, with YHWH as a kind of Achilles or Goliath who influences the outcome on behalf of the leaders. However, if we follow Thomas B. Dozeman's assertion that the principal combatants are YHWH and Pharaoh, a kind of "war between kings"³⁰, both parties laying claim to absolute authority over creation, the sole right to decide between life and death for their subjects, and to be the sole object of worship, an interpretive community will not see as much direct correlation between this story and their own time, decreasing the likelihood of using these episodes to justify their own violent actions.³¹

This central conflict is demonstrated when YHWH kills the firstborn males of Egypt in Exodus 12 in what Walter Brueggemann argues is a proportional response to Pharaoh's killing the Hebrew male children in Exodus 1. While one might read the slaughter of Egypt's firstborn as cold and cruel, as it will not bring back the slaughtered Hebrew children, Walter Brueggemann reads it in light of YHWH's role as a parent to the Hebrews. YHWH's use of force is not juridical and removed, but primal and parental.³² The "great cry" that goes up from each group of people after the slaughter is directed at the deity who has the authority to make such a thing

³⁰ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 96, 176-179.

³¹ Unfortunately, as will be seen in the section on small group discussion, many people still equated this conflict with conflict in our own time. More will be said then on how this might have been avoided.

³² Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:771.

happen—a role that YHWH and Pharaoh both lay claim to and cannot share.³³ Pharaoh asking for Moses' blessing following the death of his firstborn son demonstrates that he has (temporarily) conceded the contest for primary to YHWH.³⁴

Liturgical Pattern of Violent Episodes

In each session we explored a liturgical pattern of announcement, event, and restating that surrounds each violent act. Focusing on the liturgical nature of each of these episodes reinforces Craigie³⁵ and others'³⁶ contention that the primary purpose of these stories is not to narrate a historical violent conflict, but instead forming Israel's identity and instructing them in the worship of YHWH. This pattern appears several times prior to the plague sequence, as well as each of the ten plagues, the last of which was explored in Session 1. YHWH, then Moses, announce the plague/event to come (Exod. 11:1-10; 12:21-28), the event occurs (Exod. 12:29), the event and purpose are then restated before moving on to the next episode (Exod. 12:51).

This pattern unfolds again in chapter 14. YHWH announces the general plan to Moses (Exod. 13:1-4), and when the people panic upon seeing the Egyptian chariots, Moses announces to the people that YHWH will act on their behalf (Exod. 13:13-14). God announces the specifics to Moses (Exod. 13:16-17), who then acts, setting the announced event into motion (Exod. 13:21-22). A brief restatement of the event occurs at the end of chapter 14 (Exod. 14:30-31), but it is also carried over into chapter 15 and the restatement deepened in the songs the people sing after the sea closes. Each part of the event is marked with "Then the LORD said to Moses..."

³³ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 313.

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:780.

³⁵ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 97-100.

³⁶ Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, 2-3.

(Exod. 14:1, 15, 26), underlining the divine nature of the entire episode and furthering the theme of liturgical form surrounding the violent acts.³⁷

Relationship of violent episodes to covenantal liberation

The violent episodes in Exodus all take place to advance the “covenantal liberation” of Israel, which Brueggemann describes as the “core claim” of Exodus: the Hebrew slaves are liberated from oppression not only for their own sake, but so that they live as a people in covenant with YHWH. This community’s liturgical remembrance of what their God has done for them throughout the generations continually announces alternative possibilities to the oppressive structures of the world.³⁸ The celebration of the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened bread is “not just a historical commemoration but an actual reenactment” of what first occurred in Egypt.³⁹ Liturgical remembrance is both memory of what has happened in the past and identity formation for the present community.⁴⁰

Each session emphasized the presence of very specific liturgical instruction that surrounds each violent act. If one was to determine which aspects of the text are the most important solely by counting words, liturgy would win in a landslide. Due to this word count ratio, Carol Meyers argues that the passages of liturgical instruction formed the way the narratives of violence were shaped.⁴¹ Moses’ first request to Pharaoh was for the Hebrews to have three days to go and worship YHWH (Exod. 5:3), and the request for universal manumission only comes after Pharaoh refuses (Exod. 6:6). Worship precedes freedom. Freedom is not an end unto itself, but Israel is freed for the larger purpose of entering into a covenant with

³⁷ Meyers, *Exodus*, 113-114.

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:683.

³⁹ Propp, *Exodus*, 1:427-428.

⁴⁰ Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 54.

⁴¹ Meyers, *Exodus*, 70.

YHWH and living as a people whose communal life demonstrates a drastic alternative to those of other societies. Their way of being community demonstrates to the world who their god is.⁴²

Relevant Features in the Text

Agency of Children and other Characters

In several sessions, discussion was had on the agency of different characters in the story. This was important because it led participants to consider the perspectives of those who were affected by conflict between YHWH and Pharaoh, but had very little choice in the matter, as YHWH is the “orchestrator” of these events.⁴³ The aforementioned liturgical instruction frequently involves children. Children play a number of roles throughout these seven chapters in Exodus, and as such are agents in the unfolding drama, but the actions are set in motion by others, whether it be Pharaoh resisting YHWH’s command, YHWH working through agents like Moses and Aaron, or YHWH as a lone actor slaughtering Egypt’s firstborn.⁴⁴ Children are already at a disadvantage in terms of worldly power, which makes their victimhood in the slaughters so tragic and their role in the liturgical observance so impactful.

The firstborn of the Hebrews and the Egyptians play no part in the systemic oppression that Egypt visits upon the Hebrews, although the Egyptian children are beneficiaries of it. The firstborn of both ethnic groups are forever tied to one another, both in the event itself and the ritual memory that will be observed by the generations to come after.⁴⁵ Three times (Exod. 12:26; 13:8 and 14, respectively) in the liturgical instruction that surrounds the announcement,

⁴² See Seibert’s introduction to *The Violence of Scripture*, particularly pages 11-12, also Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:683-686.

⁴³ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 94-95.

⁴⁴ These typologies of agency are spelled out in Terrence E. Freithem, “Issues of Agency in Exodus,” in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr (Boston: Brill, 2014), 606-607.

⁴⁵ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 248-249.

event, restatement pattern of the final plague, children receive answers from adults as to why they are doing this thing, indicating that it is important that they understand the purpose behind the action, not merely that they do it. The firstborn of Israel are consecrated to YHWH immediately following their departure (a common practice in many ancient cultures⁴⁶), indicating their importance as representing not only themselves, but all that is to come after them,⁴⁷ yet the fact remains they have no agency in the events. Their role serves as a kind of microcosm of Israel's self-understanding as having transitioned from being "serfs to divine servants."⁴⁸ They still answer to someone else, but their new master is the one truly worthy of their loyalty.

The agency of Amalek in the final story in this study, where humans take on the mantle of violent actors, was also explored. Amalek's attack can be read as a threat to Israel's covenantal liberation. There is also the question of which party, Israel or Amalek, is stronger and therefore has agency. Israel remains militarily weak following their liberation, and Amalek is clearly the stronger party in the temporal sense, so one could read their actions as excessive in relation to the threat.⁴⁹ But it is also true that Israel, at this time a stateless nation, is passing through Amalek's established territory, which the latter has no doubt had to defend against aggressors many times before. As such, it is not unreasonable for Amalek to attack a foreign invader without asking questions as to their intent. Indeed, waiting to find out what Israel is doing might be considered negligent on the part of Amalek's leaders. Amalek has agency and chooses to be a violent actor, but there is a sense in which they are caught up in systems they themselves did not create.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 322.

⁴⁷ Meyers, *Exodus*, 93.

⁴⁸ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 319.

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:820-822.

⁵⁰ Fretheim, "Issues of Agency in Exodus," 606.

Considering what kind of agency violent actors on all sides in a biblical text have opens the door for contemporary interpretive communities to consider what places they and those they perceive to be enemies occupy in the systems they inhabit. Brueggemann warns of the danger of reading one party as absolutely good and the “other” as absolutely evil (and that doing so with characters in a story sets the stage for reading ourselves into the “good guy” role), a process he terms “theological demonization.”⁵¹ A grievance for a specific act may be legitimate, but eventually that group of people as a whole can come to symbolize an absolute evil with no redeeming qualities, and it becomes easier over time to justify violent actions against the “other” once the tables are turned and the previously oppressed party is in the place of power.⁵² Brueggemann cautions the reader against seeing YHWH’s declaration of eternal enmity with Amalek as justification for never ending conflict. He notes that the same deity that predicts eternal conflict with one people also promises to “remember (sins) no more”.⁵³

Hebrew terms and interpretive choices made in translation

At several points in the study it was noted that sometimes nuances in the text get lost when it is translated from Hebrew to English. The primary purpose of this was to further the argument about YHWH and humans being different actors with different degrees of agency in the story, and to get the group to consider that just because God is portrayed as doing a particular thing in the text, it does not automatically follow that we are justified in doing the same or similar things.

One such usage concerns how communities read YHWH’s statements about “gaining glory for myself.” Several participants in the sessions expressed their unease with this as a

⁵¹ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:822.

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:822-3. Meyers, *Exodus*, 135. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, 152-153.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:823.

motivation for YHWH's actions because, in one person's words, "it makes God seem narcissistic and cruel." Consideration of the Hebrew term *kavad*, however, yields a different impression. In Exodus 14:17-18, *kavad* appears twice, translated as "gain glory for myself" in the NRSV and "I will be honored" in the NIV, in reference to what drowning the Egyptian army in the sea will accomplish. However, *kavad* is also translated as "heavy" later in the Old Testament, describing God's stern, "heavy" hand (beginning in 1 Samuel 5) or the "weight" of Israel's oppression in exile (Nehemiah 5:18). Reading *kavad* as "glory" or "honor" in light of it also meaning "heavy" furthers the previously discussed theme of YHWH and Pharaoh's conflict for supremacy—the top spot which only one can occupy. YHWH, who is the only one who can adequately bear the "weight" that accompanies ultimate loyalty and worship, is moving the people from an unjust societal structure, where they are enslaved, to a just one that is expressed in the covenant at Sinai.⁵⁴ Participants reported that seeing how *kavad* has multiple legitimate English translations, each with their own nuance, helped move the phrase from having a negative connotation to a more positive one.

Another such usage of Hebrew terminology that further suggests a difference in God and humans as actors concerns the word "hand" (*yad*). Many different characters are described as having physical or metaphorical hands: Moses, Aaron, "the enemy" (Exod. 15:9, specifically Pharaoh and his army, more broadly all of Israel's enemies), and YHWH. Yet of all the "hand" references in the text, only YHWH's *yad* is modified by the adjective *chazaq*, or "mighty" (Exod. 3:19; 6:1; 13:9; 32:11). *Chazaq* is also used to describe the wind that YHWH uses to part the Sea (Exod. 10:19), and the loud trumpet blast at Sinai (Exod. 16:9). Everyone has hands, only YHWH's is "mighty," suggesting a fundamental difference in the way YHWH acts in the

⁵⁴ See the excurses on "covenant" in Meyers, *Exodus*, 148-151.

story and how humans act, which leads modern communities to a certain interpretive caution. Just because God is portrayed as doing something in a text does not automatically mean that modern human communities have license to act in similar ways.

Small Group Discussions

In the final fifteen minutes of each session, the participants were asked to break out into small groups of four or five and discuss how the text we read that day might be used in considering the ethics of engaging in violence in situations that are analogous to what happens in the text. The groups discussed the specific question, and were invited to consider other modern examples that their interpretive discussion brought to mind, considering the exegetical material presented in light of their own experiences and perspectives.

Before describing the small group discussions, it bears mentioning that the approach of comparing violent episodes in a biblical text to modern issues of violence runs the risk of allowing people to put a certain amount of distance between themselves and challenging questions that scripture can lead us to ask about our own lives and practices. As is elaborated below, a fair amount of that did occur in this study. For example, thinking about the practices of governments over which participants may have some influence as voters, but not direct responsibility as they are not elected officials, was an appropriate for this community due to their previously mentioned tendency to defer to theologically trained professionals rather than wrestle with interpretive questions themselves. This group is used to having conversations about current events, so the choice was made to use them as an entry point to talking about how scripture informs our ethical decision making. This approach was also chosen because the sessions occurred immediately after the 2016 United States Presidential election, where Donald Trump's surprise victory gave rise to many questions among the people at Christ UMC about the direction

of US foreign policy. This is what was on their minds at the time, so the design of the study took that into account.

Four one-hour sessions is a very short amount of time, and sustained engagement with these stories over a longer period would allow the group to consider them from more personal perspectives. For example, how these stories might affect the way our congregation deals with conflicts and controversies, and how we understand God's sovereignty in our community. Such an approach would have produced very different, and potentially more transformative small group interaction. Pastors have to make decisions about how best to speak to their congregants' interests and tendencies, and how much challenge they will genuinely be able to hear and respond to, and this study was designed with those factors in this context in mind.

There can also be value in people who are not directly responsible for foreign policy considering it in light of biblical stories for two reasons. First, the United States is a representative democracy, and citizens can pressure their elected representatives to affect change. Second, while individuals may not directly responsible, much like the Egyptians in Exodus, they benefit injustices and imbalances of power that can be maintained by diplomatic and military actions toward other countries. Considering how they might be complicit in the system could serve as a catalyst to considering what influence they do have and working for more just systems.

Session 1 looked at the death of the firstborn of Egypt, where God acts violently on behalf of an oppressed group, but those who are harmed by the violent actions are non-combatants. The small groups considered how we might use this text in thinking about whether violent acts in defense of innocent people are acceptable when other innocent people might or even are guaranteed to be hurt. The example we used is the United States using bombs delivered

via drone to take out leaders of the Islamic State, who are responsible for horrific war crimes, even though those leaders are residing among civilian populations who would be “collateral damage” of the drone strike.

The groups reported that, among other things, they agreed that it was difficult to draw a straight line between God’s violent actions on behalf of an oppressed people and our own. When human beings engage in violent action, they are somehow “playing God” in deciding who is harmed and who is not, even though such action may be the “lesser evil” where no good option, inaction being complicity in oppression, is on the table. One participant pointed out that being a “non-combatant” does not necessarily mean that a person is innocent. As was mentioned above, the children of Egypt benefited from the structural oppression of Hebrew slaves. They as individuals may not have actively participated in perpetuating the slave system, though it is likely many of them would have later in adulthood. Questions about the difference between innocence and non-combatant status came back again in the second session when the type of agency that different characters in the story have is discussed. Session 1’s most important takeaway was in how groups raised questions of how complicit individuals are in systems of oppression, even if they themselves are not active, direct oppressors, and what, if any, responsibility that complicity puts on individuals to work toward changing said systems. While there was no broad consensus, a number of participants reported thinking for the first time about questions they had not previously considered.

Session 2 looked at Israel passing through the sea, where God again acts on behalf of an oppressed people, but this time those who are harmed are active, aggressive combatants— the Egyptian army. The small groups considered how we might use this text in thinking about whether violent acts in defense of innocent people are acceptable when those who are harmed are

aggressors. The examples used were both “pre-emptive” military strikes, such as those prosecuted by the United States against Saddam Hussein’s government in Iraq in 2003, and whether it is ethically acceptable for a person to violently intervene in a situation where a defenseless person is about to be harmed by an aggressor.

The groups reported that a number of scenarios came up in their discussion. Several groups reflected on the question of whether the United States ought to more directly intervene in the civil war in Syria, where non-combatants were being harmed by both the Islamic State and the secular government of President Bashar al-Assad. They further stated that many participants felt that while choosing to strike and prevent or at least degrade the capacity of those entities to harm non-combatants was preferable to doing nothing (thus being complicit in the oppression), it was still an ethically difficult situation as no “good” option was on the table.

One participant who had expressed reservation about the idea of God seeking “glory” reflected that the more nuanced understanding *kavad* was helpful because it suggested that God, not Pharaoh or any other human, is the only one who can “shoulder the burden of being divine,” therefore God deserves the glory that comes with the responsibility. This person also reported that seeing God and humans as vastly different actors lessened their previous impression of the text portraying God as a narcissist.

The discussion in Session 2 was not as focused as in the previous week, and it could be that the question was too broad, allowing groups to take their conversations in different directions, which is not inherently a bad thing, but made it difficult to identify a real takeaway from this session’s discussion. It may be that the timeliness of the issues discussed in light of the text might have been so at the forefront of people’s minds that they focused more on their opinions on the news of the day rather than staying focused on the implications of the biblical

text. As can happen in preaching, an illustration can be so memorable or relevant as to overshadow the real purpose it is meant to serve.

Session 3 looked at the Song of Moses, particularly the second part (verses 13-18), as a description of God's violent acts at one point in history serving as a deterrent to others who might act violently against Israel in the future. The groups considered how we might use this text in evaluating arguments that certain violent actions can serve as deterrents to ward off other violent actions in the future. The examples cited were arguments in favor of capital punishment, and arguments against nuclear disarmament, specifically the assertion that using nuclear weapons on Japan in 1945 brought a quicker conclusion to World War II, and that not using them would have led to a ground invasion of Japan and more casualties than resulted from the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The groups reported that they were mostly unconvinced by those lines of thinking, and leaned toward viewing the Song of Moses as a call to non-violence. One group reflected that while certain violent actions like the United States killing suspected terrorist leaders with drone strikes could be intended as both a deterrent and prevention of future violence, they could actually be sowing the seeds of future violence due to the non-combatants killed in such strikes and the resentment created in the countries where the strikes occur. Another group wondered how applicable the text is, since most Christians they knew (televangelists aside) do not ascribe divine purpose to natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes. They asserted that the logic of our time and that of the ancient world is so different as to render such texts irrelevant to arguments about the ethics of violence in our own time.

Another group asked questions about the purpose of violent stories showing up in the biblical texts at all. Humans are violent, they reasoned, so these stories are "speaking our

language,”⁵⁵ as it were, showing God intervening in the structural violence of the world as we have shaped it, and redeeming this mess we’ve made. Still another group, asking a similar question, theorized that stories such as these are meant to disturb us, leading us to pursue more peaceful resolutions to conflicts. Perhaps such internal conflict in the hearers of these stories could be planting the seeds of a more peaceful way of living together, not giving us the answers, but setting us on the journey.

The participants had been doing this study for several weeks, and their comfort level with asking deep questions about the relationship between biblical texts and current issues of violence was clearly growing. While there was not a consensus in the larger group on the questions, the discussion was more focused on the text than the previous week, and served as a reminder that one class session that does not go as the teacher hopes does not mean that the class as a whole will be a failure.

Session 4 saw the first instance of Israel becoming a violent actor, with YHWH’s presence in the conflict being implied but not clearly spelled out, and noted that the severity of YHWH’s reaction may be due to Amalek’s threat to the covenant that is at the heart of the story. Noting the shift from a clear explanation of God’s presence in violent episodes to vaguer implications, the groups were asked to reflect on how we as people of faith discern how God is present when violent acts occur in our world. How does our understanding of who God is factor into our ethical reasoning when we wrestle with acts of violence, such as going to war or when police officers use deadly force? The groups were also asked to consider who are those whom we “other,” whether intentionally or otherwise.

⁵⁵ Collins makes a similar argument in his prologue. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?*, 1-3.

Reflecting on the ethics of violence, several groups reported continuing discomfort at the idea that God would ever want God's children to act violently toward one another, except in the case of preventing greater harm being done to someone who could not defend themselves. One group all agreed they were "not proud" of the violent episodes in the Old Testament, and concluded that these stories represented "human weakness more than the will of God." Another group expressed the view that conflicts always represent a failure to communicate and work out our differences in other ways. Still another group expressed the view that human beings are tribal and violent by nature, and that these stories are used as a justification for violence people have already decided to engage in, rather than being the cause of those violent acts. Several groups reported that they were hesitant to make blanket statements about how we discern how God is working in different situations, as circumstances and contexts are different in every case.

Since this class occurred right after the 2016 US Presidential election, which was widely viewed as one of the most negative in recent memory, every small group named those with differing political views as those we "other." While there was some discussion of ethnic and socio-economic "othering," the conversation was dominated by politics, reflecting the headlines at the time. If this study had been done at a different time, the groups likely would have thought more broadly about the different ways they participate in "othering." The upside is that in this final session the participants began to focus on how the text challenges the way they personally relate to others, not just about what public policy implications they might find there. In hindsight, a better balance between the personal and public would have made each session more impactful, but it was good that we were able to achieve some of it at the end.

Pre- and Post-Course Surveys and Follow-up Interviews

At the beginning of the first session and the end of the fourth, class participants were asked to complete brief surveys, numerically indicating their confidence in forming an opinion on what a biblical text means for themselves and expressing that opinion to others. Participants were also asked to indicate how often they took scripture into account when making ethical decisions for themselves and for the community. Lastly, they were asked to state their beliefs about violence in scripture and violence in the world, with the opportunity to write in comments. All of the survey data is in the appendix, but a few words of commentary on how I evaluated the teaching method are in order.

First, it is unfortunate that sample sizes between the pre- and post-course surveys are not more equal. The timing of other events in the congregation and the Thanksgiving holiday caused a number of participants to miss more than one session. People were asked to fill out the post-course survey only if they attended at least three of the sessions.

That being said, a comparison of the surveys shows that people's perceived ability to form an opinion on what a text means went up. On a scale of 1 to 5, the average on the pre-course survey was 2.93, and on the post course survey was 3.15. Likewise, the people's confidence in expressing their views on what a text means went from 2.55 to 3.4. On the post course survey, all but one of the participants indicated that they had either the same or a higher level of interest in engaging in further study of biblical texts and contemporary issues like violence.

When asked whether it is ever acceptable for human beings to act violently toward one another, the majority in both surveys (72.5% before and 75% after) selected the answer "sometimes, if it is in defense of those who cannot defend themselves." Survey comments also

indicated that participants saw the ethics of violent actions as situational. One participant elaborated, “the easy answer is no, but slow moving human history without powerful intervention takes too long,” while another said, “I wrestle with this, and am opposed to using violence personally or for nations acting out of special interests. There are some cases where stopping one saves many.”⁵⁶

A half-dozen individuals indicated that they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews to elaborate on their experience in the study and help me evaluate the teaching method. Five of these agreed to be interviewed on film, and clips from those interviews are part of the multi-media presentation of this project given at Candler’s Festival of Learning in April 2017. I will share a few of the comments I found most instructive.⁵⁷

Asked how the study affected their views on violent episodes in scripture, Mary, a 30-year-old, married, Caucasian woman with no children, said that learning more about the structure and pattern of the violent episodes in Exodus helped her understand them as part of the larger narrative of Israel’s origins. Knowing these features of the text helped lessen her impression of YHWH as a thin-skinned, blood-thirsty deity and break down the dualism of the “Old Testament God vs. New Testament God” she had always heard about. Thomas, a 45-year-old, married, Caucasian man with a preschool-aged child, said that studying the features of how the texts are structured, as well as exploring the interpretive choices made by translators, made the message of the story less clear for him, but that he was surprised at being OK with acknowledging what he called “ethical ambiguity” in scripture. When pressed on what “ethical ambiguity” meant, Thomas replied that he was feeling less of a need for every story in the Bible to have one clear, definitive meaning.

⁵⁶ See appendix for raw survey data, including all written comments.

⁵⁷ Names have been changed.

All of the individuals interviewed reported feeling more confident in both their ability to form opinions about a biblical text for themselves, and to discuss their opinion with others. Melinda, a 50-year old, married, Caucasian female with two school aged children, reported often feeling nervous interpreting scripture on her own, afraid she would “just make it mean what I want.” She shared that she felt more comfortable doing the work of interpretation in community because she believes people can check one another’s biases, and that we would arrive at a more “correct” conclusion as a group.

When asked what their biggest question was going forward from this study, Thomas shared that the biggest ethical question for him was of drone warfare. Exodus contains episodes of harm being done to both combatants and non-combatants, what we would call “collateral damage” today. While Thomas said he understands the purpose of the United States attacking ISIS and other suspected terror groups, he wonders if the cost of innocents also being harmed and the resentment such strikes create between different groups makes the benefit worth it. He said he is eager to continue engaging scripture as a “conversation partner” in thinking through difficult issues in our own world.

Melinda’s biggest question going forward centered on the question of how different the divine and human actors are in the biblical stories. The “parent” metaphor for God is deeply meaningful to her, and she sees God’s violent actions in the Bible as similar to her disciplining her children. Several times she stated, “is it violence to God, or is it love?” When pressed to elaborate on how clear a line one can draw between spanking one’s child and killing the firstborn children of an entire nation, she replied “God is the only one who can say for sure.”

Evaluation of Effectiveness

From the reports of small group discussions, pre and post-course surveys, and follow-up interviews, I can say with confidence that a pastor can expose lay persons to careful, accessible biblical exegesis by putting the text in context and highlighting relevant features in the text can increase people's perceived ability and confidence to do the work of scriptural interpretation in community.

As has been reported, participants had a wide range of reactions and interpretive choices. Many participants did not walk away with substantially different ideas than they had at the beginning of the study, but it would not be reasonable to expect that to happen over the course of only four sessions. A longer period of sustained engagement with these issues, providing more focused hermeneutical guidance as the group attempts to extract meaning from these stories,⁵⁸ would likely reflect greater evolution in participants' views. Furthermore, it is clear that the headlines during the time period in which the study was done were dominating the conversation in the small groups, particularly in the fourth session where we considered the question of "othering." If the same study was done with the same group six months earlier or later, there likely would have been reflection on a broader range of topics than the extreme divisions between the major American political parties. What is significant is the extent to which the confidence level rose in participants' perceived ability to do the work of scriptural interpretation.

But just because people feel more confident in their ability to interpret scripture does not mean they are no longer in need of pastoral guidance. As Bos argues about sermons, which I would argue also applies to teaching, "when a sermon has nothing more or nothing else to offer than a kind of popularized scholarly exegesis, it fails completely the task and calling of

⁵⁸ Bos, *We Have Heard that God is with You*, 111.

preaching.”⁵⁹ There must be some end goal in mind. Without expecting everyone to come to the exact same conclusion, a pastor must focus on some basic values they want to impart in their teaching. Reflecting on people’s feedback is essential, especially when we are attempting to connect people’s faith journeys to the way they relate to the world around them. Considering two examples from the follow up interviews will demonstrate how reflection on the study can influence pastoral practice going forward.

Thomas reported that his biggest takeaway was greater confidence with “ethical ambiguity” in biblical stories, feeling less need for one clear meaning and application to emerge. The biggest contemporary issue he kept reflecting on throughout the study was the ethics of drone strikes. He wonders if it is ethically acceptable for the United States to “play God” by killing people from far away, often harming non-combatants in the process. Thomas believes that American society has not wrestled deeply enough with the ethical questions raised by these military practices. He said that many people, himself included, did not think of the people harmed in these strikes as flesh and blood human beings, but more like “nameless, faceless characters in a video game.” Thomas has since kept a closer eye on news reports of these strikes and has reached out to his elected representatives to make his feelings known.

Seeing Thomas actively consider ethical issues in our society in light of his deep engagement with scripture gives me as his pastor more confidence to wrestle with big questions in preaching and teaching, and feeling less of a need to give a final answer to those questions at the end of a sermon or class. A pastor feeling confident in saying, “I haven’t come to a conclusion yet on this issue, but here’s where I’m leaning right now” can be a way of giving permission for lay persons to do similar wrestling and not be as concerned with “getting it right”.

⁵⁹ Bos, *We Have Heard that God is with You*, 108.

Melinda’s reactions, on the other hand, particularly when she questioned whether mass killings of children were “really ‘violence’ to God, or is it love?”—equating mass killing with her disciplining her children—was particularly distressing. She reported that her earlier fears about “getting it wrong” were eased when we addressed the historicity issue. Knowing that these events likely did not happen in exactly the way they are described in the text, and that the text is not meant to report historical events in precise detail, made the story more palatable for her, but it may have given her too much comfort. Whether we view stories of mass killings as historical or mythical, we should still be bothered by the idea of such carnage, even if, as Brueggemann argues, YHWH’s response is proportional to Pharaoh’s earlier actions.⁶⁰ Such disregard for the humanity of unnamed characters in the story, even if they are not historically accurate, would encourage me to put more emphasis on the value of every single human life to God, if we believe that all people are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27). While one session did explore a midrash showing God weeping over the Egyptians drowned in the sea,⁶¹ more exploration of supplemental stories like these would help individuals like Melinda to truly feel the tension present in a story where an oppressed group is liberated, yet others are harmed in the process.

From the contrast of these two reactions, it is clear that different people can participate in the same session, processing the same information, yet walk away with very different impressions. Exploration of scripture does not happen in a vacuum. Just as the headlines of the day are present in people’s minds as they read these stories, so also are their varied experiences and outlooks on life. While an individual class session can’t address every participant’s individual issues, strategically addressing certain particularities in teaching, as well as deeper

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *NIB* 1:771.

⁶¹ Creach, *Violence in Scripture*, 59.

exploration in individual conversations, can over time help guide individuals to engage the work of interpretation with the values the pastor wants to impart.

Because what has been described is not a formula, but a general approach informing how pastor can create content to share with others, many factors have to be considered. What is the general theological orientation of your community? How open are they to learning new things and considering ideas they haven't encountered before? Is there a general suspicion of "experts" in various fields or an eagerness to learn from them? Every congregation is different, and there is no substitute for a pastor knowing their people well and shaping their teaching so as to gain the best hearing possible.

Conclusion

While pastors in Christian congregations have unique roles as authoritative readers and interpreters of scripture, all disciples of Jesus are called to the same tasks. A pastor, by virtue of their training in biblical scholarship, can expose lay persons to careful, accessible exegesis by focusing on putting texts in context and highlighting relevant features in a text, and in so doing can increase people's perceived ability and confidence to do the work of scriptural interpretation in community. Confident readers and interpreters of scripture will be better prepared to hear the ways God is calling them to work in the world. If the focus of a study is to talk about communal or public challenges that can be drawn from reading a text together, it needs to be balanced with considering the personal challenges as well, so as to avoid the kind of distancing that happened in several of the sessions in this study. Events in the news and the life of the congregation must also be taken into consideration, so as to make sure they are talked about in light of the text without overshadowing the text. Focusing on these factors, a pastor can strengthen their role as

teachers of scripture for the purpose of “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

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Appendix: Pre and Post Course Survey Data

Pre-class. 44 completed

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel interpreting biblical texts (forming an opinion about what they mean) for yourself?

- 1. 3
- 2. 12
- 3. 15
- 4. 13
- 5. 1

Average- 2.93

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel expressing your opinion on what you believe a biblical text means?

- 1. 4
- 2. 12
- 3. 10
- 4. 12
- 5. 6

Average- 2.55

3. How frequently do you take Scripture into account when making ethical decisions for yourself?

- Never- 0
- Infrequently- 7 (15.9%)
- Sometimes- 13 (29.5%)
- Frequently- 24 (54.5%)
- Always- 0 (One person wrote “always seems presumptuous”)

4. How frequently do you take Scripture into account when forming opinions about what our society should or should not to?

- Never- 0
- Infrequently- 8 (18.1%)
- Sometimes- 14 (31.8)
- Frequently- 22 (50%)
- Always- 0

5. Which of the following phrases best describes your attitude toward violent acts in scripture?

- 1. The world is a violent place, so God sometimes has to act violently so God's will can be done- 9 (20.4%)
- 2. Those things are mostly in the Old Testament, so they don't apply anymore- 1 (2.3%) (scratched out the last half of the sentence- “so they don't apply anymore”, did not elaborate in the comments)
- 3. Those stories were written during a much more violent time, but don't really reflect God's will for humanity- 16 (36.4%)

4. Other (wrote in comments)- 13 (29.5%)
Did not answer- 5 (11.4%)

“Other” answers on 5:

None apply completely! Media magnifies all violence

God has a will and it is carried out at different times in different ways

The Bible is an expression of the range of mankind’s ability to do good or evil. I see the violent texts as reflecting this form of evil in the world

Violent stories are a history not God’s plan

The world is violent, we are violent. We look to God to describe violence

The world is a violent place and sometimes people act violently in belief they are expressing God’s will

Texts written by people trying to make sense of their experiences. World is violent. May be part of creative process. May be in part chaos. Freedom. Developing understanding of God

This is not consistent with historical facts as discovered by epidemiologist

The world has always been violent in the past, now, and the future, so it is always there. I think using violent examples in the Bible is just using what’s happening in the world to express and get a story or lesson across.

The stories are included in the Bible to teach and to demonstrate human nature. We have to learn from this in order to change history

Written during exile, possibly magnified given their current situation

I’m always looking for a better understanding of these texts

The stories are human interpretation of events which the writer need to make God the cause rather than all on humans’ decision making capabilities

5- Answered 3 and elaborated

Still explain (?), but feel that generally humanity has evolved toward a more controlled/less violent state

I really don’t know what to think of them!

Perhaps the writers wished the people had acted in violent ways to achieve and maintain purity

6. Do you think it is ever acceptable for human beings to engage in violent acts toward one another?

1. Yes. The world is a violent place, so we must defend our interests- 2 (4.5%)

2. Sometimes, if it is in defense of those who cannot defend themselves- 32 (72.7%)

3. No, violence is never acceptable under any circumstances- 5 (11.4%)

4. Other (wrote in comments)- 2 (4.5%)

Did not answer- 3 (6.8%)

“Other” answers on 6:

The easy answer is no, but slow moving human history without powerful intervention takes too long

Depends- a defense, perhaps, not a fan of violence but sometimes is necessary

6- answered 2 and elaborated

Defense and violence to defend the defenseless may represent God’s hand

I think violence is the default for those individuals or political leaders who are deficient in the skills of compromise

Evil may be confronted through violent action knowing consequences of act. Cost of actions to our morality

Post-class. 20 completed

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel interpreting biblical texts (forming an opinion about what they mean) for yourself?

- 1. 2 (10%)
- 2. 3 (15%)
- 3. 5 (25%)
- 4. 10 (50%)
- 5. 0

Average- 3.15

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel expressing your opinion on what you believe a biblical text means?

- 1. 3 (15%)
- 2. 0
- 3. 6 (30%)
- 4. 8 (40%)
- 5. 3 (15%)

Average- 3.4

3. How frequently do you take Scripture into account when making ethical decisions for yourself?

- Never- 0
- Infrequently- 3 (15%)
- Sometimes- 6 (30%)
- Frequently- 9 (45%)
- Always- 2 (10%)

4. How frequently do you take Scripture into account when forming opinions about what our society should or should not to?

- Never- 0
- Infrequently- 5 (25%)
- Sometimes- 5 (25%)
- Frequently- 10 (40%)
- Always- 0

5. Which of the following phrases best describes your attitude toward violent acts in scripture?

- 1. The world is a violent place, so God sometimes has to act violently so God's will can be done- 7 (35%)
- 2. Those things are mostly in the Old Testament, so they don't apply anymore- 2 (10%)
- 3. Those stories were written during a much more violent time, but don't really reflect God's will for humanity- 6 (30%)
- 4. Other (wrote in comments)- 4 (20%)
- Did not answer- 1 (5%)

“Other” answers on 5:

Stories which are in the Bible are man's attempt to understand God's relationship with humans and our world. Since humans write it, it is inherently flawed and must be taken in and applied with that in mind

The violent acts must have a deeper meaning. They shouldn't be taken to mean violence in the name of God is OK

Mostly above (answer 3), but through the presentation I have been thinking about the difference between God's violence and human violence that we ascribe to God. They can be difficult to separate.

The Bible isn't a history book, but tells the story of God's relationship with creation, in particular the Hebrew/Israelites. There are still some stories that are difficult and hard to explain, but they still reveal pieces of who God is and God's redeeming work in the world.

6. Do you think it is ever acceptable for human beings to engage in violent acts toward one another?

- 1. Yes. The world is a violent place, so we must defend our interests- 1 (5%)
- 2. Sometimes, if it is in defense of those who cannot defend themselves- 15 (75%)
- 3. No, violence is never acceptable under any circumstances- 2 (10%)
- 4. Other (wrote in comments)- 2 (10%)

“Other” answers on 6:

It's complicated

Through the class my feelings for pacifism rose greatly. Non-violence can be as effective as violence. The waters of what is in defense of others and what is aggressive were muddied for me. I wrestle with this, and am opposed to using violence personally or for nations acting out of special interests. There are some cases where stopping one saves many.

7. As a result of this class, how interested are you in engaging in further study on the relationship between biblical texts and contemporary issues

1. More interested- 7 (35%)
2. About the same level of interest- 12 (60%)
3. Less interested- 1 (5%)