



Violence in the Bible

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
Bishop Robert Barron.

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If you look in the writings of the New Atheists like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, one of the classic arguments you will find is, “The God of the Bible is a dreadful God who orders all sorts of murder and mayhem and chaos.” To be fair, a lot of Christians wrestle with these passages as well and call them the “hard passages,” especially in the Old Testament. Think of the Psalmist exulting in dashing babies’ heads—the children of his enemies—against the rock (Ps. 137). Think of God telling Saul to “put the ban” on the Amalekites (which means to kill every man, woman, child, and animal) (1 Sam. 15). Think of Joshua, when he comes into the promised land, basically unleashing a blitzkrieg and wiping out entire populations. Think of the passage from the book of Exodus in the story of Israel battling the Amalekites and Moses putting his arms up. As long as he is praying, the battle goes well. Finally, Yahweh carries the day. And then we hear this: “And Joshua *mowed* down Amalek and all his people with the edge of the sword” (Ex. 17:13). So even devout Christians can find this kind of passage difficult. Why? Because it seems so out of step with the God of the New Testament. Jesus reveals the God of infinite mercy and compassion. Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” “Bless those who curse you,” “Pray for those who maltreat you,” and “Resist not evil” (Matt.

5). How is that God reconcilable with this God of the Old Testament?

I would first say to both the New Atheists and to Christians who wrestle with this that this is not a new problem, as though we have discovered this in the twenty-first century. This is an old issue in the life of the Church. It goes back to some of the earliest days. Think of the Gnostics and especially the Marcionites back in the second century, who said, “Let’s solve the problem simply by jettisoning the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a testament to a fallen or wicked God, not the true God. Get rid of that. It is the New Testament that reveals the true God.”

Our best Scripture scholars and theologians resisted this move. They stood against Marcion, and they proposed the reading together of the Old and New Testament as the common witness to the true God. One of the great figures around this time was Origen of Alexandria, a theological hero of mine. Origen knew this problem and wrestled with it.

His first observation was this: We must read the entire Bible from the standpoint of the last book of the Bible. What does he mean? The great scene in the fifth chapter of the book of Revelation. The visionary is up in the heavenly space, and a scroll comes out, and it is sealed by seven seals. The scroll stands for the whole

of the Bible, the whole of God's revelation. The sealing means that it is hard to read and interpret. Who will unlock it? We hear that voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" (Rev. 5:2) Out comes a little lamb and, more to it, a little lamb who has been slain. It says, "a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (5:6); in other words, a figure of utter weakness and mildness is the one who alone can open the seals.

The point now is very clear and very important. The only standpoint from which we should read the whole of the Bible is the standpoint of Christ crucified. The lamb standing as though slain, of course, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world precisely through his suffering on the cross. Now, here is Origen's point: If we read the Bible in such a way that we see God as capricious and cruel or that encourages us to be violent, we are ipso facto misreading it. I think it is a very important point for the second century and today. If you read the Bible in such a way that it leads you to say, "Hey, violence is a good thing. I should be more violent," or that God is hateful and violent, you have ipso facto misread it, because you have not read it from the standpoint of the lamb standing as though slain.

Once that move is in place, we still have the problem in some ways. How *do* you read these

famously difficult passages, where God does seem to be pretty violent and cruel? Origen says that we should read these passages in a metaphorical, allegorical, and symbolic way, as about the spiritual struggle. Israel stands for all that is in accord with God's purposes, for love and forgiveness and compassion, and therefore, the enemies of Israel up and down the centuries, from the Amalekites to the Philistines, are not just about those ancient people. It stands for all the things that stand athwart God's purposes.

How should we fight them? *All the way down.* Fight them all the way, and not by half measures. Go back to one of the most notorious of the difficult passages, God's command to Saul to put the ban on the Amalekites. Saul doesn't do that. He kills most of them and defeats them, but keeps a lot of the livestock for himself, and he keeps King Agag, the king of the Amalekites, maybe to hold him for ransom or who knows what, but he does not kill him.

Samuel the prophet comes in. He upbraids Saul, and then he takes out his sword and hacks Agag to pieces. Now again, you ask, "How in the world is this in the Bible? How in the world is this describing the true God?" Think for a second. What do most of us sinners do with evil? We play around with it. We toy with it. We battle it to some degree, but then we typically keep a little bit for ourselves. We don't battle it all the way

down. That is the sin of Saul.

Here are a couple metaphors. Suppose I went to Cardinal Francis George, my mentor, and I said, “Your Eminence, I’m so happy being a celibate priest that I’m celibate 90% of the time.” How pleased would he be? Or if a husband went to his wife and said, “Honey, I love you. My marriage, it means so much to me. That’s why I’m faithful to you 75% of the time.” I doubt she would be thrilled about that. Or if you said, “Yeah, child sex abuse, that’s a real serious problem in this diocese, which is why we got about 65% of it under control.” Some forms of evil are so profound they have to be hacked to pieces. We have to put the ban on them. So read these texts, not as a cruel, capricious, tyrannical God, but rather as allegories of the spiritual struggle and the way that we should fight evil all the way down.

Here is another perspective, also from Origen, but picked up by a lot of people over the centuries. We are obsessed with historicity today in a way that the ancient peoples were not, that is to say, with a very literalistic reading of the text. These ancient peoples were very comfortable with more symbolic ways of reading the text. The ancient Israelites were a warlike people, as many peoples were. They are fighting all the time against their enemies, and their writers are writing in a poetic way, trying to express the truth of

God through a poetic allusion. What are they going to reach for? Well, they might reach for a militaristic metaphor.

So, Yahweh fights for His people. Yahweh fights the enemies of Israel. Well, how is he going to fight them? You are trying to describe God who is all powerful, all sovereign—what are you going to say? Are you going to say, “He killed half of Israel’s enemies. That is the God we believe in. God killed a third of the Philistines.” Of course not! If you are a poet trying to express in this militaristic metaphor what God’s power is like, you will say, “He wiped out the enemies of Israel. He eliminated them. He put the ban on them.” Again, don’t consider it like a historical journalistic description of what exactly happened, but rather as a poetic evocation of the power and sovereignty of God, using precisely a militaristic metaphor.

Now, we find that metaphor distasteful today. So what? We have a different cultural setting. That was a metaphor that a lot of ancient peoples would have reached for, as the ancient Israelites did.

It bugs me in the New Atheists, and I see it on the Internet all the time: people bring up the issue of violence as though it is a new discovery that Christopher Hitchens figured out. Our great people have known about this problem from the beginning,

and they have given us rich interpretive strategies, most especially Revelation 5. We read the whole Bible in the light of the crucified, nonviolent, compassionate, and forgiving Lamb of God. Read the Bible through that lens. You will read it right.

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