CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Bible Should Never Be Used to Harm Others

> Humans have an amazing capacity to demonize their enemies, portraying them as the epitome of evil who must be eliminated at all cost. Time and time again "civilized" Christian people have committed genocide, practiced slavery, and in other ways demeaned "uncivilized" peoples because they saw them as evil. *Using the Bible to justify this kind of behavior must stop.*
>
> —Esther Epp-Tiessen[1]

The Mystic River Massacre

On May 26, 1637, New England settlers attacked and burned a Pequot village, massacring approximately "700 elderly men and defenseless women and children."[2] It was an utterly unjustifiable act of cold-blooded killing and unmitigated brutality. How could Puritans justify such carnage? By appealing to Scripture! John Higginson wrote a treatise defending the war against the Pequot generally, and the massacre at the village at Mystic River particularly, on the basis of Judges 20. This chapter in Judges describes intertribal warfare in which the Benjaminites are nearly annihilated by their fellow Israelites. According to Laura Donaldson, this particular Old Testament passage "provided the early settlers of New England with all the legitimation they needed to wage war against the Pequot."[3]

John Underhill, who was second in command on the fateful day of the massacre, also attempts to justify the slaughter by appealing to the Old Testament. He does so by alluding to David's war with the Ammonites in 2 Samuel 12.[4] In an apparent effort to respond to some criticism of the Mystic River massacre, Underhill writes:

> Great and doleful was the bloody sight to the view of young soldiers that never had been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground, so thick, in some places, that you could hardly pass along. It may be demanded, Why should you be so furious? (as some have said). Should not Christians have more mercy and compassion? But I would refer you to David's war. When a people is grown to such a height of blood, and sin against God and man . . . he [God] hath no respect to persons, but harrows them, and saws them, and puts them to the sword, and the most terriblest death that may be. Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents. Sometimes the case alters; but we will not dispute it now. We have sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings.[5]

As Matthew Kruer has noted: "The Puritans' worldview was rooted in a Scripture that contained spectacular episodes of mass violence, and . . . these precedents provided a ready justification for those who sought to retroactively account for their ferocity."[6] When the Old Testament is used to justify the killing of hundreds of "elderly men and defenseless women and children," something has clearly gone terribly wrong!

Do No Harm

The premise of this book is simple and straightforward: the Bible should never be used to inspire, promote, or justify acts of violence. This means, among other things, that the Bible should not be read in ways that oppress or otherwise harm people. Yet, tragically, this is how the Bible has often been used in the past, and it is how it continues to be used by many people today.

In recent years, a number of books have appeared, highlighting the destructive way the Bible has been used to hurt others.[7] These books, with such provocative titles as *The Sins of Scripture* and *The Savage Text*, help people recognize how the Bible has often been read in ways that foster injustice, oppression, and death.[8] Biblical texts have been used to justify such things as warfare and genocide, violence against women, child abuse, religious intolerance, capital punishment, slavery, bigotry, and racism. The Old Testament has frequently been used in these ways, resulting in what I refer to as "the Old Testament's troubling legacy." As the subtitle of this book suggests, overcoming this troubling legacy is one of my primary concerns.

As we will see, the Old Testament's troubling legacy is intricately connected to its many violent texts. It is difficult to read the Old Testament for very long without bumping into passages that depict or describe violence in some way. Many of these passages portray violence positively and sanction various acts of violence. Tragically, many of these texts have been used to inspire, encourage, and legitimate all sorts of violence against others over the years.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament is also extremely problematic in this regard. It too has been used to inspire, encourage, and legitimate all sorts of violent acts and attitudes, and has been used to oppress, afflict, and harm countless individuals and groups over the years.[9] For example, some people have used New Testament texts to perpetrate violent acts against women and children and to legitimate immoral practices like slavery.[10] A handful of New Testament texts that speak disparagingly of "the Jews" have also contributed to an enormous amount of antisemitism, the tragic consequences of which are all too familiar.[11] Other passages, such as those related to the atonement and eschatological judgment, have led to distorted views of God and even caused some people to reject Christianity altogether.[12] Clearly, the Bible's troubling legacy is not confined to the Old Testament. The New Testament is problematic as well.

That said, one may wonder why I have chosen to focus exclusively on the *Old* Testament in this book. First, given the scope and magnitude of the problem at hand, it seemed wise to limit my discussion to one part of the Bible rather than trying to do too much. Second, it made sense for me to focus exclusively on the Old Testament since this is my area of specialization. I feel much better equipped to deal with the problem as it appears in this part of the Bible given my particular training. Third, since the majority of the teaching I do is from the Old Testament, this is the context in which the problem most naturally arises for me.

Although this book focuses on the Old Testament, I believe many of the reading strategies that will be presented are equally effective in dealing with the New Testament's troubling legacy. My hope is that people will find ways to use what is offered here to help them read both the Old *and* the New Testament in ethically responsible ways.

The Purpose of This Book

I have written this book with two particular objectives in mind. First, since I believe the Bible should never be used to harm people, I will advocate reading the Old Testament *nonviolently* in an effort to overcome the Old Testament's troubling legacy. This involves reading in a way that values all people, promotes justice, and facilitates liberation. It requires reading in an ethically responsible manner, one that utilizes various strategies for critiquing, rather than perpetuating, the Old Testament's positive portrayals of violence. Reading nonviolently means resisting all readings

that—wittingly or unwittingly—cause harm, justify oppression, sanction killing, or in some way reinforce the value and "virtue" of violence. Ultimately, this way of approaching the Old Testament results in readings that are liberating and life-giving rather than oppressive and deadly.

Second, and relatedly, I have written this book to offer some guidance for dealing with violent Old Testament texts that sanction, and sometimes even celebrate, certain acts of violence. Since these texts are often the source of the problem, it is crucial to discuss how they should be handled. For example, what should we do when we encounter passages containing divinely sanctioned violence, such as the command to kill every last Canaanite? How should we respond to passages that sanction rape and other acts of violence against women? What principles should guide our interpretation and application of passages that endorse stoning rebellious children (Deut. 21:18-21), blasphemers (Lev. 24:16), and wayward worshipers (Deut. 17:2-7)? Since many people do not know what to do with violent texts like these, they often do nothing with them. While this is understandable, it is not terribly helpful. In light of the enormous influence these texts have had on readers over the years, and given the considerable harm they have done, it is unwise to ignore them.[13] Violent texts must be confronted honestly and directly. In this book, I will offer specific guidelines for how to read such texts responsibly by critiquing the violence in them while still considering how these troubling texts can be used constructively.

This book addresses issues that are significant to both religious professionals and lay readers. Since it is designed to be accessible to a wide range of individuals, I have tried to write at a level that will appeal to both general readers *and* to those with some formal training in biblical studies, theology, and related disciplines. While the book provides a good starting point for people who are wrestling with these issues for the first time, there is also much here for those who have reflected on these questions previously. Although I do not envision my primary audience being scholars already committed to—and engaged in—an ethical critique of Scripture, I hope that even these individuals will benefit from some of what they find in the pages that follow.

A Difficult—But Worthwhile—Journey

This book is going to deal with some of the most violent and unsavory parts of the Old Testament, parts that make many readers squeamish and are often quickly bypassed for greener pastures. If you have never lingered long over these troublesome texts, some of what you are about to read will be disturbing. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan acknowledges: "While many read the Bible for spiritual direction and personal devotion, to unearth the violence and know the impact of that violence requires a reading that can be uncomfortable for those seeking simple or easy answers."[14] Yet,

given the harm these texts have caused, simplistic answers are not only inadequate, they are dangerous. The presence of violence in the Bible constitutes a serious problem, one that needs to be confronted with eyes wide open.

As we proceed, we will need to ask some hard questions. We will also need to look at some passages in new ways. At times, this may feel uncomfortable. Reading nonviolently will require us to voice our opposition to positive portrayals of violence and to certain assumptions about violence embedded in these texts. This act of "reading against the grain" may feel unnatural to some readers, especially those who have never questioned or critiqued the biblical text in this way before. It will require them to rethink their view of the Bible and their understanding of how Scripture functions authoritatively.[15] But this way of reading is precisely what is needed to overcome the Old Testament's troubling legacy. Given the concerns some may have about this way of reading the Bible, it may help for me to share a few words about my own faith commitment and view of Scripture before proceeding any further.

My Faith Commitment and View of Scripture

Sometimes people who focus on the violence of Scripture, or who emphasize certain problems with the Bible, do so in an effort to disparage the Bible and discredit Christianity. That is certainly *not* my intention. I am a committed Christian who actively participates in the life of the church and affirms the essential role of Scripture for Christian faith and practice. Thus, I write as one who deeply values Scripture, loves the church, and desires to see Christians use the Bible in a way that deepens their faith and strengthens their resolve to love God and others.

I have had an interest in the Bible for as long as I can remember. I was raised in a Christian home, attended church regularly, and decided to follow Jesus at an early age. The value and importance of the Bible were impressed upon me at home and in church, and my respect for the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is deep and profound. I continue to be amazed at how much influence these texts exert over many of my most fundamental convictions and beliefs. The Bible has played an indispensable role in my life in that regard. Reading the Bible has been a life-giving and faith-affirming experience for me, and I am convinced it is one of the most significant ways God communicates with people today. Scripture has been—and continues to be—formative and foundational in my life in many respects.

Yet, ironically, my love for the Bible is precisely what eventually led me to have such substantial difficulties with it. The more I read and studied the Bible, the more I realized how challenging some parts of it were for those wanting to use it as a guide for faithful living and theological reflection. For all its benefits, I began to recognize that the Bible was not without some significant problems. I discovered that the Bible sometimes promotes values that are objectionable, encourages behaviors that are unethical, and portrays God in ways that are unacceptable.

Unfortunately, some readers uncritically embrace these problematic perspectives, internalize the text's accommodating attitudes toward violence, and then use these texts to hurt others. Far too many people have been abused, oppressed, violated, and victimized by those who read the Bible this way. As one who loves Scripture and loathes violence, I find this to be terribly distressing. Therefore, I have written this book to encourage people to read the Old Testament more ethically and less violently, in ways that help rather than harm.

Since I will be urging throughout this book that people read the Old Testament nonviolently, I should also describe my personal convictions as they relate to violence and nonviolence. As a lifelong member of the Brethren in Christ Church, a denomination rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions, I embrace the church's strong commitment to nonviolence, peacemaking, and reconciliation. Personally, I regard all forms of violence as inappropriate for Christians, and I cannot condone the use of violence in any situation. We have been created to love and serve one another, not to harm each other. Part of what makes violence so problematic—and destructive—is that it harms both the victim *and* the perpetrator. I am especially suspicious of any attempt to make violence appear virtuous, and I agree with Walter Wink's assessment that "redemptive violence" is a myth.[16] Even when violence is used for such noble ends as protecting innocent lives, it sows the seeds of future violence and is never capable of producing the kind of lasting peace (*shalom*) God desires for humanity. Therefore, I come to the Bible with a strong presumption against violence.

For the record, I should note that my strong presumption against violence does *not* imply that I think Christians should stand helplessly on the sidelines and do nothing in the face of evil. On the contrary, I am deeply committed to active, nonviolent peacemaking. I believe we are obligated to do all within our power to set things right. But we are not to do this by returning evil for evil (Rom. 12:17). Rather, we should try to "overcome evil with good" by engaging in a wide array of creative, nonviolent strategies (Rom. 12:21).[17] My interest in reading the Old Testament nonviolently represents an attempt to read the Bible in a way that is congruent with my views about violence and nonviolence.

I realize that many people will take exception to my views here. Christians hold many different perspectives about the ethics and morality of violence. Some Christians believe going to war is fully compatible with their Christian faith, while others regard it as a fundamental violation of their most basic Christian commitments. Some Christians approve of the use of torture, violence in self-defense, and capital punishment, while others find one or all of these forms of violence at variance with the teachings of Jesus. There is no single "Christian position" on any these issues. I recognize that and respect those with differing views.

The good news here is that it is not necessary to share my particular views about violence to benefit from this book. Even those who do not categorically oppose all

forms of violence are still quite likely to object to certain violent texts in the Old Testament. There are many expressions of "virtuous" violence in the Old Testament that are equally problematic to just-war theorists as to pacifists, to people who advocate total nonviolence as to those who allow Christians to use lethal force in certain situations. Moreover, all readers—religious and otherwise—should be concerned about the way people have appealed to the Old Testament to justify various acts of violence and oppression. Thus, this book has much to offer those who are distressed about the way the Bible has been used to harm others, even if their views about violence differ considerably from my own.

Is It Okay to Critique the Bible?

Reading the Old Testament nonviolently will involve looking at some of the most violent, difficult, and morally offensive texts in the entire Bible. This will require a certain degree of honesty about the problematic dimensions of these texts and a willingness to critique positive portrayals of violence. Still, many readers—even those who feel some tension between the Bible's evaluation of violence and their own—may feel uncomfortable with the idea of critiquing the violence of Scripture. That is understandable since it runs contrary to the way many of us have been taught to read the Bible. We have been taught to listen to the Bible rather than to question it, to accept its values rather than to critique them. Therefore, it may help to say a few words about the appropriateness of engaging the Bible in this way.

First, it is important to keep in mind that the Old Testament does not speak with one voice on the issue of violence. Rather, the Old Testament contains enormous diversity. This is to be expected since the Old Testament was produced over a period of approximately eight hundred years (950–150 BCE) and represents a conversation that spans centuries. It includes many different voices and perspectives on a wide range of issues and, as one might expect, these do not always agree with one another. This is certainly true when it comes to various views about violence. The Old Testament says so many different things about violence that it is impossible to speak about "the Old Testament view on violence." There is no such thing. There are many Old Testament views and perspectives on violence, and some of these are diametrically opposed to each other. Invariably, readers will find themselves agreeing with some Old Testament assumptions about violence while at the same time disregarding others.

Second, one should remember that God allowed human beings to play a central role in the formation of the Bible.[18] The Bible was neither written by God nor divinely dictated. It did not drop out of the sky as a complete collection of sixty-six books. Rather, over hundreds of years, God worked through human writers who shaped and reshaped the texts that are now included in our Bible. While Christians can—and certainly do!—differ over how involved God was in the formation

of Scripture, this much is clear: human beings were intimately involved in writing, transmitting, preserving, and translating the various texts we find in the Bible. Given the Bible we now have, and the enormous diversity it contains, it would seem that God allowed human beings considerable freedom in this process. Since people were free to shape these texts in various ways, it comes as no surprise that they reflect the particular social and historical contexts of their writers. Nor is it surprising that the values and beliefs embedded in these texts reflect the worldview of these ancient writers and redactors.

It is not difficult to see that the people who formed the Bible had a radically different worldview from ours in many respects, and they commonly held assumptions and beliefs we no longer do. Their ethical standards, morals, and values often differ from those we accept today. In addition, the way they thought about God—particularly the way they understood God's action in the world—does not always correspond very well to the way many modern people of faith conceive of God or God's role in the world. Yet all these very human assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives are part and parcel of the Old Testament as it now stands. While some of these notions are certainly compatible with Christian faith and practice, others are not. This requires us to engage in a critical reading of the Bible.

While some might worry that critiquing the Bible in this way is tantamount to critiquing God, I do not believe that to be the case. To state the obvious, the Bible is not God! On the contrary, the Bible is a culturally conditioned collection of sacred texts that bear the marks of human involvement from beginning to end. Apparently, God was pleased to work through people who were free to include their own culturally relevant thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. While some of these reveal certain "truths" about God, the world, and humanity, others are not so transcendent. Rather, they simply reflect certain commonly held ideas and beliefs of the time. Therefore, we read the Old Testament faithfully and responsibly not by embracing everything it says but by developing a principled approach that allows us to evaluate its claims carefully and critically. We do so with an eye toward accepting what we can and resisting what we must. The humanness of these texts demands it of us.

Third, those who feel some anxiety about "critiquing" certain aspects of the Old Testament should keep in mind that it is likely they have already been doing this for some time, whether they realize it or not. People routinely engage in a critique of the Old Testament's ethics and values. For example, most Christians today condemn the practice of slavery and regard polygamy as immoral. While the Old Testament presents slavery and polygamy as acceptable, today's readers beg to differ—and rightly so! Modern Christians do critique these ancient practices and judge them as inappropriate today. What I am suggesting here is that we simply apply this same kind of ethical critique to violent Old Testament texts. Doing so is a natural extension of the way we already read and evaluate other things in the Old Testament.

At this point, it is necessary to make a *very important* distinction. The purpose of engaging in an ethical critique of violence in the Old Testament is *not* to pass judgment upon ancient Israel. I am not interested in judging the morality of ancient Israel's behavior, let alone condemning it. Rather, I want to determine the extent to which the Old Testament's assumptions about violence and violent practices should inform our own. Had I lived in ancient Israel, I have every reason to believe I would have shared their assumptions about violence. I probably would have thought that certain kinds of offenses merited death and presumably would have believed that warfare was morally acceptable and God-ordained. It is doubtful I would have even thought to question it. But since I am not living in ancient Israel, I have a moral obligation to raise questions about the accommodating attitude toward violence found in many of these texts. So again, my interest in engaging in an ethical critique is not to judge Israelites, but to consider the extent to which their views should, or should not, be ours.

Finally, for those who worry that critiquing the Old Testament is somehow impious or irreverent, I would argue just the opposite. There is nothing dishonorable about wrestling vigorously with these texts and disagreeing with some of the values, assumptions, and perspectives they offer. In fact, we must do this if our reading is to be relevant and faithful. Given the negative ways these texts have often been used, it would be wrong *not* to evaluate them in this way. Engaging in an ethical critique of the Old Testament honors God and demonstrates our deep respect for Scripture by caring enough about it to enter into a spirited conversation with it. In fact, the Old Testament itself bears witness to this kind of engaged critique as later writers have sometimes significantly reworked and challenged earlier texts and traditions.[19] This should encourage us as we do likewise.

Hopefully, this discussion has been reassuring to those who might have some misgivings about engaging in an ethical critique of the Old Testament. Later, I will say more about why this kind of critical dialogue with the Old Testament is not only appropriate but absolutely indispensible.[20]

Some Definitions

Since violence is a central concern of this book, it may help to offer a working definition before going further. Violence is a notoriously difficult term to define, and there seem to be almost as many definitions of violence as there are manifestations of it.[21] Though my definition is provisional, I offer it here to provide some sense of how I am using the term in this book. For the purposes of this study, I consider violence to be *physical, emotional, or psychological harm done to a person by an individual (or individuals), institution, or structure that results in injury, oppression, or death.*[22] My definition of violence is not limited to physical harm since some forms of violence involve no physical contact and leave no bodily scars but do immense social, emotional, and psychological damage all the same.

The definition of violence offered here is broad enough to encompass a wide range of harmful behaviors, including everything from verbal assault to mass murder. It also includes the kind of harm done to women and children by violent ideologies such as patriarchy and sexism, ideologies that find many expressions within the pages of the Old Testament. Thus, while much of the following discussion revolves around rather obvious and indisputable forms of violence, like killing others, my interests are much broader. I am concerned about all forms of violence, not just those that are most visible or that express themselves physically. Some of the most insidious forms of violence are often less recognizable to many people but are still enormously harmful.

Throughout this study, I will refer to certain Old Testament passages as "violent texts." I will be using this phrase rather loosely to refer to a wide range of passages that (a) describe acts of violence (for example, rape, murder, warfare); (b) prescribe violent sanctions for certain behaviors (for example, laws demanding capital punishment for such things as adultery, Sabbath-breaking, and kidnapping); (c) pronounce violence against others (like many judgment oracles in prophetic literature); (d) yearn for violence to come upon adversaries (as in imprecatory Psalms); or (e) contain violent ideologies (such as patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and so forth) that devalue certain individuals or groups.

Admittedly, referring to these passages as "violent texts" is not entirely satisfactory since texts themselves are not violent. They are mere words on a page, not autonomous agents. Although violent texts, like violent movies, have the power to *portray* violence, they do not, in and of themselves, have the power to *perpetrate* it. Violent texts do not kill people any more than violent movies do. Although both might be a source of "inspiration" for such diabolical deeds, neither a text nor a film can actually kill. Thus, when I speak of a text being violent, I am saying something about both its content and its capacity to be read in ways that may encourage violence. As John Collins reminds us, "it is important to bear in mind . . . that the line between actual killing and verbal, symbolic, or imaginary violence is thin and permeable."[23] We should be very careful not to underestimate the enormous influence these texts can have on readers, one that frequently results in rather accommodating views toward violence. We will consider the relationship between violent *texts* and violent *acts* more carefully later when we discuss how these texts affect the way readers think about the propriety of violence.[24]

Finally, while I am aware that the designation "Old Testament" is problematic in certain respects, I have chosen to use it since I am writing from a Christian perspective and since this designation is the one most commonly used by Christian readers to refer to the first part of the Bible. In light of that, it also made sense to use this designation since the Old Testament's troubling legacy is, tragically, largely attributable to *Christian* readers.

The Old Testament's Troubling Legacy Is Not Its Only Legacy

Writing a book that focuses on some of the most difficult and morally problematic parts of the Old Testament is not without certain risks. Some people, especially those who are generally unfamiliar with the Old Testament, might conclude that virtually every Old Testament passage is terribly violent and ethically unacceptable. That would hardly be accurate. Likewise, given this book's emphasis on the Old Testament's *troubling* legacy, some might fail to appreciate its very positive legacy. The Old Testament is not always problematic, nor is reading it a certain recipe for disaster, one that inexorably leads to acts of violence and oppression. On the contrary, the Old Testament has been a source of tremendous comfort, hope, and encouragement to readers down through the ages. Many people (myself included!) could testify to the positive impact reading and studying the Old Testament has had on their lives. As I wrote elsewhere regarding my own encounter with the Old Testament:

> During . . . eight years in college and seminary, the Old Testament came alive for me and profoundly shaped my understanding of God, the world, and humanity in more ways than I can recall. I came to appreciate how central trusting God is to Christian faith. I learned how dangerous it is for people to create their own solutions apart from God. I witnessed God's deep and abiding desire to be in relationship with people and observed how time and again God tenaciously stuck with the Israelites even *after* they repeatedly messed up. In short, I realized the Old Testament was teeming with theological insight and wisdom.[25]

I regard the Old Testament as an invaluable resource for theological reflection and spiritual growth. I love to teach and preach from the Old Testament because I find it so relevant and applicable to our world. It has much to offer those who want to know more about what life with God is like and who desire to be in relationship with the creator of all things. The Old Testament serves as a reminder of how important it is to be faithful and obedient to God and urges us to seek God diligently as we trust God to guide and direct our steps. Without the Old Testament, my theology would be greatly impoverished and my understanding of the life of faith seriously diminished. Thus, I am extremely grateful the Old Testament is part of the canon.

My deep appreciation of the Old Testament could be echoed and amplified by countless readers across the centuries who have also found the Old Testament to be faith building and spiritually edifying. They could bear eloquent witness to the enormous value of the Old Testament in both their personal lives and their corporate experiences of worship. Some have found tremendous encouragement and solace in the words of the psalmist, and some have been inspired by the Old

Testament's vision of justice. The story of deliverance in the Exodus narrative, for example, has been especially powerful for African Americans and Latin Americans striving for liberation. Others have been stirred to action by the Old Testament's insistence upon caring for the poor and the needy. Still others could speak of how their core convictions about God, the world, and human relationships have been formed through their encounters with these texts. In these and many other ways, the Old Testament has yielded much positive fruit. It is important to keep this firmly in mind, especially when reading a book like this. When we speak of the Old Testament's troubling legacy, we are telling only *part* of the story.

Given the general disregard of the Old Testament by many Christians today, its positive virtues need to be extolled loudly and often. People need to know how beneficial these texts have been to the church and how incredibly valuable they continue to be. People should be encouraged to read the Old Testament and should allow it to challenge their assumptions and broaden their horizons. When I teach the Old Testament to undergraduate students, one of my sincere hopes is that they will have a greater appreciation for it by the end of the course than they had at the beginning. The Old Testament is a marvelous collection of texts, a rich resource that can inspire, instruct, challenge, and convict us. We ignore it at our own peril.[26]

Still, despite all the positive things that can be said about the Old Testament—and there are many—and despite its ongoing value and relevance for the church, problems remain. The tragic reality is that the Old Testament continues to exert a harmful influence upon many people today. Regardless of how much good the Old Testament has done, or how beneficial reading it may be, its troubling legacy continues to have adverse consequences that must be acknowledged and addressed. To that troubling legacy we now turn our attention.