

“Dad, why does Deuteronomy 20 talk about killing the boys and girls?”

My daughter wants to know. Even as a biblical scholar, I don't have a good answer.

by [Matthew Schlimm](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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I recently felt heartbreak when my daughter, shortly after receiving her first Bible, stumbled onto Deuteronomy 20, which commands Israelites to kill all that breathes in Canaan (vv. 16-18). I'm a pacifist, and that chapter is probably the last one I would want her to read. It happened to be one of her first.

“Dad, why does it talk about killing the boys and girls?” As if that question wasn't bad enough on its own, she asked it first thing in the morning, before I had any coffee.

“I don't know,” I slowly replied.

“But you teach the Bible! You're supposed to know this stuff!”

At that moment, I wanted to resign from my job as a professor of Old Testament and find another line of work. Despite her young age, she knew enough to know that the killing described in that text was wrong. I'm very familiar with scholarly and pastoral responses to texts like Deuteronomy 20; I've even written about some of them. At that moment, each and every explanation seemed worthless and unconvincing. What do you say to a girl in elementary school about a text with which you have such a complicated relationship?

One all too common way that Christians have responded to such questions is to talk about the difference between the Old and New Testaments, point out that this text is part of the Old Testament, and then talk about how superior the New Testament is.

I refuse to go that route. I am in love with the document that Christians have called the "Old Testament," and I want my daughter to share that love. Rejecting the Old Testament closes readers off to the first three-fourths of the Bible. It means disowning the very Bible Jesus used. It increases the shameful distance between Jewish and Christian communities of faith—between our theological grandparents, our theological neighbors, and ourselves. Furthermore, historically, this approach has perpetuated its own forms of violence: rejecting the Old Testament is precisely what German scholars and pastors did in the first half of the 20th century, paving the way for theological justifications of antisemitism and Nazism, as Susannah Heschel documents in *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*.

It would be great if Christians could stop using the term "Old Testament." It's not the term Jesus used; he spoke instead about the scriptures or about the law, the prophets, and the Psalms. "Old Testament" is too often interpreted as meaning that the first 39 books of our Bibles are outdated and of little use. I hate that. I only use the term because Christians aren't always familiar with alternatives like "First Testament" or "Hebrew Bible." Plus, names rarely do justice to what they describe. (I hope they don't—my last name is a German word that means "bad, evil, naughty.")

But there is another reason I didn't tell my daughter to stick to the New Testament. The Old Testament is where I learned my pacifism, and the Old Testament says every bit as much about loving enemies as the New Testament does.

One of the Bible's oldest laws says that if your enemy's ox or donkey wanders away, you should return it (Exod. 23:4). The next verse says that if there's someone who hates you, and that person has a donkey that's suffering under a heavy load, unable to move, your job is to set the donkey free—especially if you don't want to! When Leviticus 19:18 talks about loving your neighbor as yourself, it's talking about a neighbor who has wronged you and whom you think deserves mistreatment in return. Proverbs 25:21 tells people to feed and give water to their enemies. It's the Old Testament that dreams of a world free of violence when weapons will be turned into gardening tools (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).

Jesus didn't invent a new ethic of nonviolence. He was simply a really good interpreter of the Old Testament. As he says when kicking off his Sermon on the Mount, he didn't come to abolish the law but to show its fullest sense.

I can't give a satisfactory explanation of why Deuteronomy 20 should be in our Bibles. But I also can't turn away from countless Old Testament texts that have inspired me to love peace.

"If one were to choose a single word to describe the reality for which God created the world," writes Paul Hanson, professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, "that word would be 'shalom.'" He talks about the book of Isaiah and its visions of peace, which include wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, lion and calf, bear and cow all relaxing and enjoying straw together (11:6-7, 65:25). Wolves, leopards, lions, and bears—these predators are biblical symbols for violent rulers and nations (Ezek. 22:27; Dan. 7:4-6). In Isaiah, God transforms the most violent beasts into friends of young, vulnerable animals. Long before I ever heard of Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, or even Mahatma Gandhi, these sorts of visions from the Old Testament formed my identity.

A consistent theme in the Old Testament is that people should trust in God, not in weapons. To see how often this theme appears in the Bible, we need to remember that ancient peoples didn't use horses for hobbies, transport, or farming. Horses were military animals. Before combustible engines, tanks were called "chariots."

God's law forbids the Israelites from having horses (Deut. 17:16). Imagine the US Congress outlawing the army from having tanks. In worship, Israelites sang songs with words like, "The horse for victory? No way! Even with all its strength, it cannot rescue" (Ps. 33:17). Another ancient song: "Some use swords, some use horses, but

as for us, we call on the name of the Lord our God” (Ps. 20:7). (The church should update that song for its own context, replacing “swords” with “guns” and “horses” with “drones.”) Zechariah tells Jerusalem to rejoice over her coming king, saying explicitly that this king will not ride on a warhorse or chariot, but instead will come in peace on a donkey (9:9–10).

The Israelites’ foundational story of salvation emphasizes the foolishness of weapons. Recently escaped slaves, the Israelites wander across the Sea of Reeds like a group of homeless refugees. Egyptian chariots bolt across the landscape in hot pursuit. But amid the muddy bottom of that sea, chariot wheels become stuck in the mire. When the waters come crashing down, armor weighs the soldiers down. Every sign of military strength ends up working against the Egyptians.

In another time and place, long after the monarchy has been established, the Assyrian war machine encircles Jerusalem. Brutal war criminals of the ancient world, the Assyrians appear ready to torture and kill the people of God. Not once but twice, the Bible tells how God miraculously saves Jerusalem without one of the city’s soldiers doing so much as firing an arrow (2 Kings 18:13–19:37; Isa. 36:1–37:38).

I could go on. The Old Testament is far underused as a document that can help us find ways to make peace in the world.

Few things are more contentious today than the question of who has the right to which land in the Middle East. Smack-dab in the middle of Genesis, readers find one of the only stories involving Abraham’s adult son Isaac (26:13–33). He’s repeatedly approached by Philistines who demand that he vacate the land on which he lives. Isaac could respond with violence. God has repeatedly promised his family land, and both Abraham and Isaac have legitimate claims to the land. Isaac, nevertheless, finds peace the most attractive solution. He gives up valuable real estate. Isaac doesn’t pretend that the Philistines’ demands are fair, but he does give them land rather than opting for violence.

We should neither throw away difficult biblical texts nor insist that they’re harmless.

There are, of course, many Old (and New!) Testament texts that don’t explicitly embrace anything like pacifism, and I don’t mean to dismiss them. These texts can be disturbing, but they can also be tremendous resources. For example, the seminary community where I teach was recently shaken when a student requested prayer for a loved one living in sex slavery right here in Iowa. As we learned about

the stomach-churning realities taking place right under our noses, we struggled to make sense of it all. Where is God amid nightmares that never seem to end?

One of the few passages of the Bible that offered help is Genesis 34, which contains an awful story of rape and revenge killing. It's not an inspiring, peaceful, or happy text. Yet it does tell us that at least since the Bronze Age, the people of God have had to struggle with horrendous deeds that no one wants to talk about. This chapter makes the Bible a more violent book—but also more relevant. It reminds us that God continues to work in and through families who have to struggle with these kinds of monstrosities. Religious folk are sometimes characterized as sugarcoating the nasty realities of the world. The Old Testament grounds us in what life is really like.

At times, the Old Testament presents God as violent. Exodus 15:3 calls God a warrior, and the common title “Lord of hosts” could be easily translated “Lord of armies.” How can I worship such a God, given my pacifist commitments?

I find it helpful to recognize that there are some things God is and does that are off-limits to humans. A core biblical virtue is humility, which begins with the recognition that we are not God. Human beings lack every type of perfection: we're not all good, all powerful, or all knowing. Who among us should cast the first stone—or pull the trigger?

Here's the thing: we don't need to be violent, because God will fight for us. Our job, as Exodus 14:14 puts it, is simply to stay calm while God wages our battles. If vengeance belongs to God (Deut. 32:35), then I don't need to take revenge on anyone. My load is lightened. I can take the path of nonviolence, because the emotional burden of retribution no longer belongs to me. It belongs to God. I can even pray that God will take vengeance on evildoers as a way of handing this desire for revenge over to God. The Psalms have ample prayers where people give their anger to God (Pss. 5 and 11, for example). When Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies, there's a good chance he's thinking of these sorts of prayers from the Psalms.

But there are also texts in the Bible that encourage human violence, like the passage my daughter read. While I can explain the meaning of those Hebrew words and the context in which they were written, I can't explain why they should be in our Bibles. Nor do I think I have the authority to overturn 2,000 years of church teaching that Deuteronomy 20 does belong there.

In the end, I stand by my initial response: “I don’t know.” I don’t know why this chapter is in our Bibles. That answer obviously let my daughter down. But I hope that I’m teaching her that faith is a place where questions often go unanswered. I hope that she learns that our job is to have compassion for people who struggle with the Bible, not to come up with apologetic answers that beat them into submission.

The truth is, we’re finite beings trying to grasp the infinite through texts that are thousands of years old. We’re fooling ourselves if we think everything will have an easy answer—or even any answer at all. Maybe these texts are in our Bibles so that we worship God more than God’s word.

Medical doctors don’t have a cure for every disease. Activists don’t have a solution for every social evil. I certainly don’t have an answer to every question about the Bible. Does that mean our work is in vain? No. It means we’re not God.

There are many things about the Bible we can explain, but some things we simply cannot. Some texts are best labeled “hazardous materials” and handled with utmost care. We should neither carelessly throw them away nor insist that they’re harmless. Instead, we should recognize the danger in trying to incorporate them into our daily lives.

I wonder if the Bible itself has even placed some warning labels around texts like Deuteronomy 20. I remember pastoring a church in 2003 and listening to parishioners justify the US invasion of Iraq by mentioning Joshua—a book whose characters implement Deuteronomy 20’s commands about killing. I wish I’d had the insight and courage at the time to say, “I’m all in favor of US troops parading around Baghdad, blowing on trumpets, and shouting. But let’s not fire a single weapon until we see something just as miraculous as Jericho’s walls falling down.” If the Bible is a conversation, then parts of Joshua seem to take the commands from Deuteronomy 20 and say, *Before assuming you have the authority to kill others with God on your side, see if God will miraculously defeat every one of your enemy’s defenses while you do nothing more than embody holiness, make music, and use your voice.*

New Testament scholar Jordan Ryan talks about the “tyranny of application,” the common assumption that whatever text happens to be before us is the one we should apply to our lives. I cringe at the thought of people trying to apply Deuteronomy 20 to their lives. A better approach to biblical texts is to ask, “Are there other texts in the Bible with a different perspective? If so, which text is most

applicable to us in our unique time and place?” Answering these questions makes interpretation a more complicated enterprise. We need a thorough knowledge of both the Bible and ourselves, discernment from the Holy Spirit, and a faithful community to guide us. But as the story of Jesus’ temptation reminds us, resisting evil means knowing which scriptures are most applicable—not just going with whichever one the devil lays out before us.

Last night, my daughter and I opened her Bible together. Wanting to look at some different parts of the Bible, I showed her some psalms I like. With a long yellow marker in her tiny hand, she highlighted Psalm 9:18. Her *Good News Bible* reads, “The needy will not always be neglected; the hope of the poor will not be crushed forever.” I thought of her classmates who come to school in January without mittens, hats, boots, or snow pants. They don’t get to play. They have to stand on the blacktop at recess while the other kids frolic in the snow, build snowmen, slide down hills, and make snow angels. If my daughter’s Bible teaches her that God has compassion for her low-income classmates, then I want that book in her hands—even if some parts are inexplicable. I worry about the impression Deuteronomy 20 may leave on her, but I also look forward to seeing how texts about shalom captivate her imagination.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Violent texts.”