



# Toward a Hermeneutic of Shalom: Reading Texts of Teleological Terror in Peace Perspective

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**W***ar and Peace*, the title of a literary masterpiece by Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, hints at the perception that violent conflict is the natural state of things or at least an ineluctable reality. At best, peace is but part of the natural rhythm of life in which both war and peace, in that order, have their seasons (see Eccl 3:1–8). One knows the meaning of peace by virtue of the absence of war. Such a vision of reality would seem to correspond with what Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology inform us about our long-term history and natural environment.

For most Christians, the Bible plays an authoritative role in the life of the church, whether in a normative or formative sense, even if biblical authority is counterbalanced (explicitly or implicitly) by church tradition, shared reason, and communally tested experience over time. On questions relating to war and peace, therefore, people of Christian faith naturally turn to the Bible for insight and guidance. When we do so, however, we find in its pages what might be described as mixed messages, which invariably cause consternation and confusion. Even in its depiction of God and God's ways in the world, the Bible presents contrasting perspectives. For example, although God is envisaged as an orderly, calm, and indeed

*The interpretation of biblical texts that depict divine violence requires a hermeneutic of shalom. Texts of terror should be read in the light of the Bible's insistence that God is love, an assertion that marks the beginning, middle, and end of the biblical narrative.*

peaceful creator in the opening chapters of Genesis, especially when compared with contemporary creation accounts like the *Enuma Elish*, elsewhere God's creative work is described more along the lines of divine conquest over chaotic forces (for example, Isa 51:9–11; Ps 74:12–17; 89:9–13). Moreover, divine rescue is often associated with divine violence, whether in history or as envisioned to occur at the end of history. This cannot but affect our perception of reality, especially ultimate reality, which as much as anything else influences attitudes toward war—whether as an historical inevitability, as a necessary evil, as a means to ensure peace and security, or as an instrument of supremacy stemming from a sense of divinely ordained destiny.

What if peace is primary, however? What if, in biblical perspective, peace is both our beginning and our divinely intended end? If peace is primary in biblical and theological perspective, violence is an aberration rather than a divinely intended and ratified reality.

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#### DIVINE VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE

Since violence is so much a part of the warp and weft of the biblical record, is it not implausible to suggest that the Bible envisages peace as primary? Not only does it contain stories of violence between humans, as in the case of Cain's primal killing of his brother Abel, but it also envisages God responding to human violence with overwhelming violence, as in the case of the liquidating flood. It also portrays God condoning and indeed commanding what would now be categorized as genocidal violence, as in the conquest stories of Moses and Joshua. Although it is simplistic to assert, as some do, that biblical religion is inherently violent, the Bible is nevertheless replete with texts and imagery that can be appealed to in support of violence and indeed war.

In strictly logical terms, there is no necessary nexus between one's conception of God, if one has one, and one's sense of right conduct. In the biblical tradition, however, the perception of God's nature or character has a profound bearing on morality. Biblical ethics is grounded in biblical theology. In Lev 19, for example, God's inherent holiness is the rationale for the prescribed holiness of God's people. Likewise, the "perfection of Providence" is the basis for Jesus' call for moral maturity, by which he meant that his followers should emulate the indiscriminate love (or magnanimous mercy) of their heavenly father (Matt 5:43–48; cf. Luke 6:27–36).

Ever since the second-century theologian Marcion proposed a severely restricted canon of authoritative writings to deal, in part, with the discrepancy he discerned between the God of Israel's Scriptures and the God revealed in Jesus Christ, Christians have been tempted to differentiate between the violent, judgmental God of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New.<sup>1</sup> Although there is a measure of truth in this distinction, it is nevertheless an oversimplification of the variegated visions of God in the Bible.

Even though no New Testament text explicitly endorses violent conduct on the part of followers of Messiah Jesus, even in self-defense, the biblical bond between theology (our idea of God) and morality (our sense of right conduct) makes the New Testament no less problematic than the Old for making moral judgments about violence and war. This is because a significant number of New Testament texts look forward to what John J. Collins has dubbed "eschatological vengeance," by which he means divine retributive judgment that will both avenge and vanquish opposition to God.<sup>2</sup> Such texts not only hold out hope for God's ultimate triumph over evil but also envisage the means of divine judgment as but little different from those of evil itself. Ultimately, according to these texts, human hope is grounded in unleashed divine violence that overwhelms all opposition by virtue of being greater than other forms of violence.

The prospect of eschatological vengeance on the part of the same God who authorized, empowered, and indeed "inhabited" the mission and message of Jesus of Nazareth leaves one with a sense of what might be called theological-moral dissonance. How could the God whose reign was both proclaimed by Jesus and present in his mission ultimately resort to violent vengeance? Behind the God revealed in what Jesus did and taught, is there a God with a different, darker agenda? Were the New Testament writers and other insightful interpreters down through the centuries wrong to discern that the power of divine love displayed in Jesus' nonviolent response to evil, injustice, and violence is the only means of defeating such forces? If both the resurrection and the ascension of the crucified Jesus demonstrate God's vindication of Jesus and his way, how is one to appraise expressions of dissonant eschatological expectations? Such questions take on heightened poignancy when the realization dawns that the New Testament begins and ends with texts that feature teleological terror.<sup>3</sup> For who can doubt that the church's moral imagination has been heavily influenced by expressions of violent eschatology in

<sup>1</sup>Regarding divine violence in the Old Testament, see, for example, Terence E. Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word & World* 24/1 (2004) 18–28; Fretheim, "Violence and the God of the Old Testament," in *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, ed. Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013) 108–127; Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 21–27.

<sup>3</sup>I describe texts that look forward to eschatological vengeance as texts of teleological terror for two reasons: first, definitive divine violence is foreseen to occur at the end or *telos* of the present age; and second, the prospect of end-time vengeance is often invoked to serve as teleological moral motivation.

the Gospel according to Matthew and the Revelation to John? Michelangelo's picture of the Last Judgment is but one illuminating illustration of this influence.<sup>4</sup>

#### DISCREPANT ESCHATOLOGY IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

For those who take their moral bearings from Jesus, the discrepancy between texts of teleological terror and Gospel portraits of Jesus' life and teaching is both perplexing and perturbing. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, Jesus blesses peacemakers (5:9), commands non-retaliation alongside respect for enemies (5:38–48), and conducts his ministry nonviolently. According to Matthew, however, Jesus also taught that, as the coming "Son of humanity," he would one day return as a violent avenger. At the Parousia, in short, the meek Messiah must ultimately resort to violence. Such a view is reinforced by a surface reading of the description of the rider on a white horse in Rev 19:11–21. Comparing this description with Gospel accounts of Jesus' mission, John Dominic Crossan writes, "The First Coming has Jesus on a donkey making a nonviolent demonstration. The Second Coming has Jesus on a war horse leading a violent attack."<sup>5</sup>

How does one deal with this discrepancy—within one and the same Gospel? Perhaps the first point to appreciate about Matthew's record of Jesus' eschatological teaching is that he accentuates its violent character more than any other canonical Gospel writer. The prospect of eschatological vengeance crops up occasionally in the other Gospels, but it is significantly muted by Mark, Luke, and John. This suggests that although Jesus probably expected—and taught others to expect—eschatological judgment, it might have been Matthew who tinged such teaching with hues of horror. Since all four Gospels agree on the nonviolent character of Jesus' historic mission,<sup>6</sup> but Matthew diverges from his canonical counterparts regarding the retributive severity of what Jesus taught about eschatological judgment, the responsible interpretive stance might well be to uphold the moral integrity of Jesus' historic mission and to discern the theological-moral significance of divine judgment while taking Matthew's end-time scenarios with a pinch of salt. There is good reason to think that the prominence of eschatological vengeance in Matthew's Gospel reflects the sociocultural and religious context within which it was written.<sup>7</sup> In short, both the prominence and problematic nature of the theme of eschatological vengeance within Matthew's Gospel probably reflects Matthew's rather than Jesus' retributive mindset.

If one compares Jesus' eschatological instruction in both Matt 16:27 and

<sup>4</sup>See the painting at, for example, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Last\\_Judgment\\_\(Michelangelo\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)) (accessed August 9, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 218.

<sup>6</sup>I am conscious of Gospel texts that lead interpreters to dispute this judgment and therefore address such texts in a book forthcoming from Cascade Books, provisionally titled *The Vehement Jesus*.

<sup>7</sup>For an overview of scholarly views on Matthew's eschatology in historical perspective, see David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30/2 (2007) 131–161 (135–152).

24:29–44 with contextually parallel passages in Mark and Luke, one cannot help but notice a certain “retributive enhancement” in Matthew’s texts. In other words, Matthew’s version of Jesus’ eschatological teaching is more retributive in its tone. Even more noticeable, however, is that such non-parabolic teaching features retributive violence *far less* than a series of parables within Matthew’s Gospel that contain warnings of severe end-time judgment. Seven such parables are the twin parables of the tares and the dragnet (13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50), the parable of the unforgiving slave (18:23–35), the parable of a wedding banquet (22:1–14), the parable of a waiting slave (24:45–51), the parable of the talents (25:14–30), and the partially parabolic scenario of final judgment (25:31–46). Four of these are found only in Matthew (tares, dragnet, unforgiving slave, final judgment), whereas the other three have parallels or partial parallels in Luke. Of the three parables with parallels (or partial parallels) in Luke, Matthew’s versions are not necessarily more violent than their Lukan counterparts, but all seven parables recorded by Matthew end with violent retribution and therefore envisage God or God’s agent(s) meting out vengeance at the end of the age. Within Matthew’s Gospel, then, Jesus’ non-parabolic teaching on judgment at the end of the age is much closer to the nonviolent tenor of Jesus’ historic mission and message than the content of his parabolic warnings.

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The correlation between parabolic form and violent eschatology is not always appreciated, but it is important for interpreting texts of teleological terror. When Jesus is remembered as warning about end-time judgment in parables, such parabolic texts often envisage eschatological judgment in more violent terms. When Jesus is recalled as presaging end-time events in more prosaic language, however, as in the non-parabolic sections of the so-called eschatological discourse found in Matt 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, the future arrival of the Son of humanity is described largely in positive or non-retributive terms. For example, although the coming of the Son of humanity in Matt 24:27–31 is pictured using the imagery of eschatological battle, no battle ensues and no violence is visited on lamenting tribes of the earth.

Non-parabolic eschatological instruction is no less figurative than parabolic teaching, however. Like prophetic insight, end-time foresight is visionary and intuitive, not empirical-in-advance, so to speak. Nevertheless, the difference between

parabolic and non-parabolic eschatological teaching does seem to parallel, broadly speaking, the distinction between violent and nonviolent eschatology. If this correlation holds generally, perhaps the perception that parabolic eschatological instruction tends to make use of more violent imagery than non-parabolic end-time teaching provides further interpretive leverage for tempering texts of teleological terror. After all, parables provoke rather than preach, tease rather than tutor, inspire rather than instruct, and destabilize rather than indoctrinate. In short, parables invite participation to probe meaning, not least their own.

So, especially in relation to violent eschatology in Matthew's Gospel, not only can one say that eschatological vengeance is largely a Matthean feature, relative to his canonical counterparts; not only can one say that violent eschatology is theologically and morally incongruous with Matthew's own account of Jesus' historic mission and message; but one can also say that, relative to non-parabolic eschatological teaching recounted by Matthew, most texts of teleological terror are parabolic and therefore susceptible to interpretation more in theological tune with the life story of Emmanuel as narrated by Matthew himself, regarding which he is in much closer concert with his canonical counterparts.

Beyond these considerations, is it possible to appeal to the historical Jesus to resolve the tension between moral vision and violent eschatology in Matthew's Gospel? Despite various difficulties associated with affirming this or that about the historical Jesus, I nevertheless lean toward juxtaposing the (admittedly reconstructed) moral message of Jesus alongside Gospel accounts of his eschatological teaching so as to evaluate the latter in light of the former. Especially with respect to the value and validity of violence, the voice of the historical figure of Jesus breaks through the various strata of later interpretive traditions with sufficient clarity to serve as a moral norm for his disciples. In other words, the story common to all four biblical Gospels of how Jesus responded to violence and of what he taught his disciples regarding violence is ethically determinative. As a result, Matthew's depiction of Jesus' violent eschatology may be measured against Matthew's own—but also shared—witness to Jesus' nonviolent mission and message.

#### COHERENT ESCHATOLOGY IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Beyond the disconcerting discrepancy in Matthew's Gospel between the non-violent moral vision of Jesus and his (apparent) expectation of eschatological vengeance, three texts from Luke's Gospel illustrate that New Testament eschatology is not inherently violent, vengeful, or vindictive.<sup>8</sup> The first such text, Luke 17:7–9, provides a window into social relations at the time of Jesus. "Imagine," says Jesus (my paraphrase), "that one of you has a slave who tills your fields or tends your livestock. When your slave comes in from working all day, are you likely to invite

<sup>8</sup>Although Luke 17:22–37 and 19:11–28 may be exceptions, most Lukan eschatological texts bespeak a peaceable hope. See David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 89–173.

him to join you at the dinner table? Rather, won't you order him to prepare your meal and serve you at the table, after which he can tend to his own needs? Moreover, are you likely to thank your slave for his service?" This was how things were in Jesus' sociocultural context. Masters did not lower themselves to serve their slaves.

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In Luke 12:35–40, Jesus instructs his disciples on the need for vigilant readiness for the arrival of the Son of humanity, whose timing cannot be anticipated. To make his point, Jesus uses the image of slaves waiting for their master's return from a wedding party, eagerly ready to open the door at his return home. And this is how the decisive—and beautifully constructed—lines of Jesus' analogy read: "Blessed are those slaves whom the master, when he arrives, finds keeping watch. Truly I tell you, he will ready himself and recline at the table *with them* and, coming, *he will serve them*. If, late at night or in the early hours of the morning, he comes to find them ready, *blessed are they*" (12:37–38, my translation). This is a wildly implausible sociocultural scenario—a master serving slaves, even if they are vigilant. Bracketed by beatitudes, however, Jesus solemnly assures his disciples that the coming Son of humanity might well turn the sociocultural tables by serving those waiting to wait on him. In other words, according to Jesus, we should expect the unexpected from the coming Son of humanity.

As unlikely a scenario as this imagined scene is when situated in historical context (see Luke 17:7–9), disciples of Jesus should probably not be too surprised. After all, the image Jesus conjures up in this parabolic warning envisages the homecoming master or Son of humanity conducting himself in precisely the way Jesus characterizes his demeanor among his friends at his final meal with them. There, in one of Luke's special touches, Jesus first poses the seemingly redundant question about who has greater status: one who sits at the table or one who serves and then declares, "I myself am among you as one serving" (Luke 22:27c). Indeed, this is how Jesus disarms the dispute between his disciples about which of them are the most highly regarded, which only Luke places in the context of Jesus' final meal with his friends.

For present purposes, however, the decisive point is that in Jesus' parabolic warning about the need for readiness, the returning master turns the tables on those waiting for him in precisely the way Jesus characterizes his mission as one centered on service—indeed, non-rivalrous, noncombative, and hence life-enhancing service. Here one detects moral congruence, correspondence, and indeed *coherence* between the historic mission of Jesus and the conduct of the com-

ing Son of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Or, put differently, here is an eschatological text in which the hoped-for second advent *follows the pattern of the first*.

#### TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC OF SHALOM

The difference of perspective regarding eschatological expectation between Matthew and Luke obtains more broadly within the New Testament. What emerges from attending closely to the character of the Parousia or return of Jesus as the Son of humanity is that although the future arrival of the Son of humanity is sometimes associated with eschatological vengeance, such is not always the case. On close inspection, in fact, despite the impression created by the Gospel according to Matthew and the Apocalypse of John, Gospel texts in which Jesus looks forward to the coming of the Son of humanity rather often do *not* explicitly anticipate divine retributive violence. They invariably intimate divine judgment, but such judgment is more often than not described nonviolently. This raises a significant interpretive issue: the nature of divine judgment. There are biblical reasons for the ready association between divine judgment and retributive vengeance, but eschatological expectation in the Gospels, Acts, and elsewhere in the New Testament also provide grounds for dissociating divine judgment from retributive violence. The default setting that divine judgment implies violent retribution needs to change.

Related to this is the prejudice that apocalyptic thought patterns are inherently violent and vindictive. One often encounters the supposition that eschatological vengeance is but the concomitant expression of an apocalyptic vision of reality. Granted that an apocalyptic worldview may—and frequently does—find expression in texts of teleological terror, at least some New Testament texts destabilize such an association between apocalyptic and violence. For example, although theological reflection on the mission and message of Jesus in Mark's and John's Gospels was facilitated by apocalyptic thought forms, such thought forms seem to have been reconfigured under the impress of the story of Jesus and in the process of recounting his story. One such reconfiguration was to dissociate divine action from violence.

Faced with New Testament texts of teleological terror, which reinforce other biblical texts that associate divine action with violence, how should we interpret such texts? Without claiming to have resolved this question, I have adopted a hermeneutic of shalom in line with the peaceful character of Jesus' mission and message, as narrated in the canonical Gospels. In other words, biblical texts that implicate God in violence should be read in light of the image of God constructed by the Gospel narratives of Jesus' teaching and conduct, especially when confronted by the structural violence that culminated in his death on a Roman cross. Since, according to the church's constitutive confession, the peaceful way of Jesus

<sup>9</sup>Here, too, is an exception to the earlier-observed positive correlation between parabolic eschatological instruction and anticipated violence.

was validated by resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand, the Gospels' shared witness to Jesus' peaceable mission and message is, for any who would be his disciples, the definitive disclosure of God's will and way in the world. Thus, the various and varied words that comprise the Scriptures of the Christian church should be read by the light of the divine Word, whose coming into our world clarified the character of God (John 1:1–18).

To deal with difficult or discrepant biblical texts, leading church figures from the early centuries developed various interpretive strategies. Some found allegorizing helpful, whereas others formulated the interpretive "rules" of faith and love. In light of the peaceable mission of Jesus and also in view of an increasing consciousness of the vanity of violence, it is time to add yet another interpretive rule—a hermeneutic of shalom. Augustine's rule of love should have made an interpretive rule of peace unnecessary, but the church has largely been resistant to following in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace.

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What might such a hermeneutic of shalom look like? No doubt it could be described in different ways, but here is one formulation. The first point to appreciate is that the Bible itself witnesses to a diversity of divergent perspectives in which some reappraise others. In other words, the Bible is less like a monologue, in which one perspective is articulated, than a dialogue featuring diverse perspectives, some of which are in tension with each other. Or, put differently, intra-biblical critique is a biblical phenomenon. This is evident in relation to sacrifice and that which constitutes just recompense; perhaps it is also the case with respect to violence, especially as attributed to God.

Second, for Christian readers, the life story of Jesus in the biblical Gospels is central. Moreover, the centrality of the story of Jesus is the consequence of its character as a story of life—a story that affirms life in the face of the forces of death and destruction. As the midpoint of the canonical metanarrative, the life-affirming and life-restoring story of Jesus is therefore the fulcrum and norm of the larger biblical story. In short, the intra-biblical portrayal of Jesus' mission and message is central to a Christian hermeneutic of shalom and hence the plumb line for discerning how "true" other texts are.

Were the Gospel story of Jesus' mission and message an isolated island of peace in a turbulent ocean of violence, it would be difficult to maintain its centrality for interpreting the Bible as a whole. Yet Jesus is incomprehensible apart from Jewish Scripture, and the New Testament both eschews violence at a human level

and emphasizes God's reconciling love and mercy. Furthermore, the Christian canon of Scripture both begins and ends with visions of shalom. Taken together, the two visions in Gen 1:1—2:3 and Rev 21:1—22:5 witness to God's will for the world as a whole. These peaceful visions of how life should be experienced in God's good world not only bookend the biblical story but also cohere at a profound level with the story of Jesus in the Gospels. There is thus consonance between beginning, middle, and end of the canonical metanarrative, which attests to divine proneness to shalom and also resonates with the central Christian affirmation about God, namely, that God *is* love. Beginning, middle, and end of the biblical story thus stake out a determinative canonical trajectory against which texts that construe God differently may be appraised.

To conclude, in Jesus' mission as a whole, various New Testament writers perceived true insight into God's identity and hence God's will for and way in the world. The peaceable mission of Jesus reflects on God. As a result, texts of teleological terror in the Gospels—and indeed within the New Testament as a whole—may be read in light of the conviction that God *is* love and is therefore peace prone. The moral tenor of the historic mission of Jesus in the biblical Gospels is therefore the measure of what is expressed about the character and conduct of the coming Son of humanity. As a result, eschatological judgment is more about restoration than about retribution, more about righting than requiting wrongs. ⊕

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