

## EXCERPT



### ***Flood and Fury*** *Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God*

February 28, 2023 | \$24, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0429-6

Old Testament violence proves one of the most troubling topics in the Bible. Without softening or ignoring the most troubling realities of the text, Old Testament scholar Matthew Lynch addresses violence related to misogyny, racism, and nationalism in the Old Testament, yielding surprising insights into the goodness and mercy of God.

## Be Shocked, Horrified, Frustrated with the Bible

Sometimes the best starting point is to let yourself be shocked, horrified, or frustrated with the Bible. Too often we suppress such responses to Scripture because they seem . . . unbiblical or unchristian. But if Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, felt free to respond in their frustration to God (without censure), surely we can respond honestly to Scripture without fearing loss of faith.

### **Hear it out**

We also need to make sure we've understood the problem correctly. That means looking carefully at the biblical text, including the hard-to-look-at passages. I can't overstate how important this is, and how often readers skim quickly over the text but speak with confidence about what exactly the text is stating. Every time I do this the Bible surprises me. It defies stereotypes. Prepare to be surprised!

### **Let the whole Old Testament focus our attention**

If you're like me, you get up in the morning and reach for your glasses. I can't think without them (strangely, even if it's pitch dark). The glasses bring the amorphous shapes of the room into focus and help me interpret and understand what is in front of me. Is that black object on the ground a giant spider or my sock? Is that my daughter standing in the doorway or is it my backpack? (It's that bad.) The two lenses I wear change the image my eyes perceive—and they do so in a way that helps me see what is really happening. The reality of what I'm seeing doesn't change—so it's not like the glasses rearrange the room magically. Scripture works this way, but we need to learn which texts have that focusing role.

When facing hard passages of Scripture, I've often heard it said that we need to interpret the unclear texts in the light of the clear—so we let Scripture interpret Scripture. But instead of that, I prefer to speak of Scripture *focusing* Scripture.

Here are some of the lenses Scripture offers. First, Genesis 1 focuses our reading of Genesis 1–11 and really of the whole Bible. The Old Testament offers this challenge: "Read the whole thrust of Scripture *this way*, by looking through the lens of Genesis 1, which sits first in the canon because it anticipates the whole." When we do this, we recognize that violence has no pride of place; that humanity reflects a God who delegates and distributes power; that humanity's role in creation is decidedly life-promoting; and that creation's rhythm is oriented toward restoration and not destruction. In sum, it offers a compelling vision of *shalom*—creational and right-relating wholeness—as the ideal.

Second, sometimes you need eye protection in the blazing light of violent texts. The unfiltered and UV-producing command to exterminate the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7 must be read in conjunction with the inclusion of Rahab the Canaanite prostitute (who on the surface embodies all the "snares" of Canaan) in Joshua 2 and 6. You need the Joshua 2 and 6 "UV filters" to understand Deuteronomy 7.

Similarly, the *exclusion* of Moabites to the tenth generation in Deuteronomy 23 must be read with the story of Ruth the Moabitess's *inclusion* in Israel. Ruth tells us that King David is a third generation Moabite! The alternative is to take off the storied-world sunglasses and stare exclusively at violent texts. But I don't think biblical writers recommend that. That's not how Scripture works. The Bible frequently introduces an idea and then circles back around to it from another angle, adding

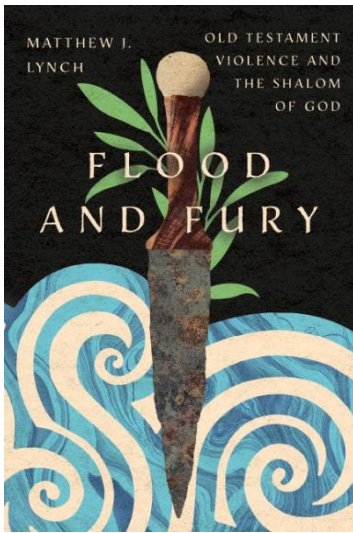


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something important and asking us to think with a whole network of Scriptures that interpret Deuteronomy 23. Noting how the Bible circles back to key themes helps us see in the midday blaze.

Third, some claims about God’s character—what he’s really like—are more central than others. I’ll explain more in chapter fourteen, but to anticipate my argument, Exodus 34:6-7 is key here:

“And [the LORD] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’”

Notice the tension here—God forgives, shows mercy, *and* judges. This specific list of character qualities echoes throughout the pages of Scripture. It’s a *really* big deal! We’re meant to hold this tension but not in a balanced way. The scale is tipped toward mercy. His mercy dominates his character.

In sum, let’s let the Bible do its work of placing violent texts in relation to core claims about creation (that it’s meant to be non-violent), the stories of Scripture (which give us multiple angles on difficult topics), and God (who is fundamentally merciful).

—Adapted from chapter two, “Finding Our Way”



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