Eric A. Seibert. *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Is there a third way of addressing the problem of violence in the Old Testament, one that does not either ignore the violence or justify it? Eric Seibert, associate professor of Old Testament at Messiah College, proposes a third way in *The Violence of Scripture*. With sensitivity he demonstrates that the legacy of violence in the OT is not a matter of dead letters on a page, but a serious matter of past and present ethical concern for the witness of the Church. Accordingly, he makes a persuasive argument that Christian communities seeking to be obedient to God must read scripture in a way that acknowledges and critiques the virtuous violence embedded within its pages.

The book begins with an exploration of violence throughout the OT. The author notes that while the OT certainly upholds a notion of "wrongful violence," as in the case of David's murder of Uriah, it more often than not tells stories that perpetuate the belief that violence can be "virtuous," as in the Sunday school classic of David and Goliath (28-38). Also troubling are the texts where God is involved in acts of violence either directly, as in the case of the drowning of the Egyptian army, or by way of sanction, as in the case of the annihilation of the Canaanites. Furthermore, the structural violence of patriarchy and slavery can, according to Seibert, also fall under the category "virtuous," as these structures are simply assumed and largely unchallenged throughout scripture (37).

Seibert's basic point is that virtuous violence in the OT is too often ignored or sanitized in the church's reading, with the impression that the church endorses virtuous violence where it should critique it (43). If this passive endorsement can be understood as a kind of violent reading, then critiquing the violence, for Seibert, is a way of reading nonviolently.

According to the author, in order to read nonviolently the church needs to learn how to be "conversant" rather than "compliant" readers of scripture (54-56). If we recognize that texts have agendas and that their agendas may not always be worth supporting, engaging texts conversantly is necessary (47). Reading conversantly, however, does not ensure we will be able to critique the violence found therein. Here Seibert proposes basic rules

that should guide readers in ethically critiquing virtuous violence. We should ensure that our "interpretation increases our love for God and others," and that we read with a concern for "those who have been wronged, oppressed, and violated" in order to "be life affirming for *all* people" (68-69, emphasis in original). Any reading that does not result in an interpretation thoroughly informed by these rules should be put aside so we can "read again" (68).

With these rules in place, Seibert looks at the account of the "Canaanite Genocide" in Joshua, several war texts scattered throughout the OT, and a variety of texts that condone violence against women, in order to offer nonviolent readings. He reads these accounts from the perspective of those being violated and harmed, instead of from that of those doing the "virtuous" harming. These readings are especially provocative and share a biblical parallel in the story of the prophet Nathan confronting David about his sin. On Seibert's view, the stories of Canaanite genocide, Israel's "virtuous" wars, and violence against women could be stories read against us, revealing the guilt of a privileged western readership whose history continues to be stained by the colonial project.

Seibert's proposal, while persuasive at many points, should be challenged on the level of its implicit assumptions about the rightness of nonviolent readings. Any method of reading, no matter how *truly* virtuous its cause, runs the risk of being violent to the text and its use in modern contexts, if it is assumed that the particular method being employed is universally valid. Thus, when Seibert states that we must be ready to critique "Israel's culturally conditioned assumptions," we must similarly demand that we do the same regarding the culturally conditioned assumptions of nonviolent readings of scripture (118). His proposal is thus most important and most in jeopardy when it reveals how critiquing the virtuous violence in scripture should itself be an act of persistent self-critique, opening our sure methods and readings to the judgment of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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