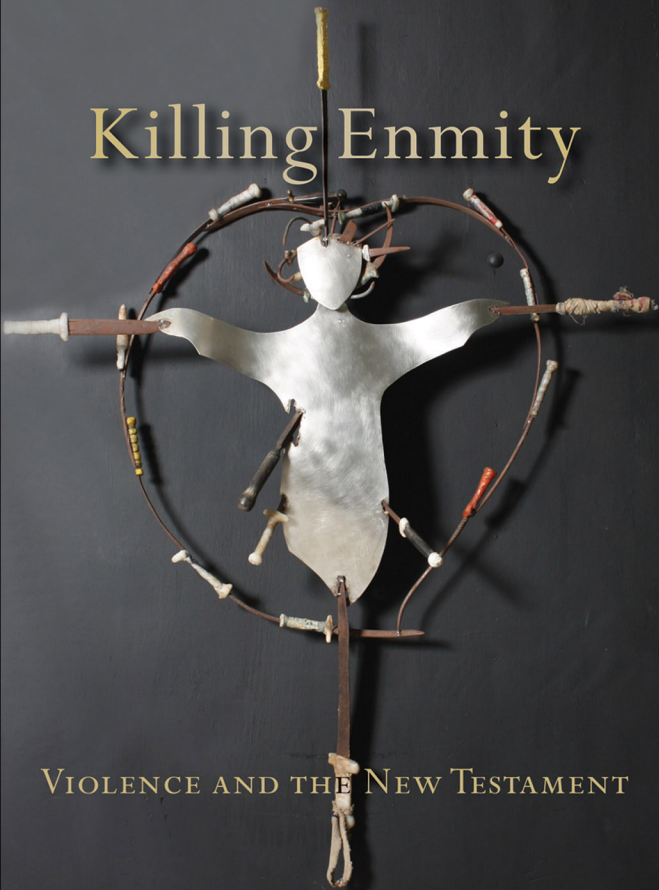


Killing Enmity



VIOLENCE AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

THOMAS R. YODER NEUFELD

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Ephesians 2.11–22

¹¹ Remember, then, that at one time you Gentiles in flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by ‘the circumcision’ made in the flesh by human hands, ¹² were at that time without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he is our peace,
who made both into one
and has broken down the dividing
wall – the enmity – in his flesh.

¹⁵ He has abolished the law in its
rules and regulations,
so that he might create the two into
one new human in himself, thereby
making peace,

¹⁶ and might reconcile both to God in
one body through the cross, thereby
killing the enmity.

¹⁷ And he came proclaiming the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and outsiders, but you are citizens together with the saints and members of God’s household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are together built into a dwelling for God in Spirit.

Translation by Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

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Preface

At the very centre of the first half of the letter to the Ephesians is arguably the greatest peace text in the Bible.¹ In chiasmic fashion Ephesians 2.11–22 celebrates the mending of the human family – enemies, strangers, Jews and non-Jews – as the most immediately experienced dimension of God’s grand healing of all rifts, partings and partitions in a cosmic ‘gathering up’ of all things in and through the Messiah (Eph. 1.10). The core of this text, verses 14–16, constitutes an act of worship, a hymn celebrating Jesus as ‘our peace’.

We should not be surprised to find in such peaceable poetry the image of the birth of a ‘new human’ made up of erstwhile enemies (v. 15). But we might be surprised to encounter violence at the very centre of the creation of peace. There is the shattering of walls that define and protect identities, but that also reinforce enmities between people and between them and God (v. 14). There is blood (v. 13), terse shorthand for Jesus’ own death on the cross (v. 16). We should remember that there was not yet a shred of romance around that instrument of lethal torture and imperial state terrorism. Perhaps most surprising is that Jesus’ violent death is the instrument by which he himself committed murder. In and through his own death Jesus ‘killed enmity’, he ‘murdered hostility’.

We are put before a question we will face again and again throughout this investigation: do we see in this remarkable poetry a way in which the vocabulary, images and metaphors of violence create a space for violence, validating, even enshrining, violence at the core of the message? Or does the presence of such language intend to subvert and finally ‘murder’ violence? This is the challenge we take up in this book.

It is not a straightforward matter to meet such a challenge. Where some see courageous suffering of violence, others see passivity and

¹ See epigraph. For a full discussion of Eph. 2.11–22, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 106–37; Yoder Neufeld, “‘For he is our peace’: Ephesians 2:11–22”, in *Beautiful upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God* (ed. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen; Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies/Scottdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 215–33.





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the willing acceptance of victimization; where some see the urgent rhetoric of a prophet, others see violent threats and ultimate sanctions; where some see a bracing call to resolute discipleship in a violent world, others see an exclusionary and for that very reason violent religious imagination; where some see a loving saviour, others see an abject victim of divine parental abuse. Some might thus be tempted to dismiss the stories and teachings in the New Testament precisely because they deem them violent. Others might be tempted to quarantine troublesome texts rather than wrestle with their implications, or simply to explain the violence away, trivialize its offence and silence those who object to its presence.

This book was from its inception to be an exploration of how the New Testament relates to the issue of violence, with attention to the variety of approaches interpreters bring to the subject. I have thus attempted to resist each of these temptations. I have undertaken, nevertheless, to wrestle with how such ‘texts of trouble’ might, ironically, have the potential to subvert the very violence that troubles us in them. I invite readers attuned to the urgent issue of violence to engage the New Testament with an ear to hear – afresh.



Abbreviations

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ESCJ	Electronic Sixteenth Century Journal
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDBSup</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>MQR</i>	<i>Mennonite Quarterly Review</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament



1

‘Violence’ and ‘New Testament’

We begin our investigation with an exploration of what we mean with ‘violence’ and ‘New Testament’. It may seem obvious what these terms mean, but in actual fact there is a wide range of meanings persons give to these two concepts, and to the approaches taken to them. Given the brevity of this study, the limited number of texts and the limited attention we will be able to give them, this chapter will serve not only as an introduction to the theme but point the way to resources that can help further investigation.

‘Violence’

Reflecting dictionaries generally, the first meaning of ‘violence’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as follows:

The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.

Violence is intentional physical harm and injury. We think of crimes of violence such as battery or murder, or of war, in which massive harm is done to others, whether by soldiers or civilians. To state the obvious, ‘violence’, ‘violent’ and ‘to violate’ have unambiguously negative implications. Even when such violence is deemed necessary in certain circumstances, it is viewed as highly regrettable. Synonyms of violence are force, coercion, abuse, aggression, fighting, hostility, brutality, cruelty, carnage, ferocity, vehemence and many more. The dictionaries point out that sometimes ‘violence’ can denote vehemence of feelings that come to expression in gestures or words, even if they are not accompanied by physical harm, and that ‘violence’ can be used to designate someone’s use of language in improper ways, or even wilful distortion of the words of others, including texts. But intended physical harm is the primary lexical meaning.





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Were violence as 'intent to injure' the sole way it is understood in our culture, this book would probably not have been written. More than once I have had to respond to the question, "You mean 'Old Testament', right?" The common assumption is that the New Testament is generally against violence. Jesus' teaching on non-retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount comes most quickly to mind. However, what counts as 'violence' has widened dramatically, with significant implications for how the New Testament relates to violence.

To illustrate, Johan Galtung coined the by now deeply entrenched terms 'structural' and 'cultural violence', showing that there is violence other than 'direct' violence engaged in and suffered by individuals.¹ Political and economic ways in which society is 'ordered' can violate whole peoples and classes. Robert McAfee Brown likewise expands the notion of violence:

Whatever 'violates' another, in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is involved or not, can be understood as an act of violence. The basic overall definition of violence would then become violation of personhood.²

Such 'an act that depersonalizes would be an act of violence' and might not be obvious 'except to the victim'.³ Importantly, in such a case the determination of what constitutes violence has shifted from the intent of the perpetrator to the one who experiences it. Brown cites Brazil's Dom Helder Camara's notion of a 'spiral of violence', where 'direct' violence is often already a response to 'structural' (economic, racial, class) violence, a notion Richard Horsley has taken up on his *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*.⁴ Similarly, the late

¹ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6/3 (1969), 167–91; Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', *Journal of Peace Research* 27/3 (1990), 291–305. Philip L. Tite would like to add 'sociological violence' to this insight, which he sees as less static, in *Conceiving Peace and Violence: A New Testament Legacy* (Dallas, TX/New York/Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), 37; see also Warren Carter, 'Constructions of Violence and Identities in Matthew's Gospel', in *Violence in the New Testament* (ed. Shelley Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2005), 81–108 (90–2).

² Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (2nd edn; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, [1973] 1987), 7.

³ Brown, *Religion and Violence*, 7.

⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 22–6.





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French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul identifies the conflict between economic classes as 'violent competition'.

The violence done by the superior may be physical (the most common kind, and it provokes hostile moral reaction), or it may be psychological or spiritual, as when the superior makes use of morality and even of Christianity to inculcate submission and a servile attitude; and this is the most heinous of all forms of violence.⁵

These perspectives reflect the issues surrounding violence particularly during the 60s and 70s of the last century, when the threat of nuclear annihilation, revolution and the war in Vietnam established the context for a consideration of the relationship of violence and the New Testament. Was the 'historical' Jesus a 'Zealot'? Did he harbour sympathies for resistance and revolutionary movements? Or was he resolutely anti-violent in his teachings on non-retaliation and love of enemies?⁶ Do Paul's famous words in Romans 13.1–7 regarding being subordinate to the authorities imply he was anti-revolutionary, thus supportive of state violence ('sword')? Or does 'Romans 13' furnish the grounds for resistance to an unjust and thus ultimately illegitimate regime? Is John's Apocalypse a blistering prophetic critique against a violent Roman Empire? Or is it a fevered apocalyptic vision of divinely initiated end-time violence, providing theological cover for those dreaming of nuclear Armageddon?

The Vietnam War ended; the Cold War came to an end of sorts; revolutionary rhetoric disappeared from common discourse in the global North. The focus of 'violence' has since shifted to terrorism, especially when religiously motivated. More, 'violence' has come to be identified not only as deliberate physical harm or injury but also harm done to the environment, through economic inequalities, persistent gender inequalities, racial, sexual and class discrimination, and marginalization and intolerance in general, whether buttressed by state power, culture or religion and, more specifically, sacred texts. Not just 'fundamentalism', but religion more generally, has come

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (trans. Cecelia Gaul Kings; New York: Seabury, 1969), 87.

⁶ E.g. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967). In opposition, see George R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1972).



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under intense scrutiny on whether it is a resource against violence or whether it might not be an incubator for it. There is heightened sensitivity to the potential of religion not only to countenance violence but also to nurture and to incite it. Needless to say, this has brought also the New Testament to the attention of critics.

To complicate matters yet more, there is growing awareness of the role of power, social location and vested interests at work in human discourse. This has undermined confidence in interpreting texts as having a particular meaning and, at the same time, increased alertness to the way texts are themselves involved in the exercise and maintenance of power, often masking the violence at work in them. In a postmodern context, the very notion of authority, of revelation and the claim to universal validity fall under the suspicion of purveying violence, broadly conceived.

If the meaning of texts does not reside simply in the author's intentions, which may or may not be accessible to the reader or interpreter in any case, but rather in the interaction between readers and the text, then a text becomes violent if the interpreter or the reader experiences or employs it as such. This is one aspect of the way in which the shift in determining whether some action or word is violent moves from actor to victim. Clearly texts can themselves fall victim to the use interpreters put them to. We speak frequently of 'doing violence to a text.' We might then also ask whether a text ceases to be 'violent' if readers do not 'take it' that way, or use it that way. For example, scholars might determine a text to be violent in its implications, but not taken that way by a believing community. Should one blame the community for not being faithful to the text's violence?

Not surprisingly, this way of construing violence as very broad has had a significant impact on the question of the relationship between violence and the New Testament. It has widened the texts that 'count' in such an investigation, but it has also opened the door to much greater and more radical critique. As Jonathan Klawans points out, 'the broader the definition [of violence], the easier it is to indict biblical texts and those who, guilty by association, deem them to be sacred.'⁷ In *Violence in the New Testament*, for example, various authors

⁷ Jonathan Klawans, 'Introduction: Religion, Violence, and the Bible', in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (ed. David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 1–15 (7).



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explore ways in which the documents of the New Testament are implicated in the violence of ‘empire’, even as these writings attempt to varying degrees to escape or critique it.⁸ The massive four-volume *The Destructive Power of Religion*,⁹ which contains many articles focused on the New Testament, adds psychology to the mix of criticism, exploring, among other things, the personality (disorders) of Jesus and Paul, the destructive effects of the intolerance in pronouncements of judgement and the violence deemed to be inherent in claims of revelatory truth.

Feminists have drawn attention not only to what they see as the implicit violence in the suppression of memory of the role women played in the early decades of the Church¹⁰ but also to what they consider to be dimensions of the religion reflected in the New Testament as ‘dangerous to [women’s] health.’¹¹ In particular they have focused on texts requiring subordination of women to men, on what is deemed to be the valorization of suffering and, closely related, on the role of the death of Jesus in atonement and salvation. Some see it as a kind of ‘divine child abuse,’¹² viewing the violence of the cross as anything but ‘redemptive’.

This is by no means a concern only of feminists. Walter Wink has made the critique of ‘redemptive violence’ central to his work on the New Testament,¹³ as has the French anthropologist and literary

⁸ Matthews and Gibson, *Violence in the New Testament*; see also, e.g., the collection of articles in Ra’anana S. Boustan, Alex Jassen and Calvin J. Roetzel, eds, *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices in Early Judaism and Christianity, Biblical Interpretation XVII/1–2* (2009).

⁹ J. Harold Ellens, ed., *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Westport, CT/London: Praeger, 2004): Vol. 1, *Sacred Scriptures, Ideology, and Violence*; Vol. 2, *Religion, Psychology, and Violence*; Vol. 3, *Models and Cases of Violence in Religion*; Vol. 4, *Contemporary Views on Spirituality and Violence*.

¹⁰ E.g. most famously Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), and the many studies that followed it.

¹¹ Letty M. Russell, ‘Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation’, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985), 137–46 (141).

¹² E.g. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, ‘For God so Loved the World?’, in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn; New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1–30.

¹³ Walter Wink, particularly the last volume in his trilogy on the ‘powers’, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1992).





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critic, René Girard, whose attention has focused on the sacrificial dimensions of religion, in particular of atonement theories in Christian theology, viewing sacrifice as participation in deep-seated violence endemic to human culture.¹⁴

If one enquires about the origin of violence, the explanations are again diverse. René Girard sees it as emerging from 'mimetic rivalry',¹⁵ in effect from wanting what the other wants. This leads ultimately to murder and then to the various mechanisms to mask that murder and to contain the resulting cycle of violence, including scapegoating and sacrifice. In short, violence adheres to the very core of religion, particularly in the sacrificial and scapegoating mechanisms he sees as central to religion.

Hector Avalos has suggested, rather, that violence emerges from scarce resources and the deliberate restricting of access.¹⁶ With respect to the New Testament, the restriction of salvation only to the elect, or only to believers, thus renders it violent at its very core.

Others propose that human beings are 'hard-wired' by nature for competition and rivalry for what it takes to live, and are thus predisposed to violence. Nature is 'red in tooth and claw', in Alfred Lord Tennyson's words.¹⁷

Jacques Ellul sees violence as reflective of nature, yes, but of a fallen and corrupted nature, an inextricable aspect of the bleak 'order of necessity'. Violence is not only sin but also rooted in primordial sin that pervades the way things are. With characteristic decisiveness, Ellul sees violence as therefore 'absolutely' prohibited for a Christian, as is any justification of violence, precisely because the Christian is 'free' from the necessity of the fallen order.

[Christians] must struggle against violence precisely *because*, apart from Christ, violence is the form that human relations *normally* and *necessarily* take . . . If we are free in Jesus Christ, we shall reject violence precisely because violence is necessary! . . . And mind, this means all

¹⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

¹⁷ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', Canto 56.





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kinds and ways of violence: psychological manipulation, doctrinal terrorism, economic imperialism, the venomous warfare of free competition, as well as torture, guerrilla movements, police action.¹⁸

(emphasis added)

Some have pushed back against such a wide construal of violence. Glen Stassen, for example, wishes to establish a thoroughgoing peaceable ethic based on the Sermon on the Mount, while recognizing the need for constraints and even a modicum of force in the interests of protection.¹⁹ Without wishing to downplay the variety of ways persons can mistreat and abuse each other, putting a mugging and a forceful pulling of a person out of danger into the same category is seen as undercutting meaningful ethical discernment and debate.

Our brief survey on the meaning of ‘violence’ suggests that no one definition is by itself operative in public discourse. While there is general agreement that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament for the most part prohibit *physical* violence, the pervasive presence of warnings of judgement for those who do not live in accordance with the will of God, or who do not confess Jesus as Lord and Messiah, are seen to constitute not just the threat of violence in the future but a form of verbal violence in the present. The clear delineation between believers and unbelievers, between good and bad, are seen to create a mindset predisposed to violence. The prominence of the theme of suffering is under suspicion as valorizing violence, even if the violence is suffered rather than meted out. In the eyes of many the New Testament is androcentric and misogynistic, and thereby violent. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood insist that pervading the New Testament is a kind of ‘*domestic violence*’, that is, ‘violence not only as violation/abuse of essentially good material’ but violence taking place ‘at the very heart’ of the New Testament.²⁰

¹⁸ Ellul, *Violence*, 127, 130.

¹⁹ Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Glen Stassen with Michael Westmoreland White, ‘Defining Violence and Nonviolence’, in *Teaching Peace: Nonviolence and the Liberal Arts* (ed. J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Biesecker-Mast; Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 17–37.

²⁰ Yvonne Sherwood and Jonneke Bekkenkamp, ‘Introduction: The Thin Blade of Difference between Real Swords and Words about “Sharp-Edged Iron Things” – Reflections on How People Use the Word’, in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Jonneke Bekkenkamp; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 1–9 (2).





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These are deeply vexing matters, partly because the meaning of ‘violence’ is not possible to delineate carefully, and most especially because the meaning of texts and their effect is not thought to reside so much in the intentions of the authors as in the interplay between readers and texts located in various contexts.²¹ In his *Peace and Violence in the New Testament*, Michel Desjardins puts it quite simply: ‘Non-physical types of peace and violence cannot be delimited with precision.’²² However regrettable, to work with a wide definition of violence ‘means giving up the possibility of arriving at a specific understanding of violence that is shared by all.’²³

‘New Testament’

If ‘violence’ is a complex reality so is ‘New Testament’, and if the New Testament is complex so are the communities invested in it, and the interpreters serving those communities, whether within the Church or in the academy.

As is well known, ‘New Testament’ refers to the 27 diverse documents making up the latter part of the Christian Bible. While now the second part of a ‘book,’ it is a composite of diverse narratives of Jesus’ life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection, of letters written by emissaries (‘apostles’) and others unknown to us and addressed to diverse groups of adherents throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire, as well as an apocalypse, penned by a prisoner languishing on an island in the Aegean. Written over roughly a century, from mid-first to mid-second century, these documents reflect an astonishing period of change: from a Jewish renewal movement, more

²¹ Sherwood and Bekkenkamp, ‘Introduction,’ 3: ‘[B]iblical, Jewish and Christian vocabularies are not sealed off in hermetic worlds unto themselves, answerable only to themselves, but . . . biblical, Jewish and Christian words, figures, scripts and themes are recycled, appealed to, exploited, banalized, as they circulate as part of ongoing vocabularies.’

²² Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence, and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 12.

²³ Desjardins, *Peace, Violence, and the New Testament*; see the study of diverse conceptions of violence by Desjardins’s student, Philip Tite, *Conceiving Peace and Violence*, 1–42; cf. Jonathan Klawans, ‘Introduction’; John Howard Yoder, ‘A Theological Critique of Violence,’ in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking* (ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation and Matt Hamsher; Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 27–41.





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or less on the radical edges of Jewish society, to increasingly non-Jewish (Gentile) Hellenistic circles of devotees of this Jewish messiah; from rural and small village life to cosmopolitan urban diversity; from the creativity and ‘holy chaos’ of an intensely future-oriented and expectant movement to increasingly routinized and institutionalized life more suited to a ‘long haul’.²⁴

We should thus expect to find diverse dimensions of what counts as ‘violence’ reflected on the pages of the New Testament. It is not an exaggeration to say that violence pervaded the world of Jesus and his followers. Herodian and Roman imperial rule, sparking sporadic resistance, and culminating in the catastrophic war against Rome in 66–70 CE, created an ambience of pervasive violence.²⁵ In addition to the political and military brutalities, the growing disparities between rich and poor, landowners and landless, form a vivid background to Jesus’ parables, for example. The conflict between the rural poor and the temple state centred in Jerusalem is reflected in the final days of Jesus’ life. If what counts as violence is marginalization on the basis of religion and sex, the pages of the Gospels reflect the pervasiveness of such violence as well. The presence in the narratives of Jesus’ life of lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, haemorrhaging women, and Samaritans testifies to what can fairly be called ‘structural,’ ‘cultural’ and ‘religious violence.’ Equally, the landowners, slaveholders, centurions, suspicious and judgemental religious leaders, local kings and Roman overlords populating the narratives of Jesus’ life and his parables represent those in charge of maintaining an order soaked in violence. Violence is seldom if ever beyond the horizon in the Gospels.

When we move beyond Palestine into the wider Mediterranean world, and view that world from the vantage point of believers in Jesus, we see that it too is marked by pervasive violence. Even when the Jesus movement benefited from the order and ‘peace’ the security state brought them, making possible the rapid spread of the movement,

²⁴ These issues are surveyed and discussed at length in countless ‘introductions’ to the New Testament and in encyclopedias.

²⁵ See, e.g., Richard A. Horsley’s numerous writings, including *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*; see also: Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (2nd edn; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); and William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994).





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the violence of that system was never far out of sight. Apart from the hostility and even physical violence early Jesus-believers experienced at the hands of their fellow Jews, Roman authorities also frequently responded to them as a threat to civic order and peace.

To take seriously the way Jesus' followers viewed reality means that we recognize the violence of the spiritual realm as well. The 'air' was filled with violence (e.g. Eph. 2.1–3). Jews and non-Jews alike saw their world to be a battle ground of invisible forces impinging in both positive and malevolent ways on the lives of people. These 'powers' were understood both as demonic and satanic and to be fully enmeshed with the visible forces of governors, armies, nations and empires. Just as a division between 'religious' and 'secular' does not fit the world of the New Testament, neither does a division between 'spiritual' and 'material' or 'physical'. What helped shape such a view was the strong eschatological or apocalyptic orientation of New Testament writers: dualistic, intensely conflictive and deeply imbued with a sense of temporal urgency. Put simply, much of the New Testament reflects a sense of living in a time of war that was about to culminate in the final and ultimate overcoming of resistance to God's reign, and with it the demise of sin and death. That the language of violent confrontation should mark these writings should thus not come as a surprise.

There is yet one more dimension of violence. As stated earlier, the literature we call the New Testament was not written as Scripture. These documents emerged out of the early history of a movement that already had Scriptures, namely, those shared with the synagogue – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Those Scriptures narrate the often violent history of Israel. They also contain frequent prophetic warnings of violent divine judgement, specifically also depictions of God as a fierce warrior, sometimes as liberator, other times as punisher. While some of this tradition undergoes radical recasting in the New Testament, as we shall see, there is no sense of estrangement from scriptural moorings in any of the New Testament writings.

Reading the New Testament as Scripture

It matters greatly how the New Testament is read, also with respect to the issue of violence. It matters whether one is a tenured university





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professor in the Global North addressing the issue of violence from the safety of a secure job and an ample office, or whether the New Testament, including its texts of violence and anger, is read by those suffering poverty and oppression. It matters whether such violence emerges from a world hostile to the Bible, or whether it emerges from within a 'Christian' religious culture. And it matters greatly whether 'New Testament' is simply the label given to a collection of ancient documents or whether they together as 'New Testament' constitute *Scripture* – authoritative, revelatory, 'word of God'.

Many scholars, regardless of their own beliefs, approach the New Testament as a collection of historical documents. With respect to the issue of violence, those writings are then placed into their historical context and analysed with respect to how they both reflect and challenge the prevailing cultural and political context in which they were written. Such study of New Testament texts is common today, even among those who study it as Scripture.

When the New Testament is read as *Scripture*, however, additional and quite different questions are asked. What kinds of views and behaviours does the New Testament reflect, and therefore warrant or demand of the faithful? Are the actions and teachings of Jesus and Paul, for example, violent? If so, are they to be imitated by those who read the New Testament as Scripture? Philip Tite is thus right to ask whether the New Testament 'promotes violence',²⁶ even if that too depends very much on who is reading it, from where, for what and with what disposition.

According to Michel Desjardins, 'the authority given to the New Testament by Christians complicates matters considerably.'²⁷ He has drawn attention to what he sees as selective or even distorted reading of the New Testament by those who see it as normative or revelatory. Violent aspects of the New Testament are typically muted in favour of the non-violent and peaceful.²⁸ No doubt that is sometimes true. The argument is often made, however, that the New Testament is indeed violent, and that this constitutes a problem because people accord it normative force. In his 2002 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, John J. Collins stated

²⁶ Tite, *Conceiving Peace and Violence*, 33.

²⁷ Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, 120.

²⁸ Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, 14.





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that the appeal to the Bible because of its ‘presumed divine authority’ gives it an ‘aura of certitude’ that represents

the most basic connection between the Bible and violence, more basic than any command or teaching it contains . . . The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation. Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world, is to show that that certitude is an illusion.²⁹

True, people do use the Bible, including the New Testament, in ways that are deeply injurious to themselves and others. In some respects this book is intended to be a contribution to lessening the hold of certain kinds of certitude, most especially when in the service of violence. We are particularly sensitive about that in our day when those who intentionally frighten the community do so from a position of moral and spiritual certitude. At the same time, there are traditions such as the Anabaptist and Quaker traditions that understand the New Testament to summon followers of Jesus unambiguously to costly forgiveness, defencelessness and love of enemies – a stance resolutely opposed to violence. In this case a normative and revelatory reading of the New Testament delegitimizes prevailing assumptions about violence as the solution to violence. The breathtaking act of forgiveness on the part of the Amish of Nickel Mines, PA, when their children were murdered in their school house on 2 October 2006, will surely stand as an example of persons who acted as they did because of the revelatory and normative hold the New Testament had on them. As the Amish would see it, it is not the revelatory authority of the New Testament that is the problem; it is the unwillingness of most Christians to heed that authority with respect to violence that is the problem.³⁰

²⁹ John J. Collins, ‘The Zeal of Phinehas, the Bible, and the Legitimation of Violence’, in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Vol. 1, Sacred Scriptures, Ideology, and Violence* (ed. J. Harold Ellens; Westport, CT/London: Praeger, 2004), 11–33 (25–6), reprinted from *JBL* 122 (2003), 3–21; published as *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Facets; Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2004).

³⁰ See Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt and David Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).





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Readers of the New Testament as Scripture clearly do bring to bear on it a particular kind of 'complication', to use Desjardins's word. They will always read it within a highly charged force field of needing to know what the text says and warrants, and what the situation they are in calls for and thus demands of them. They will be often torn between wishing the text did not say 'that' and knowing they need in some sense to submit to its authority.

For some, Scripture functions more or less as command. The challenge then will be which words to obey. It is often not Scriptures themselves but prevailing social and political mores that nudge one or another text to the forefront. For others, Scripture represents a kind of orienting shared memory, part of the tradition that goes with being a part of this or that community. The specificity of words once read as commands gives way to a kind of general gist, which, one suspects, is vulnerable to being given impetus more by prevailing political and social values than by the Scriptures themselves. The normativity of the New Testament as Scripture is thus more arms-length, and questions of violence settled at greater distance from the text. Whereas the first group will argue over what the words demand, the second will argue over whether they ought to be allowed a say at all when they run counter to what is generally held to be true. In short, 'proof-texting' is not the province only of a 'biblicistic' or 'literalistic' reading of the New Testament.

The role of the New Testament in relation to violence is thus truly 'complicated', and not only by belief. No one comes to the reading of the New Testament without an agenda. Those who do not see the New Testament as Scripture, but for whom violence is an urgent concern, will be sensitive to the New Testament's role in the culture, shaping imagination and providing either brakes on or warrants for attitudes and behaviour. That does not answer the question as to whether the New Testament will be seen either as an ally or as an impediment in that struggle.

That said, for the New Testament to function as Scripture also implies that *it*, and not just the malleable intersection between reader and text, has normative priority. That is what gives weight and urgency to engagement with the texts. That is what gives considerable resonance to the arguments over whether this or that text is violent, or whether this or that way of interpreting the text is violent.





My approach to the New Testament

In the interests of allowing readers to assess my own point of departure in this study, I wish to identify my own location and orientation. I am a former pastor and prison and hospital chaplain, and for the past three decades a university professor of New Testament. My commitment to active non-violence spans my adult life, a commitment honed within a church tradition that has made peacemaking a centrepiece of Christian faith and practice. This predisposes me not so much to read the New Testament in a certain way as to struggle with certain texts and historical interpretations, or to feel the pinch, as it were, of certain aspects of the New Testament in ways others might not.

I read the New Testament as Scripture, and thus as revelatory and normative. I take this to mean not that it is a string of oracles, nor that it is a simple matter of taking it ‘literally’ but that, in the mystery of reading, interpreting and interacting with other readers also listening for the word of God, the ‘word’ can become ‘flesh’, in the sense that it finds an audience among blood-and-flesh human beings intent on responding with their lives to what they hear. Such an ‘incarnational’ understanding of revelation also makes it mandatory, in my view, to know as much as we can of the historical embeddedness of ‘the word’ in the time the New Testament was written. This does not settle one way or another the question of violence in the New Testament nor whether it combats or promotes violence. Nor does it prevent attention to the experiences of those whose way of approaching the text might be very different and whose experiences might predispose them to hear it quite differently.

I read the New Testament as good news – ‘gospel’. To say that is not to reduce the New Testament to a set of predictable doctrines or convictions, nor do I wish to mute the diversity of voices emerging from that volatile century in the pages of the New Testament. It does mean that I have experienced the New Testament as a source of *good* news. That does not prevent me from listening to those who hear the opposite, and wrestle with what emerges in their hearing and reading – and to learn from them. It is often in the encounter with others whose experience and perspective is very different that one encounters the familiar in unfamiliar ways, and vice versa. That





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can bring with it the upheaval of estrangement and disorientation, but finally of a fuller grasp of truth.

Does that bias me? Probably. More than those on the lookout for discreditable signs of violence? Probably not. Does this bias provide blinkers against the presence of violence in the New Testament? Perhaps. But might it also be a means by which to sort out the vexatious issue of violence, even if not in any final sense? Perhaps too. I offer the following studies of specific topics and texts as examples of honest searching and listening, as well as offerings intended to aid in the careful reading of the New Testament by those for whom violence is profoundly troubling. It is impossible within the confines of this book to be exhaustive. I have thus chosen a few texts for their representative character as a set of probes or soundings into the relationship of the New Testament and violence.

Much is at stake in approaching the New Testament with the question of violence. The question is legitimate because it is one with which our time is wrestling with the utmost urgency. It is an open question, however, whether it represents the best way into the New Testament. Would we achieve a better reading of the core concern of the New Testament writers were we to have come with the question of peace, as Willard Swartley contends?³¹ I believe Swartley is correct at a fundamental level. Even so, sometimes entering through the back door lets you see things that coming through the front door might not have shown you. That can be very revealing, but also troubling.



³¹ Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–10; see also Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 150.





2

Turn the cheek and love your enemies!

As pointed out in Chapter 1, the relationship between Jesus and violence is complex. The narratives describing his life in Galilee and Judaea are suffused with violence: born to a young mother forced to endure the hardship of a journey from Nazareth to the ancestral village of Bethlehem by edict of Roman emperor Augustus, born during the brutal reign of Herod the Great, fleeing the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem, enduring the virtually constant hostility of the authorities during his brief ministry, Jesus dies the death the empire meted out to troublemakers – a slow death by torture we know as crucifixion.

If we employ a broad definition of violence, we encounter a Jesus who calls for radical repentance in view of the coming reign of God, who warns of judgement on those who do not repent, has fiercely condemning things to say about religious leaders, and acts in ways that seem to invite both ridicule and outright hostility.

However much violence or the threat of it laces the story of Jesus, he is most often associated with the opposite. He is for many an example of non-judgementalism and inclusiveness, eating and drinking with those rejected by proper society. Best known are his teachings regarding forgiveness, ‘turning the cheek’, and loving enemies. Count Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, to name only a few of the recent figures associated with non-violence and peacemaking, have all drawn inspiration from Jesus. History is replete with many more examples, including movements and groups such as Waldensians, Czech Brethren, Anabaptists and Quakers. Many renewal movements within the Church today no longer identified with pacifism were at the time of their beginnings ‘pacifist’, given their desire to be biblically uncompromising in following Jesus.¹ Even those not sharing

¹ See Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T. Hughes, *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1997).





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a commitment to non-violence or pacifism agree that Jesus taught something like what those words imply, whether or not it is realistic to emulate him in actual life.²

As Chapter 1 suggested, one of the realities of assessing Jesus' attitude to violence is that his teachings and way of life are known to us via the recollections and creative narratives of the evangelists, notably Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and to a lesser extent via the writings of the great emissaries such as the Apostle Paul, who were themselves dependent on eyewitnesses and second-hand oral tradition. This means that we have access to Jesus as remembered or recalled by those who came to believe in him.³ This has permitted scholars to second-guess the memories and recollections of those early witnesses with respect to Jesus and violence. Words or actions attributed to Jesus that seem to strike a discordantly violent note are then sometimes ascribed to the tradition or the evangelists rather than to Jesus himself. Matthew is seen as particularly vengeful, Luke as an apologist of the Roman Empire, and John as dangerously dualistic and anti-Semitic, for example. Others are quite prepared to see Jesus himself as violent in both action (the temple action discussed in Chapter 4) and spirit (e.g. Matthew 10.35).

In the next chapters we will take some select soundings in a few texts that have either played a significant role with respect to Jesus and violence or that can serve as representative of the kind of teachings associated with Jesus in the Gospels. It is impossible, given the wealth of biblical literature, the intensity of scholarly debate and the wideness of the definitions of violence, to do more than scrape the surface of the issue. Hopefully these few core samples will spark the reader's own investigation into the issue of violence and the New Testament. The vexing issue of anti-Judaism as it pertains to the Gospels' depiction of Jesus and his adversarial relationship with his contemporaries cannot, regrettably, be given the full attention

² As pointed out most recently by A. James Reimer, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church's Teaching and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

³ The titles of two recent books on Jesus remind us of that 'remembered' quality explicitly, even if it is a mainstay of Jesus scholarship: James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making, Vol. 1; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003); Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002). For what follows see also my *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos; London: SPCK, 2007).





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it deserves. Readers are directed to a recent exploration of precisely that phenomenon as it relates to the New Testament by Terence Donaldson.⁴

In this chapter we will take up the famous texts regarding non-retaliation and the love of enemies, and in subsequent chapters Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Slave, and his prophetic demonstration in the temple, before completing the focus on Jesus with an exploration of the significance of his death for the question of violence.

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The familiar injunctions to turn the cheek and to love enemies are found in two places in the Gospels. The shorter and lesser known of the two, often called the 'Sermon on the Plain', is found in Luke 6.20–49. The longer is Matthew's justly famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Both are compilations of some of Jesus' instructions on how to live in light of the reign of God, quite possibly drawn from a shared written source that predates both Matthew and Luke.⁵

Luke presents the commands not to retaliate, to be generous and to love enemies as one integrated injunction (6.27–36). The command to 'love enemies' serves as a heading for a variety of expressions of such love: doing good to haters, blessing cursers, praying for abusers, turning the other cheek to the violent, and withholding nothing from robbers and beggars. Luke's Jesus sums this up with the so-called 'Golden Rule': 'As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them' (6.31). Reciprocated love is 'normal'. 'Even sinners love those who love them' (6.32). Love of enemies is the exact opposite of a quid pro quo approach to love. Even so, a great reward awaits those who act in such a loving way: they will be 'sons of the Most High' (6.35). Such behaviour is nothing less than the imitation of a kind and merciful divine 'Father' (6.36).

⁴ Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press; London: SPCK, 2010).

⁵ For a recent and thorough discussion, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus; Vol. 4, Law and Love* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 528–31. Note particularly the excellent bibliography of scholarly studies of this tradition at 576–80. In addition there is a large number of commentaries on both Luke and Matthew, as well as on the Sermon on the Mount, that furnish scholarly background to this discussion.





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This is sometimes interpreted as the non-violence of those who have no alternative, given their victim status.⁶ We should not miss, though, that such behaviour is demanded of those who thereby achieve the status accorded kings and emperors. Turning the cheek, lending without control over repayment and, most especially, loving enemies is sovereign behaviour, befitting being ‘sons’ of the Most High God.⁷

To resist or not to resist?

These notes are echoed by Matthew’s Jesus as well. In Matthew’s ‘sermon’, however, the matter of retaliation is separated out from that of love of enemies. Both injunctions appear as the last in a series of so-called ‘antitheses’: ‘You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .’ While as in Luke these instructions follow the beatitudes, Matthew wedges between them and the antitheses Jesus’ insistence on his Torah fidelity and the demand that his followers outdo the Pharisees in ‘righteousness’, that is, in conformity to the will of God (Matt. 5.17–20). Matthew stresses thereby that Jesus’ instructions on non-retaliation and love of enemies are not an alternative to Torah, or a superseding of law, but an ‘intensification’ of Torah, driving to the very heart or spirit of God’s law, even if it ends up contradicting the inherited traditions of interpretation that have grown up around it.

Why raise this point in a discussion of violence? On the one hand, we might see this as rather unseemly competitiveness at Torah fidelity. But for those tempted or taught, then as now, to place Jesus over against his own Jewish roots, including Torah, not least with respect to violence, Matthew is making a critically important point. In his view, Jesus’ stance on violence is *not* discontinuous with Torah, as

⁶ Luise Schottroff, ‘Nonviolence and the Love of One’s Enemies’, in *Essays on the Love Commandment* (ed. Reginald H. Fuller; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 9–39. As many point out, the circumstances reflected in the ‘case studies’ suggest a social location of powerlessness. But the behaviour, disposition and status as ‘sons’ attributes great status and freedom to them.

⁷ I retain here the literal translation of *huioi* as ‘sons’ precisely because it allows us to see the status implications in the attribution. Better to expand that to ‘sons and daughters’ than to replace it with ‘children’.





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Marcion⁸ would insist a half century later, and as many Christians still do today. Matthew is more than willing to show Jesus' teachings as discontinuous with the traditions of the elders ('You have heard it said . . .'). That is, after all, why he shapes them into antitheses in this 'sermon' (compare with Luke 6). However, in the way he presents Jesus' teachings, Matthew wishes to locate non-retaliation and love of enemies at the very heart of Torah.

This 'intensification' is there already in Jesus' teaching on murder (5.21–26). Taking up the explicit command not to kill or murder from Exodus 20.13, Jesus suggests that disparagement of the 'brother' is much like murder and subject to the same ultimate sanction. This is surely as sharp an intensification of the command not to kill as one might imagine, deeply anti-violent in its implications for human relationships, almost unhuman in its demand. It certainly reflects a widening of what constitutes violence in the way it extends the meaning of 'lethal' to include the breaking of relationships through disrespect and disdain.

We observe the same radicalism in the antithesis regarding adultery (Matt. 5.27–30). Jesus makes lust itself the equivalent of adultery, going far beyond our own day in the critique of the objectification of women. Jesus rejects lust as the violation of others and their covenants, even if it is only 'in one's heart' (5.28). A broad interpretation of violence, as discussed in the previous chapter, brings this under the umbrella of radical anti-violence, probably deemed by most today at least as unrealistic as the earlier injunction against 'murder' by disdain.

Coexisting with this thoroughgoing anti-violence is, however, Jesus' intensification, at least at the rhetorical level, of the consequences of not heeding his intensified Torah. What awaits those who disparage and mistreat their kin is the 'Gehenna of fire', a metaphor familiar to those living in the environs of Jerusalem as it referred to the ever burning garbage dump outside the city (5.22). And with respect to adultery, better to rip off the offending body part than to have one's whole body thrown into Gehenna (5.30; see also Matt. 18.8, 9; Mark 9). Respect for the brother and sister and

⁸ Marcion of Sinope was a mid-second-century influential Church figure who proposed in vain abandoning the Scriptures shared with the synagogue in favour of a heavily edited Gospel of Luke and letters of Paul as the new Scriptures of the Church.





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their spouses is to be lived out against the backdrop of divine accounting and judgement.

Should we see this violent language as metaphorical hyperbole? Does this go back to Jesus, or should we ‘blame’ Matthew for this threat? Even if we might credit Matthew with some of the hyperbole surrounding judgement,⁹ certainty of judgement at the hands of a sovereign and just God is simply an unquestioned backdrop to all human action, for Jesus no less than for Matthew or any of their contemporaries. We will revisit this question repeatedly throughout coming chapters.

In the fifth antithesis (5.38–42), Jesus addresses the principle of payback or the law of *talion* (*jus talionis*), deeply rooted in common sense, in the laws of many nations, ancient and modern, and in Torah: ‘life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe’, to quote Exodus 21.23–25 (cf. Lev. 24.20; Deut. 19.21).¹⁰ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns state provocatively the hold the *jus talionis* has on us: ‘It is a pillar of Mother Culture, and formed our hearts and minds through the relentless catechism of family socialization, playground protocol, the popular media, and politics as usual.’¹¹ The notion of *retaliation* reflects a deeply held conviction that wrongs incur debts that must be repaid in order for the wrong to be set right, informing a wide range of practices in the justice systems of nations, then as today, from compensation, restitution, to the death penalty, depending on the offence or crime.¹² It is reflected also in the Lord’s prayer, where some versions have ‘debts’ rather than ‘trespasses’ (compare Matt. 6.12; Luke 11.4).

⁹ See, e.g., David J. Neville, ‘Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew’s Violent Eschatology’, *JSNT* 30/2 (2007), 131–61; Barbara E. Reid, OP, ‘Violent Endings in Matthew’s Parables and Christian Nonviolence’, *CBQ* 66 (2004), 237–55, esp. 249.

¹⁰ It has been noted that Jesus does not include the ‘life for life’ in his recitation (e.g. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 278. In my view, we should see the ‘list’ as representative and not limiting.

¹¹ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation: Vol. 1, New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 55.

¹² Restorative justice rightly distinguishes itself from ‘retributive justice’ but nevertheless retains an important place for restitution, which witnesses to the principle of *talion* in its own way.





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The antithesis to this principle of payback can be translated variously:

- ‘Do not resist (*anthistēmi*) evil!’
- ‘Do not resist the evil one!’
- ‘Do not *violently* resist the evil one!’
- ‘Do not resist by means of evil!’

Each of these translations of ‘*mē antistēnai tō ponērō*’ lends a different nuance to the phrase. Is Jesus prohibiting resistance to evil and evil persons? Many read the text this way, and derive the ethic of ‘non-resistance’ from it. Or is he not prohibiting resistance at all, but rather rejecting *violent* resistance or the vengeful payback, as in ‘resist evil, but not by evil means!’ Those rejecting the former rendering as supporting a kind of passivity in the face of violence clearly prefer this reading. We leave the question unanswered for now, since the parable-like illustrations Jesus now gives might help with the answer.

As illustrations of what it means either not to resist or not to resist by means of evil, Matthew’s Jesus offers a set of ‘mini-parables’:

- If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.
- If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well.
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.
- Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

To refer to these vignettes as parable-like is to point to their evocative and riddle-like character. But what is it that we are intended to ‘get?’ Given that Matthew has organized this into a larger set of antitheses, does he view Jesus as driving the law to its core also in this instance, suggesting an alternative form of retaliation? Or is Jesus subverting the law of equivalency, in effect undermining the broadly held notion of fairness, to say nothing of good common sense? Is he thus departing not only from the letter but also from the spirit of Torah?

The answer might depend on whether we see at the heart of the principle of *talion* in the Torah a *requirement* of equivalency, or whether its ‘spirit’ is to *limit* retaliation to *no more than* equivalency. If it is the latter, then Jesus can be seen as once again ‘intensifying’





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Torah in the direction it was already pointing, namely, to break an otherwise endless cycle of retaliatory violence.¹³

But we should be cautious. While the *talion* commands in Exodus 21.24 and Leviticus 24.20 might lend themselves to such a ‘limiting’ interpretation, Deuteronomy makes that somewhat more difficult. In Deuteronomy the law of *talion* is preceded by the phrase ‘show no pity’ (19.21) in the act of ‘purging evil’ (19.13).¹⁴ Avenging a wrong thus has a kind of purgative function for which any amelioration is to leave the impurity in place.

It remains the case that in a culture of the blood feud the principle of *talion* or equivalency, while not non-violent, serves to break the spiral of violence by limiting the violence to a measure of equivalency. Perhaps, then, Jesus’ injunctions to turn the cheek, to give the last bit of clothing, and to walk the second mile do represent a creative intensification of Torah rather than an abrogation of it. These mini-parables become then examples of subversive responses or ‘transforming initiatives’ to violence rather than acquiescence to it.¹⁵

In numerous publications Walter Wink has drawn attention to the possibility that each of these parable-like scenes reflects a seizing of initiative by victims, by those ostensibly powerless within recognizable and specific contexts of violence and oppression.¹⁶ Wink proposes that with these initiatives, or what Robert Tannehill calls

¹³ E.g. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 324; Reid, ‘Violent Endings’, 242.

¹⁴ For a study of the relationship between Deut. 19 and Matt. 5, see Dorothy Jean Weaver, ‘Transforming Nonresistance: From *Lex Talionis* to “Do Not Resist the Evil One”’, in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (ed. Willard M. Swartley; Studies of Peace and Scripture, Institute of Mennonite Studies; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 38–47. Weaver sees Matt. 5.38–42 as continuous with Deut. 19 precisely because they are both concerned to eliminate the evil from the community, albeit by radically different means.

¹⁵ Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 53–88; Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 89–105.

¹⁶ E.g. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 175–93; Wink, ‘Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way (Matt. 5.38–42 par.)’, in *Love of Enemy* (ed. Swartley), 102–25. Wink has been highly influential on, e.g., Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors*, 53–4; Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*, 63–70; and countless others.





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‘focal instances’,¹⁷ Jesus points to a ‘third way’ between acquiescence and passivity on the one hand, and violent resistance and retaliation on the other.

The first example envisions a person being struck on the *right* cheek, which implies a backhanded strike clearly intended to denigrate and humiliate. The second example conjures up a setting like a debtor’s court, where one with already next to nothing is sued for one of his two pieces of clothing. The third example is one recognizable as typical of Roman imperial humiliation of subject peoples, where a soldier could command a hapless passerby to carry his pack for a mile.

When we recognize the settings (and Jesus’ audience as well as Matthew’s would have immediately), the response to violence or abuse in each of these is precisely *not* passive suffering, as ‘turning the cheek’ has come to symbolize, but a creative, even risky, response. To turn the left cheek toward a right-handed insulter is to assert one’s dignity by challenging the victimizer to an act of aggression that treats the victim as an equal. One needs only to imagine a context of bullying to see that this is everything but a passive response. When you have only two pieces of clothing, and the one has already been taken, offering the remaining clothing to the one bringing suit becomes a bit of burlesque clearly embarrassing to the one bringing suit. Moreover, in a Jewish context in which looking on nakedness was an offence, such an act would have left the onlooker in the position of being the offender.¹⁸ Finally, since Roman soldiers were only allowed to press a local into service for one mile of pack carrying, for such a person to offer to carry the soldier’s bag for two miles would more than likely have thrown the soldier off balance. We should likely see in this a clear assertion of dignity and essential freedom. There can be little doubt that the one offering to carry the pack would have courted danger every step of the way, whether from the soldier or from those suspecting the one carrying the pack of collaboration, as anyone knows who lives under occupation today. In each of these ‘mini-parables’ victims do not behave as victims. Nor do they perform a predictable script of rebellion, retaliation or acquiescence. These

¹⁷ Robert C. Tannehill, ‘The “Focal Instance” as a Form of New Testament Speech: A Study of Matthew 5.39–42’, *JR* 50 (1970), 372–85; cf. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 329; Reid, ‘Violent Endings’, 244.

¹⁸ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 178; Reid, ‘Violent Endings’, 244.





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are clearly ways in which the ‘spiral of violence’ is disrupted if not broken.

Today we call such behaviour ‘creative non-violence’, or even ‘non-violent resistance.’ Wink captures it perfectly with ‘defiant vulnerability’.¹⁹ The characters in these vignettes are ‘vulnerable’ in that they are clearly victims abused by someone who has power over them, but vulnerable also in that by the nature of their response they are deliberately opening the door to further abuse or violence against themselves.²⁰ They are ‘defiant’ in that in doing so they are seizing the initiative, one that has a chance of undoing the predictable scripts of violence and counterviolence. Along with many, Wink considers *anthistēmi* to refer to *violent* resistance in particular, and thus not to the kind of resistance represented by the examples given.²¹

We might then translate verse 39 as, ‘Resist, but not in an evil way!’ While grammatically somewhat clumsy, it is possible, since the dative *tō ponērō* can either refer to whom or what one is not to resist (‘Do not resist evil, or the evil one!’), or it can refer to the means by which one is not to resist (‘Do not resist *by means of* evil!’).²² The problem then is not resistance per se but what *kind* of resistance is to be offered. We are reminded of Paul in Romans 12.17, 21:

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil . . . ²¹ Do not be *overcome* by evil,
but *overcome* evil with good. (emphasis added)

Notice Paul’s stress on ‘overcoming’ or ‘being victorious over’ (*nikaō*) evil. To view our text through this lens has Jesus calling not for *non-resistance to evil* but to a form of non-violent resistance. Importantly,

¹⁹ Wink, ‘Neither Passivity nor Violence’, 115.

²⁰ William Klassen, *Love of Enemies: The Way to Peace* (Overtures to Biblical Theology 15; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 86.

²¹ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 185.

²² The great pacifist and integrationist founder of the Koinonia community in Georgia, USA, Clarence Jordan (PhD in New Testament), renders it freely but consistent with this understanding: ‘But I’m telling you, never respond *with evil!*’ (*Cotton Patch Version*; emphasis added). He suggests that the phrase should be carefully translated as ‘not to retaliate revengefully by evil means’ (*The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (New York: Association Press, 1972), 69). While Jordan has influenced countless peacemakers and activists, his reading is reflected also in recent scholarship: see, e.g., Pinchas Lapide, *Sermon on the Mount* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Willard M. Swartley, ‘War and Peace in the New Testament’, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2.26.3, 2338.





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Wink formulated this very influential interpretation of Matthew 5.38–42 in relation to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, attempting to see how Jesus’ teachings might relate to a setting in which the struggle is between those with power and those ostensibly without.²³

The relationship of these responses to violence is more complex, however, than might first appear. It does not require a particularly vivid imagination to see that these actions as Wink has characterized them can easily become a means of goading to greater violence. In fact, non-retaliation can emerge from hatred for the victimizer. When joining the covenanters at Qumran at the Dead Sea, for example, the following pledge would be given:

I shall not repay anyone with an evil reward; with goodness I shall pursue the man. For to God belongs the judgement of every living being, and it is he who pays man his wages. I shall not be involved at all in any dispute of the men of the pit until the day of vengeance. *However, I shall not remove my anger from wicked men nor shall I be appeased until God carries out his judgement.*

(1QS 10.19–21; emphasis added)



There is no hint that kindness motivates such refusing to pay back. Deferred gratification might be a more fitting characterization. Might such defiant vulnerability even be a form of entrapment, wishing thereby to have judgement fall all the harder on the victimizer?²⁴ Paul’s words in Romans 12 have sometimes been read in this light:²⁵



¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath [of God]; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’
²⁰ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’

By themselves, then, these examples of ingenuity in the face of violence may be little more than the tactics of victims with little power. They

²³ Wink holds Matthew responsible for preparing the ground for identifying Jesus with passivity in the face of violence by, unlike Luke, explicitly connecting Jesus’ words with the issue of *talion* (‘Neither Passivity nor Violence’, 117).

²⁴ One can see this in the ‘martyr theology’ in, e.g., 2 Macc. 7; 4 Macc.

²⁵ There is in my view no *Schadenfreude* in Paul’s words, only a recognition that the ‘heavy lifting’ of judgement is to be left to God. More in Chapter 7 below.





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may be a creative way of taking the initiative, of asserting dignity and of subverting the ostensible power relationships. That is of considerable significance, but it is not yet all Jesus was asking of his followers, as both Luke and Matthew remember it in their ‘sermons’.²⁶

Love your enemies!

In Luke 6 the examples of responses to violence are framed by the command to love enemies (6.27, 35). There is no room for vindictive non-retaliation in the way Luke has shaped Jesus’ ‘sermon’. That is true for Matthew as well, only he has separated out the instructions on retaliation and love of enemies into two antitheses, 5.38–42 on non-retaliation and 5.43–48 on love for enemies. Left by itself, the antithesis regarding retaliation might, as we have seen, be (mis)read as an invitation to another form of enmity – non-violent in the moment, maybe, but not necessarily in spirit, nor in relation to coming judgement. For that reason alone, Matthew no doubt never intended that antithesis to be read apart from the final one:

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children (‘sons’) of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

(Matt. 5.43–45)

The ‘thesis’ contains two parts: love your neighbour; hate your enemy. Along with the primary obligation to love God, love of neighbour was in Jewish tradition the summation of Torah, as reflected also in the New Testament.²⁷ What is *not* found in Torah is any explicit injunction to hate the enemy. Since the previous antitheses all take up a Torah command only to ‘intensify’ it, this antithesis is jarring. Is Jesus (or Matthew) maligning or deliberately mischaracterizing Torah, in the process doing violence to the tradition of neighbour love?

²⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4, 529, 616, nn. 179, 180.

²⁷ Lev. 19.18; cf. in the New Testament, e.g., Matt. 22.37–40//Mark 12.29–34; Rom. 13.8–10; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5.14; James 2.8; 1 John 4.





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The background to this stark antithesis between love and hatred lies not in anti-Judaism but in drawing out the implications of covenantal solidarity.²⁸ We recall that at Qumran covenanters promised not to allow their anger at the ‘men of the pit’ to subside until God’s judgement would deal with them. Those ‘of the pit’ were decidedly not ‘neighbours’ to be loved. Whereas to leave them to the imminent eschatological judgement of God is in keeping with God’s prerogative, to *love* them would be to break solidarity with God. To pledge unremitting hatred to God’s enemies was thus a pledge of loyalty and fidelity to God. Psalm 139 captures this perfectly, pronouncing what amounts to a curse on God’s enemies, precisely as evidence of the integrity of the psalmist’s loyalty to God:

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!

*Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.*

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139.19–24; emphasis added)

The pairing of neighbour love with enemy hatred is thus not calumny against inherited tradition but a succinct characterization of the reverse side of the coin of neighbourly love. In effect, your enemies are my enemies; you can count on me! ‘Neighbour’, as understood in Leviticus 19, means ‘fellow member of the covenant community’ – one of ‘us’. Enemies are those who threaten that community of solidarity,

²⁸ See, e.g., Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4, 532–9. How dissimilar Jesus’ terse command to ‘love enemies’ is to the wisdom of his age, whether within or outside the Jewish community, is debated. Meier insists on its uniqueness, whereas others parse such love as kind treatment and non-retaliation, and thus find many parallels. See, e.g., Klassen, *Love of Enemies*; PHEME PERKINS, *Love Commands in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1982), 28–38.





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whoever they are.²⁹ It is unlikely that such a pairing of love and hatred would have shocked Jesus' or Matthew's contemporaries. What might well have shocked them is Jesus' call to love not just neighbours but enemies, those who threaten the very bonds 'neighbour' signifies.

Matthew's Jesus compounds the shock by stating that such strange love is required of all those who would be 'sons of [their] father in heaven' (5.45).³⁰ The Wisdom tradition of Israel is close at hand. The just or the righteous (Heb. *tzaddik*; Gk *dikaïos*)³¹ are true to the covenant with God, obey the will of God, most especially as expressed in Torah. They keep their distance from injustice or unrighteousness, and thus also from the unjust. In doing so, they show themselves to be 'sons of God' (e.g. Wisd. 2.18).³² Covenant loyalty, living in keeping with God's will, Jesus insists surprisingly, requires the imitation of a God who loves enemies. This is thus nothing less than 'love turned inside out', covenant solidarity directed toward enemies.

The wisdom character of this teaching is also shown in the way in which creation is drawn into this love. God *makes* the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5.45). The fact that on any given day that which makes life possible is lavishly bestowed on those who threaten that very life with violence and oppression is nothing other than divine love for God's rebellious and often violent creatures. The dawn of each new day is, in the light of the pervasiveness of injustice, oppression and violence, nothing less than a love that risks being mistaken for impunity on the part of the violent or callousness on the part of their victims. But it is a way of deliberately keeping the future open for turning from violence

²⁹ Richard Horsley parses 'enemy' as the hostile member of the local community ('Ethics and Exegesis: "Love Your enemies" and the Doctrine of Non-violence', *JAAR* LIV/1 (1986), 3–32 (22–4)); Weaver identifies enemies as hostile fellow Jews ('Transforming Nonresistance', 52). I agree with Barbara Reid ('Violent Endings', 245–6), etc., that the plural is to be taken as inclusive rather than limiting. 'Enemies' might be the neighbourhood bully, hostile and persecuting religious authorities, but also imperial overlords and their enforcers.

³⁰ Recall that in the beatitudes it is peacemakers who are called 'sons of God' (Matt. 5.9).

³¹ See especially the figure of the 'just' in Wisd. 2—5 and the Servant in Isa. 53 on which it is based. See also Gottlob Schrenk, 'δικη, κτλ.', *TDNT* 2.182–91.

³² Interestingly, the *dikaïos* is identified in the Wisdom of Solomon as 'son of God' (2.18), an identification that is reflected in the words of the centurion when looking on the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Mark has him referring to Jesus as 'a son of God' (Mark 15.39//Matt. 27.54), Luke as a 'just one' (*dikaïos*; Luke 23.47).





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to love, for true repentance and reconciliation. To love enemies is thus to imitate such a ‘father in heaven’ as ‘sons’ (and daughters) of such a scandalously loving God.

This antithesis, and with it the antitheses as a whole, ends with the imperative to ‘be perfect (*teleios*) as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (5.48). Luke’s parallel in 6.36 reads: ‘Be merciful (*oiktirmōn*), just as your Father is merciful!’ Is Matthew altering mercy into a demand for perfection? No one doubts that it is possible for persons to be merciful. But perfect?

Teleios is typically translated as ‘perfect’ but would more likely in the Aramaic have had overtones of wholeness or completeness.³³ But even that does not fully mitigate the shock. Wisdom of Solomon 11 and 12, a relatively contemporaneous Jewish wisdom writing, provides a glimpse at the close relationship between mercy and perfection.

11.23 *But you are merciful (eleeis) to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent.*

24 For you love all things that exist,
and detest none of the things that you have made,
for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.

...

26 You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living.

...

12.16 For your strength is the source of righteousness,
and *your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.*

17 For you *show your strength when people doubt the completeness* (or ‘perfection’ *teleiōtēs*)³⁴ *of your power*, and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.

18 Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance (*pheidō*) you govern us;³⁵ for you have power to act whenever you choose.

19 Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous [or the just] must be kind,

³³ Deut. 18.13 demands that the people entering the land be *teleios*, thus having overtones of ‘holy’ (Hays, *Moral Vision*, 328).

³⁴ Compare ‘*teleios*’ in Matt. 5.48.

³⁵ A more slavish translation of the Greek reflects the relationship of sovereignty to mildness and patience more clearly: ‘But/and controlling things (*despozō*) with power, you judge with clemency (*epieikeia*), and with all restraint (*pheidō*) you rule us, for you do whatever you wish.’





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and you have filled your children (lit. 'sons') with good hope,
because you give repentance for sins.

(Wisd. 11.21–26; 12.16–19; emphasis added)

Enemy love is 'perfection', in that it seeks repentance and restoration of creation; it is 'mercy', in that it creates the space for repentance.³⁶ Moreover, by linking enemy love to 'sonship', Matthew makes it clear that it is the exercise not of victimhood but of sovereignty and power, however much, as in the case of the Messiah Jesus, it looks like powerlessness vis-à-vis violence.

We return briefly to the previous antithesis in Matthew 5.38–42. Along with Wink and many others we earlier viewed the parable-like examples of responses to violence as 'focal instances' of 'defiant vulnerability', creative strategies intended to take the initiative away from victimizers, and thus break the cycles and spirals of violence. Such a reading comports well with an activist understanding of peace-making. But when read in close connection to the command to love enemies in 5.43–48, it becomes apparent that *by itself* such a reading is not complete.

First, love is not the same as strategy or tactic, as much as they might serve as love's devices. Non-retaliation, even non-violence, is not the same thing as love, as much as love might well demand such. True, love is not primarily an emotion or 'feeling' but it is creativity driven by a deep and persistent desire to see good for the other, including the enemy, regardless of whether it is reciprocated.

Second, such love is not only characterized by what it *does* but also by what it might *not* do, that is, by its patience, its forbearance, by keeping the future open in a way that looks maddeningly passive vis-à-vis violence, and might in fact be taken as abject weakness by the violent. Enemy love does surely have an objective or goal, namely, repentance and then reconciliation, and thus a transformation of the relationship.³⁷ Such patient love is both hopeful and scandalously

³⁶ For a fuller discussion of the close relationship between Wisdom and Solomon and our present text, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, 'Power, Love, and Creation: The Mercy of the Divine Warrior in the Wisdom of Solomon', in *Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible* (ed. Ted Grimsrud and Loren L. Johns; Millard Lind Festschrift; Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 1999), 174–91.

³⁷ E.g. Schottroff, 'Non-violence', 14, 23. Meier and others disagree that there is any quid pro quo to this love (*Marginal Jew*, 4, 530 and literature cited there).





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non-coercive, however, as is implied in the use of sun and rain as metaphors for enemy love (Matt. 5.45). It is risky in the extreme, in that it opens up a space violence might fill. Hence the frequent charge of moral irresponsibility. Interestingly, whereas today it is the violence of judgement and the imagery of a forcefully intervening God that causes offence, in the Bible itself it is at least as often the patience and forbearance of God in view of injustice and violence that puzzles and enrages victims. The urgent question of the martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6.10 – ‘How long, O Lord?’ – echoes a theme that pervades the Scriptures. Matthew 5, as also Wisdom 11 and 12, explain this as the love of a creator for errant creation, providing yet another day for ‘turning’, for repentance from violence and enmity.³⁸

By its very nature, however, patience has its limit, even as that limit remains hidden in the mystery of God’s love. Matthew may well stress eschatological judgement with a violence that many scholars do not wish to attribute to Jesus,³⁹ but at no point is it ever questioned anywhere by anyone in the New Testament, including specifically also in the Sermon on the Mount, as we see in the antitheses on hatred and adultery (5.22, 30), that at the ‘end’ everyone will face the judge. We will encounter this apparent conundrum again. But it is mercy, fuelled by love, and not non-violence that informs enemy love. And mercy is unintelligible apart from judgement. It is that which gives love of enemies its edge in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain. Love destabilizes any systems or rigid expectations, whether violent or non-violent, anchoring the treatment of the enemy in a much deeper and more resilient and at the same time pliable place. It is love for all, including enemies, that risks all by creating the space (sun and rain) to exercise the creativity (cheek, shirt, second mile and open wallet) with which to ‘kill’ enmity.

To be sure, there is much teachable wisdom to be garnered in the practice of such creativity. Witness the non-violent liberation movements, conflict transformation initiatives and peace study programmes. While love gives rise and sustains a great deal of this creativity, love of enemies is neither constrained by nor satisfied with the practical wisdom of tactics and strategies, and will persist even when those

³⁸ 2 Pet. 3.8–10 reflects this sovereign patience that can be most trying for those yearning for liberation from violence.

³⁹ Neville, ‘Toward a Teleology of Peace’, 131–61.





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practices have failed ‘this time’. As Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 13, love is beyond a calculus of success. The love of enemies, as we will see later, is even willing to be defeated by those enemies, to the point of crucifixion, if that is what it takes to reconcile with them, as Paul also makes clear in Romans 5.10 (more on that in Chapter 5). Put bluntly, the love of enemies cannot be separated from suffering and, finally, the cross.

Third, such vulnerability is chosen with full confidence in the vindication of God. As Luke 6.35 reminds readers, a great, if unsought, reward awaits lovers of enemies. This conviction is deeply ingrained in the paradigmatic figure of the ‘just’ or ‘righteous one’. In choosing to remain faithful to God’s will, the just person is deliberately vulnerable, ‘turning his cheek to the smiter’ (Lam. 3.30), like a ‘lamb that is led to the slaughter’ (Isa. 53.7). It is not difficult to see the degree to which this paradigm provides the lens through which evangelists and apostles view Jesus. However, as Habakkuk 2.4 states: ‘The just will live by faith’, both by his or her own faithfulness and trust in God, as the Hebrew has it, and by the faithfulness of God, as the LXX has it.⁴⁰ The beatitudes in both Luke (6.20–23) and Matthew (5.3–12) reflect this paradigmatic suffering of the just, as they do a God whose faithfulness both provides a model for their chosen vulnerability as well as a promise of a new future without violence.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children (‘sons’) of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5.9–12)

Biblically such deliberate vulnerability and willing suffering thus only makes sense in the light of divine vindication, even when that vindication is understood eschatologically as judgement and resurrection. There is hope but no guarantee that turning the cheek, taking off one’s last bit of clothing, or walking the forbidden mile will subvert

⁴⁰ The verse is cited in Rom. 1.17; Gal. 3.11; Heb. 10.38.





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and end the cycle of violence. There is hope but no guarantee that loving enemies will kill enmity. To take a vindicating God out of the picture as a relic of violence transforms these parabolic actions from expressions of patient and vulnerable love into tactics that have to 'work,' which can and must be abandoned when they do not.

Viewed in this light, the translation 'Do not resist the evil one!' is not a mistake. It is highly regrettable that English cannot retain the ambiguity of the Greek, one that leaves the reader no secure place against either the summons to patient suffering (*non-resistance*) or the call to creative subversion (*non-violent resistance*).⁴¹ Both alternatives are inadequate by themselves. It is love that keeps such a stance from degenerating into passivity. It is love that gives scandalous elasticity to patience, and charges such patience with hope and the readiness to suffer rather than to inflict suffering. It is love, and not a commitment to the superior practicality of non-violence, that is willing to risk the disappointment represented by the cross, in the knowledge, gained after Good Friday, that even that calamity can serve, in the ingenuity of the divine peacemaker, to bring about salvation for the enemies (Rom. 5; Eph. 2).⁴²

Fourth, the instruction to love the enemy is so general as to include all enemies. However, as cheek, shirt, mile and wallet indicate, it is always also so specific as to include all enemies, from neighbourhood and church to empire. There is no enmity in which the sons and daughters of God might find themselves in which love is not to be given full reign. At the same time, the terseness of Jesus' command and the parable-like nature of the 'case studies' make Jesus' teaching ill suited for ethical casuistry. Such casuistry has too often allowed Christians to know ahead of time where to draw lines for when such deliberate vulnerability of love is *not* or *no longer* to be practised.⁴³

We ask then, finally, how this tradition of non-retaliation and enemy love relates to violence. Our assessment is ambiguous. It depends on who is doing the reading and interpretation. On the one hand,

⁴¹ Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, 'Resistance and Nonresistance: The Two Legs of a Biblical Peace Stance', *Conrad Grebel Review* 21 (2003), 56–81.

⁴² Klassen, *Love of Enemies*, 88.

⁴³ Richard Hays conveniently summarizes the evasion techniques employed in the Christian tradition to slip out from under Jesus' love of enemies command (*Moral Vision*, 320). The long history of justified violence since at least Augustine finds repeated if sometimes reluctant defenders among Christian ethicists.





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when divorced from enemy love, our texts can underwrite forms of shaming or goading to further violence or encourage exposure of the adversary or enemy to the anticipated violence of final judgement. On the other hand, the strategies implied by the parabolic examples can be examples of creative non-violence, and have spawned a great deal of courageous and creative non-violent engagement for peace and justice. They become instances of violence subversion and an invitation to reconciliation when exercised by a love that is deliberately vulnerable and risk-taking in hopes of ‘killing enmity’. But that deliberate ‘non-resistant’ stance is precisely what opens it to the charge of leaving the door open to yet more violence. Perhaps the most famous case illustrating this conundrum is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, as author of the *Cost of Discipleship*, nevertheless participated in the plot to murder Hitler.

The practical challenges of such enemy love are *necessarily* great, since it is *enemies* who are loved – enemies who are seldom on the lookout for opportunities for reconciliation. It thus remains *necessarily* an open question as to whether enemy love reduces violence or opens space for it. The answer will be different for those experiencing violence at the hands of the powerful and the callous, and for those for whom violence is readily at hand in the exercise of social responsibility.⁴⁴ The moment Jesus’ teaching went beyond the Galilean neighbourhood and headed for Jerusalem, and then beyond that into the empire, and over time into the palace itself, the summons to love ‘our’ enemies would need to be heard again and again in relation to new specific contexts of violence. Just so, as ‘bizarre’ as the mini-parables were in Jesus’ and then in Matthew’s and Luke’s settings, so they must continue to be. Jesus’ instructions, regardless of whether one is hearing them as a migrant worker or as a president, will always have about them a maddening mix of a counter-cultural and counter-intuitive ideal and a demand to practise such love in relation to real enemies. It is an ethic that cannot be divorced from confidence in a just and merciful God whose reign will be asserted in the end.

⁴⁴ For example, even from within the pacifist traditions there are those in the wake of events such as the Rwanda genocide who urge the adoption of the doctrine of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ vulnerable populations, or who make room for the paradigm of policing rather than war as a way of exerting limited force in the interests of protection and public order. E.g. Gerald W. Schlabach, ed., *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

