

Webinar
Understanding verses/texts about WAR and VIOLENCE
in Bible and Qur'an

Dear colleagues and participants of this webinar,

First of all, thank you for inviting me to contribute to this special meeting.

I want to start with a quote from Psalm 139. A Psalm very much loved by many people because it sings about the presence and faithfulness of God in the writer's life. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me!" It is a hymn that suddenly takes a turn that is incomprehensible to many. We read from verse 19:

¹⁹ Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!
O men of blood, depart from me!
²⁰ They speak against you with malicious intent;
your enemies take your name in vain.[b]
²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
²² I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies.

It is language that evokes great resistance in the ears of contemporary believers. We prefer to skip the verses. I remember an elderly woman in my first congregation who had read the entire Bible several times in her life. But now she had to admit she couldn't do it anymore. She stumbled over the stories full of violence and blood. Over laws and punishments. Over destruction willed by God. So as not to lose her faith she stopped reading. An interesting question is why she did not feel such great resistance when she read the gruesome texts earlier. But I'll come back to that later. The crucial question is what we do with holy stumbling texts about war and violence.

Misunderstandings

There is sometimes the bizarre idea in the Christian world – for convenience's sake I call it this way – that the Koran is filled with barbaric texts full of hatred and calls to violence, while the Bible is seen as a civilized book in which no blood flows and God has clean hands. This idea can only exist if one does not know the holy books or if one only allows the sweet and beneficent texts of the Bible. The quote from Psalm 139 is one of many examples of hard stumbling texts. The story of Noah tells how the whole world drowns in the flood with which God washed the creation clean. And what about the story of Moses who frees the people from slavery in Egypt. God punishes the land with ten plagues. The tenth plague is the death of every firstborn son of Egypt. And Pharaoh's armies will later drown in the Reed Sea. When the people of Israel enter the Promised Land after forty years of wandering, the city of Jericho forms a major obstacle. God commands seven ram's horns (shofars) and seven priests with the ark of the covenant to walk around the city walls of Jericho for six days. The seventh day they have to make seven rounds. Then the people must erupt in screams and the walls will tumble. All the inhabitants of Jericho

must be slaughtered, men and women, children and the elderly, and all livestock. And I can tell many more stories of war and violence sanctioned by of the Eternal One.

Another misconception is that there is a difference between the God of the Old Testament, i.e. the Jewish Tanakh, and the God of the New Testament. Jesus was fully Jewish, and the evangelists go out of their way to avoid any semblance of a break with the past. For them, Jesus is not a new message but fulfilment of all that is written in the old holy scriptures. The God of the Jews is also the God of Jesus. The New Testament also contains harsh words over which we stumble. Jesus says in the Gospel according to Matthew (10:34-36):

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

And in the New Testament we hear how Ananias and Sapphira drop dead when it is comes to light that they have not fully shared their possessions with the congregation. As if punished by God.

Just as the New Testament contains stories of violence, the Old Testament is filled with calls to love and justice. The Law of Moses almost incessantly calls to look after the widows and the orphans and the strangers in our midst.

In summary: stumbling texts can be found everywhere. But how to deal with them?

No vacuum

The writers of the sacred texts did not live in a vacuum. Time and context guide the pen and colour the stories. It is believed that the first five books of the Bible were put to paper during the time of the Babylonian Exile. It was often a written record of a long oral tradition. The aim was not only to record the history and identity of the people, but also to speak to the people in this particular situation of crisis. In the stories of the past one found answers for the present. The readers also did not read the texts openly, but through the lens of their time, of their situation, of their personal lives.

We also take our whole life with us in reading the sacred texts. A great many elements determine how the words speak to us. Sometimes it is simply our mood of that day. But often one reads as part of a certain group. If one lives in progressive circles ones language differs from conservative tongue. When one is member of an evangelical congregation one reads a Bible verse differently than when one is member of a liberal church. Ones preference for Koran verses is also partly determined by the circles in which one lives. In the various congregations that I have served, people knew and sang different Psalms. This was not only a matter of taste, but also a matter of theological points of view.

An important element that shapes our reading is also whether or not an acute crisis is felt. Our language also adapts to the times and situation. Now I come back to the old woman who could no longer read the Bible. She witnessed the Second World War. The Netherlands were occupied. The Nazis and their horrific regime were soon seen as the work of the devil. At that time people chose different psalms than we would choose now in time of peace. When caught in threat and living in occupied territory, the stumbling

texts of war and violence resonate better. In such times one wants God to strike down the enemy inexorably. In The Book of Revelation the writer John describes the great final battle between good and evil, between God and the devil. Not without reason, this book was written in a time of foreign domination and a constantly felt threat.

In every time and every situation, sacred texts will be read differently or one will be passed over. When extremists use sacred texts for legitimizing oppression and terror, this tells us nothing about those texts. It tells us about the situation in which extremism flourishes. It makes no difference if they use Jewish, Christian or Islamic sacred texts. The situation can be the threat of losing one's identity. To protect the last remnants against the evil world, religious laws will be put on people's shoulders like weighty dogmas. The situation also can be the war in which the pain and grief are channelled into a sacred purpose. It can also be the hopelessness in a society where justice is reserved only for the rich and a desire grows to overthrow order with terror in the name of God or Allah. There can be so many causes. But in my opinion it is never the sacred text that calls for war or violence, but the person who reads the text in his or her situation.

Images of God

The Bible contains laws that say, for example, that we should stone adulterous women or men who have sex with each other. Luckily we don't do this. That's not just a matter of civilization. It also a matter of how we see God. Is He a God of wrath or a God of love? When I read the sacred texts, I meet a God who creates life, who liberates, who cares like a shepherd, who saves, who forgives, who is faithful to people. He does not seek the death of men, but life. He is not only my God, but Lord of all the world and Father of all men. As a believer, this determines my attitude towards creation and its inhabitants. God's love goes out to every person. Even to those who err or sin. Even to those who do not want to hear his name. God won't let go.

What do your actions say about God? That is the question I constantly ask myself. But also a question that comes to mind when I see discrimination against women and homosexuals. Is that what God asks of you? Or when people kill others for their so-called disbelief. Or when suicide bombers blow themselves up in the midst of many innocents in the name of any god. What does that say about your god? Does He need you as judge and executioner? No religious texts call for death and destruction. Whoever reads that in them damages and insults God.

What to do with stumbling texts

When we read the Bible, we can conveniently skip the stumbling texts. That would be a pity because even these texts can speak to us. Also in our time. But how does one read them? First of all, we must recognize that these are religious texts. The Bible is not a history book and does not intend to be such. The stories do not consist of passing on historical facts but want to tell the religious community something different: what is truth, what is of value. Everything in the Holy Scriptures focuses on the good that God wants to give us: living on earth in freedom, peace, joy, love and justice. We humans are his allies in recreating this world. Our goal is not a life in paradise after we die. Our goal is a heaven on earth for every person.

That's a struggle. A battle within oneself. Does one want to belong to a dead existence or does one choose the new life. An eternal life, life with eternal value. That can be a considerable battle with yourself, with human nature that frequently gets the best of us. And with that inner struggle in my mind, I read the many stories that I find difficult. Not only to find direction for myself but also to find direction for the community.

When I read about the death of the firstborn of Egypt, it is a promise that God will not let evil bear fruit. When the chains are broken from slavery, that is my own liberation to stand in freedom in this society that constantly wants to bind me too. When Jericho rigorously disappears from earth, it tells me that I will not enter the Promised Land without clearing obstacles in me. Many of the stories teach me that half choices are no choices. If I want love, I'll have to live love. If I want a heaven, I must act as if heaven already is here.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in reading the stumbling texts is not to place evil outside oneself. One is not asked to exterminate ones greatest enemies, but the enemies within oneself. When fighting within myself to let the good and the holy win, the words of Psalm 139 also sound anew when they speak of the enemies

I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies.

Then sacred text becomes sacred again. Without violence, without terror.

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