

## “Be Strong and Resolute!”: Reading Joshua in the Contemporary Church

CAROLYN J. SHARP\*

*The LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. . . . Be strong and resolute; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:1–2, 9)*

This afternoon it is my joy to engage with you the perennial problem of so-called “difficult texts” in the Hebrew Scriptures. I teach in a progressive theological school that cares deeply about Christian formation in community. That community, much like Perkins School of Theology, is a lively multid denominational body, with groups given to cheerful interrogation of their own and each other’s claims. Regarding the Old Testament program, the stamp of Enlightenment rationalism is strong at this particular moment in the life of Yale Divinity School. Currents and trajectories do ebb and flow in the lives of theological schools and churches, of course. Years ago at my institution, one could hear the magisterial Protestant biblical theology of Brevard Childs, with its echoing of patristic and Reform themes in the history of reception. These days an unabashed historical positivism is audible in some corners of the YDS quad, sometimes coupled with a robust rejection of the authority of biblical texts whose content is seen as problematic for the worldview of secular North American liberalism. While I commend the ethical commitments that might lead a traditional liberal historian to decline to grant scriptural authority to difficult texts, my own hermeneutical sensibilities are otherwise.<sup>1</sup> We who

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\* Carolyn J. Sharp is Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. This paper was delivered on February 4, 2014 as the second of two Jackson Lectures for Ministers Week at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>1</sup> Here I allude to the homiletical theory expounded by John S. McClure in his *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice

are literary critics are fascinated to explore around and beneath surface content, seeking to illumine the rhetorical power of exhortation and the ways in which metaphor, ellipsis, irony, and other subtleties of narrative art might serve the formation of implied audiences. We who are feminist and postcolonial readers know that much of importance is communicated through what is unsaid—both in the texts we study and in the norms of interpretation we promote or reconfigure. Finally, we who are priests or pastors or lay leaders may be compelled to yield, in the peculiar dictions of our own traditions and in our own unique ways, to the dialectic of holy submission and holy resistance that characterizes faithful, and not just “reasonable,” readings of Scripture.

I hope to get traction this afternoon on what it means to read a particular difficult text in contemporary Christian communities of faith. This is a text whose protagonist has been acclaimed as the heroic successor to Moses, read as a valiant prototype for King David, even celebrated as the Old Testament prototype for Jesus himself. It is a text whose stirring rhetoric of covenantal commitment has thrilled countless generations of believers who seek to commit themselves and their households to God. It is also a text that sides with invading outsiders against indigenous inhabitants unaware of their approaching doom; a text that enthusiastically promotes wholesale genocide of Canaanite people groups; a text that breathes militaristic triumphalism and makes no distinction whatsoever between enemy combatants and civilians; a text that cheers Israel’s appropriation of the fields, herds, and homes of others. That text is the book of Joshua.

The violence narrated in the plot of Joshua is relentless. Its valuing of expansionist military conquest and an utter lack of mercy toward those construed as the enemy are justified in theological terms at every turn in the book. Thus the ethical problem animates both the storytelling proper—the plot—and the meta-narratological theology of this text. Further, another dimension of this ancient narrative has provoked objections from the modern reader, albeit less dramatically: the book celebrates miracles of divine intervention that contravene the laws of nature long enshrined on the Enlightenment altar of rationalist empiricism. I speak of the parting of the Jordan River so

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Press, 2001). Reflecting on philosophical insights of Emmanuel Lévinas, McClure explores the possibilities offered by a preaching ethic based on the conviction that “the scriptural canon that is lived out is at its deepest level a centripetal, decentering, other-directed canon” (27).

that Israel could cross and of the moment in Joshua 10 when the sun and moon are commanded to stand still and are said to do so. Other miracles could be explored, if time permitted. Every narration of ancient holy war in the Bible has elements of divine discomfiture of the enemy, and in Joshua we have also the spectacular fall of the walls of Jericho at the liturgically powerful blast of seven rams' horns and the war cry of the Israelite invaders.

Readers today who encounter Joshua will have their own ways of reconciling, bracketing, or dismissing the scientific problem of the miraculous and the ethical problem of the genocidal violence of the book. It should be incontestable, however, that the issues must be engaged. The notion of covenant shapes every level of Israel's identity as a chosen people. God's covenant promise was about descendants and land; Joshua narrates the fulfillment of the promise of land in a way that makes both miraculous divine intervention and unremitting violence key to that fulfillment. In the centuries since the book of Joshua was written, we have witnessed the devastating economic, political, and cultural damage wrought by unbridled militarism, territorial expansionism, and colonialism. Given the terrible history of ways in which nations and groups have exploited, oppressed, and exterminated other groups, the contemporary biblical reader dare not reach too swiftly for an allegorical or spiritualizing reading of Joshua. To do so would be to risk dishonoring the truth to which real lives bear witness in their suffering. Many are dissatisfied with the complacent answer, "These days, we just read this as spiritual warfare against the principalities and powers." Believers must be no less dissatisfied with the dismissal of Joshua as "just" a product of its historical context, because the implication there is that this biblical book is not sacred, that it is "just" a limited and distorted text whose witness we may view in patronizing terms, if not abandon to the dustbin of history. No: as believers we must wrestle with this text, praying for God-given creativity and resilience whenever we feel that we might be overpowered, seeking those moments when holy submission is made possible for us and those moments when holy resistance will yield new fruits of the Spirit. I dare to say we may appropriate the thematic exhortation of Joshua 1:9 for our hermeneutical struggle: we must "be strong and resolute" as we move forward into these contested regions, knowing that "the LORD [our] God is with [us] wherever [we] go." Here we will have another valued companion for our journey today, one only slightly less authoritative than the LORD himself: Perkins's own Professor Richard Nelson, whose magnificent

Old Testament Library commentary on Joshua<sup>2</sup> is my constant companion as I work on this biblical book.

First, then, exploration of the miraculous in Joshua. This may prepare us to grapple with the problem of the violence of the book.

### 1. *Miracles in Joshua*

In Joshua 3, we encounter the story of Israel crossing the Jordan on dry ground. Our text expressly notes that the Jordan is at flood stage (v. 15), making the crossing extremely dangerous for a large company weighed down with military arms and provisions. Long noticed are the resonances with the story of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea. The Exodus deliverance, of course, serves as the paradigmatic formative experience for a people learning to trust God as One who redeems from oppression and sustains the faithful in times of need. The connection here is unmistakable, given the similarities of the two water miracles and the LORD's statement to Joshua in verse 7, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses." Back in Exodus 14, Moses had stretched out his staff over the water and it had been divided, allowing Israel to cross. Here in Joshua, the waters stand in a heap far off at the moment when the priests' feet are dipped in the edge of the river. A mix of traditions demonstrates that this story was reflected upon in different ways by different tradents. Twelve memorial stones are set up in the midst of the Jordan, yet the same stones are also to be set up on the shore where Israel will camp, later to be moved to the cult center at Gilgal. The multiplicity of traditions suggests that the liminal and dangerous moment of crossing was deemed significant by multiple scribal groups.

The echoing of the Red Sea deliverance establishes foundational claims about the authority of Joshua's leadership and underscores the reliability of divine deliverance in new times and places. Yet there are also important differences between the Exodus event and this crossing of the Jordan. The Exodus narrative celebrated the escape of a fearful group of slaves from a pursuing army of cruel Egyptian oppressors. Here at the Jordan, the deliverance is envisioned proleptically: the story points to the *future* prospect of the LORD's driving out

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<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

from before Israel all of the indigenous Canaanite people groups. It is important to name the euphemistic language here for what it is. “Driving out”: the Conquest is not the story of the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, and so forth running away, being driven away from their homes by the Israelites and fleeing to a new place. It is the story of God helping Israel to slaughter “everything that breathes” (Deut. 20:16) during Israel’s systematic, ruthless invasion of Canaanite villages and towns. Thus this brilliant narrative links the old story of Israel’s deliverance from slavery with a new story of Israel’s sustained search-and-destroy military campaign.

So: the raging waters of the flood-stage Jordan River pile up in a heap, and the Israelites cross over on dry ground. This miracle constitutes an ancient promise reheard for the implied audience (which I believe to be a post-exilic audience). The promise? That the LORD will continue to work in awe-inspiring ways to secure Israel’s flourishing in situations of threat and conflict within the land. What hope this would have provided to a fractured post-exilic Yehud! Think of the bitter political divisions in the post-exilic community, transparently visible to us in Isaiah 56–66 and in Ezra–Nehemiah. For the traumatized Judean community returned from Babylon, seeking to rebuild but riven by internecine conflict and harassed by significant local opposition, this Jordan crossing would have constituted a powerful unifying story.

Another difference between the Red Sea crossing and the Jordan crossing merits our attention. Where the Exodus crossing could offer only the Song of Miriam as liturgical acclamation on the far side of the Red Sea—“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exod. 15:21)—this new iteration at the Jordan is much more deeply liturgicized. The role of the ark is pivotal and priestly leadership is crucial: the priests carrying the ark into the Jordan are at the heart of the LORD’s new saving work on Israel’s behalf. This new locus of God’s miraculous power adumbrates the leadership of the Second Temple priestly structure at Jerusalem. Nelson notes that this crossing expresses Israel’s transition from promise to fulfillment, from wilderness to security in the land.<sup>3</sup> We may also see it as underlining the crucial transition from a brutalized and enslaved leadership in Babylon to newly empowered

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<sup>3</sup> “The story of the crossing is a foundational myth of transition from a past time of promise to a present time of fulfillment, a journey from desert chaos to landed order,

priestly leadership in the Second Temple period, from 515 BCE onward. Through the work of the priests, the LORD may be trusted to be mighty in every new liminal time of transition for Israel. Liturgicizing the story plays a vital role in teaching future generations who they are in covenant with God. Not only does it make visible the wondrous deeds God had wrought in the distant past; it invites the community to continue to trust and witness to the power of the living God even in the seemingly prosaic contemporary circumstances of communal life. See Joshua 4:24: the LORD has exercised power through this miracle “so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever.”

The biblical text knows full well that the miracle will be hard to believe in mundane contemporary times. For the original implied audience, “contemporary” would have been the Second Temple period with its requisite cultural compromises and its leadership disputes, which would grow so fierce that sectarians would split off from Jerusalem and found a reformed community at Qumran. This miracle is no less challenging for us to believe in our own times. In our conflicted post-industrial landscape, religious fundamentalism and hyper-secularism regularly clash. The fetishizing of economic power is driving many sectors of society into crisis in the United States; the idea of the Holy is construed as unenlightened by many in Europe and suppressed in China; tribalism incites local groups to internecine repression and violence against one another in many parts of the Middle East and Africa. This Jordan crossing is a liturgicized re-reading of the deliverance at the Red Sea offered precisely for believers who might otherwise be theologically jaded, who might write off that ancient history of redemption as implausible or irrelevant.

Briefly, we may consider another miracle. Joshua 10 narrates the story of a Canaanite alliance against the invading Israelites and the miraculous routing of the enemies by the LORD, with attendant cosmological signs. King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem is alarmed by Israel’s destruction of Jericho and Ai, and he is concerned that the local metropolis, Gibeon, has made a non-aggression pact with Israel. So he allies himself with four other local chieftains to attack the Gibeonite–Israelite alliance. What unfolds is the classic pattern of a holy-war battle combined with archaic elements that seem to have made the

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from Moses to Joshua, from desert manna to the produce of the land (cf. 5:12), from outside the land to inside it” (Nelson, *Joshua*, 68).

Deuteronomist nervous. Verses 10 and 11: “The LORD threw [the Canaanites] into a panic before Israel, who inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon. . . . The LORD threw down huge stones from heaven on them . . . , and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.” Verses 12 to 14 offer what seems to be a very old reflection on this battle in Israelite lyric poetry, lauding the authority of Joshua as having successfully commanded the heavenly luminaries to stop moving until the Israelites could finish off the Canaanites. Our text says:

On the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, Joshua spoke to the LORD; and he said in the sight of Israel, “Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon.” And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. . . . The sun stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice; for the LORD fought for Israel.

Definitely a miracle! As Robert Coote notes, naturalist explanations simply do not work.<sup>4</sup> This could not have been a solar eclipse because the sun and the moon are stopped in their tracks in two different locations: Gibeon in the east and Aijalon in the west. The story privileges as the most miraculous element the fact that God heeded a human voice. As Coote puts it, “God had never taken orders from anyone in battle” before.<sup>5</sup> Nelson helpfully notes parallels with ancient reports of military campaigns in Assyria and Egypt. “In these propagandistic documents,” he says, “one finds enemy coalitions, astronomical phenomena, emphasis on victory in a single day, the incomparability of the triumph . . . and especially divine intervention.”<sup>6</sup> Nelson argues for a difference in the Joshua account: the emphasis is not on the greatness of Israel’s king, as in other ancient Near Eastern battle reports, but rather on Israel’s “identity as the people of a powerful God.” (I myself would hold both interpretive possibilities as viable: the emphasis of at least one layer of this tradition is indeed on the greatness of Joshua as prototype of the Israelite king.) Nelson guides us through

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert B. Coote’s treatment of Joshua 10 in “The Book of Joshua,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume II (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Coote, “Book of Joshua,” 647.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, *Joshua*, 139.

several ways to conceive of the sun and moon standing still, options that trade on possible semantic nuances of the Hebrew verb *dāmam*. One is that the sun and moon should “remain dark” so that predawn darkness would mask the Israelite attack. Another interpretation has it that the sun and moon should “remain silent” and not give an omen favorable to the enemy kings. A third possibility is that the sun and moon are to “stand still” and fight for Israel (see Judges 5) or “stand still” simply as an omen favorable to Israel. A fourth option: that the sun and moon should stop in their tracks out of awe at Israel’s victory.<sup>7</sup> Nelson suggests that the speaker was originally the ancient poet—not the character Joshua, but the narrator—apostrophizing the sun and moon to stand still in awe at God’s power. It is certainly possible that an old poetic flourish (rather than an actual command) was later misunderstood or worried about, demythologized, and reframed as the LORD’s own action. Contemporary believers must nevertheless wrestle with the final form of the text, which is the only version we can read and the version that has been accorded sacred authority by the church.

So how do we read this? Yesterday I suggested that Jacob, Jeremiah, and Jonah are proto-postmodern heroes: each moves through liminal space into uncharted cultural territory, reconfiguring received tradition and struggling with fractures in his own identity. Today I propose that the Joshua story of the sun and moon standing still may be considered a proto-postmodern epic. Contestation is woven into the storytelling itself and becomes constitutive of the formation of the implied audience. Is this about God’s power far beyond what Israel could accomplish on its own? Verse 11: yes. Is it about Joshua as incomparable leader who can have even God do his bidding? Verse 14: yes. Is it about the heavenly bodies fighting on behalf of the covenant people of God, or about the heavenly bodies apostrophized as witnesses to the power of Israel’s God? Verse 12: yes and yes. The narrative is undecidable. I would go further and say that it is holy and authoritative in its undecidability. We are built up in our capacity as faithful Scripture readers by the text’s undecidability. Jacob’s wrestling at a time of liminal return authorizes us to wrestle with God in our own threshold moments. Jeremiah’s lamenting the burden of prophetic leadership in a time of exile authorizes us to lament the cost of visionary leadership we ourselves must provide in diasporas real and

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<sup>7</sup> See Nelson, *Joshua*, 142–145.



metaphorical. Jonah's resisting of spiritual platitudes authorizes us to resist worn-out theological clichés in our own post-exilic journeys of faith. Joshua 10 authorizes us to enter into the undecidability of the biblical witness, listening for ways in which the mystery of the LORD's power and the possibilities of vocational leadership may be variously understood by the people of God.

The Gibeon battle story compels us, finally, to address the other issue that makes Joshua a "difficult text," and that is the problem of violence.

## 2. *Violence in Joshua*

Unrelenting violence is enacted in the plot of Joshua, something that has troubled interpreters in many centuries and social contexts. Sieges and battles against enemy combatants were a regular feature of life in the ancient Near East, of course. It goes without saying that military actions and paramilitary hostilities have dominated inter-regional and international relations in many parts of the world for millennia. But here in Joshua, it is nothing less than genocide that the Israelite army seeks to accomplish. The invaders work strategically, and expressly under divine imprimatur, to exterminate "everything that breathes" in the Canaanite towns and villages that stand in the path of the Israelite juggernaut. That the Conquest does not end up having been fully completed—per Joshua 13 and the book of Judges—is irrelevant to the ethical issue. That Israel was a small and threatened nation rather than a world-crushing empire is irrelevant to the ethical issue. That the Canaanites are portrayed as having been idolatrous and immoral is irrelevant to the ethical issue, unless you truly believe that every one of those thousands of men, women, and children could have been so heinously immoral as to require their extermination. (Some years ago, I was amazed to hear a philosophy professor defend that line of argumentation. It is an ethically abhorrent way to think about an entire country full of people groups including innocent children; further, it is poor theology. Orthodox Christian belief affirms the doctrine of original sin; we all fall short of the glory of God; none of us can stand. Christianity claims as central to the gospel the conviction that God's grace can transform every human heart.)

The theological and ethical problems are stark indeed. Israel pursues genocidal military tactics against indigenous inhabitants in order to take their land. This violence is not peripheral; it lies at the core of

God's covenant with God's chosen people. Martin Noth's thesis about the original separateness of the patriarchal traditions, the Exodus tradition, and the Conquest tradition notwithstanding, it is virtually impossible, when we read the final form of our holy Scriptures, to understand God's promise to Abram, God's deliverance of Israel from slavery, and God's sustenance of Israel in the wilderness without reference to the fulfillment of the covenantal promise in Israel's military subjugation of the land of Canaan.

Here we may consider some approaches to the problem of violent biblical rhetoric. Some of the key texts are Deuteronomy 20:10–18 (holy-war regulations), Joshua 6:15–21 (the destruction of Jericho), and Joshua 8:24–28 (the destruction of Ai). Note the underlying divine command in Deuteronomy 20 that Joshua's military campaigns are said to fulfill. For Canaanite towns that are not close by and that do not fall into the "inheritance" of Israel, God allows Israel to take noncombatants alive and keep the resources of destroyed towns for themselves (see Deut. 20:13–14: "You shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil"). This is not "mercy," of course, to take Canaanite women as sexual slaves and plunder the community's material goods. It is horrific. And for the local Canaanite towns nearby, Israel dare not grant terms of peace, for God commands, "You must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them" (Deut. 20:16–17). The book of Joshua narrates, then, the obedient fulfillment of these rules. In the destruction of Jericho, see the last verse there: "They devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys" (Josh. 6:21). Except for Rahab and her family, everything that breathed in Jericho was hacked to death. So too the destruction of the city of Ai: "The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand—all the people of Ai" (Josh. 8:25). Combatants and noncombatants alike: all were slaughtered. The extermination of noncombatants means that we should not call this "war" in our own lexicon, as if it were military aggression versus enemy soldiers only. In each case, it is butchery of an entire town.

How have biblical scholars addressed this? Richard Hess offers as a rationale the fact that holy-war political ideology was widespread throughout the ancient Near East (certainly true) and suggests that Christian readers can trump the older Israelite view by a christological

move.<sup>8</sup> Jerome Creach suggests that Norman Gottwald's "peasant revolt" model of the Conquest,<sup>9</sup> an alternative to the biblical account, provides a solution because we need not worry that the narrated genocide had been performed in actuality; further, he adds apologetically, some of Israel's wars were defensive in nature.<sup>10</sup> Some, such as Carly Crouch, seek to illumine the cultural motivations behind holy war as a promotion of order against the forces of chaos.<sup>11</sup> All of these positions offer something valuable for us to mull. But none of them fully resolves the difficulty of genocidal rhetoric in our holy texts.

I would like to share three convictions that may help when your congregations are reading violent Scripture texts. First, it is essential to name the violence of biblical texts and not to gloss over it or euphemize it. Texts do harm. There was a photo in the *Dallas Morning News* in March 2003 of an American soldier in the desert in Iraq, reading his

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<sup>8</sup> Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Book 6 (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 46–50: "Few of the many issues raised by the book of Joshua create more difficulty than the question of how a loving God could command the wholesale extermination of nations that inhabited the Promised Land. . . . While this idea of return to God that which is his from the beginning is significant in the warfare of Joshua and in other biblical wars, it is not unique to Israel. . . . [This] is a political ideology that Israel shared with other nations." Moving to New Testament theology, Hess offers: "Christ takes upon himself the sin of the world and becomes the victim of the holy war that God wages against sin (2 Cor. 5:21). The earthly army that Christ leads introduces the other focus of holy war: the engagement of Christians in a lifelong spiritual struggle against the powers of sin and evil."

<sup>9</sup> See the classic work of Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979). See also Gottwald's, *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Jerome F. D. Creach, *Joshua*, Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 15: "Violence is spoken of [in the Old Testament] most often in the context of human arrogance and imperious self-interest (e.g. Ps. 73:6). Hence, Israel's conquest of Canaan is not classified as violence since its purpose is to replace godlessness with obedience to God's law. . . . It may be helpful to identify Israel's conquest with modern revolutions that have overturned repressive regimes. If the Israelite 'conquest' was in part, as some scholars think, a revolt against oppressive Canaanite kings, it was an effort to establish justice in the contemporary sense of that term." Creach also says it should help that the conquest did not happen historically as it is represented: "The battle reports we find in the book are mostly aggrandized by authors living centuries after the events. . . . Archaeological evidence shows Joshua contains narratives that may not be considered historically accurate by modern standards. In other words, Israel did not in reality commit genocide (at least to the extent and of the nature reported in the book). . . ." (16).

<sup>11</sup> See C. L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History*, BZAW 407 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).

Bible (not Joshua; he was reading the Gospel of Mark). On his bandanna he had scrawled the words, “Kill ’em all.” It is profoundly troubling to me that a Christian would write “Kill ’em all” as a slogan on his clothes. Apart from the grievous harm wreaked by those who act on the basis of texts promoting genocide, rhetorics of violence are extremely destructive to the human imagination. When we speak or preach as if it were a viable option for armed groups of human beings intentionally to destroy large numbers of other human beings, we learn to think that waging preemptive war and taking no prisoners can be viable options, perhaps even the only options in certain circumstances. We fail to imagine otherwise.<sup>12</sup> When biblical texts promote punitive vengeance as if it were a reasonable response on the part of human communities or on the part of God, they restrict the imaginations of readers to a framing of questions of power in a polarized economy of mutual coercion. Over time, readers begin to take that framework for granted and forget how to visualize alternatives. Thus the interruption of holy-war ideation is essential. Naming the violence in texts is fundamental for ethical reading practices.

Second: since all of Scripture is sacred, thus authoritative, edifying, and written for our instruction in some way (see Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:11, and 2 Tim. 3:16–17), believers do not have the option of dismissing anything in the Bible out of hand. Everything in Scripture can teach us about what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Thus we may look for ways to interrogate disturbing texts by means of other Scripture texts whose values are more consonant with the purposes of the God who exhorts us not to judge (Matt. 7:1, Rom. 2:1, Jas. 4:11–12) and who calls us in Christ to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Look for texts of peace, texts of radical encounter with the Other, and texts that show us that we cannot commodify God for our own purposes. For example, when faced with rhetoric in Scripture that despises enemies and eagerly anticipates God’s horrific punishment of them (as so many biblical texts do, including prophetic oracles against the nations and psalms of imprecation), we may cling to our confession of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace and the rest of the vision of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah 11. We

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<sup>12</sup> Again I allude to McClure, who writes that we should “approach preaching as a saintly nonviolent act with, for, and on behalf of others. . . . This is more than just knowing about suffering in the world; it involves an active solidarity with those who suffer” (*Other-wise Preaching*, 150).

might also lift up the theme of reconciliation in a more obscure text, Isaiah 19:24–25: “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of Hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.’” When we are dismayed at the ways in which believers seek to justify the sinful desire for power over against others, whether through economic inequity or racial injustice or some other harm, we may reach for Isaiah 55:8–9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”

Your own searching of the Scriptures will have led you to your own cherished themes and specific texts that may serve as “counter-testimony,” to use the term of Walter Brueggemann.<sup>13</sup> In your congregations, share the biblical texts that are central to your hermeneutics, your faith, your ministerial leadership, your work for justice. I wrote a book called *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*<sup>14</sup> not only because I find literary theory fascinating and vitally important for Old Testament interpretation, but also because I am passionate about lifting up ironic Scripture texts that destabilize or reconfigure ancient Israel’s coercive rhetorics. A great deal of inner-biblical dispute, critique, and reframing goes on within the canon of Holy Scripture. I encourage you to explore the revelatory quality of the dynamics at play between and among biblical texts. Watch for how a text presses its claims urgently over against other texts—other witnesses that may be challenged yet, for their own part, refuse to be erased or silenced. Building on the work of Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin, I affirm that the presence of different voices in Scripture is a gift. Why? Because it challenges the unhelpful presumption of Scripture as monologue, the idea we encounter in some contemporary interpretive traditions and reading practices that there is one unified “message” of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Scripture’s own dialogical engagements, within complex compositions such as Genesis and Isaiah and Jeremiah and also between biblical books, invite us to honor multivocality. For me as a teacher and preacher, honoring multiple voices—in Scripture, in

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<sup>13</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997), for his hermeneutical model of testimony and counter-testimony as intrinsic to the operations of biblical rhetoric.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> See my *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), esp. 59–75.

my Divinity School classroom, in my congregation—is not only interesting and enlivening, it is an ethical mandate. The affirmation of biblical multivocality and intertextuality authorizes, I believe, creative and resistant reading strategies.

Third and finally, read with the Other. Learning what is at stake for other readers and communities gathered around Scripture will keep us alert to new insights; we will be enriched by new theological ways forward that may not be native to our own temperament or to our tradition's hermeneutical practices. If you can't host a Bible study with strangers or folks from another branch of Christianity or believers from another culture, then read books or see films that can help you imagine the perspective of the Other. Read the 2002 book of pastor Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*,<sup>16</sup> to learn about how biblically-grounded organizing work in the slums of Baltimore helped to empower the residents of a desperately broken neighborhood to understand themselves as beloved of God and move forward in ministry together. Read the 2011 book of my pastoral care colleague, Jan Holton, *Building the Resilient Community: Lessons from the Lost Boys of Sudan*,<sup>17</sup> to learn what Scripture means to an African community fractured by years of militarized violence and unthinkable conditions of deprivation. Read feminist and postcolonial reflections on Scripture (yes, even if you're not a feminist or a postcolonial thinker yourself) to learn about the terrible cost of ideologies that marginalize women, non-normative men, and indigenous communities. Then share with your peers in ministry and your colleagues in theological education the good news of books and films that sustain you and inspire you to wrestle with Scripture.

Be strong and resolute, my brothers and sisters! Wrestling with Scripture—with *all* of it—is so important! Nothing less than catalytic renewal of our faith communities is at stake. Remember this: we are walking the road to Emmaus every day, and in our wrestling with Scripture in community, we may glimpse none other than the risen Christ.

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<sup>16</sup> Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> M. Jan Holton, *Building the Resilient Community: Lessons from the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2011).