

Book review

Joshua P. Yoder

God and Violence: Biblical Resources for Living in a Small World, by Patricia M. McDonald. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004.

God and Violence is the latest offering from Herald Press dealing with the problem (for pacifists) of war and violence in the Bible. McDonald does not offer a comprehensive survey of the Bible but a selective sampling of its books. The first books of the Bible, Genesis through Judges, get the most attention, with chapters on Isaiah, Mark, and Revelation following.

McDonald's basic approach is twofold. First, she wants to demonstrate that there is less violence in the Bible than many readers assume. The accounts of war and killing tend to stand out in our minds more than other materials, so we imagine they make up a bigger part of the Bible than they actually do. Readers also tend to see certain texts in militaristic terms when there is no warrant for doing so. We may view the sword emerging from Jesus' mouth in Revelation as a weapon rather than as a symbol for the word of truth, or regard the companies organized at the beginning of Numbers as military units although the people do no fighting until the next generation. Second, McDonald wants to draw attention to the many places where the Bible shows violence in a negative light or where potential violence is avoided. For example, she points out how the patriarchs generally take pains to avoid violence in conflicts with neighboring peoples, and her survey of Judges reveals many instances in which violence is viewed negatively.

McDonald's approach, then, is specific rather than systematic. She reads each text for what it has to say about violence, rather than trying to fit them all into an overarching pattern. Systematic approaches have suggested that the warrior God of the Old Testament is replaced by the pacifist God of the New Testament,

or that war represents God's "permissive will" while Jesus' nonviolence reflects God's true will. Instead, McDonald holds up texts in both testaments that disparage violence and promote nonviolence, even while acknowledging the narratives in the Bible that do endorse violence and war. I appreciate this text-by-text approach: better to acknowledge some violent tendencies but show the Bible's essential ambivalence by highlighting texts that reject it and present alternatives.

Particularly useful is the chapter, "Three Soundings," in which McDonald reviews three stories, from 1 and 2 Samuel and 2 Chronicles, in which characters refuse to respond to provocation, instead defusing potentially violent situations and acting to restore peace. This chapter serves as an important reminder that many biblical stories demonstrate peacemaking and nonviolent responses to conflict.

At times McDonald overreaches in her attempts to downplay the violence in the text and bring out elements of nonviolence or antiviolence. In her chapter on Judges, she writes, "Judges thus seems to suggest that the Lord is responsible for all manner of outrages, carried out by people whose behavior is at least questionable. Readers may want to check for irony.... For it may be that at least some of these narratives are intended to show people's propensity for blaming others (any others, including the Lord, if necessary)" (147–48). To suggest that we should see irony in the text's claims for divine support of the judges' military exploits seems to me to overstep the bounds of common sense, and to say that the Lord's Spirit is responsible for "all manner of outrages" raises the question of what should be considered an outrage.

I found most problematic the chapter on Joshua, "Receiving the Land as a Gift." McDonald points out that the book emphasizes not the military exploits of Israel but the way God gives them victory despite their inexperienced and inferior army and because of their fidelity to the covenant with God. At the end of the chapter, McDonald suggests that we "bracket out" the problematic aspects of the book in order to focus on its real meaning—that all we have is given by God, and that faithfulness to God is the most important ingredient in success (141–42). It is important not to lose sight of these positive lessons, but it is also

essential that we not sweep the unpleasant parts under the rug. We need to face these narratives squarely and name what we see: ethnic cleansing and genocide undertaken in the name of God and justified by demonizing the enemy and appealing to religious purity. To her credit, McDonald does not pretend that there are not “real problems” (141) in the book of Joshua. Yet in her efforts to bring out the helpful aspects, she comes close to suggesting that we overlook the harmful aspects. To do so would be to engage in denial about the shadow side of the Bible.

Pastors wanting to use the Bible as a resource for challenging violence and encouraging peacemaking will find much that is useful in *God and Violence*. Busy pastors may want to skip around in the book, reading the sections that particularly interest them. One of the most useful aspects of McDonald’s book is that she engages some of the scariest parts of the Bible for pacifists, including Joshua, Judges, and Revelation. McDonald’s treatment of these books should open up new vistas for pastors and encourage us to use these books in our preaching and teaching.

About the reviewer

Joshua Yoder has served as a pastor at Fellowship of Hope (Elkhart, IN) and is now studying Bible at the University of Notre Dame.