
Coping with Violence in the New Testament is Volume 16 in the Studies in Theology and Religion (STAR) series edited on behalf of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER). It contains twelve essays that emerged from a conference on the topic of violence in the New Testament that was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, January 21-23, 2008. The participants were New Testament scholars drawn from universities located in Belgium, the Netherlands, and South Africa. The papers were presented in Dutch, Flemish and Afrikaans. In describing the event the editors note, “Also, new ventures like this conference reveal communalities in approaches to the discipline and generate knowledge that may be distinctive from, say, German, British or American approaches” (p. x).

The editors have done a very nice job of organizing and documenting the volume. Part I consists of two “Introductory Essays.” Part II contains nine “Case Studies.” Part III is an “Epilogue.” Rounding out the volume are a very good Bibliography, an Index of [biblical] Passages referenced, and a Subject Index.

In Part I Editor Jan Willem van Henten introduces the study with a helpful overview entitled “Religion, Bible and Violence.” With a brief review of the work of Rene Girard, Regina Schwartz, Mark Juergensmeyer, and J. Harold Ellens the nine essays that follow are placed in their contemporary scholarly setting. He notes at the outset that, “Recent publications . . . have resulted in the insight that both the Old and New Testaments present conflicting perspectives on violence. . . . we find not only violent words and metaphors, but also negative serotypes of persons, and sometimes even incitements to violent acts” (p. 5). How we are to “cope” with this material is the topic of the volume.

The second introductory essay by Jeremy Punt is entitled “Violence in the New Testament and the Roman Empire: Ambivalence, Othering, Agency.” This essay provides an overview of the wider context of violence in which the New Testament writers lived and wrote. The author explores how the imperial policy and actions of the Roman Empire produced the violent first-century world in which Christianity began. In Punt’s opinion, this reality has not been sufficiently acknowledged or studied as yet. As he concludes, “A major neglect in the study of the New Testament and violence, can, therefore, be remedied by the acknowledgement of the impact of the Roman Empire and its ideology of violence on the New Testament documents and their positions on violence” (p. 39).

As Part III, Editor Pieter G.R. de Villiers has constructed an Epilogue entitled “Hermeneutical Perspectives on Violence in the New Testament,” which is a very useful interpretative summary and reflection on the topic of the volume. He concludes:

This article has offered some hermeneutical observations about violence in the light of the contributions to this volume within a wider range of publications in New Testament studies as a discipline. . . . A major step forward in the discussion of violence was the recognition, for example, that Christianity itself is not merely about people who suffer violence at the hand of its persecutors, but also about Christianity itself perpetrating violence in many forms. Another significant development was the openness and the growing concern about the consequences of violent pronouncements and motifs in biblical texts and in the understanding of God’s character and actions. . . .
Whilst much has been achieved . . . much remains to be done, especially since violence is now perhaps one of the most serious threats to humanity and creation (p. 273).

The nine Case Studies that follow the introductory essays and constitute PART II consider a variety of texts and issues. The first three concentrate attention on Paul. Andries van Aarde offers an examination entitled: “Paul’s Version of ‘Turning the Other Cheek’: Rethinking Violence and Tolerance.” Francois Tolmie poses an intriguing question: “Violence in the Letter to the Galatians?” The third, by Rob van Houwelingen, is entitled: “A Godfighter Becomes a Fighter for God.”

The next three essays deal with texts in the gospels. Ernest van Eck presents an interesting study entitled: “Jesus and Violence: An Ideological-Critical Reading of the Tenants in Mark 12:1-12 and Thomas 65.” Next is a study of John’s account of the woman taken in adultery by Wim J. C. Weren: “The Use of Violence in Punishing Adultery in Biblical Texts (Deuteronomy 22:3-29 and John 7:53-8:11).” The sixth study, by Jan van der Watt and Jacobus Kok, deals with a number of different passages in the Gospel of John and is entitled: “Violence in a Gospel of Love.”

The third three Case Studies consider the theme of violence as it is found in the Revelation to John, which by all measures contains the most images of violence of all the New Testament documents. Paul B. Decock offers: “Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence in the Revelation of John.” The eighth essay by Pieter G. R. Villiers (one of the volume’s editors) is entitled: “Unmasking and Challenging Evil: Exegetical Perspectives on Violence in Revelation 18.” The final Case Study is by Tobias Nicklas: “The Eschatological Battle according to the Book of Revelation: Perspectives on Revelation 19:11-12.”

It is not possible to review each of these studies in detail, but they offer some solid research and reflection. Since, as the title of the volume suggests, “coping” with violence in the New Testament is the aim, it is important to acknowledge when and where violence is to be noted. The recognition that the writers of the New Testament themselves, at times, resort to the use of a rhetoric filled with violent terminology and images is critical. Placing the New Testament writings into the context of the first-century is, of course, necessary, but that should not be used to “excuse” or “deny” the violence—either implicit or explicit—that is there. The writers of the Case Studies are well aware of this “temptation” and challenge it.

Another issue that is explored in several of the essays is the way biblical texts are heard and “used” by twenty-first century readers. Responsibility for possible “unintended consequences” is urged. Since none of the writers of this volume advocate either deleting or ignoring problematic texts, one form of “coping” with them requires careful exegesis and thoughtful explanation of the limits of modern-day “application.” Violent images and language in texts—whether intentionally or not—have and can again bring about violent actions never imagined by the original writers.

One further concern that surfaces in several of the essays has to do with the understanding of divine judgment. Does God judge/punish immorality/unfaithfulness? If so, what is the proper language/imagery to use in discussing such actions? If God is in fact opposed by evil powers, how is the struggle to be described? Does it matter that “liberation” and “deliverance” may look like “peace” and “justice” to the powerless and as something quite different—and violent—to the powerful? These are some of the questions that emerge in various ways in several of the Case Studies. No definitive resolution is reached, but that such concerns do receive articulation is important.