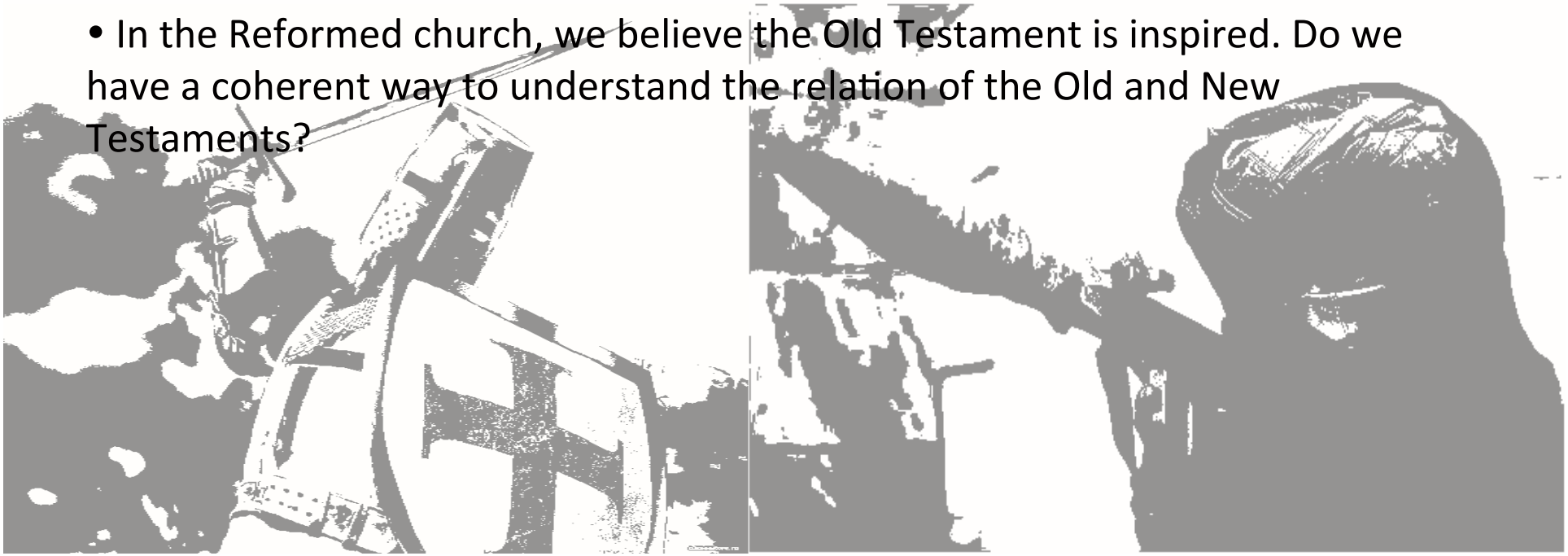
Violence in Religious Texts

The problem:

- People quote the Koran as justifying violence for religious advance.
- But then others will quote the Old Testament as saying similar things.
- Many Christians say "that's just the Old Testament, we don't pay attention to that!"
- Muslims and others rightly ask, "What kind of religion throws away revelation from God?"
- In the Reformed church, we believe the Old Testament is inspired. Do we have a coherent way to understand the relation of the Old and New Testaments?



Outline

1. How do we understand the Bible?

    A. Overall covenantal structure of the Bible, and the “kingdom of God”

    B. Understanding specific passages in the Old Testament

2. Islam and the Koran as a retelling of the Biblical narrative

ntal Structure of the Bible

le is a “covenant document”

covenant is not just a “contract” or “agreement.” It is a binding union.

olical covenants bind *communities* to God. God is interested in
ulture building”– the “people of God”/ the “kingdom of God”

n elements of the covenantal narratives:

God takes the initiative. God reaches to bind people to himself.
ach covenant has a visible “people of God”.
ach covenant sets a standard of behavior and signs of belonging.
he visible people of God can collectively break covenant with God.
ut God always preserves a “remnant” faithful to him, which becomes
seed of the next covenant.

Covenantal narratives in the Bible

Adam (Genesis 2-4, Hosea 6:7)

Broken covenant leads to death, expulsion. But "seed" promised, clothes given to Adam and Eve by God. The line of Seth has the remnant of those who "call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:25-26). This line is preserved through the curse on humanity in the Flood.

Noah (Genesis 9)

Noah and his son fall into sin and curse right after the Flood. But a righteous line is preserved down to Abraham.

Abraham/Isaac/Jacob (Genesis 15, Exodus 6:4)

Begins nation of Israel. Downfall into captivity and slavery, but nation preserved.

Moses (Exodus 19:5, 24:7-8)

"The Law"– beginning of the "Old Testament" = "Old Covenant"
This kingdom ends in the Exile, but the Jewish people are restored to the land.

David (1 Chronicles 17, 2 Chronicles 7:18, 13:5)

His sons as kings in Israel break the covenant, rejected finally in the Exile.
But his line is preserved through to Christ.

Jesus: “New Covenant”/ “New Testament” (Matthew 26:2, Hebrews 7:22, 8:6)

The same possibility of covenant breaking by the visible people of God remains (Hebrews 3:12-4:16) but God promises to preserve a line of his church (Matthew 16:18)

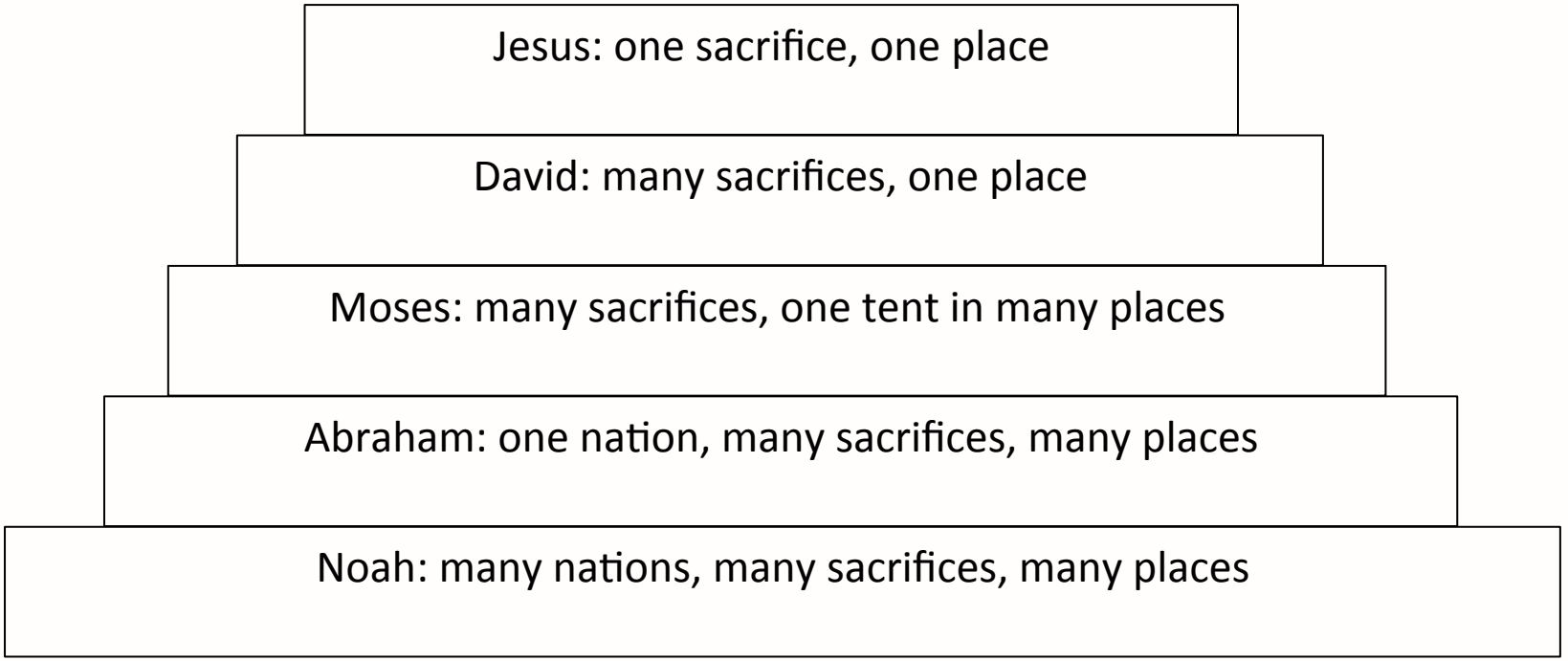
The covenant of Jesus is the *last* covenant. (1 Corinthians 15:45, Hebrews 1:1-3)

With each new covenant, there is a change of law (Hebrews 7:12, 8:13)

Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham make sacrificial altars on “high places” and are blessed...forbidden under Moses. (Deut 12:10-14)

Sacrifice occurs in movable tent under Moses, restricted to Jerusalem under David. (2 Samuel 7:13)

Sacrifices and circumcision required under Moses...done away with (fulfilled) under covenant of Jesus. (Galatians 5:2, Hebrews 7:27, 9:23, 10:1)


Jesus: one sacrifice, one place
David: many sacrifices, one place
Moses: many sacrifices, one tent in many places
Abraham: one nation, many sacrifices, many places
Noah: many nations, many sacrifices, many places

Political/organizational changes:

No king under Moses...kingship is established under David. (1 Samuel 8)

After the Exile, Jews commanded to seek the good of the nation they live in (Jeremiah 29:1-7, cf. Daniel, Nehemiah), not to restore their king or to rebel.

No hereditary priesthood or religious roles under Jesus; Gentiles are fully equal (Ephesians 2:11-22).

New Covenant: separation of church and state

- "Render unto Caeser" (Matthew 22:21)
- "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) [i.e., not of this world's type]
- "Submit to governing authorities" (Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13)

Jesus directly rejected the Zealots, who advocated armed war to restore Israel's political kingdom.

How do we view the Old Testament, in particular the Law of Moses?

Standard Reformed division:

- **Sacrificial law**: abolished, fulfilled in Christ
- **Moral law**: abiding universal moral principles that still apply
- **Civil law**: nation-specific to Israel, made obsolete in the New Covenant

Why was there a Civil Law of Israel?

- God was making a *people*, with a *culture* distinct from the surrounding nations. After the nation of Israel vanishes in the Exile, the culture of Israel still persists. The early church becomes integrated into this culture.

- Although Gentiles eventually outnumbered Jews in the church, the culture of Christianity is very much a continuum with Jewish culture, e.g. the value of scholarship ("people of the Book"), sexual sanity, value of work, equality of all classes of people, law-abiding interactions rather than personal patronage interactions, etc.

The Law of Moses set up a real nation, with real borders and government, army and defense. It was a "harsh schoolmaster" (Galatians 3:24) to create a new culture from a landless and lawless tribal people.

For culture to thrive, there had to be a "place," a "homeland" where people could interact.

What about the specific commands for wars?

- Some wars by Israel were unjust (e.g. Genesis 34). Not every action by Israel is endorsed!

- The initial wars of conquest of Canaan were commanded by God. These wars were restricted to only the seven nations of Canaanites (Deut 7:1) and the Midianite and Amalekites. These nations were judged to have "filled up their evil" (Deuteronomy 9:5)

- There was no mandate to conquer the rest of the world. Rather, they were to be a "blessing" to the nations (Genesis 12:3) and treat all aliens fairly.

- Even in the wars on the Canaanites, there was an implicit offer of peace and mercy if the cities embraced God (e.g. Rahab's family, Joshua 11:19-20). Such nations could be enslaved, but the record indicates that they were able to become integrated into Israel as free people (Joshua 10:6, Nehemiah 3:7, 7:25).

- Destruction of all of the people and things in the wars against Canaan ensured that there if there is to be judgment, no personal profit is to come from it.

What do the wars tell us about God?

- War is not always and intrinsically evil– God himself is called a "warrior" (Exodus 15:3, Revelation 19:11)
- Justice can be retributive.
- Rescue (a strong savior vanquishing a powerful enemy to protect the helpless) can be heroic.

Does this give us a mandate to start "holy wars"?

- Government is established as having the right to "bear the sword" for the protection of the people. (Romans 13:1-7)
- Government/war is *never* mandated to advance religious conversion in the NT or the OT. Even the wars against Canaanites were a type of final judgment, not a method of conversion.
- The church is never mandated to use force to advance. "We do not fight with the weapons of this world" (2 Corinthians 10:4, cf. John 18:36)

The role of the "prophet" in the Bible

In general, final judgment is left to God.

The wars against Canaan are an exception: God uses Israel to destroy them.

Later, God uses pagans to destroy/judge Israel!

Israel's mandate came from God via Moses. A prophet in the Bible who can give original commands must be "accredited" by "signs and wonders" (e.g. Acts 7:36, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Hebrews 2:4)

A prophet who tries and fails <u>even once</u> to perform a "sign and wonder" is a false prophet, and under OT law must be put to death. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

The notion of the "kingdom of God" in Christianity

- The "kingdom of God" in the Bible is fundamentally a *people*, not a government. It predates national Israel (the children of Abraham) and exists after national Israel (the Diaspora).

- The nation-state of Israel under Moses was a true "kingdom" for only part of its existence: before David, and after the Exile, it had no king and existed primarily as a culture. But the nation-state during its time served a valuable purpose in creating a community of identity.

- Some nations after Christ have become mostly Christian, with mostly Christian leaders (often in true sincerity, not just image). There is nothing wrong with that, nor for Christian leaders to be informed by their Christian beliefs.

- From the beginning of the church, through the early middle ages, (e.g. Augustine in Rome), the idea of "two cities", i.e. separation of church and state, was the dominant view. Perhaps *too* much– with monastic retreat from the world. This changed after Islam arose.

Islam

- Islam was started by Mohammed in the 500's.

- Islam and the Koran are not independent of Judaism and Christianity. Mohammed appears to have met Jewish and Christian merchants, who may have told him conflicting and confusing variations of what the Bible says, including the notion of the kingdom of God.

- Mohammed presented himself as another prophet in the line of Jewish prophets. He deliberately adopted many Jewish practices and themes. But he had a falling out with the Jews and was rejected by them. One reason: he never did any "signs and wonders".

Islam

• For Mohammed and Islam, the "kingdom of of God" is centrally about conquest and government control. There is no separation of church and state in Islam. "All of life" is to be under the Koran.

• There is no concept of "covenant" or "covenant community" in Islam. There are also no concepts of redemption, sacrifice, or the "remnant community" which allows for separation of church and state.

• "Jihad" (struggle, or striving) is a central duty in Islam. At its core, it does not require violence, but it does require every Muslim to attempt to bring about Muslim control of the whole world, including explicitly Muslim government.

Islam and History

• Through its entire history until the end of WWI, Islam had one superpower nation which was a dominant player on the global scene.

• This ended with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the breakup of the Middle East by Western powers. This is seen as an immense tragedy by nearly all Muslims, who believe that their kingdom of Allah should always advance.

• Because they believe God has promised advance of their earthly kingdom, the lack of a unified Muslim superpower is a *spiritual* crisis for many Muslims. Many are therefore ambivalent about terrorists and dictators who hold out promise to create a unified Muslim power.

• A small (but not tiny) fraction of Muslims believe that any means which works to advance jihad and restore the political power of Islam is legitimate.

THE CRUSADES

- European and Islamic history are intertwined, not independent.

- As the Islamic Empire pressed in against Europe, the idea of a "Holy Roman Empire" grew, against the many fractured nations of Europe at the time.

- The Crusades were in many ways a defensive reaction against the onslaught of the Islamic empire, but adopted many of the same themes as Islam, e.g. "holy war" = jihad, "Christendom," conversion by conquest, holy cities.

Was this direct influence, or were these ideas just "in the air" in those times?

- The main offense of the Crusades to Muslims is not that they used warfare (which was used by Muslims as well to advance their cause), but that the Crusaders occupied Islamic lands as outsiders. The same offense is caused by the existence of Israel today.

Postmillenialism and World Conquest

• Throughout the past 2000 years, there has been a line of thought called "postmillenialism" which says that Christians will take over the world, including all governments, before Christ returns.

• This view emphasizes the "this world" aspect of the "kingdom of God". We *should* be concerned about justice and good government this world. But postmillenialism can tempt us to priorities of using people for power.

• Some Christian postmillenialists in history have been terrorists, trying to overthrow existing powers to bring about a political kingdom on God.

• Modern (nonmilitant) examples include N.T. Wright (leftist) and Doug Wilson (rightist).

• "Theonomists" tend to reject moral law/civil law distinction, and want to adopt or adapt all of the non-sacrificial law of the OT to today. Theonomy is often associated with postmillenialism, in its focus on Christian government.

• Extremist militant groups *have* grown out of theonomist and postmillenial Christian groups in the US. They are a tiny fraction of Christians (and even of postmillenialists), but often are reacting against a majority of Christians who don't have a robust view of the kingdom of God at all.

"Robust" view of kingdom of God includes

- definite visible commitment to a "people", not individualism.
- willingness to "look different," not blend in with the world.
- commitment to distinct "culture building" independent of, and not derivative of, the world's ways.
- concern for justice and good law, working through persuasion and prophetic witness, even if it makes us unpopular.
- long-term view, not just immediate short term. What foundations are we building?