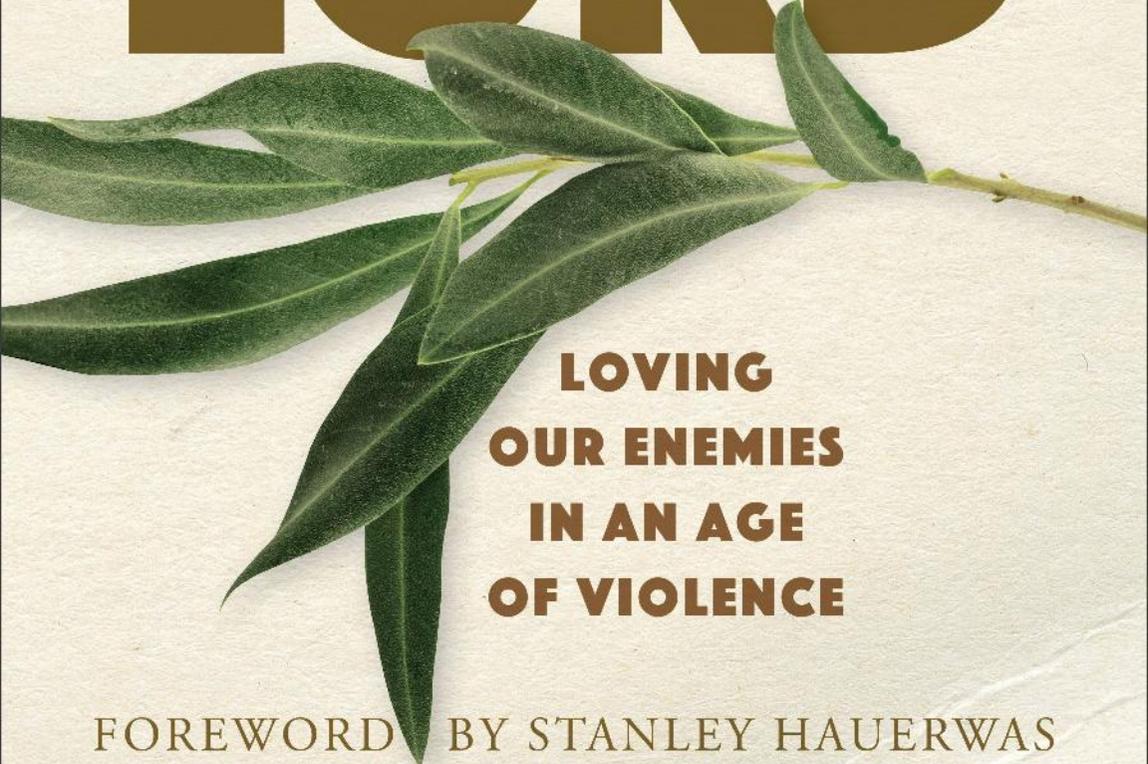


IF JESUS IS LORD



**LOVING
OUR ENEMIES
IN AN AGE
OF VIOLENCE**

FOREWORD BY STANLEY HAUERWAS
RONALD J. SIDER

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FOREWORD

STANLEY HAUERWAS

Ron Sider has always defied categories. His life and work have belied the generalization that evangelicals, a description that does not do him justice, lack a sense of social and political responsibility. His passion for the poor, the hungry, and the outcast has been a witness that we have sorely needed. He has not let us forget, moreover, that Christians believe that justice is a demanding virtue that tests the soul. Yet his soul has remained gentle and kind. Observing his work on behalf of the have-nots could lead you to think that he believes he has earned the right to take it easy in his later years. But I do not believe Ron Sider knows how to take it easy.

Instead, he has now given us this book developing and defending Christian pacifism. It is a book that has taken a lifetime to write. I do not mean that he has been writing the book for a lifetime, but rather he has through his work on behalf of the poor learned how to live nonviolently. In short this is a book that could have been written only by one who has experienced the demanding life and work of loving one's enemies. By providing close readings of Jesus's work and teachings Ron helps us see that nonviolence is not a side issue in Jesus's ministry but rather is at the very heart of what the kingdom Jesus proclaimed is about. The justice that is Jesus is the justice that is nonviolent.

The pacifism Sider defends in this book, as the title suggests, is "biblical" but that description can mislead. Sider certainly engages in close exegesis of texts, but he does so with a constructive, theological, christological

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perspective. This is but a way to say that Ron helps us see how Scripture must be read christologically. Not every peace is the peace that is Christ, but the peace that is Christ is not restrictive—rather, it is an invitation for all to live lives that are not dominated by fear. Sider’s account of nonviolence is not an “ethic” only for Christians but a reality that makes possible common efforts for peace by Christians and non-Christians.

The detailed exegesis matters, and Sider does not skip the hard questions that a biblical account of pacifism raises. His dealing with the texts in the Old Testament in which God commands the killing of Israel’s enemies is particularly important. He is well aware that the understanding of nonviolence he develops cannot be justified by any one text of the New Testament. But once the Bible is read as testimony to the risen Christ, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Christ has made it possible for a people to exist who can and have survived without killing.

In particular Ron’s reading of the Old Testament is important because it can be seen as a way to challenge the oft made criticism “pacifism cannot work.” It is alleged that pacifists are unjustified idealists who do not understand the way the world works. Such critiques of pacifists, however, fail to acknowledge that a people has existed for centuries without an army, lived as Jesus seems to have wanted his followers to live, and has often moved to avoid being killed—they are called Jews. Accordingly Sider is quite right as well as insightful to see the significance of Ephesians 2:11–22 for how the Christian commitment to nonviolence draws on God’s care of God’s chosen people.

Before I die I have given myself the modest task of convincing the Christians in America that as Christians we have a problem with war. I am not expecting the vast majority of Christians to be pacifists or even just warriors. I simply want them to see that there is a profound tension between our worship of a crucified messiah and the support of war. I am well aware that this may be a utopian project, but Ron Sider’s book is surely going to be an important aid in that project. So thank God for Ron Sider.

INTRODUCTION

Both in my head and in my heart, I understand and appreciate the just war tradition. Vicious bullies and ruthless dictators—Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, ISIS—swagger through history wreaking terrible havoc on hundreds of millions of innocent people. In response, thoughtful, caring Christians (and others) regularly conclude that the only realistic way to stop their vile destruction is to use lethal force. Pacifists who claim that the followers of Jesus should love their enemies and never kill seem, in the face of such massive evil, to be naive, simplistic, utopian.

Even worse, pacifists appear to be fundamentally immoral. They seem to ignore their basic moral responsibility to love—and therefore protect—their neighbors. Standing passively on the sidelines doing nothing to defend neighbors who are being destroyed is irresponsible and wicked.

C. S. Lewis makes the point vividly: “Does anyone suppose that our Lord’s hearers understood Him to mean that if a homicidal maniac, attempting to murder a third party, tried to knock me out of the way, I must stand aside and let him get his victim?”¹ Just war Christians regularly charge that pacifists fail to love their neighbors who are threatened. Pacifists, they allege, take no responsibility for history. In fact they prefer tyranny to justice.

I think just war Christians are correct that if there are only two options (to kill or do nothing to defend neighbors), then faithful Christians should kill. Lewis is surely right: Jesus would not want us to step aside and passively watch while an aggressor brutalized others.

The problem with this critique of pacifism is that there are never only two options (to kill or do nothing). There is always a third possibility: to intervene nonviolently to oppose and seek to restrain the aggressor. Nor is nonviolent

1. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 86. From a 1940 speech (“Why I Am Not a Pacifist”) at Oxford to a pacifist society.

resistance to evil a utopian, ineffective approach. In the past one hundred years (and especially the past fifty years) nonviolent resistance to injustice, tyranny, and brutal dictatorship has again and again proved astonishingly successful. Gandhi's nonviolence defeated the British Empire. Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent civil rights movement changed American history. Solidarity's nonviolent campaign defied and conquered the Polish communist dictatorship. A million nonviolent Filipino demonstrators prevailed against the vicious dictator President Ferdinand Marcos.² A recent scholarly book examined all the known cases (323) of *both* major armed and unarmed insurrections from 1900 to 2006 and discovered an amazing result: "Nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts."³

It is simply contrary to the facts of history to say that there are only two options: to kill or to do nothing in the face of tyranny and brutality. I agree that to stand aside and fail to resist evil is cowardly, irresponsible, immoral, and blatantly contradictory to Jesus's command to love our neighbor. But the historical record demonstrates that there is always a third option: vigorous, nonviolent resistance. And it frequently works—in fact, it apparently succeeds more often than violence.

But not always. Sometimes, at least in the short run, nonviolent actions fail. What then should Christians do?

That is the central question of this book. Does Jesus ever want his disciples to kill in order to resist evil and promote peace and justice? When Jesus commanded his disciples to love their enemies, did he mean that they should never kill them?

Later, I will examine the many arguments that allege that Christians today need not, should not, be bound by Jesus's teaching. But if Jesus is true God as well as true man; if the eternal Son became human not only to die for our sins but also to reveal how we should live; if Jesus claimed to be the long-expected Messiah; if central to Jesus's gospel is the announcement that the messianic kingdom where forgiveness and shalom reign is now breaking into history in the new community of Jesus's disciples; and if, in the power of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit, it is possible for Jesus's disciples to live *now* the norms of Jesus's dawning kingdom; if that is what the New Testament teaches (and this book will seek to show in detail that it is), then it is a huge theological mistake to say that contemporary Christians should ignore or set aside what Jesus taught about killing.

2. See Sider, *Nonviolent Action*, for more examples.

3. Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, 7.

For the Christian who embraces historic orthodox teaching about who Jesus is, the most important question for our topic is: Did Jesus mean to teach his disciples never to kill?⁴ This book is my answer.

Before starting that detailed argument, however, I need to define how I use the words “coercion” and “violence.” I use the word “coercion” to refer to the exercise of influence on others in ways that pressure them to act in a certain way. Legitimate coercion is action that influences others in ways that are in keeping with Jesus’s call to love our neighbors (which, as I will argue, excludes killing them). Violence is any action against a neighbor where the intent is to harm the neighbor, including killing the neighbor.⁵

Because we are created as social beings, coercion is inevitable. The most loving acts of parental discipline involve psychological coercion. So do the most loving acts of church discipline or a kind teacher’s insistence on deadlines and appropriate behavior. Psychological coercion is an inevitable part of our being social beings living in community. “Coercion is an inherent component of social life.”⁶ Coercion always involves some exercise of power over another. Duane Friesen outlines several questions to help determine whether the use of such power is moral coercion or immoral violence: the use of power should contribute to shalom, be truthful and not manipulative, not reduce others to impotence (although it may rightly reduce their options for a time), and be nonviolent.⁷ It is a mistake to speak of “the ideal of absolute non-coercion in human relations.”⁸

Economic boycotts are coercive. So is the physical restraint of a child about to run in front of a car, or of a distraught person about to jump off a high bridge. But these coercive acts are fully compatible with loving the other persons, seeking their best interest and leaving them free to make different choices in the future. Killing a person is fundamentally different from physical restraint prompted by love and exercised to protect persons, or encourage different (moral) choices because killing a person removes any possibility of the person changing.

4. I am aware that New Testament scholars in the past two hundred years have argued in great detail whether the Gospels accurately reflect the teaching and actions of Jesus or rather primarily reflect the thinking of the Gospel writers. I do not in this book try to enter into that detailed discussion, although I largely embrace the approach and conclusions of scholars like Craig S. Keener (*Historical Jesus*). Rather, I begin with the church’s confession that the biblical canon is God’s special revelation that properly functions as the primary source of authority for Christian faith and practice. Therefore my basic question in this book is, What does the biblical canon say to the question of whether Jesus ever wants his followers to kill their enemies?

5. I find especially helpful the distinctions made by Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking*, 143–49.

6. Friesen, “Power,” 76.

7. Friesen, “Power,” 83–84. See also the helpful essay by Finn, “Morality, Government.”

8. Roth, *Choosing against War*, 115.

Violence can be psychological, physical but not lethal, or lethal. Action that damages, and is intended to damage, the dignity or self-esteem of another person is violent. So is action that damages, and is done with the intention to damage, the body or property of another person. Obviously, physically restraining a mentally ill person or boycotting a business because of its unjust activity may cause harm to a person's body or property, but those acts are not violent, because the action does not kill anyone and the intent is to create well-being, not harm.⁹ The motive of the person causing harm is a crucial factor in determining whether the action that causes harm is moral coercion or immoral violence. As long as the intent is love and well-being for persons involved and the action leaves all persons free to make different, better choices in the future, the coercive action is not violent.¹⁰ However, even action that causes modest bodily harm or minor economic loss is violent if the intent of the action is to cause harm rather than promote the well-being of the persons involved (which in an economic boycott includes the well-being of large numbers of people being treated unjustly by the person or institution being boycotted).

Coercion (whether psychological, physical, or economic) is morally appropriate as long as the intent and overall effect is the promotion of everyone's well-being and persons are not killed. Violence (whether psychological, physical, or economic) is always wrong, because the action does not flow from love for all persons involved and the desire to promote their well-being. Killing another person always involves violence.

One other comment on definitions: I frequently use the word "pacifism" to describe my position. But by this word, I do not intend to depict a passive (or nonresistant) response to evil and injustice. The biblical pacifism I endorse is not only compatible with a vigorous nonviolent resistance to all evil. As my book *Nonviolent Action* demonstrates, it also demands it.

9. Thus I do not agree with the definition of violence in Stassen and Westmoreland-White, "Defining Violence and Nonviolence," 18. Their definition ("Violence is destruction to a victim by means that overpower the victim's consent") would mean that a morally justified economic boycott that caused some economic loss to an unjust business would be violent. I prefer to call such action morally justified coercion.

10. Hans Boersma finds the key factor distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate nonlethal harm to be the motive of the person causing the harm. Boersma, however, prefers to call even the legitimate nonlethal harm "violence," whereas I find it more clarifying to use the word "violence" only in the case of inappropriate action. See Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 46–47.

1

Jesus's Gospel

Virtually every New Testament scholar, whether liberal or conservative, Catholic or Protestant, agrees that the gospel Jesus announced and proclaimed was “the kingdom of God.” This phrase (or Matthew’s equivalent, “the kingdom of heaven,” which means exactly the same thing) appears 122 times in the first three Gospels—most of the time (92) on the lips of Jesus. Jesus points to the kingdom as the purpose of his coming (Luke 4:43). Both his preaching and his miraculous healings are signs of the kingdom (7:18–28). And Jesus sends out his disciples to announce the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 10:7–8; Luke 10:9).

At the core of Jesus’s teaching was the claim that the long-expected messianic time of peace, justice, forgiveness of sins, and restoration of Israel was actually breaking into history in his person and work. But Jesus puzzled and astonished his contemporaries. By his teaching and action, he offered an understanding of the nature and work of the Messiah that was strikingly different from that of popular expectation. He rejected the widespread messianic idea of a conquering military hero. When he publicly made messianic claims in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he rode not on a military general’s proud warhorse but rather on a lowly donkey. And he taught his followers to love their enemies.

To understand the implications of Jesus’s messianic understanding for our topic, we must first explore the messianic expectations of his day, then examine the extent of messianic violence in Jesus’s time, and finally develop more fully Jesus’s teaching on the dawning kingdom of God. Only then will

we be ready to understand Jesus's more specific words and actions with regard to violence.

Messianic Expectations

In 587 BC Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah, destroyed the capital city Jerusalem and its temple, and took Judah and its leaders into exile in Babylon. Those events fundamentally challenged the basic belief that God had given the land of Israel to Abraham's descendants forever and that the one God of the universe was uniquely present in the temple in Jerusalem. The people's sinful failure to obey God's revealed law, their prophets explained, was the reason for national destruction and exile. But their prophets also held out the hope of a future return from exile and a restoration of their God's presence in a rebuilt temple.

There were modest movements of return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah in the latter half of the fifth century BC. But no strong independent Jewish kingdom emerged. Many descendants of the ancient Israelites remained scattered throughout the Near East. And those who still lived in the ancient homeland suffered under the rule of oppressive empires. For a century after the Hasmonean revolt, which started in 167 BC, a small Jewish kingdom existed, but the Romans swept through Palestine in 63 BC. Living under the Romans' ruthless rule, the Jews had little sense that the long-expected return from exile had truly happened.

The hope for a Davidic figure who would bring the nation freedom was largely absent for several hundred years after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. But in the Hasmonean period a messianic hope for national restoration grounded in some earlier biblical texts emerged. Yale biblical scholar John J. Collins shows that by the end of the first century BC the idea of the Davidic Messiah as a warrior king who destroys Israel's enemies and brings unending peace "constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era."¹ "This expectation of a Davidic messiah had a clear basis in the Scriptures and became very widespread in various sectors of Judaism in the last century before the Common Era."²

That is not to suggest that there was one uniform messianic understanding in this period. A variety of messianic views existed.³ The Jewish historian

1. J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 68.

2. J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 95. See also A. Collins and J. Collins, *King and Messiah*, 63–75, and Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 265, for a number of texts of the period that express messianic (often militaristic) hopes.

3. Longman, "Messiah," 28–30; N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 307–20.

Josephus (who is our best source outside of the New Testament for the events in Palestine in the first century AD) talks about various violent rebellious movements (some of which were messianic) in the period leading up to the Jewish War (AD 66–70). These violent movements, Josephus suggests, helped lead to that war. Josephus speaks of an “ambiguous oracle” in the Jewish sacred writings about someone from their country becoming a ruler of the world.⁴

In the Jewish texts from the two hundred years before and after the birth of Jesus that speak of the Messiah, his central task is the liberation of Israel (often using military means) and the cleansing or restoration of the Jerusalem temple. There is no expectation that the Messiah will suffer.⁵ But the expectation of a military conqueror is certainly present: “How beautiful is the king, the messiah, who will arise from those who are of the house of Judah! He girds up his loins and goes forth and orders the battle array against his enemies and slays the kings along with their overlords, and no king or overlord can stand before him; he reddens the mountains with the blood of their slain, his clothing is dipped in blood like a winepress.”⁶ Craig Keener says that “most Jews expected a final war against the Gentiles to culminate this age and inaugurate their redemption.”⁷

The texts describing the end of the old age and the arrival of the new messianic age often use powerful apocalyptic language and vivid cosmic imagery. Unfortunately, since the time of Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of the twentieth century, many scholars have thought these texts were talking about the end of the physical world. But more recent scholarship has shown that view to be fundamentally mistaken. In N. T. Wright's words:

There is virtually no evidence that Jews were expecting the end of the space-time universe. There is abundant evidence that they, like Jeremiah and others before them, knew a good metaphor when they saw one, and used cosmic imagery to bring out the full theological significance of cataclysmic socio-political events. There is almost nothing to suggest that they followed the Stoics into the belief that the world itself would come to an end. . . . They believed that the *present world order* would come to an end—the world order in which pagans hold power and Jews, the covenant people of the creator God, did not. . . . Jews simply did not believe that the space-time order was shortly to disappear.⁸

4. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 312.

5. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 320.

6. Palestinian Targum on Gen. 48:10; quoted in Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 69.

7. Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 168.

8. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 333 (italics original). See also N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 284–85. So too J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*,

The apocalyptic language “had nothing to do with a supposed end of the space-time order and everything to do with the great climax to Israel’s history, the final liberation of Israel from her pagan enemies.”⁹

Very often these texts predicted a violent war that would overthrow the pagans and usher in the age of peace. There are also many passages in the Old Testament that speak of a future leader and time that will bring universal peace. Especially striking are three from Isaiah.

Isaiah 9:5–7 speaks of a coming king who would bring peace and justice:

Every warrior’s boot used in battle
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be destined for burning,
 will be fuel for the fire.
 For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 Of the greatness of his government and peace
 there will be no end.
 He will reign on David’s throne
 and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.

Isaiah 11:1–9 also talks about a coming descendant of David who will bring peace and justice:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse [the father of David]; . . .
 With righteousness he will judge the needy,
 with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. . . .
 The wolf will live with the lamb,
 the leopard will lie down with the goat. . . .
 They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain.¹⁰

in his discussion of the frequent phrase, “the end of days” (or the “last days”). The phrase does not mean “the end of history or of the world. . . . In all the prophetic texts, the reference is rather to the end of one era and the beginning of another,” 105.

9. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 40; see also 81, 95–97.

10. It is true that Isa. 11:4–6 may suggest a violent war before the age of peace.

And most amazing, Isaiah 2:2–4 says that in the last days,

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls and other documents from this period that around the time of Jesus, many Jews understood Isaiah 2:2–4, 9:5–7, and 11:1–9 as predictions of the messianic time. “Isaiah 11 becomes an important proof-text for messianic expectation in the period of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”¹¹ And the New Testament clearly and explicitly applies these passages from Isaiah about peace and justice to Jesus.

Matthew 4:15–16 quotes Isaiah 9:1–2 in connection with the beginning of Jesus's proclamation of the coming of the messianic kingdom. Paul refers to Isaiah 11:1 and 10 in Romans 15:12. Alluding to Isaiah 9:2, the prophet Zechariah points with eager expectation to the Messiah who will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). And repeatedly Christian writers of the first three centuries declared that the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 2:4 (Mic. 4:3) was fulfilled in Jesus's prohibition against killing.¹²

Messianic expectations were widespread among the Jews in the period around the time of Jesus's life. But was violence a central part of the expectation?

11. J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 25; see also 57–61. It is also true that these documents often describe the coming Davidic Messiah as a warrior. For evidence that Isa. 9:6 was understood to refer to the Messiah, see Mauser, *Gospel of Peace*, 153.

12. Sider, *Early Church on Killing*, 173.

Messianic Violence

There is substantial scholarly disagreement about the extent and nature of movements of messianic violence in the decades around the lifetime of Jesus. Martin Hengel wrote an influential scholarly book called *The Zealots*, in which he argues that the zealots were a major nationalistic messianic party in Judaism at this time. Richard A. Horsley strongly disagrees.¹³ Horsley argues that the typical modern portrayals of Jesus as a pacifist depend “basically on ‘the zealots’ as a foil for Jesus’ position and the sayings of Matthew 5:38–48.” But that is a mistake because “there was no sustained movement of violent resistance to Roman rule during the first century C.E.”¹⁴ Horsley rightly points out that Josephus (ca. AD 37–100) first speaks of the “zealots” as an organized party only in the winter of AD 67–68.¹⁵ The available evidence does not warrant our speaking of a continuous organized zealot party throughout the first century.

What is clear, however, from numerous sources, is that again and again in the three centuries before the Jewish War, oppressive conquerors provoked violent, often religiously motivated, rebellion on the part of the oppressed Jews in Palestine. In this same period, and frequently in close connection, messianic speculation became fairly widespread among the Jews.

In 167 BC, the Hellenistic rulers in Palestine added religious persecution to their heavy taxation. A megalomaniac Syrian monarch actually desecrated the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and replaced Jewish rites with worship of himself. Some Jews refused to comply and were killed. Others, drawing on their holy war tradition and inspired by the religious “zeal” of Phinehas in the Old Testament (who slaughtered those who disobeyed God), organized a guerrilla movement led by Judas Maccabaeus.¹⁶ In a series of bloody battles, they drove the Hellenistic conquerors out of Palestine and secured one hundred years of religious and political freedom. But that was not to last.

In 63 BC, Pompey’s Roman soldiers conquered Palestine, inaugurating many centuries of Roman rule. Sometimes they ruled through client kings and sometimes directly through procurators like Pilate. But always the taxation was heavy, and the threat to cherished religious beliefs was frequent. (Pompey walked right into the holy of holies in the temple, where only the high priest

13. Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*. See also Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis,” 3–31; Smith, *Studies in Historical Method*, 211–26.

14. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 318–19.

15. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, x.

16. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 158–59. For Phinehas, see Num. 25:6–13 and 1 Maccabees 2:17–28.

was allowed to enter once a year.) Violent revolts led by Jews, often motivated by religious (sometimes messianic) hope that their God would intervene to save the chosen people, erupted with some frequency. Many of the revolutionaries believed that since God was their only Lord, Jews should not submit to Rome or pay Roman taxes.¹⁷

The War Scroll of the Essenes (a major Jewish monastic community in the two hundred years before and after the birth of Jesus) illustrates how the holy war tradition (revived under the Maccabees) helped at least some Jews of this period to expect to fight a war against the Romans to usher in the messianic time. The War Scroll talks about how the entire community of the Essenes will fight against the *Kittim* (the Romans). And they believed that God would intervene as they fought to destroy the Romans and inaugurate the messianic kingdom.¹⁸

Herod the Great ruled Palestine as a client king from about 37 to 4 BC. He built a glorious temple in Jerusalem but also imposed heavy taxes and ruthlessly murdered opponents. He also introduced the cult of the Roman emperor into the Hellenistic areas of his kingdom (building Roman temples honoring Caesar as divine) at a time when the emperor called himself “son of God”—blasphemy, according to devout monotheistic Jews.

Not surprisingly, widespread rebellion broke out when Herod died. It started when Herod was on his deathbed. Contrary to the Jewish prohibition against images, Herod had placed a large golden eagle (a symbol of Roman rule) on a gate of the rebuilt temple. As Herod lay dying, two Jerusalem scribes encouraged their followers to tear down the eagle. But Herod was still alive, and his troops killed the rebels. That only provoked more widespread rebellion against Herod's son and successor, Archelaus, after Herod's death. Teachers of the law led a rebellion, which Archelaus squelched, killing three thousand Jews, many in the temple. Fifty days later, an even larger Jewish crowd attacked the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. They saw, according to Josephus, “a proper opportunity for the recovery of their country's ancient liberty” (*Ant.* 17.269). Religious zeal was clearly a significant part of the rebels' motivation. Furious battles ensued in Jerusalem, killing large numbers of both Roman soldiers and Jewish rebels. Finally, the Roman general in charge of Syria arrived, squelched the rebellion, and crucified two thousand Jewish insurgents (*JW* 2.75; *Ant.* 17.295).¹⁹

Josephus reports that at this time there were “ten thousand other disorders in Judea” (*Ant.* 17.269). The whole of Judea, Josephus says, was “one

17. Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, 53.

18. Hengel, *Zealots*, 281–87. See also J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 60. For the meaning of *Kittim*, see 57–58.

19. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 172–73.

scene of guerilla warfare” (JW 2.65). Simon, a former slave of Herod, led a rebel group and proclaimed himself king. A shepherd named Athronges did something similar. These two rebellious outbreaks, N. T. Wright believes, were “would-be messianic movements.”²⁰

A rebellion also broke out in Galilee in the city of Sepphoris (not too far from Nazareth). The leader was Judas, the son of Hezekiah, a brigand chief with some substantial support in Jerusalem (Hezekiah had been killed several decades earlier by Herod). Judas led a large group of followers, who broke into Herod’s arsenal and armed themselves. His motive in part, according to Josephus, was “an ambitious desire of the royal dignity” (*Ant.* 17.272)—quite possibly a messianic claim. But the Romans defeated them, burned the city, and enslaved all the inhabitants (JW 2.56, 68).

About ten years later, another rebellion against Rome occurred in opposition to the census and taxation that Quirinius the governor conducted in Judea. “Enrolling in Rome’s system meant admitting that the land and the people were not after all sacred to Israel’s god.”²¹ Judas of Galilee and Sadduk, a Pharisee, led the people to revolt against the census. They said that “this taxation was no better than an introduction to slavery and exhorted the nation to assert their liberty” (*Ant.* 18.4). Declaring a message that could easily have been understood to have messianic implications, they told the people that God would assist them if they would join together in daring revolt (*Ant.* 18.5).

From the Essenes’ War Scroll, we also know that other Jewish people of this general period believed that when God would intervene at the end of the age, all the devout would join in a holy war of total annihilation of the wicked.²² Josephus tells us that many people followed Judas and Sadduk and “the nation was infested with this doctrine to an incredible degree” (*Ant.* 18.6; see also Acts 5:37).

Josephus describes Judas of Galilee and Sadduk as the founders of a fourth Jewish “philosophy” alongside that of the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Their “philosophy,” he says, was almost identical to that of the Pharisees except that Judas and Sadduk “have an inviolable attachment to liberty and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord.” Nor can even fear of death “make them call any man lord” (*Ant.* 18.23). Josephus says explicitly that it was this fourth philosophy with its religious, perhaps messianic, rejection of Roman rule and taxation that led eventually to the devastating Jewish War (AD 66–70), which destroyed the nation (*Ant.* 18.9–10).

20. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 173.

21. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 173.

22. Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 39–40.

Hostility to and rebellion against Rome continued in the next sixty years after Judas of Galilee's rebellion against Roman taxation. There were at least seven major incidents just during the ten years (AD 26–36) when Pilate was procurator of Judea.²³ In the 40s, Theudas claimed to be a prophet, gathered a substantial number of followers, and promised to divide the Jordan so they could easily cross over—a clear claim to be reenacting the historic exodus from Egypt. But the Romans killed many of his followers and decapitated Theudas (*Ant.* 20.97–99). Sometime between AD 46 and AD 48, two sons of Judas the Galilean were crucified as rebels against Rome. And Josephus says that during a Passover sometime in the years between AD 48 and AD 52, the Romans slaughtered twenty thousand Jews (*Ant.* 20.105–12).

Josephus tells us that in the next decade people he calls bandits (*Sicarii*) attracted many people with their claim to divine inspiration and call for revolutionary change. Someone from Egypt duped thirty thousand Jews, claiming to be a prophet, but he failed (*JW* 2.259–63). According to Josephus, “the imposters and brigands banded together, incited numbers to revolt, exhorting them to assert their independence and threatening to kill any who submitted to Roman domination” (*JW* 2.264).

The evidence is clear. From the time of the death of Herod I in 4 BC, there were repeated violent rebellions against Roman rule in Palestine. Both in Galilee and especially in Jerusalem, “revolution of one sort or another was in the air, and often present on the ground.”²⁴ The sources often indicate a religious motivation. Frequently, N. T. Wright points out, these movements “were led by messianic or quasi-messianic figures.”²⁵ And the Romans frequently squelched them with crucifixion. Violent messianic revolt, grounded in the belief that God would intervene to bring the messianic kingdom if the Jews would dare to rebel, was clearly part of Jewish life in this period.²⁶

Even Horsley acknowledges that popular “messianic” revolts occurred in the years before Jesus. With reference to the rebellion in 4 BC at Herod's death, Horsley says, “The three major popular revolts in each of the major outlying

23. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 174.

24. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 176. Also: “Violent revolution against Rome was a very live option at this time” (303).

25. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 173.

26. In *New Testament and the People of God*, N. T. Wright says, “I thus agree broadly with the outline of Hengel's work” (181n76); see also N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 290n178. Nigel Biggar agrees that it is “prima facie unlikely” that violent Jewish nationalism had disappeared in Jesus's lifetime (*In Defence of War*, 45–46). Thus both Wright and Biggar largely agree with Hengel's basic interpretation of the period in Palestine in the hundred-plus years between 50 BC and AD 70. See further the critical review of Morton Smith and Richard Horsley in Klassen, “Jesus and the Zealot Option,” 131–49.

districts—Galilee, Perea, and Judea—all assumed the same socio-religious form, that of a popular messianic movement.”²⁷

Hengel sums up this period of imperialistic violence, foreign oppression, and passionate religious nationalism this way: “For the unsophisticated Jewish population, it was almost entirely a history of oppressive exploitation, wars of indescribable brutality and disappointed hopes. The rule of Herod and his sons and the corrupt regime of the procurators—Pilate not least among them—had made the situation in Jewish Palestine so intolerable that apparently only three possibilities remained: armed revolutionary resistance, more or less opportunistic accommodation to the establishment—leaving open the possibility of mental reservations—and patient passive endurance.”²⁸ Remembering this context is essential if we are to properly understand Jesus’s gospel of the kingdom of God.

Jesus’s Gospel of the Kingdom

As we saw earlier, the first three Gospels make it very clear that the core of Jesus’s message is the announcement that the kingdom of God is arriving in his person and work. At the beginning of his Gospel, Mark summarizes Jesus’s whole message with the simple words: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Luke begins Jesus’s public ministry with Jesus in the synagogue reading Isaiah 61:1–2—a text often understood in that time as a passage about the coming messianic kingdom.²⁹ Jesus ends the reading with the words “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the long-expected Messiah, Jesus points to his miraculous healings of the blind, lame, lepers, and deaf as evidence enough (7:18–23). His actions, Jesus implies, are fulfilling messianic expectations. This becomes especially clear when one compares Jesus’s reply to John the Baptist to a fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The latter text reflects an expectation that the Messiah would bring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, good news to the poor, and raising of the dead (see 4Q521).³⁰ And when opponents claim that Jesus is casting out demons by the power of Satan, he replies, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Past tense! The long-expected kingdom of God has already

27. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 52.

28. Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 71.

29. E.g., 4Q521 from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 35.

30. See Perrin, “From Qumran to Nazareth,” 224–26.

arrived, and it is happening through the work of Jesus himself—a rather clear, if indirect, claim to be the expected Messiah.

Some scholars have doubted that Jesus ever claimed to be the Messiah. But among the various reasons for thinking that he did is one stark fact. The one thing the Roman judicial and political world knew about Jesus of Nazareth was that he was crucified as a political threat to Rome precisely on the charge of claiming to be king of the Jews, the Jewish Messiah. If Jesus had not claimed to be the Messiah, the disciples would certainly not have applied this politically dangerous title to him after his death. That would have meant creating for themselves the highly dangerous situation of being disciples of someone convicted of treason.³¹

Jesus's declaration that the kingdom of God was arriving would have sparked enormous excitement among Jesus's contemporaries. As N. T. Wright says, "God's kingdom, to the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century, meant the coming vindication of Israel, victory over the pagans, the eventual gift of peace, justice, and prosperity."³²

But Jesus fundamentally reinterpreted his people's hope for the messianic kingdom. Nowhere is this more clear than in Jesus's rejection of the violent revolutionaries' call to take up arms against the Romans. These revolutionaries who opposed paying Roman taxes would certainly have denounced the Roman law that made it legal for a Roman soldier to demand that a person in a conquered territory carry his bags for one mile. Instead of urging rebellion against that law, Jesus called his followers to carry the bags a second mile! Instead of urging slaughter of the godless conquerors, Jesus urged his people to love their enemies. Luke describes Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey rather than a warhorse—a powerful indication of Jesus's rejection of violent messianic strategies. And immediately after this account, Luke tells us that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, foreseeing how the calls for violent revolution will lead to the city's destruction (a tragedy that actually happened in AD 70). Sadly, Jesus says, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42).³³

Many Jews in Jesus's day thought the Messiah would come to inaugurate the kingdom if large numbers of people would join the rebels in a huge war

31. Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 266. See also N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 514, for the fact that Jesus's frequent self-description "Son of Man" (based on Dan. 7) was understood by some in Jesus's day as a messianic figure.

32. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 204. See too N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 303.

33. See also Mark 13:1–4 and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chap. 8.

against the Romans.³⁴ Jesus rejects this violent messianic option, calling his disciples to love their enemies. N. T. Wright puts it this way: Jesus taught that the kingdom would come “not by military victory, but by a doubly revolutionary method: turning the other cheek, going the second mile, the deeply subversive wisdom of taking up the cross.”³⁵

Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness also contrasted sharply with other messianic strategies. Some Pharisees taught that if the people kept the law faithfully, that would hasten the coming of the Messiah. Jesus, however, teaches that forgiveness was central to the arrival of the kingdom. The kingdom, Jesus says, is like a merciful king who freely forgives a huge debt that his servant cannot repay (Matt. 18:23–35). To the horror of the Pharisees, Jesus eagerly forgives even the most notorious offenders—prostitutes, the woman caught in adultery, and hated tax collectors profiting from collaboration with the foreign oppressors. To underline his acceptance, he shares table fellowship with these social outcasts. When the self-righteous protest indignantly, he retorts that he came to call not the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17).

Jesus forgave sinners in this radical, prodigal way because he knew that God is like the forgiving father in the parable of the prodigal son. In parable after parable, Jesus teaches that God takes the initiative to forgive sinners. “Throughout all the parables, God appears in constantly new variations as the one who is generous: as the magnanimous, merciful king, as the lender generously cancelling a debt, as the shepherd seeking the sheep, as the woman searching for the lost coin, as the father rushing out to meet his son, as the judge hearing the prayer of the tax collector. Again and again [God] is seen afresh as the God of infinite mercy.”³⁶ We in turn—as the parable about the unforgiving servant so vividly shows—are to imitate God’s radical forgiveness in our relationships with others (Matt. 18:23–35).

Jesus not only teaches about a forgiving God. He also claims personal authority to forgive sins. Jewish sources do not speak of the Messiah forgiving sins on his own authority. But Jesus boldly claims that authority. Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic seeking healing. When the religious leaders object to this blasphemous infringement on God’s sole authority to forgive sins, he retorts, “I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10).

34. See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4–6, 9–10, 23; Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 174; and Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 39–40, 58.

35. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 465.

36. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 276. See Matt. 18:23–27; Luke 7:41–43; 15:3–7, 8–10, 11–32; 18:9–14; cf. Matt. 20:1–15.

Jesus's designation of himself as "Son of Man" in the passage on forgiveness is significant. In Jesus's day, many Jews understood the figure of the "son of man" in Daniel 7 to be a messianic figure. We have Jewish texts of this period that interpret Daniel 7 as a messianic passage that predicts "the Lion of Judah triumphing over the Eagle of Rome."³⁷ Josephus says that this messianic prophecy "more than anything else incited the Jews to revolt" (*JW* 6.312–15). As the messianic Son of Man, Jesus did see himself bringing the kingdom. But he brought it through offering forgiveness, not through violence. Jesus understood his offer of forgiveness as a fundamental element of the kingdom breaking into history in his person and work. Forgiveness, not violence and vengeance, was the sign of his messianic kingdom.

Jesus's teaching in general and the Sermon on the Mount in particular spell out how Jesus intends his new messianic community to live. New Testament scholar Richard Hays points out that Matthew understands the Sermon on the Mount not as some impossible ideal but rather as "Jesus' programmatic disclosure of the kingdom of God and of the life to which the community of disciples is called."³⁸ And Jesus certainly does not think of his disciples as a tiny isolated fringe group in Israel. He says his people should be the salt of the *earth* and the light of the *whole world* (Matt. 5:13–14). By appointing twelve disciples, he shows that his message was for the twelve tribes of Israel—that is, the whole nation. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah of the whole people. His teaching was "a challenge to Israel to *be* Israel."³⁹

And that message involved a radical challenge to the status quo at many points. He upsets men who were happy with the easy divorce laws that enabled them to dismiss their wives for many reasons. Instead, he insists that God intended one man and one woman to live together in lifelong union (Matt. 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12). Jesus also disregarded social patterns that treated women as inferior. According to Jews of the time, a woman's word had no authority in court.⁴⁰ It was a disgrace for men to appear publicly with women. A widely used prayer recommended for daily use by Jewish males thanked God that they had not been created a gentile, a slave, or a woman.⁴¹ Jesus, on the contrary, appears publicly with women (John 4:27), teaches them theology (Luke 10:38–42), and honors them with his first resurrection appearance (John 20:11–18).

37. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 514.

38. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 321.

39. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 288 (italics original); see also 251.

40. See Moule, *Significance of the Message*, 9.

41. See Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, 154–57.

Jesus upset political rulers who were smugly satisfied with their domination of their subjects. In the dawning messianic age, servanthood must replace domination.⁴² The greatest in the kingdom is the Messiah, who is a servant of all. Therefore, those who aspire to leadership in Jesus's kingdom must likewise be humble servants rather than domineering masters.

Jesus terrified the economic establishment of his day. It would be easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle, he insists, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom (Matt. 19:24). He summons those with capital to lend to the needy even if they had no hope of recovering their investment (Luke 6:30, 34; cf. Matt. 5:42).⁴³ He recognized in the rich young ruler the idolatrous materialism that plagues many rich people. Therefore, he summons him—and presumably all others who worship the same idol—to give all his wealth to the poor (Matt. 19:21). And he denounces those who oppress poor widows.

In a daring act that led to his arrest, Jesus attacked the economic oppression and the religious desecration going on in the temple. Many people see only the religious side of Jesus's cleansing of the temple. But the text explicitly says that Jesus objects to both the sacrilege and the robbery: "It is written . . . , 'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Luke 19:46). The chief priests and their collaborators with Rome had a monopoly on the sale of sacrificial animals, which Jewish worshipers who came from any distance had to purchase in order to sacrifice. Apparently, they turned the temple's Court of the Gentiles into a profitable stockyard where they charged very high prices. Jesus denounces their desecration of the gentiles' place of prayer for the sake of economic oppression.⁴⁴

It is hardly surprising that the authorities moved quickly (Luke 19:47) to dispose of Jesus. A person demanding such radical change from the rich and powerful was a dangerous revolutionary. Jesus's uncompromising attack on the status quo wherever it was wrong was *one* fundamental reason he was crucified.

But Jesus's radical challenge to the status quo is only one part of the explanation for Jesus's death. The title Pilate placed on Jesus's cross, "King of the Jews," shows that the Romans crucified him on the political charge of treason (John 19:19; cf. Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38). And the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin charged him with blasphemy for acknowledging that he was

42. Matt. 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:24–28. Notice that already here servanthood is grounded in the cross.

43. See, beyond these brief references, the more than four dozen passages from the Gospels in Sider, *Cry Justice*, and Sider, *Rich Christians*, chap. 3.

44. See Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 80, who calls this act "an exemplary demonstration against the misuse of the sanctuary to enrich the leading priestly families."

“the Son of the Blessed One” and asserting that they would see him “sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One” (Mark 14:61–64).⁴⁵

Jesus, however, went to the cross, not just because others hated what he said and did. The Gospels also tell us that Jesus thought his death was central to his mission. The Son of Man (his favorite title for himself) came, Jesus says, “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Both Matthew and Mark report that immediately after Jesus affirms Peter’s confession that he is the Messiah, Jesus begins to warn the disciples about his coming death (Matt. 16:13–23; Mark 8:27–33). At the last meal with his disciples, Jesus says his blood is “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

N. T. Wright shows how Jesus saw his death as central to his belief that the kingdom of God that he had announced was actually arriving in his own person. Jesus’s contemporaries expected the Messiah to cleanse or rebuild the temple and defeat their enemies. Jesus seems to suggest that his death will accomplish what Jews generally thought the temple accomplished (he had already claimed authority to forgive sins apart from the temple). “In other words,” Wright says, “Jesus intended that his death should in some sense function sacrificially.”⁴⁶ His death would also conquer the real enemy, who was not the Romans but Satan, “who had duped YHWH’s people into themselves taking the pagan route, seeking to bring YHWH’s kingdom by force of arms and military revolt.”⁴⁷ Wright continues, “This, then, was how Jesus envisaged the messianic victory over the real enemy. The Satan had taken up residence in Jerusalem, not merely in Rome, and was seeking to pervert the chosen nation and the holy place into becoming a parody of themselves, a pseudo-chosen people intent on defeating the world with the world’s methods. . . . He would act on behalf of, act in the place of, the Israel that was failing to be what she was called to be.”⁴⁸

The cross, then, is central to Jesus’s understanding of the kingdom of God. And the resurrection, also, is central to Jesus’s and our understanding of the kingdom. If Jesus had remained dead, the only conceivable conclusion for a Jew would have been that Jesus’s announcement of the kingdom was false and that Jesus was a failed, false messiah. Too often in the history of Christianity, Christians have focused exclusively (or largely) on only the life and teaching or only the death of Christ. Even the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed move directly from Jesus’s birth to his death—as if nothing

45. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 550.

46. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 604.

47. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 564.

48. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 608–9.

important happened in between.⁴⁹ That is to belittle or ignore Jesus's teaching and undermine discipleship and ethical obedience. The widespread (heretical) idea in many evangelical circles that the only important reason Jesus came was to die for our sins is one of the most glaring examples of failure to embrace the full biblical Christ. Tragically, other Christians seem to affirm the (equally heretical) idea that it is only Jesus's teaching (especially his call to love enemies) that is finally important. If we believe with the church through two millennia that the teacher from Nazareth is God incarnate, then we must embrace the full biblical Christ.

This rather brief sketch of Jesus's gospel—his announcement of the kingdom, his teaching about the kingdom, and his actually inaugurating the kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection—provides the context for us to explore in detail what his actions (the next chapter) and teaching (the following two chapters) tell us about our basic question: Does Jesus ever want his disciples to kill?

49. J. D. Weaver rightly makes this critique in *Nonviolent Atonement*, 121–26, 209.