

# I

## A Foreign Country

*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*

– L. P. Hartley

If the past is a foreign country, it is a shockingly violent one. It is easy to forget how dangerous life used to be, how deeply brutality was once woven into the fabric of daily existence. Cultural memory pacifies the past, leaving us with pale souvenirs whose bloody origins have been bleached away. A woman donning a cross seldom reflects that this instrument of torture was a common punishment in the ancient world; nor does a person who speaks of a *whipping boy* ponder the old practice of flogging an innocent child in place of a misbehaving prince. We are surrounded by signs of the depravity of our ancestors' way of life, but we are barely aware of them. Just as travel broadens the mind, a literal-minded tour of our cultural heritage can awaken us to how differently they did things in the past.

In a century that began with 9/11, Iraq, and Darfur, the claim that we are living in an unusually peaceful time may strike you as somewhere between hallucinatory and obscene. I know from conversations and survey data that most people refuse to believe it.<sup>1</sup> In succeeding chapters I will make the case with dates and data. But first I want to soften you up by reminding you of incriminating facts about the past that you have known all along. This is not just an exercise in persuasion. Scientists often probe their conclusions with a sanity check, a sampling of real-world phenomena to reassure themselves they haven't overlooked some flaw in their methods and wandered into a preposterous conclusion. The vignettes in this chapter are a sanity check on the data to come.

What follows is a tour of the foreign country called the past, from 8000 BCE to the 1970s. It is not a grand tour of the wars and atrocities that we already commemorate for their violence, but rather a series of glimpses behind deceptively familiar landmarks to remind us of the viciousness they conceal. The past, of course, is not a single country, but encompasses a vast diversity of cultures and customs. What they have in common is the shock of the old: a backdrop of violence that was endured, and often embraced, in ways that startle the sensibilities of a 21st-century Westerner.

## HUMAN PREHISTORY

In 1991 two hikers stumbled upon a corpse poking out of a melting glacier in the Tyrolean Alps. Thinking that it was the victim of a skiing accident, rescue workers jackhammered the body out of the ice, damaging his thigh and his backpack in the process. Only when an archaeologist spotted a Neolithic copper ax did people realize that the man was five thousand years old.<sup>2</sup>

Ötzi the Iceman, as he is now called, became a celebrity. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and has been the subject of many books, documentaries, and articles. Not since Mel Brooks's 2000 Year Old Man ('I have more than 42,000 children and not one comes to visit me') has a kilogenarian had so much to tell us about the past. Ötzi lived during the crucial transition in human prehistory when agriculture was replacing hunting and gathering, and tools were first made of metal rather than stone. Together with his ax and backpack, he carried a quiver of fletched arrows, a wood-handled dagger, and an ember wrapped in bark, part of an elaborate fire-starting kit. He wore a bear-skin cap with a leather chinstrap, leggings sewn from animal hide, and waterproof snowshoes made from leather and twine and insulated with grass. He had tattoos on his arthritic joints, possibly a sign of acupuncture, and carried mushrooms with medicinal properties.

Ten years after the Iceman was discovered, a team of radiologists made a startling discovery: Ötzi had an arrowhead embedded in his shoulder. He had not fallen in a crevasse and frozen to death, as scientists had originally surmised; he had been murdered. As his body was examined by the the CSI Neolithic team, the outlines of the crime came

into view. Ötzi had unhealed cuts on his hands and wounds on his head and chest. DNA analyses found traces of blood from two other people on one of his arrowheads, blood from a third on his dagger, and blood from a fourth on his cape. According to one reconstruction, Ötzi belonged to a raiding party that clashed with a neighboring tribe. He killed a man with an arrow, retrieved it, killed another man, retrieved the arrow again, and carried a wounded comrade on his back before fending off an attack and being felled by an arrow himself.

Ötzi is not the only millennia-old man who became a scientific celebrity at the end of the 20th century. In 1996 spectators at a hydroplane race in Kennewick, Washington, noticed some bones poking out of a bank of the Columbia River. Archaeologists soon recovered the skeleton of a man who had lived 9,400 years ago.<sup>3</sup> Kennewick Man quickly became the object of highly publicized legal and scientific battles. Several Native American tribes fought for custody of the skeleton and the right to bury it according to their traditions, but a federal court rejected their claims, noting that no human culture has ever been in continuous existence for nine millennia. When the scientific studies resumed, anthropologists were intrigued to learn that Kennewick Man was anatomically very different from today's Native Americans. One report argued that he had European features; another that he matched the Ainu, the aboriginal inhabitants of Japan. Either possibility would imply that the Americas had been peopled by several independent migrations, contradicting DNA evidence suggesting that Native Americans are descendants of a single group of migrants from Siberia.

For plenty of reasons, then, Kennewick Man has become an object of fascination among the scientifically curious. And here is one more. Lodged in Kennewick Man's pelvis is a stone projectile. Though the bone had partially healed, indicating that he didn't die from the wound, the forensic evidence is unmistakable: Kennewick Man had been shot.

These are just two examples of famous prehistoric remains that have yielded grisly news about how their owners met their ends. Many visitors to the British Museum have been captivated by Lindow Man, an almost perfectly preserved two-thousand-year-old body discovered in an English peat bog in 1984.<sup>4</sup> We don't know how many of his children visited him, but we do know how he died. His skull had been fractured with a blunt object; his neck had been broken by a twisted cord; and for good measure his throat had been cut. Lindow Man may have been a

Druid who was ritually sacrificed in three ways to satisfy three gods. Many other bog men and women from northern Europe show signs of having been strangled, bludgeoned, stabbed, or tortured.

In a single month while researching this book, I came across two new stories about remarkably preserved human remains. One is a two-thousand-year-old skull dug out of a muddy pit in northern England. The archaeologist who was cleaning the skull felt something move, looked through the opening at the base, and saw a yellow substance inside, which turned out to be a preserved brain. Once again, the unusual state of preservation was not the only noteworthy feature about the find. The skull had been deliberately severed from the body, suggesting to the archaeologist that it was a victim of human sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> The other discovery was of a 4,600-year-old grave in Germany that held the remains of a man, a woman, and two boys. DNA analyses showed that they were members of a single nuclear family, the oldest known to science. The foursome had been buried at the same time – signs, the archaeologists said, that they had been killed in a raid.<sup>6</sup>

What is it about the ancients that they couldn't leave us an interesting corpse without resorting to foul play? Some cases may have an innocent explanation based in taphonomy, the processes by which bodies are preserved over long spans of time. Perhaps at the turn of the first millennium the only bodies that got dumped into bogs, there to be pickled for posterity, were those that had been ritually sacrificed. But with most of the bodies, we have no reason to think that they were preserved only because they had been murdered. Later we will look at the results of forensic investigations that can distinguish how an ancient body met its end from how it came down to us. For now, prehistoric remains convey the distinct impression that The Past is a place where a person had a high chance of coming to bodily harm.

## HOMERIC GREECE

Our understanding of prehistoric violence depends on the happenstance of which bodies were accidentally embalmed or fossilized, and so it must be radically incomplete. But once written language began to spread, ancient people left us with better information about how they conducted their affairs.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are considered the first great works of Western literature, and occupy the top slots in many guides to cultural literacy. Though these narratives are set at the time of the Trojan War around 1200 BCE, they were written down much later, between 800 and 650 BCE, and are thought to reflect life among the tribes and chiefdoms of the eastern Mediterranean in that era.<sup>7</sup>

Today one often reads that total war, which targets an entire society rather than just its armed forces, is a modern invention. Total war has been blamed on the emergence of nation-states, on universalist ideologies, and on technologies that allow killing at a distance. But if Homer's depictions are accurate (and they do jibe with archaeology, ethnography, and history), then the wars in archaic Greece were as total as anything in the modern age. Agamemnon explains to King Menelaus his plans for war:

Menelaus, my soft-hearted brother, why are you so concerned for these men? Did the Trojans treat you as handsomely when they stayed in your palace? No: we are not going to leave a single one of them alive, down to the babies in their mothers' wombs – not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear.<sup>8</sup>

In his book *The Rape of Troy*, the literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall discusses how archaic Greek wars were carried out:

Fast ships with shallow drafts are rowed onto beaches and seaside communities are sacked before neighbors can lend defensive support. The men are usually killed, livestock and other portable wealth are plundered, and women are carried off to live among the victors and perform sexual and menial labors. Homeric men live with the possibility of sudden, violent death, and the women live in fear for their men and children, and of sails on the horizon that may harbingers new lives of rape and slavery.<sup>9</sup>

We also commonly read that 20th-century wars were unprecedentedly destructive because they were fought with machine guns, artillery, bombers, and other long-distance weaponry, freeing soldiers from natural inhibitions against face-to-face combat and allowing them to kill large numbers of faceless enemies without mercy. According to this reasoning, handheld weapons are not nearly as lethal as our high-tech methods of battle. But Homer vividly described the large-scale damage

that warriors of his day could inflict. Gottschall offers a sample of his imagery:

Breached with surprising ease by the cold bronze, the body's contents pour forth in viscous torrents: portions of brains emerge at the ends of quivering spears, young men hold back their viscera with desperate hands, eyes are knocked or cut from skulls and glimmer sightlessly in the dust. Sharp points forge new entrances and exits in young bodies: in the center of foreheads, in temples, between the eyes, at the base of the neck, clean through the mouth or cheek and out the other side, through flanks, crotches, buttocks, hands, navels, backs, stomachs, nipples, chests, noses, ears, and chins. . . . Spears, pikes, arrows, swords, daggers, and rocks lust for the savor of flesh and blood. Blood sprays forth and mists the air. Bone fragments fly. Marrow boils from fresh stumps. . . .

In the aftermath of battle, blood flows from a thousand mortal or maiming wounds, turns dust to mud, and fattens the grasses of the plain. Men plowed into the soil by heavy chariots, sharp-hoofed stallions, and the sandals of men are past recognition. Armor and weaponry litter the field. Bodies are everywhere, decomposing, deliquescing, feasting dogs, worms, flies, and birds.<sup>10</sup>

The 21st century has certainly seen the rape of women in wartime, but it has long been treated as an atrocious war crime, which most armies try to prevent and the rest deny and conceal. But for the heroes of the *Iliad*, female flesh was a legitimate spoil of war: women were to be enjoyed, monopolized, and disposed of at their pleasure. Menelaus launches the Trojan War when his wife, Helen, is abducted. Agamemnon brings disaster to the Greeks by refusing to return a sex slave to her father, and when he relents, he appropriates one belonging to Achilles, later compensating him with twenty-eight replacements. Achilles, for his part, offers this pithy description of his career: 'I have spent many sleepless nights and bloody days in battle, fighting men for their women.'<sup>11</sup> When Odysseus returns to his wife after twenty years away, he murders the men who courted her while everyone thought he was dead, and when he discovers that the men had consorted with the concubines of his household, he has his son execute the concubines too.

These tales of massacre and rape are disturbing even by the standards of modern war documentaries. Homer and his characters, to be sure,

deplored the waste of war, but they accepted it as an inescapable fact of life, like the weather – something that everyone talked about but no one could do anything about. As Odysseus put it, ‘[We are men] to whom Zeus has given the fate of winding down our lives in painful wars, from youth until we perish, each of us.’ The men’s ingenuity, applied so resourcefully to weapons and strategy, turned up empty-handed when it came to the earthly causes of war. Rather than framing the scourge of warfare as a human problem for humans to solve, they concocted a fantasy of hotheaded gods and attributed their own tragedies to the gods’ jealousies and follies.

## THE HEBREW BIBLE

Like the works of Homer, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was set in the late 2nd millennium BCE but written more than five hundred years later.<sup>12</sup> But unlike the works of Homer, the Bible is revered today by billions of people who call it the source of their moral values. The world’s bestselling publication, the Good Book has been translated into three thousand languages and has been placed in the nightstands of hotels all over the world. Orthodox Jews kiss it with their prayer shawls; witnesses in American courts bind their oaths by placing a hand on it. Even the president touches it when taking the oath of office. Yet for all this reverence, the Bible is one long celebration of violence.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God took one of Adam’s ribs, and made he a woman. And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. With a world population of exactly four, that works out to a homicide rate of 25 percent, which is about a thousand times higher than the equivalent rates in Western countries today.

No sooner do men and women begin to multiply than God decides they are sinful and that the suitable punishment is genocide. (In Bill Cosby’s comedy sketch, a neighbor begs Noah for a hint as to why he is

building an ark. Noah replies, ‘How long can you tread water?’) When the flood recedes, God instructs Noah in its moral lesson, namely the code of vendetta: ‘Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.’

The next major figure in the Bible is Abraham, the spiritual ancestor of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Abraham has a nephew, Lot, who settles in Sodom. Because the residents engage in anal sex and comparable sins, God immolates every man, woman, and child in a divine napalm attack. Lot’s wife, for the crime of turning around to look at the inferno, is put to death as well.

Abraham undergoes a test of his moral values when God orders him to take his son Isaac to a mountaintop, tie him up, cut his throat, and burn his body as a gift to the Lord. Isaac is spared only because at the last moment an angel stays his father’s hand. For millennia readers have puzzled over why God insisted on this horrifying trial. One interpretation is that God intervened not because Abraham had passed the test but because he had failed it, but that is anachronistic: obedience to divine authority, not reverence for human life, was the cardinal virtue.

Isaac’s son Jacob has a daughter, Dinah. Dinah is kidnapped and raped – apparently a customary form of courtship at the time, since the rapist’s family then offers to purchase her from her own family as a wife for the rapist. Dinah’s brothers explain that an important moral principle stands in the way of this transaction: the rapist is uncircumcised. So they make a counteroffer: if all the men in the rapist’s hometown cut off their foreskins, Dinah will be theirs. While the men are incapacitated with bleeding penises, the brothers invade the city, plunder and destroy it, massacre the men, and carry off the women and children. When Jacob worries that neighboring tribes may attack them in revenge, his sons explain that it was worth the risk: ‘Should our sister be treated like a whore?’<sup>13</sup> Soon afterward they reiterate their commitment to family values by selling their brother Joseph into slavery.

Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites, find their way to Egypt and become too numerous for the Pharaoh’s liking, so he enslaves them and orders that all the boys be killed at birth. Moses escapes the mass infanticide and grows up to challenge the Pharaoh to let his people go. God, who is omnipotent, could have softened Pharaoh’s heart, but he hardens it instead, which gives him a reason to afflict every Egyptian with painful boils and other miseries before killing every one of *their*

firstborn sons. (The word *Passover* alludes to the executioner angel's passing over the households with Israelite firstborns.) God follows this massacre with another one when he drowns the Egyptian army as they pursue the Israelites across the Red Sea.

The Israelites assemble at Mount Sinai and hear the Ten Commandments, the great moral code that outlaws engraved images and the coveting of livestock but gives a pass to slavery, rape, torture, mutilation, and genocide of neighboring tribes. The Israelites become impatient while waiting for Moses to return with an expanded set of laws, which will prescribe the death penalty for blasphemy, homosexuality, adultery, talking back to parents, and working on the Sabbath. To pass the time, they worship a statue of a calf, for which the punishment turns out to be, you guessed it, death. Following orders from God, Moses and his brother Aaron kill three thousand of their companions.

God then spends seven chapters of Leviticus instructing the Israelites on how to slaughter the steady stream of animals he demands of them. Aaron and his two sons prepare the tabernacle for the first service, but the sons slip up and use the wrong incense. So God burns them to death.

As the Israelites proceed toward the promised land, they meet up with the Midianites. Following orders from God, they slay the males, burn their city, plunder the livestock, and take the women and children captive. When they return to Moses, he is enraged because they spared the women, some of whom had led the Israelites to worship rival gods. So he tells his soldiers to complete the genocide and to reward themselves with nubile sex slaves they may rape at their pleasure: 'Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.'<sup>14</sup>

In Deuteronomy 20 and 21, God gives the Israelites a blanket policy for dealing with cities that don't accept them as overlords: smite the males with the edge of the sword and abduct the cattle, women, and children. Of course, a man with a beautiful new captive faces a problem: since he has just murdered her parents and brothers, she may not be in the mood for love. God anticipates this nuisance and offers the following solution: the captor should shave her head, pare her nails, and imprison her in his house for a month while she cries her eyes out. Then he may go in and rape her.

With a designated list of other enemies (Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites), the genocide has to be total: 'Thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them . . . as the Lord thy God has commanded thee.'<sup>15</sup>

Joshua puts this directive into practice when he invades Canaan and sacks the city of Jericho. After the walls came tumbling down, his soldiers 'utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.'<sup>16</sup> More earth is scorched as Joshua 'smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.'<sup>17</sup>

The next stage in Israelite history is the era of the judges, or tribal chiefs. The most famous of them, Samson, establishes his reputation by killing thirty men during his wedding feast because he needs their clothing to pay off a bet. Then, to avenge the killing of his wife and her father, he slaughters a thousand Philistines and sets fire to their crops; after escaping capture, he kills another thousand with the jawbone of an ass. When he is finally captured and his eyes are burned out, God gives him the strength for a 9/11-like suicide attack in which he implodes a large building, crushing the three thousand men and women who are worshipping inside it.

Israel's first king, Saul, establishes a small empire, which gives him the opportunity to settle an old score. Centuries earlier, during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the Amalekites had harassed them, and God commanded the Israelites to 'wipe out the name of Amalek.' So when the judge Samuel anoints Saul as king, he reminds Saul of the divine decree: 'Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'<sup>18</sup> Saul carries out the order, but Samuel is furious to learn that he has spared their king, Agag. So Samuel 'hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord.'

Saul is eventually overthrown by his son-in-law David, who absorbs the southern tribes of Judah, conquers Jerusalem, and makes it the capital of a kingdom that will last four centuries. David would come to be celebrated in story, song, and sculpture, and his six-pointed star would symbolize his people for three thousand years. Christians too would revere him as the forerunner of Jesus.

But in Hebrew scripture David is not just the ‘sweet singer of Israel,’ the chiseled poet who plays a harp and composes the Psalms. After he makes his name by killing Goliath, David recruits a gang of guerrillas, extorts wealth from his fellow citizens at swordpoint, and fights as a mercenary for the Philistines. These achievements make Saul jealous: the women in his court are singing, ‘Saul has killed by the thousands, but David by the tens of thousands.’ So Saul plots to have him assassinated.<sup>19</sup> David narrowly escapes before staging a successful coup.

When David becomes king, he keeps up his hard-earned reputation for killing by the tens of thousands. After his general Joab ‘wasted the country of the children of Ammon,’ David ‘brought out the people that were in it, and cut them with saws, and with harrows of iron, and with axes.’<sup>20</sup> Finally he manages to do *something* that God considers immoral: he orders a census. To punish David for this lapse, God kills seventy thousand of his citizens.

Within the royal family, sex and violence go hand in hand. While taking a walk on the palace roof one day, David peeping-toms a naked woman, Bathsheba, and likes what he sees, so he sends her husband to be killed in battle and adds her to his seraglio. Later one of David’s children rapes another one and is killed in revenge by a third. The avenger, Absalom, rounds up an army and tries to usurp David’s throne by having sex with ten of his concubines. (As usual, we are not told how the concubines felt about all this.) While fleeing David’s army, Absalom’s hair gets caught in a tree, and David’s general thrusts three spears into his heart. This does not put the family squabbles to an end. Bathsheba tricks a senile David into anointing their son Solomon as his successor. When the legitimate heir, David’s older son Adonijah, protests, Solomon has him killed.

King Solomon is credited with fewer homicides than his predecessors and is remembered instead for building the Temple in Jerusalem and for writing the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (though with a harem of seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines, he clearly didn’t spend all his time writing). Most of all he is remembered for his eponymous virtue, ‘the wisdom of Solomon.’ Two prostitutes sharing a room give birth a few days apart. One of the babies dies, and each woman claims that the surviving boy is hers. The wise king adjudicates the dispute by pulling out a sword and threatening to butcher the baby and hand each woman a piece of the bloody corpse.

One woman withdraws her claim, and Solomon awards the baby to her. ‘When all Israel heard of the verdict that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king, because they saw that he had divine wisdom in carrying out justice.’<sup>21</sup>

The distancing effect of a good story can make us forget the brutality of the world in which it was set. Just imagine a judge in family court today adjudicating a maternity dispute by pulling out a chain saw and threatening to butcher the baby before the disputants’ eyes. Solomon was confident that the more humane woman (we are never told that she was the mother) would reveal herself, and that the other woman was so spiteful that she would allow a baby to be slaughtered in front of her – and he was right! And he must have been prepared, in the event he was wrong, to carry out the butchery or else forfeit all credibility. The women, for their part, must have believed that their wise king was capable of carrying out this grisly murder.

The Bible depicts a world that, seen through modern eyes, is staggering in its savagery. People enslave, rape, and murder members of their immediate families. Warlords slaughter civilians indiscriminately, including the children. Women are bought, sold, and plundered like sex toys. And Yahweh tortures and massacres people by the hundreds of thousands for trivial disobedience or for no reason at all. These atrocities are neither isolated nor obscure. They implicate all the major characters of the Old Testament, the ones that Sunday-school children draw with crayons. And they fall into a continuous plotline that stretches for millennia, from Adam and Eve through Noah, the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, David, Solomon, and beyond. According to the biblical scholar Raymund Schwager, the Hebrew Bible ‘contains over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others. . . . Aside from the approximately one thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executioner of violent punishments, and the many texts in which the Lord delivers the criminal to the punisher’s sword, in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people.’<sup>22</sup> Matthew White, a self-described atrocitologist who keeps a database with the estimated death tolls of history’s major wars, massacres, and genocides, counts about 1.2 million deaths from mass killing that are specifically enumerated in the Bible. (He excludes the half million casualties in the war between Judah and Israel described

in 2 Chronicles 13 because he considers the body count historically implausible.) The victims of the Noachian flood would add another 20 million or so to the total.<sup>23</sup>

The good news, of course, is that most of it never happened. Not only is there no evidence that Yahweh inundated the planet and incinerated its cities, but the patriarchs, exodus, conquest, and Jewish empire are almost certainly fictions. Historians have found no mention in Egyptian writings of the departure of a million slaves (which could hardly have escaped the Egyptians' notice); nor have archaeologists found evidence in the ruins of Jericho or neighboring cities of a sacking around 1200 BCE. And if there was a Davidic empire stretching from the Euphrates to the Red Sea around the turn of the 1st millennium BCE, no one else at the time seemed to have noticed it.<sup>24</sup>

Modern biblical scholars have established that the Bible is a wiki. It was compiled over half a millennium from writers with different styles, dialects, character names, and conceptions of God, and it was subjected to haphazard editing that left it with many contradictions, duplications, and non sequiturs.

The oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible probably originated in the 10th century BCE. They included origin myths for the local tribes and ruins, and legal codes adapted from neighboring civilizations in the Near East. The texts probably served as a code of frontier justice for the Iron Age tribes that herded livestock and farmed hillsides in the southeastern periphery of Canaan. The tribes began to encroach on the valleys and cities, engaged in some marauding every now and again, and may even have destroyed a city or two. Eventually their myths were adopted by the entire population of Canaan, unifying them with a shared genealogy, a glorious history, a set of taboos to keep them from defecting to foreigners, and an invisible enforcer to keep them from each other's throats. A first draft was rounded out with a continuous historical narrative around the late 7th to mid-6th century BCE, when the Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Judah and forced its inhabitants into exile. The final edit was completed after their return to Judah in the 5th century BCE.

Though the historical accounts in the Old Testament are fictitious (or at best artistic reconstructions, like Shakespeare's historical dramas), they offer a window into the lives and values of Near Eastern civilizations in the mid-1st millennium BCE. Whether or not the Israelites actually engaged in genocide, they certainly thought it was a good idea.

The possibility that a woman had a legitimate interest in not being raped or acquired as sexual property did not seem to register in anyone's mind. The writers of the Bible saw nothing wrong with slavery or with cruel punishments like blinding, stoning, and hacking someone to pieces. Human life held no value in comparison with unthinking obedience to custom and authority.

If you think that by reviewing the literal content of the Hebrew Bible I am trying to impugn the billions of people who revere it today, then you are missing the point. The overwhelming majority of observant Jews and Christians are, needless to say, thoroughly decent people who do not sanction genocide, rape, slavery, or stoning people for frivolous infractions. Their reverence for the Bible is purely talismanic. In recent millennia and centuries the Bible has been spin-doctored, allegorized, superseded by less violent texts (the Talmud among Jews and the New Testament among Christians), or discreetly ignored. And *that* is the point. Sensibilities toward violence have changed so much that religious people today compartmentalize their attitude to the Bible. They pay it lip service as a symbol of morality, while getting their actual morality from more modern principles.

## THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND EARLY CHRISTENDOM

Christians downplay the wrathful deity of the Old Testament in favor of a newer conception of God, exemplified in the New Testament (the Christian Bible) by his son Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Certainly loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek constitute an advance over utterly destroying all that breatheth. Jesus, to be sure, was not above using violent imagery to secure the loyalty of his flock. In Matthew 10:34-37 he says:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

It's not clear what he planned to do with that sword, but there's no evidence that he smote anyone with the edge of it.

Of course, there's no direct evidence for anything that Jesus said or did.<sup>25</sup> The words attributed to Jesus were written decades after his death, and the Christian Bible, like the Hebrew one, is riddled with contradictions, uncorroborated histories, and obvious fabrications. But just as the Hebrew Bible offers a glimpse into the values of the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, the Christian Bible tells us much about the first two centuries CE. Indeed, in that era the story of Jesus was by no means unique. A number of pagan myths told of a savior who was sired by a god, born of a virgin at the winter solstice, surrounded by twelve zodiacal disciples, sacrificed as a scapegoat at the spring equinox, sent into the underworld, resurrected amid much rejoicing, and symbolically eaten by his followers to gain salvation and immortality.<sup>26</sup>

The backdrop of the story of Jesus is the Roman Empire, the latest in a succession of conquerors of Judah. Though the first centuries of Christianity took place during the Pax Romana (the Roman Peace), the alleged peacefulness has to be understood in relative terms. It was a time of ruthless imperial expansion, including the conquest of Britain and the deportation of the Jewish population of Judah following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The preeminent symbol of the empire was the Colosseum, visited today by millions of tourists and emblazoned on pizza boxes all over the world. In this stadium, Super Bowl-sized audiences consumed spectacles of mass cruelty. Naked women were tied to stakes and raped or torn apart by animals. Armies of captives massacred each other in mock battles. Slaves carried out literal enactments of mythological tales of mutilation and death – for example, a man playing Prometheus would be chained to a rock, and a trained eagle would pull out his liver. Gladiators fought each other to the death; our thumbs-up and thumbs-down gestures may have come from the signals flashed by the crowd to a victorious gladiator telling him whether to administer the coup de grâce to his opponent. About half a million people died these agonizing deaths to provide Roman citizens with their bread and circuses. The grandeur that was Rome casts our violent entertainment in a different light (to say nothing of our 'extreme sports' and 'sudden-death overtime').<sup>27</sup>

The most famous means of Roman death, of course, was crucifixion,

the source of the word *excruciating*. Anyone who has ever looked up at the front of a church must have given at least a moment's thought to the unspeakable agony of being nailed to a cross. Those with a strong stomach can supplement their imagination by reading a forensic investigation of the death of Jesus Christ, based on archaeological and historical sources, which was published in 1986 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.<sup>28</sup>

A Roman execution began with a scourging of the naked prisoner. Using a short whip made of braided leather embedded with sharpened stones, Roman soldiers would flog the man's back, buttocks, and legs. According to the JAMA authors, 'The lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh.' The prisoner's arms would then be tied around a hundred-pound crossbar, and he would be forced to carry it to a site where a post was embedded in the ground. The man would be thrown onto his shredded back and nailed through the wrists to the crossbar. (Contrary to the familiar depictions, the flesh of the palms cannot support the weight of a man.) The victim was hoisted onto the post and his feet were nailed to it, usually without a supporting block. The man's rib cage was distended by the weight of his body pulling on his arms, making it difficult to exhale unless he pulled his arms or pushed his legs against the nails. Death from asphyxiation and loss of blood would come after an ordeal ranging from three or four hours to three or four days. The executioners could prolong the torture by resting the man's weight on a seat, or hasten death by breaking his legs with a club.

Though I like to think that nothing human is foreign to me, I find it impossible to put myself in the minds of the ancients who devised this orgy of sadism. Even if I had custody of Hitler and could mete out the desert of my choice, it would not occur to me to inflict a torture like that on him. I could not avoid wincing in sympathy, would not want to become the kind of person who could indulge in such cruelty, and could see no point in adding to the world's reservoir of suffering without a commensurate benefit. (Even the practical goal of deterring future despots, I would reason, is better served by maximizing the expectation that they will be brought to justice than by maximizing the gruesomeness of the penalty.) Yet in the foreign country we call the past, crucifixion was a common punishment. It was invented by the Persians, carried back to Europe by Alexander the Great, and widely used in Mediterranean

empires. Jesus, who was convicted of minor rabble-rousing, was crucified along with two common thieves. The outrage that the story was meant to arouse was not that petty crimes were punishable by crucifixion but that Jesus was treated like a petty criminal.

The crucifixion of Jesus, of course, was never treated lightly. The cross became the symbol of a movement that spread through the ancient world, was adopted by the Roman Empire, and two millennia later remains the world's most recognizable symbol. The dreadful death it calls to mind must have made it an especially potent meme. But let's step outside our familiarity with Christianity and ponder the mindset that tried to make sense of the crucifixion. By today's sensibilities, it's more than a little macabre that a great moral movement would adopt as its symbol a graphic representation of a revolting means of torture and execution. (Imagine that the logo of a Holocaust museum was a shower nozzle, or that survivors of the Rwandan genocide formed a religion around the symbol of a machete.) More to the point, what was the lesson that the first Christians drew from the crucifixion? Today such a barbarity might galvanize people into opposing brutal regimes, or demanding that such torture never again be inflicted on a living creature. But those weren't the lessons the early Christians drew at all. No, the execution of Jesus is The Good News, a necessary step in the most wonderful episode in history. In allowing the crucifixion to take place, God did the world an incalculable favor. Though infinitely powerful, compassionate, and wise, he could think of no other way to relieve humanity from punishment for its sins (in particular, for the sin of being descended from a couple who had disobeyed him) than to allow an innocent man (his son no less) to be impaled through the limbs and slowly suffocate in agony. By acknowledging that this sadistic murder was a gift of divine mercy, people could earn eternal life. And if they failed to see the logic in all this, their flesh would be seared by fire for all eternity.

According to this way of thinking, death by torture is not an unthinkable horror; it has a bright side. It is a route to salvation, a part of the divine plan. Like Jesus, the early Christian saints found a place next to God by being tortured to death in ingenious ways. For more than a millennium, Christian martyrologies described these torments with pornographic relish.<sup>29</sup>

Here are just a few saints whose names, if not their causes of death,

are widely known. Saint Peter, an apostle of Jesus and the first Pope, was crucified upside down. Saint Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, met his end on an X-shaped cross, the source of the diagonal stripes on the Union Jack. Saint Lawrence was roasted alive on a gridiron, a detail unknown to most Canadians who recognize his name from the river, the gulf, and one of Montreal's two major boulevards. The other one commemorates Saint Catherine, who was broken on the wheel, a punishment in which the executioner tied the victim to a wagon wheel, smashed his or her limbs with a sledgehammer, braided the shattered but living body through the spokes, and hoisted it onto a pole for birds to peck while the victim slowly died of hemorrhage and shock. (Catherine's wheel, studded with spikes, adorns the shield of the eponymous college at Oxford.) Saint Barbara, namesake of the beautiful California city, was hung upside down by her ankles while soldiers ripped her body with iron claws, amputated her breasts, burned the wounds with hot irons, and beat her head with spiked clubs. And then there's Saint George, the patron saint of England, Palestine, the republic of Georgia, the Crusades, and the Boy Scouts. Because God kept resuscitating him, George got to be tortured to death many times. He was seated astride a sharp blade with weights on his legs, roasted on a fire, pierced through the feet, crushed by a spiked wheel, had sixty nails hammered into his head, had the fat rendered out of his back with candles, and then was sawn in half.

The voyeurism in the martyrologies was employed not to evoke outrage against torture but to inspire reverence for the bravery of the martyrs. As in the story of Jesus, torture was an excellent thing. The saints welcomed their torments, because suffering in this life would be rewarded with bliss in the next one. The Christian poet Prudentius wrote of one of the martyrs, 'The mother was present, gazing on all the preparations for her dear one's death and showed no signs of grief, rejoicing rather each time the pan hissing hot above the olive wood roasted and scorched her child.'<sup>30</sup> Saint Lawrence would become the patron saint of comedians because while he was lying on the gridiron he said to his tormenters, 'This side's done, turn me over and have a bite.' The torturers were straight men, bit players; when they were put in a bad light it was because they were torturing *our* heroes, not because they used torture in the first place.

The early Christians also extolled torture as just deserts for the sinful.

Most people have heard of the seven deadly sins, standardized by Pope Gregory I in 590 CE. Fewer people know about the punishment in hell that was reserved for those who commit them:

- Pride: Broken on the wheel
- Envy: Put in freezing water
- Gluttony: Force-fed rats, toads, and snakes
- Lust: Smothered in fire and brimstone
- Anger: Dismembered alive
- Greed: Put in cauldrons of boiling oil
- Sloth: Thrown in snake pits<sup>31</sup>

The duration of these sentences, of course, was infinite.

By sanctifying cruelty, early Christianity set a precedent for more than a millennium of systematic torture in Christian Europe. If you understand the expressions *to burn at the stake*, *to hold his feet to the fire*, *to break a butterfly on the wheel*, *to be racked with pain*, *to be drawn and quartered*, *to disembowel*, *to flay*, *to press*, *the thumbscrew*, *the garrote*, *a slow burn*, and *the iron maiden* (a hollow hinged statue lined with nails, later taken as the name of a heavy-metal rock band), you are familiar with a fraction of the ways that heretics were brutalized during the Middle Ages and early modern period.

During the Spanish Inquisition, church officials concluded that the conversions of thousands of former Jews didn't take. To compel the conversos to confess their hidden apostasy, the inquisitors tied their arms behind their backs, hoisted them by their wrists, and dropped them in a series of violent jerks, rupturing their tendons and pulling their arms out of their sockets.<sup>32</sup> Many others were burned alive, a fate that also befell Michael Servetus for questioning the trinity, Giordano Bruno for believing (among other things) that the earth went around the sun, and William Tyndale for translating the Bible into English. Galileo, perhaps the most famous victim of the Inquisition, got off easy: he was only *shown* the instruments of torture (in particular, the rack) and was given the opportunity to recant for 'having held and believed that the sun is the center of the world and immovable, and that the earth is not the center and moves.' Today the rack shows up in cartoons featuring elasticized limbs and bad puns (Stretching exercises; Is this a wind-up? No pain no gain). But at the time it was no laughing matter. The Scottish

travel writer William Lithgow, a contemporary of Galileo's, described what it was like to be racked by the Inquisition:

As the levers bent forward, the main force of my knees against the two planks burst asunder the sinews of my hams, and the lids of my knees were crushed. My eyes began to startle, my mouth to foam and froth, and my teeth to chatter like the doubling of a drummer's sticks. My lips were shivering, my groans were vehement, and blood sprang from my arms, broken sinews, hands, and knees. Being loosed from these pinnacles of pain, I was hand-fast set on the floor, with this incessant imploration: 'Confess! Confess!'<sup>33</sup>

Though many Protestants were victims of these tortures, when they got the upper hand they enthusiastically inflicted them on others, including a hundred thousand women they burned at the stake for witchcraft between the 15th and 18th centuries.<sup>34</sup> As so often happens in the history of atrocity, later centuries would treat these horrors in lighthearted ways. In popular culture today witches are not the victims of torture and execution but mischievous cartoon characters or sassy enchantresses, like Broom-Hilda, Witch Hazel, Glinda, Samantha, and the Halliwell sisters in *Charmed*.

Institutionalized torture in Christendom was not just an unthinking habit; it had a moral rationale. If you really believe that failing to accept Jesus as one's savior is a ticket to fiery damnation, then torturing a person until he acknowledges this truth is doing him the biggest favor of his life: better a few hours now than an eternity later. And silencing a person before he can corrupt others, or making an example of him to deter the rest, is a responsible public health measure. Saint Augustine brought the point home with a pair of analogies: a good father prevents his son from picking up a venomous snake, and a good gardener cuts off a rotten branch to save the rest of the tree.<sup>35</sup> The method of choice had been specified by Jesus himself: 'If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.'<sup>36</sup>

Once again, the point of this discussion is not to accuse Christians of endorsing torture and persecution. *Of course* most devout Christians today are thoroughly tolerant and humane people. Even those who thunder from televised pulpits do not call for burning heretics alive or hoisting Jews on the strappado. The question is why they don't, given

that their beliefs imply that it would serve the greater good. The answer is that people in the West today compartmentalize their religious ideology. When they affirm their faith in houses of worship, they profess beliefs that have barely changed in two thousand years. But when it comes to their actions, they respect modern norms of nonviolence and toleration, a benevolent hypocrisy for which we should all be grateful.

## MEDIEVAL KNIGHTS

If the word *saintly* deserves a second look, so does the word *chivalrous*. The legends of knights and ladies in King Arthur's time have provided Western culture with some of its most romantic images. Lancelot and Guinevere are the archetypes of romantic love, Sir Galahad the embodiment of gallantry. Camelot, the name of King Arthur's court, was used as the title of a Broadway musical, and when word got out after John F. Kennedy's assassination that he had enjoyed the sound track, it became a nostalgic term for his administration. Kennedy's favorite lines reportedly were 'Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot / For one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.'

As a matter of fact, the knightly way of life *was* forgot, which is a good thing for the image of the knightly way of life. The actual content of the tales of medieval chivalry, which were set in the 6th century and written between the 11th and the 13th, was not the stuff of a typical Broadway musical. The medievalist Richard Kaeuper tallied the number of acts of extreme violence in the most famous of these romances, the 13th-century *Lancelot*, and on average found one every four pages.

Limiting ourselves to quantifiable instances, at least eight skulls are split (some to the eyes, some to the teeth, some to the chin), eight unhorsed men are deliberately crushed by the huge hooves of the victor's war-horse (so that they faint in agony, repeatedly), five decapitations take place, two entire shoulders are hewn away, three hands are cut off, three arms are severed at various lengths, one knight is thrown into a blazing fire and two knights are catapulted to sudden death. One woman is painfully bound in iron bands by a knight; one is kept for years in a tub of boiling water by God, one is narrowly missed by a hurled lance. Women are frequently abducted and we hear at one point of forty rapes. . . .

Beyond these readily enumerable acts there are reports of three private wars (with, in one case, 100 casualties on one side, and with 500 deaths with poison in another). . . . In one [tournament], to provide the flavor, Lancelot kills the first man he encounters with his lance and then, sword drawn, 'struck to the right and the left, killing horses and knights all at the same time, cutting feet and hands, heads and arms, shoulders and thighs, striking down those above him whenever he met them, and leaving a sorrowful wake behind him, so that the whole earth was bathed in blood wherever he passed.'<sup>37</sup>

How did the knights ever earn their reputation for being gentlemen? According to *Lancelot*, 'Lancelot had the custom of never killing a knight who begged for mercy, unless he had sworn beforehand to do so, or unless he could not avoid it.'<sup>38</sup>

As for their vaunted treatment of the ladies, one knight woos a princess by pledging to rape the most beautiful woman he can find on her behalf; his rival promises to send her the heads of the knights he defeats in tournaments. Knights do protect ladies, but only to keep them from being abducted by other knights. According to *Lancelot*, 'The customs of the Kingdom of Logres are such that if a lady or a maiden travels by herself, she fears no one. But if she travels in the company of a knight and another knight can win her in battle, the winner can take a lady or maiden in any way he desires without incurring shame or blame.'<sup>39</sup> Presumably that is not what most people today mean by the word *chivalry*.

## EARLY MODERN EUROPE

In chapter 3 we will see that medieval Europe settles down a bit when the knightly warlords are brought under the control of monarchs in centralized kingdoms. But the kings and queens were hardly paragons of nobility themselves.

Commonwealth schoolchildren are often taught one of the key events in British history with the help of a mnemonic:

King Henry the Eighth, to six wives he was wedded:  
One died, one survived, two divorced, two beheaded.

Beheaded! In 1536 Henry had his wife Anne Boleyn decapitated on

trumped-up charges of adultery and treason because she gave him a son that did not survive, and he had become attracted to one of her ladies-in-waiting. Two wives later he suspected Catherine Howard of adultery and sent her to the ax as well. (Tourists visiting the Tower of London can see the chopping block for themselves.) Henry was clearly the jealous type: he also had an old boyfriend of Catherine's drawn and quartered, which is to say hanged by the neck, taken down while still alive, disemboweled, castrated, decapitated, and cut into four.

The throne passed to Henry's son Edward, then to Henry's daughter Mary, and then to another daughter, Elizabeth. 'Bloody Mary' did not get her nickname by putting tomato juice in her vodka but by having three hundred religious dissenters burned at the stake. And both sisters kept up the family tradition for how to resolve domestic squabbles: Mary imprisoned Elizabeth and presided over the execution of their cousin, Lady Jane Grey, and Elizabeth executed another cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. Elizabeth also had 123 priests drawn and quartered, and had other enemies tortured with bone-crushing manacles, another attraction on display in the Tower. Today the British royal family is excoriated for shortcomings ranging from rudeness to infidelity. You'd think people would give them credit for not having had a single relative decapitated, nor a single rival drawn and quartered.

Despite signing off on all that torture, Elizabeth I is among England's most revered monarchs. Her reign has been called a golden age in which the arts flourished, especially the theater. It's hardly news that Shakespeare's tragedies depict a lot of violence. But his fictional worlds contained levels of barbarity that can shock even the inured audiences of popular entertainment today. Henry V, one of Shakespeare's heroes, issues the following ultimatum of surrender to a French village during the Hundred Years' War:

why, in a moment look to see  
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,  
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes.<sup>40</sup>

In *King Lear*, the Duke of Cornwall gouges out the eyes of the Earl of

Gloucester ('Out, vile jelly!'), whereupon his wife, Regan, orders the earl, bleeding from the sockets, out of the house: 'Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell his way to Dover.' In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock obtains the right to cut a pound of flesh from the chest of the guarantor of a loan. In *Titus Andronicus*, two men kill another man, rape his bride, cut out her tongue, and amputate her hands. Her father kills the rapists, cooks them in a pie, and feeds them to their mother, whom he then kills before killing his own daughter for having gotten raped in the first place; then he is killed, and his killer is killed.

Entertainment written for children was no less grisly. In 1815 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published a compendium of old folktales that had gradually been adapted for children. Commonly known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the collection ranks with the Bible and Shakespeare as one of the bestselling and most respected works in the Western canon. Though it isn't obvious from the bowdlerized versions in Walt Disney films, the tales are filled with murder, infanticide, cannibalism, mutilation, and sexual abuse – grim fairy tales indeed. Take just the three famous stepmother stories:

- During a famine, the father and stepmother of Hansel and Gretel abandon them in a forest so that they will starve to death. The children stumble upon an edible house inhabited by a witch, who imprisons Hansel and fattens him up in preparation for eating him. Fortunately Gretel shoves the witch into a fiery oven, and 'the godless witch burned to death in a horrible way.'<sup>41</sup>
- Cinderella's stepsisters, when trying to squeeze into her slippers, take their mother's advice and cut off a toe or heel to make them fit. Doves notice the blood, and after Cinderella marries the prince, they peck out the stepsisters' eyes, punishing them 'for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives.'
- Snow White arouses the jealousy of her stepmother, the queen, so the queen orders a hunter to take her into the forest, kill her, and bring back her lungs and liver for the queen to eat. When the queen realizes that Snow White has escaped, she makes three more attempts on her life, two by poison, one by asphyxiation. After the prince has revived her, the queen crashes their

wedding, but ‘iron slippers had already been heated up for her over a fire of coals. . . . She had to put on the red-hot iron shoes and dance in them until she dropped to the ground dead.’<sup>42</sup>

As we shall see, purveyors of entertainment for young children today have become so intolerant of violence that even episodes of the early Muppets have been deemed too dangerous for them. And speaking of puppetry, one of the most popular forms of children’s entertainment in Europe used to be the Punch and Judy show. Well into the 20th century, this pair of bickering glove puppets acted out slapstick routines in ornate booths in English seaside towns. The literature scholar Harold Schechter summarizes a typical plot:

It begins when Punch goes to pet his neighbor’s dog, which promptly clamps its teeth around the puppet’s grotesquely oversized nose. After prying the dog loose, Punch summons the owner, Scaramouche and, after a bit of crude banter, knocks the fellow’s head ‘clean off his shoulders.’ Punch then calls for his wife, Judy, and requests a kiss. She responds by walloping him in the face. Seeking another outlet for his affection, Punch asks for his infant child and begins to cradle it. Unfortunately, the baby picks that moment to dirty itself. Always the loving family man, Punch reacts by beating the baby’s head against the stage, then hurling its dead body into the audience. When Judy reappears and discovers what’s happened, she is understandably upset. Tearing Punch’s stick from his hands, she begins to lay into him. He wrestles the cudgel away from her, pummels her to death, and then breaks into a triumphant little song:

Who’d be plagued with a wife  
That could set himself free  
With a rope or a knife  
Or a good stick, like me?<sup>43</sup>

Even Mother Goose nursery rhymes, which mostly date from the 17th and 18th centuries, are jarring by the standards of what we let small children hear today. Cock Robin is murdered in cold blood. A single mother living in substandard housing has numerous illegitimate children and abuses them with whipping and starvation. Two unsupervised children are allowed to go on a dangerous errand; Jack sustains a head injury that could leave him with brain damage, while Jill’s