

Murder and Mayhem in the Bible

An Age-old Problem

Hello and welcome to this course! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fr Tony Milner, a priest of the diocese of Arundel and Brighton, currently working in the parish of Brighton and Hove. My ministry has been divided roughly equally between parish work and teaching in various contexts, particularly in seminaries, but also in other areas of adult formation. My ‘special subject’ is biblical theology, and as part of that I have completed a doctorate. The title of the thesis was *A Theology of Genocide?* The question mark is very important. I will be speaking more about that later.

In 1994 I was a recently ordained priest in my first parish on the south coast. It was in April of that year that we began to here of terrible things happening in Rwanda. One group of people slaughtering another purely on the basis of perceived ethnicity. Genocide. The world looked on in horror. Aid agencies tried to help those who fled the violence. The special collection at our church raised far more than we expected. People were very generous.

But in my mind was the biblical story of the conquest of Canaan, and the command to the Israelites:

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. ¹⁷ You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded . (Dt 20:16-17)

If that is not genocide, then I don’t know what is! The question of how we can say “this is the word of the Lord” to this passage, and indeed many other troubling passages in the Bible, remained with me. Over a decade later, and back in Rome (where I had done my earlier studies), I found the time to explore this more deeply, and it is the fruits of that study that I want to share with you. We will look at this particular problem – the command to slaughter the people resident in the Promised Land – next week. But first we need to take a step back a bit and see what others have made of this. We are not the first to have problems with Biblical texts!

One recent writer opined:

The god of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist,

infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹

And while Richard Dawkins is not normally on my go-to list of theological authorities, we have to admit that, on the surface at least, he seems to have a point.

Nor is this a question that just troubles us ‘moderns’. In the 2nd century Marcion argued that the god of the Old Testament was “fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic, [and] cruel”, quite unlike the “Supreme God of Love whom Jesus came to reveal”.² He thus excised the entire Old Testament from the Bible, and also much of the New Testament, finishing up with just the Pauline letters and the Gospel of Luke. And even these he had to edit down somewhat.

Marcion’s ideas were rejected by the Church, but the question remained, and many of the early writers of the Church sought to understand better how to approach the more challenging biblical passages. Here I will mention just two. Origen, from the 3rd century, and Gregory of Nyssa from the 4th.

Origen was arguably the first great biblical scholar of the church, and there are two things he wrote I want to briefly look at. The first comes from a book on the practice of reading the Bible:

But since, if the usefulness of the legislation, and the sequence and beauty of the history, were universally evident of itself, we should not believe that any other thing could be understood in the Scriptures save what was obvious, the word of God has arranged that certain stumbling-blocks [literally ‘scandals’], as it were, and offenses, and impossibilities, should be introduced into the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not, through being drawn away in all directions by the merely attractive nature of the language, either altogether fall away from the (true) doctrines, as learning nothing worthy of God, or, by not departing from the letter, come to the knowledge of nothing more divine.³

In other words, if the Scriptures were not difficult, we would remain only at the ‘surface level’ of understanding, and not be forced to look more deeply. For Origen, and indeed for all the writers of the era, most scriptural texts had at least two ‘senses’: the ‘literal’ (the plain meaning of the text), which is principally about what happened in the past, and the ‘spiritual’ or allegorical, which is, broadly speaking, the message the text has for all ages. I will unpack this a bit more in the session.

¹ R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, Bantam, 2006, 31.

² F. L. Cross, & E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, 1040.

³ Origen, *Peri Archon* 4.2.9.

My second quote from Origen comes from his homilies on the book of Joshua and illustrates this distinction:

Unless those physical wars bore the figure of spiritual wars, I do not think the books of Jewish history would ever have been handed down by the Apostles to the Disciples of Christ, who came to teach peace, so that they could be read in the churches.⁴

For Origen, the literal meaning is almost always a springboard to a deeper meaning. And indeed he will go on to argue that if the literal meaning is in some way impossible or ‘unworthy of God’ then it can be discounted.

Gregory of Nyssa, who lived a century later and was influenced by Origen spells this out in some places. One interesting example is his work on the life of Moses. Just before the Israelites leave Egypt, they are encouraged to borrow precious items, particularly silver and gold, from their Egyptian neighbours (Ex 11:2-3). Given that this was not going to be returned (cf. Ex 12: 35-36), Gregory regards this as stealing, and given God could not order something which was objectively wrong, it must have a deeper meaning, and that meaning must be the primary meaning. Gregory argues in fact that it refers to the philosophical ‘treasures’ of pagan peoples, particularly ancient Greek philosophy.

Some other early writers are a bit more cautious. Augustine counsels against being overly quick to discount the literal meaning of the text, arguing that, if the literal meaning is difficult for us, that might say more about us than the text. None the less he allows for the reader to see texts that are ‘impossible’ (rather than just difficult) as allegorical.

How does this fit in with the best of modern biblical scholarship? One key insight of the broadly historical study of the scriptures is the realisation that we must pay close attention to both the literary genre of the biblical texts, and also their historical context.

On literary genre, it is important to note that none of the books of the Bible are ‘history’ in the modern sense. Even the books of Kings, which are perhaps the most ‘historical’ of the books of the OT, actually indicate that they are not written primarily as histories. There is a repeated formula in the books of Kings: “as for the rest of the acts of so-and-so, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Judah/Israel”. The authors indicate they are selecting particular stories, above all to illustrate ways in which a particular king did good or evil in the sight of God. Of course the books do draw on historic traditions, but the purpose is religious and ethical rather than simply the recalling of the story.

This leads to context. Who is the author and, perhaps more importantly, who is the audience? Who was this written for? Going back to the command to slaughter the

⁴ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 15.1

Canaanites, we can note that the book of Deuteronomy, in the form we have it, was written many generations after the events it refers to. Indeed, most scholars conclude it was largely written late in the period of the divided monarchy of Israel and Judah, and probably reached its final form during or just after the Exile in Babylon. This is long after there were any Canaanites to slaughter, so what did our text mean for them? Is it just an historical detail, or did it have a deeper meaning for them also? I will argue the latter in the next session!

A further 'toolkit' of modern biblical study, which can help when trying to determine the 'purpose' of a text, is literary analysis. This involves treating biblical texts, especially narrative ones, as story, and looking at such features as plot, character and audience. Also important in the context is intertextuality – how one text relates to others that the audience is presumed to know. In the case of the Conquest, there are stories in the book of Joshua which depend upon detailed knowledge of passages from Deuteronomy in order to be comprehensible, as we shall see next week.

Character is also particularly important, especially when the 'character' is God! Any characterisation is always a representation, involving selectivity and viewpoint. Further, the bible contains many representations of God, sometimes even contradictory ones. The book of Job has two very different characterisation of God, and this appears to be a deliberate effort by the author to invite the audience to a deeper understanding of the problem of evil.

One final point for now is to recognise the difference between what is presumed by a text, and what the author is actually seeking to communicate. Many OT texts presume a cosmology involving a flat, stationary earth with the celestial bodies traveling across the sky. But that does not mean we have to espouse that cosmology ourselves.

These are some key tools we will be using in the coming weeks in order to better understand some of the more troubling passages of the Bible. Strap in, it is going to be an interesting ride!

