

Murder and Mayhem in the Bible

2. A Genocidal God?

Last week we noted that, in the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites who are about to enter the promised land are told by Moses that they must “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” (Deut 20:17). But can we really believe God commanded genocide? Let us look a bit more closely.

The phrase translated here as “annihilate them” uses a very specific term. Herem, a term which is sometimes translated as ‘Ban’. In fact, our phrase uses the term twice, as verb and noun. Literally ‘ban them under the Ban’. Historically speaking, the Herem, or Ban, was the complete slaughter of the defeated enemy as a sacrificial act to a god. There is evidence outside the Bible that this was a practice that existed in the region in the early part of the first millennium BC. An inscription from one of Israel’s neighbors – the Moabites, describes it being used against Israel:

And Kemosh said to me: ‘Go, seize Nebo from Israel,’ (15) So I went in the night, and I attacked it from the break of dawn until noon when (16) I seized it, and I slew everybody (in it)—seven thousand m(e)n, b(o)ys, ladies and gi(rl)s, (17) and maidens—for the warrior Kemosh I committed them to the ban. I took from there (18) t(he vessel)s of YHWH and I dragged them before Kemosh.⁵

The ban involves, at minimum, the slaughter of all enemy combatants. It often involves the killing of all other residents of the town being attacked, and sometimes involves the killing of all livestock and the dedication of any booty to the God concerned, either destroying it or giving it to a temple. Probably the clearest example in the biblical narrative is the destruction of Jericho in the book of Joshua, where we are told “they subjected everything in the city to the Ban, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.” (Josh 6:21), and previous to that it was noted that “all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD” (Josh 6:19).

We noted last week that the book of Deuteronomy was written for an audience long after the Conquest, so the command to slaughter the Canaanites is not included as a direct instruction to the audience. It is, however, necessary ‘background information’ for understanding key parts of the book of Joshua. Deuteronomy does not allow for any exceptions to this law, and yet twice in Joshua exemptions are made. First for Rahab, who hid the spies when they came to Jericho, (Cf Josh 2 & 6), and second for the Gibeonites, who pretended to be outsiders to avoid being slaughtered (Cf Josh 9). Their exceptionality is on the basis of their wholehearted (in the case of Rahab) or grudging (in the case of the Gibeonites) acceptance that the land has been given by God to the

Israelites. So whereas in Deuteronomy 20 ethnicity is the primary consideration, Joshua 'moves the goalposts' as it were to a focus on commitment to God's law. This is made clear also by the fate of Achan, an ethnically impeccable Israelite, who disobeys the Ban by stealing some of the booty, and is found out and condemned (Josh 7).

A further point of note in Joshua is the authors relative lack of interest in the battles themselves. In the story about the conquest of Jericho the actual conquest itself is reported in just two verses (6:20-21). All the rest is preparation, instructions, and details about the booty and the fate of Rahab.

Reading Deuteronomy 20 in the light of Joshua, we see a clear 'development' from seeing Israelite identity as purely ethnic to one which is more focused on the embracing and following the Law. But what is the context of this message?

In 2 Kings 22, during the reign of Josiah we are told that the 'Book of the Law' was found in the temple. This leads to consternation that the Law has not been being followed, and to a major religious reform. Scholars have noted that this reform looks a lot like the stipulations in Deuteronomy. One particular feature, the centralisation of sacrificial worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, is featured clearly in Deuteronomy and also in Josiah's reform, but is notably absent elsewhere in the Pentateuch.

In the time of Josiah there was a bit of a 'power vacuum' in the Holy Land, with Assyria in decline, Babylon not having reached the strength we will see a couple of generations later, and Egyptian influence not being overly strong. This allowed Israel to expand modestly back into former territories. Yet the reform of Josiah does not mention anything about the fate of any non-Israelite peoples who might be still resident in the land. The reform is purely an internal matter and does not have a military dimension at all. The only possible battle (if it is that) is a somewhat enigmatic note about Josiah getting involved in what appears to be a confrontation between Egypt and Assyria, and being killed by Neco, the Pharaoh (2 Kings 23:28-30) This stalls the reform and leads eventually to the Exile.

Indeed the overall message of the 'Deuteronomistic History' appears to say that the attempt to keep 'pure' by keeping foreigners out in one way or another (usually violently) is a complete failure. The only guarantee of security is trust in God and following God's law! In this even ethnicity is irrelevant, as the case of Rahab proves.

So the text isn't encouraging its audience to practice genocide on foreigners. But that still leaves the problem: did God command genocide at the time of the Conquest?

There are a number of reasons for being cautious about taking the narrative of the Conquest at face value. Let us look briefly at three.

First, the narratives themselves are inconsistent. Joshua 11: 23 assures the hearer that:

Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.

But a few paragraphs later God tells Joshua:

You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be possessed. (Josh 13:1)

This is a theme we find in the book of Judges, which also speaks mostly of the ‘driving out’ of the Canaanites rather than their destruction.

Second, the archaeological evidence points away from a single act of conquest of the Promised Land by massive forces. For example, although there is evidence that both Jericho and Ai were destroyed at some point, the dates of those destructions are separated by centuries. Indeed, Ai would have been a ruin at the time of the conquest; the very name ‘Ai’ means ruin!

But perhaps the most cogent argument is a moral one:

How is it possible to establish that God has commanded such a thing [genocide] in order to act on it? As the narrative stands, the command to exterminate the Canaanites in the land comes from a revelation to Moses who communicates it to the people, and which Joshua is to put into practice. Thus, all who follow this command are doing so because someone has told them that God has commanded it. However, such an action would normally be abhorrent. ... Is it acceptable to do something morally abhorrent because someone in authority has told you God commands it? The answer to that is surely ‘no’.⁶

The Bible contains many, varied, and at times seemingly contradictory images of God. Sometimes even in the same book, such as Job. The thought “is God really like that?” seems to be a question actively encouraged, as is the question “what is this text really about”. The book of Joshua tells us, among other things, that it is not the stranger or outsider that is the threat to the community, such as Rahab or the Gibeonites, but greedy people within their own community like Achan! Maybe there is something for us to learn from that today.