

27 September 2020

God and Genocide

Joshua 7-24; Luke 9:51-55

Israel's history, as told in the Hebrew Bible, has many stories about God's people waging holy war with people of other nations and other faiths. All Jesus' disciples would have grown up with those stories, which helps to explain James and John in this episode from Luke 9, verses 51-56:

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

A little background before we resume our story in Joshua. In the Ancient Near East, every nation had its own patron deity. Thus, whenever nations went to war with each other – which they did, because war appears to be a part of the human condition – the war was seen as a sort of referendum on each nation's deity. Whose god is stronger? But, while every war involved the gods, some wars did so more than others. Ancient texts describe some wars as being devoted entirely to a nation's god. These "holy" wars began with purification rites, often involved carrying the god's image into the battle, and any plunder that was taken was given to the god – that is, brought to the god's temple. Judging from biblical evidence, these wars could also be more brutal than other wars. You see, even in war, people sometimes refrain from wanton cruelty, because compassion, too, is part of the human condition. But when one is fighting for a god, it seems to be easier to suppress one's humanity.

Now, back to the story. As we ended last week, the great walls of Jericho were tumbling down, leaving the city exposed. Joshua shouted, "Charge! Kill them all, and keep none of the plunder for yourselves! All shall be given to God!" and the children of Israel poured into the city, where they slaughtered men and women, children and elders, ox and sheep and donkey. Everything that had breath was killed and placed under the ban – the *cherem* – which means something like utterly destroyed as an offering to God. Only the prostitute Rahab and her family were spared the slaughter, because Rahab had saved the lives of the Hebrew scouts who had entered the city.

And the people stood amid the blood-spattered rubble of what had once been a vibrant city and gave thanks to God, then turned their attention to the next city. Joshua was right. With God on their side, nothing could stop them. Scouts that Joshua sent out located a nearby town, much smaller than Jericho, named Ai (spelled just the way it sounds: A-I). They told him, "Don't waste too many troops on this little place; it's a walk in the park." So Joshua cut out a raiding party from his army and sent them to Ai. "You go wipe out that town. We'll wait here."

Well, Joshua's raiding party got its tail handed to them by the men of Ai. When the survivors came limping back to Joshua's camp, the Hebrew army was stunned. What happened? Wasn't God with them anymore? Joshua went to his tent and fell on his face and began weeping and praying, "Oh, God, what have you done? Have you abandoned us? All the land cowered before us after Jericho, but now they'll see that we can be beaten! Why did we ever cross the Jordan, anyway? We're doomed! Help us!" And God said to Joshua, "Oh, stop cringing. I told

you I'd be with you, but you have to make some effort to stay with me, too. You know what I'd like? Just once, I'd like people to ask for my help before they start something, instead of waiting until they've screwed it up on their own. But why would I expect your people to follow my instructions, they didn't even follow *your* instructions at Jericho."

"But we killed everyone!"

"Yes, I saw that."

"Did someone keep some of the plunder for himself?"

"What do you think?"

Joshua rose and strode purposefully out of the tent. "Summon the people! Someone has sinned against God! That's why we lost this battle!" He divided the people into their twelve tribes and began casting lots between them. He narrowed it down to the tribe of Judah, then to the clan of Zerah, then to the household of Zabdi, and finally to the family of a Judahite named Achan. "Did you keep something from the plunder at Jericho?" Joshua demanded.

Achan nodded. "I did. A new change of clothes and a bar of gold that I found. They're buried under my tent." Joshua sent men to look, and when they returned with the items that Achan had named, Joshua pronounced his sentence: death. Achan was taken out to the desert, along with his wife and children and livestock, and the people of God stoned them to death, all of them, and set the bodies on fire and then stoned them some more.

Then Joshua asked God, "Shall we attack the village again now? Will you be with us?"

And God replied, "I'm always with you, Joshua. Yes, you may attack again, but Joshua? I don't need the plunder. Let's not have another Achan thing. And stop killing animals, all right?"

So Joshua led the people back to Ai, where they lured the men of Ai – overconfident after their earlier victory – out of the city into a trap. Soon they had captured a second city and, again, slaughtered all the human inhabitants.

At this point, the various Canaanite city-states were taking notice of the warlike invaders from the desert, and their kings began to send messages to each other, forming alliances for the inevitable war. But one Canaanite city, called Gibeon, had a different idea. And so it came about that one day a caravan of travelers came to Joshua's camp. "We are representatives of a distant land, come to make a treaty with the Hebrew people, for we have heard that your God is strong, and we wish to honor you both."

"What land are you from?"

"A . . . a distant one. You wouldn't have heard of it."

"How distant?"

"Well, look at our gear. Look how dusty it is! See our water bags, how cracked and dry they are? They were brand new when we started. See this bread, how old and crumbly it is? I tell you, we've been traveling a long time!"

"Huh. Those *are* really old water bags. Sounds legit. Fine, we'll make a treaty. If someone goes to war with us, you'll come help us, and if someone attacks you, we'll help you."

So Joshua made a covenant with the people of the caravan, and the book comments, “but he did not inquire of the Lord.”

Well, when the word got out, as was bound to happen, that the people he’d made a treaty with actually lived just a few miles away, Joshua stormed over to them. “What is this? This isn’t a great distance! Why did you lie to me?”

“Um, because we didn’t want to get slaughtered? But you promised, remember.”

Well, when the other Canaanite kings heard what the Gibeonites had done, they were furious. One of their own cities had made an alliance with the invaders. So, instead of leading an attack on the people of Israel, the Canaanite coalition attacked the traitors of Gibeon. The Gibeonites promptly sent a message to Joshua, “Hey, remember that treaty we made?”

To make a long story short, that treaty ended up leading to Joshua’s greatest victory as he was able to attack the armies of several cities at once while they were besieging Gibeon. This is the famous battle where, according to Joshua 10, there just weren’t enough hours in the day to kill all the available Canaanites, and so Joshua prayed for more time, and God stopped the sun in its journey across the sky to give Joshua an extra day to fight. Yep, that’s what it says.

The rest of the Book of Joshua we can deal with fairly quickly. Chapters 11 is little more than a long list of the cities that Joshua captured, concluding with the statement “And Joshua captured the entire land, according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses,” and chapter 12 is a list of all kings he killed. Then in chapters 13-22, we have one of the most deathly dull and (to us, at least) meaningless sections in the entire Bible, as Joshua assigns the conquered land to the twelve tribes, describing every boundary line and naming every city. At last he dismisses the tribes and sends them out to make homes in the land that God had promised to their forefathers.

* * *

As you probably remember, the purpose of this extended story journey through the Bible is for you to hear the whole story, in order, and see how it all fits together. With that purpose in mind, my own goal is to tell each story with minimal commentary, letting the narrative speak for itself. Today I can’t do that, because so much of what the text says for itself is repugnant. Oh, there are some good lessons to learn in today’s story – lessons about listening to and trusting in God *before* we make hash of our lives – but those lessons are completely overshadowed by the brutality of their context. The human author of Joshua clearly believes that it was God’s will for the Hebrews to commit genocide in Canaan. And it is simply impossible to reconcile that God with the God who was revealed in Jesus Christ.

Curiously, there are scattered hints in even in the original narratives that God isn’t in favor of genocide. Back in the law of Moses, in Deuteronomy 20, God outlines rules for warfare that say basically, “If you can’t make peace and have to fight, then fight – but only soldiers. Do not harm women and children and elders, and don’t destroy the earth either. Don’t cut down fruit trees, and don’t ruin the soil.” In our own narrative, there’s that odd detail in Joshua 8 – after the stoning of Achan and his family – when God reins in Joshua: “Stop worrying about the plunder, and don’t kill farm animals.” It’s also notable that the Book of Joshua devotes almost as much space to accounts of the foreigners who are allowed to live and to become a part of Israel as is devoted to battles. People like the Gibeonites and Rahab and her family. But, while those hints of

a different perspective are nice to have, they don't take away the problem. The Bible clearly says, repeatedly, that God willed this genocide.

So we have to decide what we're going to do with that. For some, this is the last straw. Wanting nothing to do with such a God, they leave the faith. Others – biblical inerrantists, primarily – try to find some way to reconcile this God with the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, with embarrassing results, mostly. It can't be done. But they keep trying, because their doctrine requires it. For me, though, all I can say about the Book of Joshua is this: They really didn't get God, yet, did they? They had met a God of love and covenant, the God who had rescued them from slavery, but they were viewing that God through the lens of the bickering, warlike gods of the Canaanite pantheon. Sort of like they viewed the world through the lens of an ancient science in which the sun travels across the sky. They were wrong, on both counts. The lens through which we must read scripture is the lens of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to imagine the Jesus found in our gospels calling for genocide – remember, when James and John suggested it for that village in Samaria, Jesus rebuked them. Since we cannot imagine Christ calling for genocide, we must reject the teaching of Joshua that that's what God did. Instead, what we see in this book is a faithful people holding on to a primitive and brutal expression of faith, into which God very occasionally manages to insert moments of light, until such time as the people are ready for the true light to be revealed. And it was. That light began to shine some 2000 years ago in a stable in Bethlehem, when a distant descendant of Rahab the prostitute was born, named Jesus.

* * *

But we aren't quite done with Joshua's story. After the land was settled, when Joshua was old and full of days, he called the people of Israel together one more time, to renew their covenant with the Lord. On a hill outside Shechem, in the land allotted to the tribe of Ephraim, Joshua recounted the history of the people. "Long ago," he said, "your ancestors lived across the great northern river and worshiped the gods of that land, but then the Lord called our father, Abraham, and made covenant with him. God was with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons and delivered them from famine by bringing them to Egypt. And when they were made slaves in Egypt, God sent his servant Moses to bring you out. He brought you across the sea on dry land, through the desert, feeding you with the food of heaven and bringing water from the rock. Now God has given you this good land, and you are safe. You have vineyards you didn't plant, houses and cities you didn't build. So now I call on you to choose. Today, who will you serve? Will you serve the gods that your forefathers served across the great river, or will you serve the Lord? As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord."

Benediction:

God, you have set the world before us, a world filled with both beauty and ugliness,
and you have given us the freedom to choose which we will embrace.

Today, by your grace, we are free to choose
mercy or cruelty,
compassion or indifference,
care for others or jealous protection of ourselves,
trust in you or emptiness.

So today, like every day before and every day to come, we choose.

God, I know not what choice others will make –
to serve you or the gods of this world –
but as for me and my house, as you give me strength and courage to do so, I choose you.
Amen.