

Approaching YHWH's Violence

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Biblical violence and the concomitant ethical quandaries for a culture that is deeply rooted in the biblical worldview and story are currently popular topics in both academic and mainstream circles.¹ It is common to point to Israel's genocide² of the Canaanites³ as the parade example of the appalling results of faithfully following the ways of the Bible.⁴ I suggest an alternative approach for beginning to understand biblical violence within a modern context that may be more promising than beginning with the conquest of Canaan.

I see three complicating problems with beginning a study of biblical violence with the destruction of the Canaanites. First, the Canaanites as a people are not a principal concern of the Bible. Second, literal and metaphorical violence in the conquest are confused by the complex historical questions surrounding what actually happened as Israel became established in the land. Third, it obscures the problem of violence in theology with violence in ethics. In this brief essay I consider each of these problems in turn and then propose an alternative approach.

First, the fate of the Canaanites—while not inconsequential for the biblical authors—is not a primary concern of the Old Testament. The text is focused on YHWH and Israel; other nations play relatively minor roles. The dynamic of YHWH's relationship with the Canaanites is largely hidden. Israel is repeatedly warned not to follow their gods or their ways (e.g. Exod 23:23-33; Deut 7) but these passages are about YHWH's relationship with Israel in the context of the Canaanites, not about the Canaanites themselves. Even where slight hints of YHWH's attitude toward the Canaanites appear in the text (e.g. Gen 15:16-21; Deut 9:4), the context is YHWH explaining the situation to Israel, not YHWH interacting with the Canaanites themselves. This blank may be interpreted as YHWH having no relationship with them before commanding their annihilation, but such an argument would be a weak one based on silence. For these reasons, judging the morality of YHWH's command of Canaanite genocide will be necessarily based on limited data. Even if one views genocide as absolutely and unconditionally wrong—an “open and shut case”—it would still be helpful to hear

¹ E.g. the 2002 SBL presidential address (John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122:1 [2003],3-21) and the provocative book Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

² I cautiously but deliberately use this modern war crime designation in reference to the sacred biblical destruction of a people known as אֲכַנַּנִּים. However, it is important to discern that genocide assumes the context of modern political warfare where the destruction of a social group is deemed to be unnecessarily cruel in the pursuit of political goals that can be met within a liberal framework where competing cultural beliefs are assumed to be peaceably compatible. The biblical notion of אֲכַנַּנִּים assumes a context of cultural clash where competing beliefs are deemed to be irreconcilable and the continued existence of the enemy culture within the conquering culture is therefore unacceptable. Arguably the present “war on terror” bears some resemblance to אֲכַנַּנִּים since the terrorist culture of violent opposition to Western culture is incompatible with it and therefore the destruction of the terrorist culture is deemed necessary by the prevailing powers in the West.

³ Commanded by YHWH in Deut 7 and declared completed in Josh 11:14-23, though cf. Judg 1:1-2:5.

⁴ Collins, "Phinehas," 5. (XXX refer to an appropriate portion of Schwartz).

YHWH's side of the story to better reveal the (apparently immoral) divine mind. Therefore, it would seem helpful to focus on examples of YHWH's violence where the text is more concerned to justify or explain what YHWH did, rather than the case of the Canaanites where the text does not dwell on their story.

Second, historians of ancient Israel have raised serious questions about the historical reconstruction of the traditionally understood stories of Israel's exodus, YHWH's lawgiving at Sinai, Moses' second lawgiving across the Jordan, and Israel's conquest of Canaan.⁵ Furthermore, the biblical witness to the extent of the conquest is itself difficult to interpret because of the tension between Josh 11:14-23 and Judg 1-2:5. If the conquest never happened or was pressed only to a lesser extent then a degree of ethical pressure is relieved.⁶ Moberly suggests that the **אָרָם** of the peoples of Canaan as presented in Deuteronomy may rework an earlier tradition about literal violence by focusing less on spilling blood and more on spiritual "violence" against the sin of idolatry.⁷ As far as Jewish and Christian interpreters through the centuries have limited their application of these texts to the necessity for moral ruthlessness against sin, so the ethical issues are somewhat diminished.⁸ The current historical and interpretive questions cloud the problem of biblical violence. It would seem helpful to focus on cases of biblical violence that have fewer uncertainties attached to them in order to avoid clouding the theological problem.

Third, the problem of the Canaanites conflates two quite different difficulties. On one hand, Israel considered her violence against the Canaanites as a good and proper action.⁹ This presents an *ethical* problem for those who disagree. On the other hand, YHWH commends—even requires—this violence.¹⁰ This presents a *theological* problem for those who are repulsed by such a deity. It seems to me that the theological problem is logically prior to the ethical problem insofar as Israel's story grounds the conquest in YHWH's commandment. Many critiques of biblical violence are primarily

⁵ Cf. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), ch. 2; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long and Tremper (III) Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), ch. 7.

⁶ I think the ethical problem still largely remains regardless of the historicity of the Canaanite genocide because their annihilation is still commended as ethically proper. Yet talking of killing Canaanites is less problematic than actually doing so.

⁷ "Deuteronomy 7, I suggest, presents *herem* as a metaphor for religious fidelity which has only two primary practical expressions, neither of which involve the taking of life" (R. W. L. Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* [ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 135).

⁸ However, the use of the texts to inspire later violence—e.g. Cromwell against the Irish or American settlers against the indigenous peoples—sharpens the problem considerably since the texts remain as authoritative narratives within the canon that is available for interpretation apart from historical community controls (cf. Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," in *The Postmodern Bible Reader* [ed. David Jobling, Tina Pippin and Ronald Schleifer; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001], 191).

⁹ Israel's approval is present in the text even if it could be shown historically that the conquest did not occur as presented in the Bible. But see below for a discussion of the historical issue.

¹⁰ Collins, "Phinehas," 10-11.

concerned with the ethical underpinnings of the biblical stories and the resulting ethics of faith communities that embrace these stories as part of sacred scripture. However, the theological problems of YHWH's personal violence and YHWH's command of and desire for human violence should be considered before moving on to the ethical questions of Israel's and subsequent communities' violence. If YHWH is the theological source of a subsequent ethical problem then a much different approach to biblical ethics is required than if YHWH's character is unproblematic and Israel's theology and ethics have been faulty. It would seem helpful to address the theological problem of violence before the ethical problem.¹¹

For these reasons, I seek to begin with the theological problem of YHWH's violence: how can we understand YHWH's choice to cause human harm at times? Engaging this topic may shed light on the subsequent ethical problem of violence by YHWH's people; however ethics is not within the scope of the present project.

Rather than focusing on YHWH's violence toward other nations, I propose to look at violence toward Israel. Since Israel's relationship with YHWH is the primary focus of the Old Testament there are many relevant texts for understanding how YHWH's violence contributes to the relational dynamic with Israel.¹² In fact, the poverty of Canaanite texts turns into an embarrassment of riches of Israelite texts, with so many possibilities that a choice among them must be made. I choose to focus on the book of Deuteronomy because of its primary place for the theological concerns of Israel's relationship with YHWH and the many places where Deuteronomy refers to the role of YHWH's violence in that relationship.

YHWH's violence in Deuteronomy also provides a relatively clear historical situation. Though the dating of Deuteronomy is contested,¹³ YHWH's threat of violence against Israel's disloyalty eventually materializes in the horrible events of the Babylonian exile, whether these events are being predicted in the distant future, foreseen in light of the northern kingdom's destruction at the hand of Assyria, or interpreted after the fact. Even with the uncertainty in dating Deuteronomy, clearly the traditions of the text have settled on a final canonical form where the historically undisputed Babylonian

¹¹ Such a neat separation between theology and ethics is impossible, or at least inadvisable since each impinges on the other. However, there seems to be substantially more complexity surrounding the violence toward the Canaanites because it involves a rather broad and general command by YHWH to Israel that Israel then enacts and remains within the canon to be revived to justify later violence. YHWH's personal violence against Israel has much less potential for summoning human violence, even though it is ultimately (as far as the OT is concerned) carried out through the human agency of Assyria and Babylon, for these agents are not knowingly working to carry out YHWH's will. Therefore YHWH's violence against Israel seems to probe more directly into the divine character than the more complex violence against the Canaanites.

¹² Examples include the golden calf (Exod 32), the wilderness complaints (Num 11), Miriam's murmurs (Num 12), Korah's rebellion (Num 16), Baal worship at Peor (Num 25), Achan and Ai (Josh 7), David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11-12), and Ezra and mixed marriages (Ez 9-10).

¹³ The four main eras used for dating the text of (and sources for) Deuteronomy are the Mosaic pre-conquest, the reign of Hezekiah, the Josianic reform, and the return from Babylonian exile.

exile is the reality of which Deuteronomy warns.¹⁴ YHWH, true to his warnings, acts violently toward Israel through the agency of Babylon. Israel's suffering is no metaphor but historical reality. The exile, a central event of the Old Testament and a central concern of Deuteronomy, is rooted in YHWH's decision to act violently toward Israel, his own inheritance, creation, and son.

By bringing together the modern condemnation of violence with these biblical portrayals of YHWH's violence I seek to make progress toward a contemporary understanding of YHWH in these texts. As Moberly suggests, "Questions of how to understand the Bible in its own right, of how to understand the Bible in terms of contemporary categories, and of how to relate these perspectives are *the* questions of biblical interpretation."¹⁵

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¹⁴ Deuteronomy is by no means a lone voice on this subject, for the prophets reiterate these warnings of divine wrath with increasing intensity as the tragedy approaches (e.g. Jer 26:1-6; Ezek 4-7) and later writers interpret the events after the fact with YHWH at the center (e.g. Lam 2; Ezra 9:6-7).

¹⁵ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 76 (emphasis original).