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Paul N. Anderson

*George Fox University*, [panderso@georgefox.edu](mailto:panderso@georgefox.edu)

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### CHAPTER 3

# GENOCIDE OR JESUS: A GOD OF CONQUEST OR PACIFICISM?

*Paul N. Anderson*

## Introduction

Of the many tensions rising from a careful reading of the Bible, none of them is as striking or problematic as God's commanding genocide in the conquest, indeed, extermination of the Canaanites; and Jesus' clearly teaching nonviolence and love for one's enemies. In fact, I consider this the greatest theological and hermeneutical problem in the Bible. It is theological in that Jesus claims to represent the will and reign of God, while at the same time God is portrayed starkly in the Hebrew Bible as the one commanding the lethal conquest. One cannot get around those facts. The question is what to do with them, and this is why the subject is such a pressing problem for interpretation, the hermeneutical issue.

If God is the one commanding either murder or nonviolence, such a presentation has moral implications for those seeking to follow the will of God. If indeed God commands both actions, God seems contradictory, or at least inconsistent, and the struggle then becomes how to decide which of those directives should be followed. What results from these considerations is that the Bible is often interpreted variously, and it ceases to speak with a clear and authoritative voice on a historically important matter, especially with relation to the Bible's role in supporting or resisting violence.

But how do we know that it is really *God* or *the divine will* that is represented by either of these directions? Were either or both of

these presentations influenced by contextual factors that might help us understand better the content being conveyed? Did God change God's mind? Does the Author of life alone retain the right to grant and withdraw the gift of life, thereby requiring us not to question divine ordinances? Then again, how might one have known, either in biblical times or at other times, that a violent action is being commanded by God as opposed to being a projection of human psychological paranoia? How do we keep from simply applying parts of the Bible that seem most conducive to our prejudices and biases, thereby replacing the voice of authoritative sacred scripture with our own? How do we decide what sort of approach to take in addressing violent situations in the world today, when sticking to principle of any sort may lead to unfavorable outcomes? Or finally, must one simply choose one path only, either violence or nonviolence, siding with one portrait of God and rejecting the other? Is there a third alternative to be considered? These are the sorts of questions that emerge from this tension, and the approaches we take have profound implications. The focus of this chapter, however, will center on one point only: how do such scripture messages or stories reflect a unitive divine will? How can the same God be portrayed as commanding genocide and love of enemies in the same Bible?

## Approaches to the Issue

Approaches to this conundrum have been numerous and varied. While the present discussion cannot cover them all, nor is there space to treat any of them extensively, a preliminary survey might be helpful. Consider these approaches. First, one might *appeal to the sovereignty of God*: "God commanded the conquest; who are we to question God? In the sovereignty of God's will, God alone gives life, so who are we to object if God decides to take a person's life away?" This may sound workable to some, but if God alone has the authority to end life, how dare we think that we know how to perceive the divine will to exterminate enemies? Moreover, why does the same God command through Jesus, as his presumed representative agent, the indiscriminate love of enemies? The sovereignty of God works well when respecting the sanctity of life; it fares more poorly when it comes to the taking of human life.

A second approach *infers a change of the divine will on the subject of killing*: "The God of the Old Testament formerly commanded killing, but he changed his mind with the New Covenant in which he now

commands forgiveness and love. The God of the Old Testament was a God of judgment and punishment, but the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and mercy." Indeed, this was Marcion's opinion, and in the second century C.E. he and other Gnostic Christians were happy to marginalize the Old Testament God, replacing that being with the God revealed in Jesus and taught by Paul. The resulting crisis, however, threatened the authority of the larger canonical corpus, and the larger Christian movement was not willing to say that the Hebrew Scriptures were not inspired or canonical. Even if one retains the larger canon, however, many interpreters operate as "functional Marcionites" when it comes to taking seriously the God of the Old Testament conquest narratives. We might rather leave that presentation out of our authoritative collection of writings, but if we take the entire Bible as inspired in some way and authoritative at some level, we cannot escape this tension. We must find a way to deal with it.

An obverse problem is caused by *retaining a vindictive picture of God and marginalizing the ethical teachings of Jesus*: "I'm really an Old Testament Christian, and I believe people should get what's coming to them!" a fiery preacher might tout. "Even Jesus preached fire and brimstone according to Matthew's gospel, and despite presentations of God's love in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation we have clear presentations of God's wrath!" This is one of the most damaging hermeneutical stances there can be. Some people really do envision a God full of judgment, and they seize upon the conquest narratives as sources of inspiration for pathological attitudes and behavior. For some reason they still call themselves Christians but refuse to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes! This stance is really hard to understand for those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Or, they might adopt an interim ethic and teach that only after the rapture and restoration of God's kingdom in the millennium would God's perfect moral will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Until then, the God of judgment supplants the God of grace.

A fourth approach *regards the commands to kill the Canaanites as a punishment for their sinfulness*: "God commanded the Israelites to kill the Canaanites because of their awful moral practices. When you consider the terrible things those people must have done, you can understand why God wanted to teach them a lesson." This kind of logic may seem to work until you start considering the specifics. Notice that not all wicked people in the Old Testament are punished, and even when Israel or Judah sins grievously against Yahweh, never are

they wiped out by God. God forgives and is merciful, even in the original Covenant, and the commands for genocide have more to do with the Israeli foreign policy of clearing the land of its prior inhabitants than with teaching any individual or people a lesson.

A fifth approach *relativizes the damage, claiming it was a "necessary evil"* as the only path to a greater good: "God knew that the only way to bring a blessing to the whole world was to deliver Israel into the Promised Land, which unfortunately was inhabited by pagans. While God never rejoices in suffering, because the greater good justifies the initial cost, God's divine economy can be seen to be at work even in the killing of the Canaanites." Indeed, clearing the land was the primary rationale for the conquest narratives, but the God of Israel is portrayed as retaining sovereignty on other matters; why not on this one? Moreover, if one is going to argue that the end justifies the means on any ethical issue, one immediately sacrifices the option of standing up for any kind of objective principle of justice, decency, morality, or proportionality.

A sixth approach *supplants principle with realism*: "Jesus may have taught a doctrine of nonresistance, but that just doesn't work in the real world. This is a fallen world, as depicted in the Bible, and in a fallen world we must use fallen means—including violence, if necessary—to make the world a safer place." Part of the problem here is that the authority of scriptural teaching is minimized on the basis of imagined outcomes, and the principle itself is never given a full chance to work. Another way of putting it considers the call to principled faithfulness regardless of the results. In fact, results cannot be the motivation for faith or faithfulness; otherwise, it becomes a mere transaction, something less than faith and faithful living.

A seventh consideration takes the conquest narratives at face value, *seeing God as a violent and inhumane deity, worthy of being abandoned*: "If God indeed commanded genocide, and genocide is inhumane and morally reprehensible, God must be morally reprehensible and unworthy of a moral person's loyalty. The actions of the God of the Old Testament cannot but drive the moral individual away from these savage religious traditions." Many in the modern era might feel this way, especially given the fact that the biblical conquest narratives have been used historically to legitimate the resorting to violence by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, this approach fails to recognize that the God of the Bible is also one of the prime motivators toward conscientious and humane treatment of others, and rejecting the Judeo-Christian God because of the book of Joshua fails to

account for the God revealed by Jesus in the gospels. This tension must be addressed to make any sort of judgment adequately.

A final consideration is the way some interpreters *infer from these scriptures a set of temporal "dispensations" wherein differing "rules" govern the human-divine relationship*: "There was a dispensation of law and conquest, followed by a dispensation of hope and deliverance, followed by a dispensation of the New Covenant, followed by a dispensation of the life of the Church, followed by the return of Christ, and so forth. In that former dispensation of OT life God permitted some forms of violence, but in later ones, they are forbidden." This is similar to the sovereignty-of-God approach, but it works more explicitly with punctuating epochs in eschatological history, seeking to itemize differing ethical and religious standards for each of these dispensations. A variant of this approach, though much more refined theologically, is process theology, which assumes that God's perfection may have involved growth and movement rather than static consistency, more of a Greek notion than a Hebrew one. Indeed, the basic Christian teaching is that Jesus fulfilled the Law without abolishing it, and the New Covenant does indeed do away with Jewish cultic observances but preserves the essence of the covenant of grace, making way for new approaches to God.

One of the greatest among the many problems with dispensational speculation is the tendency to apply arbitrarily differing sets of divine regulation over different epochs. The question of who makes those judgments, and by what standard they are made, reflects a couple of the major headaches with such an approach, but an even greater problem is that God ceases to be unitive and consistent. The more changes one adds between dispensations, the less God can be said to have a "changeless" character or even enduring ethical standards. Is God decent, consistent, fair, and just? Dispensational approaches are especially problematic when it comes to deciding moral standards of praxis.

For these and other reasons, the tension between the presentation of Jesus' teachings on the love of one's neighbors and one's enemies continues to be an enduring interpretive problem. As a way forward, we might consider first the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps he was getting at something else. We shall then consider the presentation of Yahweh's commands to kill in the Hebrew conquest narratives to see if we can learn anything by examining a theme in its context and moving from that point toward a meaningful interpretive approach.

## Jesus' Teachings on Nonviolence and the Love of Enemies

Just what did Jesus teach about violence and peace? Some scholars may locate Jesus among the Galilean prophets mentioned by Josephus, claiming that Jesus' failed mission to overthrow the Romans was reformulated into a more inane presentation of Jesus as a teacher of nonviolence, but this approach is unconvincing.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is pervasively portrayed as distinguishing himself from the later Theudas, the Samaritan, and the Egyptian, and he seeks to flee attempts to rush him to a hasty coronation on the Galilean shore (John 6:14–15). Moreover, the Messianic Secret in Mark reveals a Jesus who is not interested in sensational publicity and who seeks to avoid creating a popularist stir. The fact that this presentation is more muted in Luke and Matthew suggests its origin was earlier and likely closer to Jesus than an image onto which later Christian notions might have been superimposed. A longer treatment may be found elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> but here are seven larger points regarding Jesus' teachings on peace within which smaller ones may be inferred.

First, Jesus commands his followers to love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and to *love our neighbors as ourselves* (Matt. 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27). Jesus' followers will be known by the trademark of sacrificial love (John 13:34–35). The love of God and neighbor in Jesus' teaching reflects a radical understanding of the Decalogue. Jesus had apparently boiled down the Ten Commandments into their vertical and horizontal dimensions, effectively summarizing the Law of Moses within two basic commands. The love of neighbor, of course, gets applied in Luke to the unlikely Samaritans. Where the question "Who is my neighbor?" might be interpreted as an honest interest in identifying neighbors in order to do them good, Jesus picks up the real question and answers it wittily. Rather than narrowing down the categories of those to be loved, Jesus chooses the most unlikely of love objects, those detested Samaritans, and says *those* are the people to be loved as one's neighbor. This must have been a disappointing response to those hoping to find their provincialisms and prejudices protected in a religious guise.

A second motif takes things even further: Jesus calls his followers to *love even our enemies, and to pray for those who spitefully use us* (Matt. 5:43–48). Even the Gentiles and tax gatherers might return good for good, or evil for evil, but Jesus' teaching was really different. This teaching makes it especially difficult to consider Jesus as a political

revolutionary who failed. The love of enemy would have been an unlikely development within such a movement, and it more likely represents another sort of revolution, seeking to overthrow not the Romans, but the myth of redemptive violence, replacing it with the domination-free order of God. To pray for one's adversary refuses to go along with worldly divisiveness. Rather, it embraces a transcendent value: the active reign and leadership of God, which cannot be furthered by going against its character. The way of the Kingdom involves love, forgiveness, and peace, and Jesus invites human involvement in its actualization by embodying those values unilaterally, regardless of the outcome.

A third motif casts fresh light on the truly subversive character of God's love: Jesus calls his followers to *renounce a spirit of vengeance and to embrace a spirit of exceeding generosity* (Matt. 5:38-42). When stricken with a backhanded slap, Jesus instructs his followers to stand with dignity and turn the other cheek. When one's cloak is required, give also the rest of one's clothing, and when asked to carry a soldier's pack for one mile, go twice as far out of love of God. These images have been misinterpreted by well-meaning Christians across the years to imply servile cowering and doormat passivity, when they are not meant to be taken as such. Indeed, they are highly activist, in revolutionary ways.

In Walter Wink's profoundly creative analysis of this Matthean passage,<sup>3</sup> he argues several things that make a good deal of sense. Given that the right hand would have been used for striking (the left hand would not have been used for interpersonal exchange), to have been struck on the right cheek implies a backhanded slap, a gesture meant to *intimidate* rather than to injure. Likewise, a soldier might have "limited" the abuse of his Galilean subject by requiring "only" one mile as a means of feigning generosity, and a harsh creditor might have exacted one's cloak if that was the only thing between him and his land (the real goal of the creditor). For Jesus to advocate standing and welcoming the intimidating threat by saying in effect, "Go ahead, I'll take a forehand blow; I'm no less of a human being than you are!" would certainly have thrown the dominator off balance. What would have happened if a soldier's superiors heard that subjects were carrying the soldier's pack more than one mile? Would they really believe his claim that he did not coerce or demand such, or would he be punished *by his own Roman superiors*?

Wink invites us to imagine the ironic picture of a Roman soldier chasing a Galilean peasant beyond the mile marker, begging him to



put down his pack! The third example was equally subversive. As the shame of the naked debtor would have fallen upon the observer, this would have drawn quick attention to the stern creditor and an unyielding system of leverage. In all these ways, Jesus' teachings and example subverted worldly systems of domination and provided an alternative to fight-or-flight dichotomies. Jesus intended to change the world with his nonviolent subversion of worldly domination, and he sought to teach others how to do so without falling prey to its devices.

A fourth motif regards *the character of the Kingdom*. Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world; if it were, his disciples would fight to defend it (John 18:36–37). Rather, we are exhorted to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness, and all we truly need will be given us (Matt. 6:33). Here Jesus orients his followers to another set of standards by which to measure one's success. Many mistaken views of Christianity rest upon the faulty foundations linking too closely the Kingdom of God with any human endeavor or organization. The active leadership of God transcends such ventures, and when the disciple remains focused on the advancing of truth, hope, and love, one's goals also become realigned by a new set of priorities. The *way of the Kingdom* is always counterconventional. Jesus' Kingdom turns things upside down: the first will be last, and the last will be first. The Gentiles lord it over their subjects, but not so among Jesus' followers. The one wishing to be first must be the servant of all (Matt. 18:4; Mark 9:35, 10:42–45; Luke 22:25–26), and only those willing to lose their lives will find them. The way of the Kingdom, therefore, is a paradoxical one, and this is why seeing it at all requires a revelation from above. It cannot otherwise be imagined.

A fifth motif presents itself in dramatic form: Jesus *commands his followers to put away their swords* (Matt. 26:52–53; Luke 22:49–51; John 18:11). He goes on to issue a wise warning that those wishing to live by the sword will die by it. This passage is extremely clear; Jesus commands his followers to refuse the path of violence lest they be ensnared in it. Of course, Luke adds a passage (Luke 22:36–38) in which Jesus tells his disciples that they will need a sword, and when they bring him two swords he exclaims, "Enough!" The interpretive question is whether the phrase in Greek (*ikanon estin*) means "That will do fine, thank you; two swords are enough," or whether it means "Enough of that! You haven't a clue about what this movement is really doing!" In the context of verses 49–51, the latter seems like the better rendering, and it is also doubtful that anyone would have been

suggesting that two swords would have been sufficient to take on the Romans. No. Jesus commands his followers to put away their swords; his reign advances in other ways.

A sixth feature of the Kingdom is typified by Jesus' commanding his followers to *forgive even the undeserving* (Matt. 18:21–35). Despite Peter's being granted instrumental "Keys of the Kingdom," he is also required to be forgiving, even 70 times 7 times. But what if they aren't sorry? "Forgive," says Jesus. But what if they'll do it again? "Forgive," he says again. But what if they really do damage—blow down the World Trade Center towers and kill 3,500 people? Should we not hold it against them? According to Jesus, the answer is unequivocally "No!" The answer even then is "Forgive!" The way of the Kingdom overflows with abundant forgiveness, and as we have received grace, so should we be willing to extend it. After all, this is the character of God's forgiveness, and it is also the kind to be emulated by Jesus' followers. Besides, nothing else works in life, and never has worked in history. Why is that so hard to notice and take seriously?

A seventh feature of the Kingdom is one in which Jesus calls for his followers to *embrace the cross* (Matt. 10:38–39; Mark 8:34–38; John 12:25–26). One who wishes to save one's life will lose it, but one who is willing to release one's life for the sake of Christ and his way will paradoxically find it. This is one of the hardest sayings in the Bible. It offers no guarantees when it comes to favorable outcomes; it simply invites believers to commit themselves to faithfulness whatever the result may be. This is not to be confused with seeking martyrdom in order to make a point. The issue here is faithfulness regardless of what the outcome might be, and this motif adds some realism to the mission. After all, following Jesus might *not* protect one from persecution; it may even provoke it (Matt. 5:10–12), and yet, therein lies the path of blessedness as the believer shares in the mission, and at times the sufferings, of the Lord. As James Parnell, that 19-year-old Quaker martyr, said, "Be willing that self shall suffer for truth, and not the truth for self."

Finally, Jesus says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers*, for they shall be called 'the children of the Most High'" (Matt. 5:9). Notice, however, that this passage does not spell out specifically what it means to be a peacemaker. On the other hand, James points out that the pursuit of peaceable goals by peaceable means distinguishes the workings of God from the methods of the world (James 3:18–4:4), and that may shed a bit of light on the Matthean insight. Jesus also promises his

followers that he will bless them with peace, not as the world gives peace, bolstered by outward security, but inward peace, that which overcomes the strategies of this kind of world (John 14:25–27). In that sense, unworldly peace bears within itself great capacity to impact the world, and one gets the sense that in aspiring to such an ethic, the divine will is furthered.

The result of this brief survey is to outline some of the ways that Jesus' teachings really seem to be quite clear on the subject of peace and nonviolence. Some might object that the cleansing of the Temple was a violent act, or one in which Jesus lost his temper, but it is more suitably regarded as a prophetic sign designed to make a point in the name of God rather than an expression of violence. Also, there appears to have been intentionality behind the action. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus arrived at the Temple site late in the day when the crowd may have dissipated, and he came back the next day, suggesting the action was intended to make a public demonstration rather than an uncontrolled fit of rage (Mark 11:11). Theologically, however, does Jesus purport to be representing the divine will when he calls for peaceable means to peaceable solutions? Pervasively, yes, and this is why the presentation of God's commanding violence and the use of lethal force in the Old Testament is *theologically* problematic.

## Divine Commands for a Lethal Conquest

The voice of Yahweh in the Bible is an interesting phenomenon. It certainly plays a literary role, and that literary feature has theological implications. But what about the historical role of Yahweh's speaking? When we hear someone saying today "God told me . . .," we might ask ourselves how this person is interpreting the divine voice. We might wonder if the person has had a flash of insight that is being crafted into a convention described as a divine address, or perhaps the person is alluding to being moved by a particular religious means. We would even think of the possibility that the person is suffering from psychotic delusions.

On the other hand, a Bible passage might have become especially meaningful; a priest or pastor might have offered some timely counsel, or perhaps a sunset has been especially beautiful and the person feels addressed by a voice within. I suppose we might imagine a sensory audition with one's ears, but most often we do not experience God "speaking" to us through our auditory senses. What, then, do we make of the Deuteronomistic convention "And Yahweh said . . ."?

It could be that people really did experience being addressed by God in the days described by the Hebrew Bible; certainly the calling of young Samuel is portrayed as his hearing the voice of God in a physical way (1 Sam. 3). But the theological question may be put this way: even if the divine address were experienced sensorily, how should we interpret the message *theologically*, as a factor of the transcendent, divine will for humanity? We must leave that question open for now, and the fact is that we must do so because we have no way of answering the question either way. Let me describe, however, some of the historical and literary layers we might have to peel back in searching for an answer.

Starting from the latest text tradition, we might work backward and see what happens. At the latest stages of the books of Joshua and Judges, material thought to have been finalized by the Deuteronomistic editors and theologians around 500 B.C.E., we have the material representing the importance of keeping the Law. Positive rewards for obedience and negative consequences for disobedience accompany at least one or two of the editorial versions. These were written about the time of the Babylonian exile of the Kingdom of Judah. Here the emphasis was placed on trusting Yahweh fully and keeping the Law of Moses. In these passages, the voice of Yahweh can be read as calling for faithfulness to the covenant with God, so that things might go well for the Israelites.

During the two or three centuries before that, these traditions probably came together as a way of explaining "how we got here in captivity in Babylon" and as a reminder of "what we need to be doing to get on well with God in the future." In captivity the Israelites seemed to get the clue to their big question: "How is God in our wretched history?" The answer was that the nations of the world had been sent to chastise them for their sin against God. Struggles faced from the tenth to sixth centuries B.C.E. included trying to sort out the meaning of the invasions by the Assyrians and the Babylonians; trying to figure out how it is that the Kingdom of Israel divided, sending both into a downward spiral toward trivialization and destruction; and finding out God's intentions with the rest of the land's inhabitants, Canaanites who did not seem to be part of God's original promise of grace and mercy.

Of course, the narrations of the conquest itself would have come down for two or three centuries before that, probably in oral form, and these stories would have included heroic tales from the past, together with a sense of God's provision and sustenance along the

way. Moreover, we must remember that the records that we have are those told by the victors and from their point of view. A real conquest did happen; whether it was as expansive or as effective as portrayed in Joshua and Judges, we have no idea. At least some sort of warfare and Israelite occupation is more than plausible, and the point here is to consider historical origins of later, emergent narratives. This being the case, let us consider how some of those perceptions and theological constructs might have developed within Israel's conquest narratives.

A first level is a prehistoric, *anticipatory* one. Within this mythic phase, the hope for the future provides direction and sustenance for the present, and ideas formed early in Israel's history would have affected later perceptions and developments as well. The descendants of Abraham, who left Ur for the land promised him by Yahweh, continued longing for a land they could call their own before, during, and after their sojourn as captives in Egypt. The anticipated conquest imagined God fulfilling his promise by granting the land (Gen. 12:1–3, 15:1–8, 17:1–27; see the more pointed hope in Exod. 3:8), and such a hope was probably tempered only by the reality of how things went with the actual conquest.

The second phase would have involved *the conquest itself*. Within this historical phase, the time of the events being narrated, we still have the central question before us: did *God* command the killing of the Canaanites in some way similar to the final reporting of the events six hundred years later? Put otherwise, did people perceive the voice of God to be commanding the killing of the Canaanites, however they might have construed the divine voice of Yahweh? This is not an impossibility. Certainly, the Israelites would have felt that God wanted to deliver them into the land, and they would have experienced divine assistance, and perhaps even a divine mandate, to carry out the clearing of the land. Even if this were the case, though, experientially and historically, we are still left with the theological question as to the degree to which the transcendent and loving God of the universe ever desired one tribe to eradicate neighboring clans and tribes, for whatever reason.

Was this Israeli foreign policy projected on God, or God's mandate to "his people"? If the latter is true, then whose people were those poor Canaanites who were living peaceably in the land until the Israelites wreaked arbitrary havoc upon them? Is not God the God of the whole universe and all "his dear children"? What were the Israelites thinking, anyway? It is likely that some reflection would

have taken place by some wise and sensitive folk in the Israeli community, depending, of course, on how things went. In other words, some Israelites must have felt universalistic passion and compassion for those other human beings, and most of the Israelites must have wondered why, if all of this was divinely ordained, some campaigns went well and others did not. In any case, theological conjecture would have played a formative role early in the subsequent presentation and narration of the historical events. This phase, however, would not have been the last opportunity for crafting the role of God's direction in the matter.

A third phase in the history of tradition would have involved the oral narration of war stories, complete with the exaltation of heroic figures and events, and the denigration of the less worthy. Within this oral stage of narrative transmission, several features arise within the material and contribute to its elaboration. Stories sometimes get duplicated, or interesting points from one narration become attached to another; actual numbers and accounting get rounded off into general groupings and figures; moralizing comments get added along the way, as events in the past become patterns for the future; and tribal features emerge within the narrations as a means of furthering tribal prosperity and success. Within this early tradition stage, "our tribe versus their tribe" would certainly have played a role in the formation of the memory. Within that stage, and it continued until the material was finalized, probably in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., the "voice of Yahweh" would have played a significant role in the emerging destiny of the nation.

In particular, explaining *why* things did or did not go well in the past becomes a didactic platform for addressing contemporary issues six hundred years later when the narratives are being reedited into an official story line, and these become the basis for imagining and structuring the future. Several exhortative themes can be seen to have developed within this phase: (a) the conviction that God had promised to deliver them into the land; (b) the memory of at least partial success whereupon God, not Israel, deserved the glory; (c) the memory of at least partial failure whereupon Israel and her failings, not God, deserved the blame; and finally, (d) the emerging tension resultant from the fact that they had been delivered into the promised land, but that land was fraught with difficulties and their memory was fraught with their own horrendous bloodshed.

As regards their religion, they faced temptations to resort to Baal worship and to follow Canaanite pagan customs, evoking this sort of

existential question: *"How could God have delivered us into the land, but at the same time have given us a land that had its seemingly entrenched temptations and trials?"* Answer: It was not God's fault; it was Israel's. When we followed God fully, the enemy was delivered into our hands. When we did not, however, the conquest was incomplete, and that's how the root of later "problems" might best be explained.

A psychoanalyst, of course, would have some important insights here regarding the degree to which the Israelite temptation to identify with the local Canaanite inhabitants, evidenced by their commerce and intermarriage with them as well as their sharing of the Canaanite religious devotion, might reflect an unconscious level of embarrassment and bad conscience regarding how badly they had abused the Canaanites, purportedly at the command of Yahweh. Why not seek Baal, who had apparently afforded his people peace and prosperity until Yahweh and his bunch came along and wreaked such uncivilized havoc on the settled Canaanite civilizations? Who would want to stick with that kind of Yahwist god for the long run?

That speculation aside, of course, a fourth phase in the preservation of Israel's history would have involved preserving the material in more standardized forms and units, at times producing written traditions and at times formalizing oral ones. Interest in preserving the memories of particular aspects of the conquest and the geographical progress, explaining also the reason a place had the name it did or served as a reminder of a particular event, would likely become increasingly important as distance from the heroic conquest events increased. Here especially we see the value of historical narrations providing a pattern for faithfulness in the future. Especially in Judges, for instance, the cycles of disobedience, hardship, and punishment, followed by repentance and recovery of prosperity, provide instructive lessons for later generations, motivating them to be ever more vigilant and faithful. In particular, making peace with the pagan neighbors was frowned upon, and this served to motivate presumed or claimed religious and ethnic purity in Israel as compared with her neighbors, from the conquest to the Babylonian exile. The emphasis should be upon the phrase "presumed or claimed," since in practical fact Israelite behavior was no more sanctified than that of the nations around Israel. The Israelite prophets themselves make this truth plain.

A final stage in the material's composition before being finalized by the Deuteronomistic editors, then, would have been the writing of complete books and narratives. On this matter, Deuteronomy, Joshua,

Judges, and Samuel each had their own relative autonomy, but many similarities and connections also can be traced through all of these traditions. Of special importance in each of these historical narrations is the connection between what happened “back then,” namely, in the earlier, remembered history of conquest and consolidation, and its implications for a later generation. In that sense, interpretative modifications probably never stopped collecting around these ancient memories until these works were standardized in the sixth century B.C.E.

These are very broad strokes with which to paint the tradition-development landscape, but why is this speculation about the development of Israel’s traditional history important for the consideration of the present topic? Given the theological implications of the presentation of the divine voice of God commanding the killing of individuals and entire groups of people, the contextual question presents itself as an extremely important matter. If we can make some good guesses about the contexts out of which the presentation of God’s command to kill Canaanites might have developed, we might gain a clearer sense of how much of this motif goes back to God and how much of it resulted from either an anthropomorphic projection of the divine will in relation to the needs of Israel at the time, or even the degree to which it simply serves as a literary device. This being the case, narrating the voice of God commanding the killing of neighboring tribes and individuals will have different meanings and associations in different stages in the narratives’ tradition history. The answer to our question regarding God as the source of such mandates may finally be inaccessible, but we may gain clearer insights into ways such a presentation was represented and passed on within Israel’s developing tradition history. Moreover, this may be crucial in helping us understand how the ancient traditions are being consciously or unconsciously applied in Israeli foreign policy toward the Palestinians at our present moment in history.

## **Meanings and Associations within Israel’s Developing Tradition**

With regard to the presentation of God’s role in the killing of the Canaanites, several features of Israel’s warfare deserve consideration. They will provide the background for a better understanding of how to regard the “voice of Yahweh” in commanding mass killings.



First, Israel's wars are not portrayed as hers; they are portrayed as Yahweh's wars, with Yahweh receiving the glory for the triumphal results.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, Yahweh uses all means at his disposal. He uses the forces of nature (see Exod. 15), he uses Israel as an agent of battle, and he even employs other nations to do his bidding, sometimes to discipline Israel. Yahweh fights for Israel and invites her to join him in his work.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Yahweh alone gives the battle into Israel's hands, and this is a factor of her faithfulness to Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> Yahweh's presence goes forth as a victorious feature in Israel's conquest, and whenever the Ark of the Covenant is with them, they are invincible in battle. A result of Yahweh's fighting for Israel is that the enemy loses courage, and the battle is often won readily.<sup>7</sup> In Israel's faithfulness to Yahweh, she must first of all trust, and the reliance on Yahweh alone is often portrayed as the obverse of relying on chariots or weapons of war.<sup>8</sup>

Third, particular stipulations are to be associated with the ways Yahweh's Holy War is to be fought. (a) Combatants are to dedicate themselves in purity to Yahweh and to fight for him alone. This may have involved a ritual cleansing (Josh. 3:5), and holy warriors were expected to be sexually chaste (1 Sam. 21:4–5; 2 Sam. 11:6–17). (b) They were not allowed to keep any booty or spoils of war (as in the case of Achan, Josh. 7), or even take prisoners (as in the case of Saul, 1 Sam. 15) because the mission was to clear the land rather than to amass gain. This is called "the ban." (c) Then again, reports were not always consistent on these matters. Deuteronomy 20, for instance, prescribes a variety of approaches, and this fact suggests a fair amount of unevenness in the ways the Israelites carried out their campaigns. When attacking a city, they were to make an offer of peace, and if the inhabitants surrendered they would be spared and could work as their servants (vss. 10–11). If the inhabitants resisted the men were to be killed, but the rest of the people, the livestock and their valuables could be taken as spoils. At least cities at a distance could be treated this way (vv. 12–15). However, the nearby cities were to be destroyed completely (vv. 16–18), and an interesting reason is listed. If they are not, they will corrupt the Israelites with their religion and detestable practices and will cause Israel to fall away from God. The trees, however, are to be saved (v. 19).

Fourth, we see a variety of results in how things are reported to have happened. Where Israel trusted Yahweh fully, success was sweeping and grand. However, where the Israelites failed in faith or faithfulness, disaster ensued. Von Rad rightly points out how the suc-



*Saul Attacking David*, by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri Guercino. The Art Archive/Palazzo Barberini Rome/Dagli Orti (A).

cesses of people like David, Gideon, Deborah, and Moses serve as narrative examples of how things went right in Yahweh's wars.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, things also went awry, and not only did Israel lose heart at times,<sup>10</sup> but she or her leaders sometimes disobeyed the instruction of Yahweh. Achan failed by collecting and hiding valuables under his tent, and because of this sin, three dozen Israelite soldiers were routed at Ai (Josh. 7). Saul failed by sparing the king of the Amalekites and his livestock (1 Sam. 15), and because of this Yahweh eventually removed Saul as king of Israel.

Eventually, several things brought an end to Holy War in Israel. The appointing of Saul as a king was the beginning of the end according to the Samuel tradition, because from that time on, Israel abandoned Yahweh as her king and began to establish standing armies and instruments of war. This was entirely contrary to the ethos of fighting alongside Yahweh as the divine warrior. It constituted a shift from a theocracy to a monarchy, in the view of the chief religionist of the time, Samuel, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by this change. Another development was the devastation of Israel and Judah by the Babylonians and the Assyrians. The dev-

astating failures to oppose the enemy in those wars forced Israel to reconsider her understanding of Holy War. Nonetheless, the memory lived on, and even within the prophetic and poetic traditions of Israel, the lore of Yahweh's battles lived on.

Two theological considerations follow the preceding survey of Israel's Holy Wars. First, one of the things we see is Israel projecting her need for a provider and protector upon Yahweh. People of all religious persuasions will always construct an image of the Deity in ways consonant with their needs and situation, and Israel was no different. Dianne Bergant, in her excellent essay "Yahweh, A Warrior God?" (see note 4), points out how the Israelites during these sojourning years would have yoked the metaphorical character of theological language to their sustenance needs at the time. They clearly regarded Yahweh as their patron protector, and against the dangers of hostile tribes and territories, they interpreted Yahweh's deliverance and help in patriarchal warlord sorts of ways. Does this mean, however, that God is a male and a male only? Of course not! God also provides nurturing and sheltering support for Israel, and the God of Israel transcends gender representations.

Theologically, this consideration is important. It clarifies the legitimacy of Israel's experience and representation of Yahweh as a warrior, without necessitating an ontological identification of God as such. That being the case, Yahweh's clearing the land of its obstacles, including socioreligious ones, takes precedence over the concern to love Israel's neighbors and to treat them well, a notion that seems to still prevail today in Israeli perceptions—as well as in Palestinian perceptions and policy.

A second theological inference emerges from considering why the divine voice of Yahweh was required as part of Israel's narrated history on this matter. Why, for instance, is Yahweh the one portrayed as commanding the killing, even genocidal killing on the local level? The answer relates first of all to the question of why Yahweh was commanding the clearances to begin with. In Deuteronomy 20:18 the *why* comes to the surface. If you do not completely destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites from the land, declares Yahweh, they will corrupt you with their detestable worship practices and you will fall into sin! Putting that concern in reverse makes the point clearly.

The conquest narratives also respond to the later questions in the sixth to the tenth centuries B.C.E.: *"Why do we still have corrupting pagan influences in the land, despite a perfect God bringing us faithfully into*

*it?*" The answer according to the historians is *not* that it is Yahweh's fault. They might have put it this way: "Look, Yahweh tried to warn Israel to be devout and thorough so that the land could be cleared once and for all, but Israel failed to live up to her end of the bargain. When she did so faithfully and effectively, things went fine, and the land was cleared. However, due to several kinds of failure, the clearances were ineffective, and that is why we have the temptations and the troubles that we do in our lands today!" In that sense, Yahweh's commands to clear the land thoroughly explain the failed panacea, which explains, in turn, the interreligious tensions and violence suffered by Israel over the next six centuries until these traditions were finalized.

### **Can the God of Jesus and the God of the Conquest Be One and the Same?**

Now we return to our original question: can the God of Jesus and the God of Israel's conquest ever be considered one and the same? The teachings of Jesus, in the name of the God of Israel, seem clear on the matter. We are commanded to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. This is not a program, however, of doormat passivity; rather, it represents a radically subversive goal of challenging the domination systems of the world, which tend to be bolstered by the myth of redemptive violence. Jesus challenges that myth with the proclamation of the domination-free order of God, using Wink's language, and he invites humanity to attend and respond to the active leadership of God in the world.

These views, however, would not have been foreign to the ancient Israelites entirely. Indeed, six out of the Ten Commandments deal with horizontal concerns, the love of neighbor. Hospitality is required especially for the alien in the camp, as illustrated by Lot's hospitality to the angelic strangers (Gen. 19) and the tragic story of the Levite and his concubine (Judg. 19). We even see people using nonviolent alternatives to conflict resolution here and there in Hebrew Scripture, and in those ways, Jesus reflects more continuity with the God of the Old Testament than some scholars and religious leaders have thought. Bishop Oxnam's claim that the God of the Old Testament is a big bully and is in no sense the God of love and peace that we see in the face of Jesus is a trivial and trivializing comment. Even the deliverance of Israel into the land can be seen as a means to the end of Yahweh's blessing the earth through the seed of Abram

(Gen. 12:1–3), and in that sense, Jesus was also seeking to further the same.

The preceding analysis also raises the question sharply as to whether the God of the Hebrews *ever* actually strove for the death of Israel's neighbors, who were also created in the divine image. This question may be impossible to answer finally, but three factors must give us pause before claiming to *know* that he did: first, discerning the divine voice is always a challenging endeavor, and we might simply keep in mind the difference between a direct leading and declaration of God and human perceptions of such. Tribal loyalties, perceptions of God's special and exclusive calling of the Hebrew nation, needs for provision and deliverance in the land—all of these may have figured in perceiving or misperceiving the divine voice.

Second, the instruction of God to clear the land of its inhabitants must have served literary and socioreligious, as well as aggressive political, functions along the way, as the tradition matured and was preserved. Given Israel's needs for protection and sustenance, it is perfectly understandable but hardly justifiable that Israel would have cast God's provision and protection in ways commensurate with the prime figure of strength in their culture, the warrior-lord figure. Reducing the eternal God to such a construct, however, is simply not fitting. Finally, the presentation of Yahweh as commanding genocide in the Hebrew conquest narratives served the function of setting the stage for explaining why the conquest was an incomplete one. As a means of answering the existential and irritating questions of their interreligious setting, the conquest historians may also be explaining whose fault it was that there were still pagan inhabitants in the land. "It is not God's fault," they might have claimed. "God commanded a thorough cleansing, but it was Israel's lack of faith and faithfulness that contributed to the ambiguous situation we face now, centuries later!" None of the post-exilic editors seems to have tumbled to the notion or had the temerity to suggest that those Israelites who, in the end, moved for accommodation and integration were more "on the side of the angels," so to speak, than a monster killer-god.

This being the case, the real God of the Old Testament might not be so far from the God of the New. In both cases, God's love for his children is evident, and God's provision is sure. In both parts of the Bible, narrators of the past are trying to deal with the meaning of emerging situations, bringing the great events in the past into the light of the present day. However, can the God of the Israelites be construed as the same God represented by Jesus? Indeed, human per-

ceptions of God grow over time, and God may grow with them. On the other hand, if we recognize the anthropomorphic projections involved in the narrative traditions, God's consistent and loving character comes through in both of these disparate parts of the Bible. If the presentation of God can be taken to be addressing issues faced by the emerging community of faith at the time, these two renderings of God might not be so far apart as some might have thought.

In the end, the way one looks at these things and the manner in which one interprets these matters depends completely upon one's theology of sacred scripture. Most of the problems in religion and social ethics in the last five thousand years in the Western World result directly from an inadequate theology or philosophy of sacred scripture in which the human cultural-historical matrix that carries "the voice of God" for us is not adequately distinguished, within each of our faith traditions, from the word of truth that the matrix carries for our benefit. To read the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or the Qur'an correctly, as J. Harold Ellens (cf. introduction to volume 1) has constantly claimed for three decades, requires the ability to distinguish the voices of humans in sacred scripture from the voice of God. To use Ellens' language, it requires the ability to separate the garbage from the gospel; the cultural metaphors from the divine meanings.

## Notes

1. See my fuller treatment of the issue in "Jesus and Peace," *The Church's Peace Witness*, Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 105–130, especially 105–109.
2. See "Jesus and Peace," 109–120.
3. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
4. See Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980); Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Lois Barrett, *The Way God Fights: War and Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987); Patrick Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford, 1993); Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, Marva Dawn, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Ben Ollenburger, "Peace and God's Action Against Chaos in the Old Testament," in *The Church's Peace Witness*, Marlin Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 70–88; and Dianne Bergant, "Yahweh: A Warrior God?" in *The Church's Peace Witness*, Marlin Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds. (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1994), 89–103. There are even references to the “Book of Yahweh’s Wars” upon which latter narratives are constructed (Num. 21:14).

5. See von Rad, 44–45; Exodus 14:4, 14, 18; Deuteronomy 1:30; Joshua 10:14, 42; 11:6; 23:10; Judges 20:35; 1 Samuel 14:23.

6. See von Rad, 42–44; Joshua 2:24; 6:2, 16; 8:1, 18; 10:8, 19; Judges 3:28; 4:14; 7:9, 15; 18:10; 20:28; 1 Samuel 14:12; 17:46; 23:4; 24:4; 26:8; 1 Kings 20:28.

7. See von Rad, 46–49; Exodus 15:14–16; 23:27–28; Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25; Joshua 2:9, 24; 5:1; 10:2; 11:20; 24:12; 1 Samuel 4:7–8. As a result, the enemy is thrown into what von Rad calls “divine terror”—Exodus 23:27; Deuteronomy 7:23; Joshua 10:10–11; 24:7; Judges 4:15; 7:22; 1 Samuel 5:11; 7:10; 14:15, 20.

8. See von Rad, 45; Exodus 14:13–14; Deuteronomy 20:3; Joshua 8:1, 10:8, 25; 11:6; Judges 7:3; 1 Samuel 23:16–17; 30:6; 2 Samuel 10:12.

9. See von Rad’s chapter on “Holy War in the Post-Solomonic Novella,” 74–93.

10. See von Rad, 47; Leviticus 26:36; Joshua 7:5; 1 Samuel 17:11; 28:5.