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# Objecting to Joshua

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When the Scriptures come into focus as a structured whole, we gain perspective on the violent passages of the Bible.

## 1

And when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. (Dt 7.2).

<sup>3</sup>So Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian....

<sup>7</sup>They warred against Midian, as the LORD commanded Moses, and killed every male.... <sup>9</sup>And the people of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones, and they took as plunder all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods.... <sup>10</sup>All their cities in the places where they lived, and all their encampments, they burned with fire, <sup>11</sup>and took all the spoil and all the plunder, both of man and of beast.... <sup>15</sup>Moses said to them, "Have you let all the women live? <sup>16</sup>Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD. <sup>17</sup>Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. <sup>18</sup>But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves. (Nm 31.3-18)

Then they devoted all in [Jericho] to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword (Js 6.21).

And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai. (Js 8.25)

<sup>28</sup>As for Makkedah, Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining.... <sup>29</sup>Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Makkedah to Libnah... <sup>31</sup>Lachish... <sup>33</sup>Gezer... <sup>34</sup>Eglon... <sup>36</sup>Hebron... <sup>38</sup>Debir... <sup>40</sup>So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings.... <sup>14</sup>every person they struck with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed.... <sup>20</sup>For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses. (Js 10.28-11.20)

And [Josiah] sacrificed on the altars all the priests of the high places who were there, and burned human bones on them.\* (2Kg 23.20)

Reading passages like this, a friend objects,

I just can't worship a God who demands so much killing of innocents for so little reason. Sometimes I wonder if YHWH really *is* the demiurge who mistakes himself for the Almighty God. (I'd make a pretty good Marcionite, I guess.) It makes me wonder if Christianity and the doctrine of grace showed up largely as a form of damage control to make up for the mess.

Just so we're clear, let's consider my friend's interesting qualifier, "for so little reason", first: Could there be a reason, or kinds of reasons, that would be "enough" to justify killing innocent people?

People try to defend God by answering Yes: God ordered the Israelites to kill the children "for their own good". Or:

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\* To defile them and render them unfit for worship.

Who knows what evil they might have done, if they had grown up. Or simply: God hates (idol worshippers, “fags”, terrorists— fill in the blank); they don’t deserve to live. Or, when all other “reasons” have broken themselves on the rock of our outrage, people still say, lamely, “God gave life, and he can take it. He knows what he’s doing; his will is perfect. It was Israel’s job just to obey.”

So the Bible talks about the killing of innocents on a number of occasions, but does it *justify* it, on any level?

It might seem so. At least, when we read the Bible as history, and not only as *descriptive* but even as somehow *prescriptive*— it even seems to sanction crusades, wars, and pogroms. Certain situations, it seems, cry out for *jihad*. God is on our side.

But these passages are only part of a much larger *context*. For instance, Joshua, with all its wars, is part of a series of books— Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings— that form a continuous narrative with common themes, style, vocabulary, point of view. Scholars call this sequence the “Deuteronomic History”. Because we can discern the same language and concerns in Jeremiah, and for other reasons as well, some think that the “Deuteronomist” was Jeremiah, or someone in his circle (perhaps his secretary Baruch).<sup>1</sup> If we read Joshua within the Deuteronomic history as a whole and together with Jeremiah and related books, we discover something much different than an “inspired record”— let alone a justification— of divinely sanctioned violence.

We discover a *prophetic view of the violence in history*.

## 2

We can begin reflecting on the violence in Joshua by reading a passage in Jeremiah 25:

<sup>3</sup>For twenty-three years... I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened. <sup>4</sup>And though YHWH has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. <sup>5</sup>They said,

‘Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land YHWH gave to you and your fathers for ever and ever. <sup>6</sup>Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not provoke me to anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you.’

<sup>7</sup>But you did not listen to me,” declares YHWH, “and you have provoked me with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves.”

<sup>8</sup>Therefore YHWH God says this:

“Because you have not listened to my words, <sup>9</sup>I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon,” declares YHWH, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them\* and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. <sup>10</sup>I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. <sup>11</sup>This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” (Jr 25.2-11)

This is a sentence of *horrific* violence, like the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. But what is all the more shocking, Jeremiah is threatening *Judah* with the violence that Joshua earlier wrought upon the *Canaanites*— and for the *same reason*. God will treat his own people as he did the others. In fact, over and over again Jeremiah says, Don’t go around saying, We’re God’s chosen people! No, God is holy, and he expects his people to be holy as well— and you will pay sorely if you’re not:

<sup>24</sup>Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. <sup>25</sup>Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants... <sup>27</sup>for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. <sup>28</sup>And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.” (Lv 18.24-28)

So at the very least, we see that the Bible does not view being “chosen people” as a warrant for acting with impunity. Injustice calls forth destruction. Perhaps that’s as it should be; there have to be consequences to our acts, after all.

<sup>4</sup>Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’ <sup>5</sup>For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, <sup>6</sup>if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this

<sup>1</sup> RE Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

\* Hebrew *haharamtim*, to place under the ban (*herem*); to consecrate to complete destruction.

place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup>then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. <sup>8</sup>But you trust in deceptive words to no avail. <sup>9</sup>Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, <sup>10</sup>and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'— only to go on doing all these abominations? <sup>11</sup>Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD. <sup>12</sup>Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. (Jr 7.4-12)

But this still leaves the problem of a God who brings violence down on innocent people and even beasts. What kind of God would do that?

### 3

Theologians tell us that for the Bible, 'revelation' is always and primarily *self-revelation*. Its purpose is not to provide facts about (for instance) how the world came to be, or even "rules for living". Revelation is God's *self-disclosure*.

So *in the story*, YHWH, the Creator of the universe, is disclosing the kind of God he is by giving instructions to Joshua for holy war. In doing so, he is showing who he is and how he expects his friends to be. What we may not grasp until later is that he will have the same "policy" toward Israel as he has towards other nations.

We don't have any words God addressed to the Canaanites, of course, but if God is One, then we can assume that, had he chosen them instead of the Israelites to be his witnesses among the nations, he would have said to them as he did to the Israelites:

"<sup>29</sup>When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, <sup>30</sup>take care that you be not ensnared to follow them.... <sup>31</sup>You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, *for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.*" (Dt 12.29-31).

God used Israel to punish the Canaanites because they were defiling his good land by practicing murder and injustice in the name of religion. Violence will come upon Israel for the same reasons:

<sup>15</sup>They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. <sup>16</sup>And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. <sup>17</sup>And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. <sup>18</sup>Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. <sup>19</sup>Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced. (2 Kgs 17.15-19).

To put it in terms of the future: 'If you don't mend your evil ways, *I will give you the evil you have chosen.*'

The sentence of *herem* (complete destruction) which God ordered Israel to impose on the Canaanites turns out to be Israel's fate as well:

I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction (*herem*) and Israel to reviling (Isa 43.28).

And this in turn becomes the fate of the very Babylonians by whom he brings evil upon Judah, and for the same reasons:

"<sup>12</sup>But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares YHWH, "and will make it desolate forever. <sup>13</sup>I will bring upon that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations. <sup>14</sup>They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands." (Jr 25.12-14)

"Waste and utterly destroy them (*haherem*), says YHWH, and do according to all that I have commanded you" (Jr 50.21; cf also 50.26, 51.3).

The Bible isn't saying that God commanded his favorites to put their enemies to the sword just so they could take over their lands, like the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians today, on the assumption that they are God's special people. It's saying that God chose Israel in order

to make himself and his larger purposes *understood* through them. In the whole swirling sea of violence that is human history, Israel destroys the Canaanites, then the Assyrians destroy Israel, then the Babylonians destroy the Assyrians, then the Persians destroy the Babylonians, and the Greeks destroy the Persians, and the Romans destroy the Greeks... and so it goes. The nations claim they prevail because their gods are stronger than those of their enemies. We moderns view history as the out-working of economic, political, and social "forces", of nations striving for advantage over each other through time. Our books make no reference to gods. We humans have no one to blame but ourselves, or at least, other people, for the whole genocidal mess. That's ok, but now we can ask: Who will destroy us?

Because God did tell Noah:

"Whoso sheddeth man's blood,  
by man shall his blood be shed:  
for in the image of God  
made he man" (Gn 9.6).

shophēk dam ha-adam,  
ba-adam dammō yisshaphēk,  
ki b'tsélem elohim  
āsāh eth-ha'adam.

And that's *exactly* what happens in the Bible— to one empire after another, Israel included.

For the Bible, human violence is the result of abandoning God: "And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faith" (Dt 32.20). What's remarkable in the Bible is not the violence, but rather that God continually *tells* Israel *why* there's violence. Even more remarkable is the fact that, despite the violence, God preserves a *remnant* of Israel, who will remember and bear witness to what's he has told them, *so that the nations may learn*.

So the question is how to get off the merry-go-round.

That's the part about Jesus.

#### 4

Not surprisingly for a work devoted to laws pertaining to a sanctuary, Leviticus has a very clear structure, which is the key to its interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, it's a kind of 'guided tour' of the Tabernacle, in which the laws set forth relate to the successive architectural features (en-

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<sup>2</sup> See Mary E. Douglas' brilliant monograph, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1999). On chapters 19–20, see pp 234–240.

trances, spaces) and appurtenances that a person entering the Tabernacle would encounter.

Once past the first screen, which is the story of Aaron's sons' punishment, the reader is faced by a trilogy of chapters, 18 and 20 repeating each other, and between them chapter 19, which must be considered to be of central importance if only because of the way it is framed by the other two.

The two supporting chapters, 18 and 20, repeat each other like a song chorus or procession, chanting the same anathemas against the evil things that are done in the religions of Egypt and Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible sets all of this in a specific story: that of Israel's relationship with God, not that of the Canaanites or even of the human race in general. We don't hear much about God's concern for other nations, although there are of course oracles on the nations in many of the prophets which expand on the themes mentioned above, insofar as they touch Israel. The *main story*, the *narrative* of the Bible concerns Israel. The stories of the other nations are significant only insofar as they advance that plot. But from time to time— for instance in Jonah— the Bible shows that the other nations are the objects of the same care God exercises toward Israel:

<sup>4</sup>Jonah... proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."<sup>5</sup>The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth...<sup>10</sup>And when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (Jon 3.4-10)

Of course, Jonah complains loudly. He is an Israelite, and Israel has suffered enough under 'Nineveh'— i.e., Babylon. He *wants* vengeance, even though he knows that God revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai as a compassionate God:

<sup>6</sup>And YHWH passed by before him, and proclaimed, YHWH, YHWH God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,<sup>7</sup>Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Ex 34.6-7).

So Jonah's bid for vengeance fails:

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas 234.

<sup>11</sup>But YHWH replied,... "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jon 4.11).

Jeremiah and the author of Jonah, then, seem to be telling us to understand Joshua's slaughter of the Canaanites in the same way we do Nebuchadrezzar's slaughter of the Judahites: nations don't destroy one another in frenzies of horrific cruelty because they are "better", or "chosen", or even because they are "more powerful". They do so because God leaves them people to their own devices when they go after pseudo-gods, and that's the order of history when he does. Of course, the Bible is relentlessly monotheistic, so there is not an "evil god" or a "god of war" or *any* other god who brings one nation against another. YHWH, the God of Israel, totally *owns* history, and all that happens, happens under his rule. But *because of this*, even the belief that a nation is "chosen"— even when it's true— is nothing other than *idolatry*, if it lends itself to *injustice*. And "Whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gn 9.6).

Whether such a pattern of idolatry-and-retribution actually exists in history or not might be debatable— and the Bible itself contains plenty of material (for instance, the entire book of Job) that calls simplistic answers into question— but in general the Bible is about the working out in history of God's judgment against idolatry and injustice (and his restoration of the proper state of affairs). Oppressive social practices are based on, reinforced, and mediated by the worship of lies. God's judgment on this is what is working itself out in history. It isn't always a question of black-and-white— his ways are mysterious— but there would be no story if there were not some of that. The Bible tells a story of "justice and mercy and truth" (Mt 23.23), by focusing on one people, which in the process becomes itself the *bearer*, the *example*, and the *witness* of God's judgment. And part of the message is that the judgment works itself out *within* history, not from outside. God does not go around smashing nations; he summons that nations to smash the nations. "By man shall his blood be shed" (Gn 9.6).

Nebuchadrezzar and Cyrus and Rezin of Damascus and the Pharaoh don't know that they're the servants of YHWH; they see themselves as agents of their own wills, and servants of their own gods: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly, in

the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit." (Isa 14.13-15). The pride of the nations leads inexorably to their downfall, *just as it did with Judah, and the Canaanites before them*. Israel's history is a paradigm not for  *jihad*  but for  *history* . Just as God used Israel to execute justice on the nations of Canaan, so he uses Babylon to execute justice on Israel, and he will use the Babylon to execute justice on the Assyrians. That is Jeremiah's point. But the nations (even the USA!) may escape the cycle of violence through repentance— God's point to Jonah— and indeed the message of all the prophets.

Of course, if the Bible were simplistic, it would ultimately not be very interesting, or true. What makes it interesting is that the Bible as a whole weaves a number of other major voices into the account— Job's, for instance— that ask why the just have to suffer as much as or even more than the transgressors. And those are serious questions. But in this discussion, we will stay focused on the "Deuteronomic" story we have been talking about, where those who turn from evil and do good are spared.

## 5

A book composed some 2500 years ago will follow its own rules as to what constitutes 'good writing' and what kinds of expectations it responds to. But in any case it's clear that in this story, the book of Joshua is quite literally a triumphal *tour de force* of faithful Israel and her God. And this triumphal *tour de force* sets the stage, as a kind of prologue to the whole history of *faithless* Israel that follows, which leads to— *exile* and then to a (much-humbled) restoration. So the story of Joshua is *already a story about Israel's Exile*, and not about Israel's divine mandate to practice genocide. *That's* what we miss unless we grasp the Bible *whole!* Joshua is Israel's national myth, but at the same time it's a *caricature* of Israel's national myth, told for the express purpose of getting to the real point, which is in the *author's present*: Exile and destruction have come upon us because we believed a little too one-sidedly in our national myth. We, the God-protected and God-chosen nation (just look at Joshua!), have suffered utter humiliation, defeat, and exile *because we acted no better than the Canaanites. In fact we were worse, because God actually spoke to us!*

It would be a mistake to read the Bible as far as Joshua, discover all the violence in it, and slam the book shut in outrage. As it turns out, Joshua is immediately contradicted by Judges— the *very next book*— which was written

by the *same hand*. In Joshua, Israel marches triumphantly into the land and effortlessly conquers it. In Judges, Israel is continually harassed and oppressed by the nations it was supposed to have conquered, and spends half its time conquered! And with that double beginning, the rest of the story, which is a story not such much of history itself, as about Israel's faith (or not) *in* history, unrolls.

## 6

After diligently searching for a couple of centuries, most archaeologists no longer think anything *quite* like the story in Joshua or Judges ever happened *as such*. For example, even WG Dever, a fairly conservative commentator, is forced to affirm that 'traditional biblical archaeology and its goal of finding tangible proof of the central events of the First Testament has failed' (*What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: Eerdmans, 2001*).

Such facts bring us face to face with the *literary* character of the story. That is, they force us to recognize that the Bible is a story *about history*, rather than a *record of history* as such. The point of Joshua was never that God authorized his "chosen" people to engage in genocide. Even less does it support the idea that modern Israel, or America, by virtue of some supposed continued or similar "election", may engage in ethnic cleansing in the present. Joshua provides, at the beginning of a much longer and more convoluted work, an image of loyalty and faith (and above all of *God's* faithfulness) which contrasts with disloyalty and betrayal on the part of Israel that mark the later pages of the Deuteronomistic History and indeed of the Bible as a whole. Joshua's picture of a triumphant Israel placing the evil Canaanites (and their innocent children and farm animals) under the ban is only the beginning of a story about *Israel* coming under the *very same ban*. The Bible is a story about the violence of history, and about God's purposes among men amid the seeming insanity. It doesn't justify  *jihad*  so much as attempt to answer why Israel has *suffered jihad*.

'This is not "history" in the technical sense; history provides merely the framework reflecting God's plan for the world.' (RE Murphy, following G Lohfink in *BibThBul*, Spring 2003). Biblical history is less the account of what "really happened" than of what "really, really happened". Now, ancient "history" writing often pursues "higher" truth at the expense of "hard facts". Its primary intention is to instruct in wisdom and not simply to report what happened. Today, at least in theory, we consider *factual accuracy* to be the main purpose of historical writing; we do not expect *meaning*, which is probably only "ideolog-

ical" at best. We prefer our history to be "values-neutral"— "Just the facts, ma'am." But even the most "objective" historians today select and order their materials so as to show what they understand as the *meaning* of events. But we will get especially confused if we read ancient works like the Bible as straightforward reportage rather than as a story *about* history. We need to take especial pains to grasp how Joshua is a *commentary on* history, rather than history *itself*.

Of course we *can* read Joshua— approvingly or disapprovingly— as a mandate to kill, or even as an account of a great historical killing. And it has often been read as such, and used to justify more of the same. But *in its own context*, which is the *Bible as a whole*, it's the beginning of a story of *the judgment that violence is*, and of *God's judgment on violence*. But you have to read the whole story to see that Joshua is not an isolated and self-complete unit, that it belongs to a larger context. The Bible is ultimately a story of the disaster that came upon Israel because of its own violence and pride. And— apart from that, Joshua is actually *misleading*. It's not the whole story; it's only Side A of the record that has 2Kings on Side B— the story of Israel's own violent destruction and exile.

This is even more evident in the light of Friedman's point in *Who Wrote the Bible* that the final edition of the Torah, and of the entire "Deuteronomistic" corpus from Joshua through 2Kings (with Deuteronomy as a kind of prologue) came from the pen of— Jeremiah the prophet, or his secretary Baruch. For, as is well known to scholars, Jeremiah's book is very similar in style, theme, and diction to the Deuteronomist's work. If Jeremiah, the prophet of Israel's destruction and exile, *is* the author of Joshua, then the vision of history that Jeremiah sets forth under his own name, in his own book, is the key to the meaning of the whole Bible, including Joshua:

"I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon," declares YHWH, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin." (Jr 25.9).

## 7

Now, as Friedman points out in *The Disappearance of God*, the narrative which we can take to be centered in Jeremiah's vision, presents the drama of Israel's discovery of human responsibility. Friedman quotes Moses:

<sup>18</sup>You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. ... <sup>20</sup>I will hide my face from them,' he said, 'and see what their end will be'.... (Dt 32.18-20)

God sets Israel on her feet; Israel walks, but then falls; God withdraws, and Israel must learn to walk on her own. God gave her his "Torah" (literally, his "teaching") to guide her. Wisdom is available there— and if she pays attention to it, she'll do fine. If not— well, God "will see what their end will be". And in case you don't already know, their "end" will be that of the Canaanites who also "defiled the land so that it vomited them out". How will this happen? "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gn 9.6).

Moreover the Bible says that happens not because of any inexorable and abstract law ("karma", perhaps)— or because human beings are the pawns of various gods warring in the heavens— but because God's own personal judgment falls, however hiddenly or not, on the perpetrators of evil in history and society. As Jeremiah prays, "[Your] eyes observe all the ways of men, so as to repay every man according to his ways, and with the proper fruit of his deeds!" (Jr 32.19)— deeds have fruit ("karma") in history, but the God of Justice is behind it.

## 8

The same friend who raised the objection about the Bible's violence also voiced another:

Jews (or believers) as the sole "Chosen People"—there are bigtime dangers in relegating all others to the NOT ONE OF US category. (Just look at the Middle East.) With more stars than grains of sand on the earth, why would God only shows up in the universe as YHWH of the Jews (or as Jesus Christ, for that matter)?

Christian mission today is usually driven by a sense that people are either saved or lost to God. However, the Hebrew Bible actually offers three categories of election: the elect, the non-elect, and the anti-elect, and places all three in the overarching context of what God intends to do with his creation, for which perhaps the handiest shorthand is "thy kingdom (i.e., regime) come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven" (Mt 6.10). Election and non-election are related to membership (or not) in God's covenant people and ultimately to the restoration of all creation to its rightful purpose (see Rm 8). There is *no* implication in the Bible that the non-elect are all "going to Hell". In fact, St Paul specifically denies that. He says to the Athenians that God

"made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined... that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us" (Ac 17.26-27)

—and he goes on to quote pagan philosophers to that effect. But *anti*-election— that is, *hostility* to God's purposes— leads to condemnation. And even if election was the special privilege of the Jews, still, the OT authors did not think their chosenness rested on racial and cultural superiority or that outsiders were not chosen because of some innate deficiency. The concept of peoplehood is "familial and natural without being racial and biologicistic";<sup>4</sup> and God chose the *Jews* because he wanted to display his truth to the *nations*.

Moreover, the three categories of elect, non-elect, and anti-elect are permeable. Ruth was among the non-elect, and Rahab (Js 2) originally part of the anti-elect, but both successfully attached themselves and their families to the elect. On the other hand Achan, who was among the elect, was annihilated along with his family as anti-elect because he deliberately violated the covenant of election (Js 7).

So even if the *anti*-elect— of whom the Canaanites are the best-known example but Jonah's Ninevites (Babylonians) would be another— are those who have placed themselves beyond the pale of divine mercy and doomed themselves to destruction, the merely *non*-elect, for their part, actually have a place within the divine economy, albeit a different place than Israel's. Their status was not necessarily lower. God says of Job, a gentile, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on earth, a perfect and upright man, one who fears God, and eschews evil? (Jb 1.8). At the time of disaster and exile— when we might expect the biblical writers to express nationalistic sentiments in a most forceful and paranoid manner— the Bible's God calls Cyrus and even Nebuchadrezzar his "servants", and it's precisely the nationalistic but *false* "prophets" who most loudly support the notion of Israel's "election" (we would say, its "exceptionalism"), who are leading Israel astray. Election does not save Israel from God's wrath, nor does non-election lead other nations to it. These categories have another purpose: they are simply about where YHWH God is choosing to make *his own* story *known* to *all* humankind. God wants *witnesses*, and he chose Israel to be his

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<sup>4</sup> See J. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism", in Mark Brett, ed., *Ethnicity and the Bible*, Brill 1996

witnesses. "Ye are my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any" (Isa 44.8).

## 9

When God chose Abraham, he promised that Abraham would be a blessing to *all* nations. The genealogies of Genesis underscore this fact by showing Abraham as the direct descendant of Adam, and Aaron (not David, as usually presumed) as the direct descendent and heir of Abraham. In this way they place the true, God-established, non-idolatrous worship of the Aaronic tabernacle at the center of the entire family of humanity—and at the same time, relate the entire human family specifically to Aaron. In Aaron, God restores the priestly function that belonged to Adam as prototype. And it is no accident that its vision of correct ritual ordinances (*huqqot*) which if a man (*'adam*) does them, he shall live in them (Lv 18.5; Ne 9.29).

In the eschatological vision of the psalms and of Isaiah, the nations bring tribute to Zion, not because they wish or need to become Jews, but because the wisdom that Israel has gained through her experience with God is attractive and compelling to them precisely *as* the (non-elect) nations, as N Lohfink explores in *The God of Israel and the Nations*. The Bible is quite explicit in affirming that Israel's is not the *only* wisdom that can be found. Job, for instance, is a righteous gentile patriarch, contemporary and equal to Abraham; the book of Proverbs explicitly incorporates a substantial body of international wisdom; and St Paul himself affirms that wherever we find what is good and noble and true, we hold on to it and rejoice in it.

However, the fate of the other nations is never fully worked out in the Hebrew Bible. Later Jewish thinkers, building on the Bible, did not maintain that those who are not Jewish are not excluded from salvation. Gentiles who observe the Noahide laws can attain the rewards of the "righteous" in the next world, as Rabbi Joshua's observation shows: "since Scripture has stated, 'who have forgotten God,' it teaches that there are righteous (*yesh tzaddiqim*) among the nations and that they do have a portion in the age to come" (D Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws*; Edwin Mellen, 1983, p 262, citing *T San* 13.2).

On the other hand, much of what we usually think of as "classical" Christian theology excludes those who fail to acknowledge Jesus as Christ from ultimate salvation. We need to ask whether this "classical" theology really has the earlier Christian tradition behind it, though, or

whether it is a later development—and if so, whether it is legitimate. For it seems rather that the Bible speaks, as K Rahner would put it, of a "history on God's part"—a history of salvation which is coextensive with the whole of world history from God's point of view, where the transcendental self-communication of God towards all men takes place, "so that", as St Paul says, "men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being', and... 'We are his offspring.'" (Ac 17.27-28). (Note again that St Paul is quoting pagan authors in this speech.)

The explicit and particular history of salvation described in the Bible is worked out in Israel, a special story of an ongoing event of dialogical partnership in which this "history on God's part" is disclosed (see K Rahner, "Exegesis and Dogmatic Theology", pp. 67-93 in *Theological Investigations* vol 5: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1966, p 167; and "The Old Testament and Christian Dogmatic Theology", pp 177-90; *op cit* vol 16: Seabury, 1979, pp 177-90; cf RE Murphy, "When Is Theology "Biblical"?—Some Reflections", *BibThBul*, Spring 2003).

The biblical narrative of God's choice of, and work with Israel, thus discloses the tip of an iceberg, and a paradigmatic tip at that. God's unique choice is not simply a privilege inexplicably and arbitrarily accorded to one group over another; still less is it a rationale for claims of ethnic, cultural, or religious supremacy; and even less than that a justification for violence. Indeed, if anything, Israel's election is a responsibility before God's other children—for the apparent privilege culminates in the messianic role of the Servant who lays down his life in service, in the context of all nations: "I will make you a light to the nations", Is 42:6, 49:6; "a light to the peoples", 51:4; and even "a covenant to the people", 42:6, 49:8. And in fact, one of the problems discussed in the Bible is Israel's constant attempt to turn her election into the claim to ethnic supremacy that it precisely is not!

Biblical particularism has a universal horizon. This universalism is not a new superior stage of religious faith that surpasses Israel. Rather, the Bible's universalism "is rooted in and draws its nourishment from the soil of biblical particularism. [This] not only explains, but gives positive theological value to ... texts like Second Isaiah that seem to ... contain both a universalistic thrust but always maintain a deep particularism about Israel's elect status." (Kaminsky, *BibThBul*, Winter 2001). Israel is always at the *center* of God's *universal* plan to restore his creation.



The Bible's use of hierarchical images thus primarily expresses, first, *God's* choice, not Israel's superiority: God explicitly says that he chose Israel not because it was the greatest, but because it was the least of all nations (Dt 7.7). But he had to start somewhere. So while some biblical texts like Psalm 2 envision the nations submitting to God's anointed, and others like Second Isaiah have them submitting to Israel as a whole, this submission is meaningful only when Israel has already submitted to God by accepting the covenant at Sinai. The Psalmist prays that God's own justice be given to the royal son (Ps 72); he does not celebrate the king as the source of justice. Again, Jeremiah: "It is I who made the earth, and the men and beasts who are on the earth, by My great might and My outstretched arm; and I give it to whomever I deem proper" (27.5). God obviously hasn't committed the whole earth to Israel, but her universal authority comes from her loyalty to the one, true authority of God.

It is clearly not the doctrine of the Bible— nor, for that matter, is it that of the fathers of the Church, whom we've had no room to study here— that the "Chosen People" constitute an exclusive club of the "saved", leaving all others out in the cold, destined for hell. God's choice of Israel is a theological, literary, and historical fact undertaken to make his own glory known. God is not in the business of supporting nationalistic claims, or justifying genocidal violence. Jeremiah's arguments with the official prophets make this abundantly clear.

## 10

For a Christian, God's election in history comes down to, centers on, and is made explicit in one person— the Anointed of God, the Elect, Jesus (Lk 23.35). Interestingly enough, that is the precise title put in the mouths of those who mocked him on the cross, so it's worth exploring what kind of election is being shown us here.

Due to the peculiar (de)formation of Western religious culture, we tend to think of Jesus as the lone individual who carried out the purely individualistic substitutionary role that our habitual Augustinian-Anselmian model of salvation assigns to him. A full discussion of this view would take us not only through the New Testament and deep into the history of dogma, but we can try to indicate at least the directions in which we need to look, to continue our discussion of Joshua into the Christian context.

In the Augustinian-Anselmian view, man sinned and offended God's infinite justice. Since this justice is absolute, it must be "satisfied" by a punishment equal to the offense. But the gravity of the offense, which can be

measured only by the majesty of the offended, cannot be satisfied by finite and sinful man. Jesus, as God's Son, is the only individual who is in a position to merit salvation for us. The Father must have "satisfaction", and yet he "so loves us", that he sends this Son to pay the penalty for us.

In this view, the Father himself has his only-begotten Son tortured and murdered in order to satisfy it an abstract law to which he himself is subject. Unfortunately, this brutal and sadistic model of salvation has fundamentally determined the habitual Western understanding of Israelite chosenness and of the Christian chosenness which is thought to supersede it. The deficiencies of this aberrant theology inevitably motivate objections like those articulated by my friend, above.

Apart from the fact that the fathers see God as the author of justice, not its subject, and again apart from the fact that they do not find in him a need for the "satisfaction" of an enraged sense of justice that would be reprehensible even among men, they also did *not* see Christ as an "*individual*". The unique Son of God did not become "*a*" man— he became Man. He did not take to himself an individual human being, but precisely *human nature*. The person who is the son of man is not merely a separate human individual like us; rather, he is at all times the Son of God now existing also in a human nature. There are not two persons in him, for instance a divine Christ and a human Jesus, as some have alleged both in ancient times and in modern. The Messiah is only one person, the Son of God, subsisting now through Mary as son of man also; one person whose two natures remain distinct and unconfused. So (to say it again), he took to himself human nature per se, not just an individual instantiation of it, and redeemed what he took to himself by uniting it to his divine nature— for being lost meant precisely that we had been estranged and cut off from God.

So, on the one hand, in uniting all of what we are to himself, he has rejoined the brokenness of humanity and reunited us to God; and on the other, in uniting himself to what we are, he became precisely the New Adam— the new, universal Man who, because his humanity is not limited by being merely individual, takes up again or "recapitulates" (St Paul's term) the whole of humanity and unites us to one another in God.

Salvation is thus given to all, although, being persons, we have the freedom to accept or to reject what is given. As before, of course, if we prefer the works of our own hands, we will come to an evil end, because it is the

choice of a lie. But those who follow the Messiah do not condemn, but embrace all, even as they themselves have been embraced. And if our responding to that embrace entails a submission— as it does— that submission finally means only what we spoke of at the beginning: “do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not provoke me to anger with what your hands have made.” (Jr 25.6). Rather, we listen to the Messiah because in him is the ultimate truth of our relationship with God.

This is what we mean when we speak of a “new covenant”. And it is worth pointing out that this new covenant is precisely an extension of God’s election to the gentiles:

<sup>14</sup>He ... has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup>...to create in himself one new man out of the two,... <sup>16</sup>and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility...  
<sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Ep 2.14-19)

As before, the operative idea of divine election in Christ is not one of religious supremacy, but a condition in which, by listening, we live. We bow down to nothing less than the God whose word is Truth, or rather, the God of whom Truth itself is His word. We do not even bow down to our own ideas of Truth. We adopt an attitude of intense listening. We allow him who actually has his own word— of whom Truth itself is his word— to speak to us, himself!

Listening is a universal human necessity, and wise men everywhere practice it. But apparently not everyone hears God speaking in the Bible. We affirm that there is only one God, and that human beings cannot worship another. Yet if when people listen they don’t hear the God of the Bible— if honestly (and honesty counts for everything!) the biblical tradition makes no sense to them as the site of the ultimate self-disclosure of God— then it is not required to pretend. We can live, as Job did, as righteous gentiles enjoying God’s favor. And “not everyone has faith” (2Th 3.2). None the less, “if today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts as at Meribah” (Ps 95.78), for in understanding the Bible’s story, we have learned the lesson of Meribah. Then he will guide us into his place of rest, in the manner he sees best. And the saints confirm what the Messiah reveals: that we gentiles who have heard his word may now live no longer simply as God-fearers among the (non-chosen) nations, but may be numbered with his chosen through his Son—

through the eucharistic covenant in which our broken and divided individuality is taken up into his own unity.

## 11

St Paul stresses in Romans and Galatians that, apart from this unity with the Messiah, being among the “elect” doesn’t save us, nor does being among the “non-elect” condemn us. “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law” (Rm 2.14).

“What advantage is there [then] in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?— Very much, in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God... Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. 5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever blessed! Amen!” (Rm 3.1-2, 9.4-5).

In other words, God can and will and indeed has spoken for himself. He chose Israel to hear his speech and to become the sign and bearer of the purpose announced in it. Joshua affirms that those who listen to his word know his power. But his purpose was not just to make Jews better than everybody else; God’s purpose was ever to reveal his own saving glory, which he did not only by guiding, but also by judging Israel. And if Job reminds us of the messiness of history, it is ultimately the Messiah, who takes to himself not only the task of Israel, but the question of Job, and not the question only, but the very *being* of Job:

“And now in him you too have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and having believed in him, you have been sealed by the holy Spirit of the promise, <sup>14</sup> which is the down-payment of our inheritance until the final redemption of his possession, to the praise of his glory” (Ep 1.13-14).