

Old Testament Violence

By Fr. Dave Heney

Did God really send a flood to kill almost all the people of the earth? Did God really ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son? Did He really side with the Israelites in their bloody conquest of Canaan? ...Does God “side” with anyone who uses violence?

Anyone who reads the Old Testament can wonder about its many violent stories and what part God plays in them. Because these events seem so foreign to our experience and certainly to what we would consider the nature of God they demand that we take a more careful look at them. They actually can help reveal a number of important ideas about the scriptures that we might not have known otherwise. Let’s start with ideas about just what the scriptures actually are. (The numbered paragraphs are from the “Catechism of the Catholic Church.”)

What is the Bible?

The simplest definition is “The Word of God in the words of human authors” Notice that the “Word” of God is singular. The bible is meant to convey a single message of salvation from God. All the many stories, speeches, narratives, and biblical scenes are the many different ways the one single revelation of God shines through.

***102** Through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one Utterance in whom He expresses himself completely:*

However, our faith is not just a collection of scripture verses, theological ideas, or creedal statements, but rather a relationship with the person of Jesus, a real historical figure who is himself the fullest revelation of the Word of God. “The Word became flesh, and made His dwelling among us.” (Jn. 1:14)

***108** The Christian faith is not a "religion of the book." Christianity is the religion of the "Word" of God, a word which is "not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living." If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, "open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures."*

While the “Word” of God is singular and constitutes a single message, it is conveyed to us “incarnate” in thousands and thousands of words composed by many different human authors, from ancient cultures, over hundreds and hundreds of years, and yet all under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is a collection of books, each one from a different author, or authors, who often assembled material that had been handed down orally for hundreds of years before.

101 In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness, God speaks to them in human words: "Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men."

This is in marked contrast to the Koran and the Book of Mormon, both of which are reported to be a direct dictation by God to a human writer who does not participate in the composition beyond the writing itself. The Bible, on the other hand, arises from and respects the ancient culture and human character of the author. The Bible is the story of God acting “incarnate” in our human history.

106 God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. "To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men, who, all the while He employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever He wanted written, and no more."

The human authors were writing to their own people according to the cultural writing styles and forms that their ancient cultures employed. While they spoke to their ancient culture then, God speaks to us today. That message can become clearer if we become familiar with the writing styles and literary forms the ancient authors used to communicate their inspired message.

110 In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current. "For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression."

Ancient biblical writing styles

It is often easy to forget that the Bible was not written in English by Americans, but by people in an ancient culture very far removed from our own and with a very different way of looking at the world and describing events. For example, after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they entered the land of Canaan, but then attacked other towns and cities in

the usual violent and aggressive way that peoples of that time often did. *How they understood what they were doing in the plan of God and how we understand the telling of that story in the OT requires some special knowledge. Here are just few key ideas.*

CAUSALITY: The ancient biblical writers had a different sense of causality, or why things happen. While we might say, “It is raining” they would say, “God has made it rain.” Nothing ever “just happens” in the ancient world. Whatever happens would be interpreted as the action of God as the principal agent who always causes something to happen.

At the time of Abraham and Moses, the Jews believed that Yahweh was the most important God but was also simply one God *among many other national gods*, as the First, of the Ten Commandments, affirms. In the ancient Mediterranean world, why things turned out the way they did depended on the activities of *all the gods present*. If there was a conflict between two countries who worshipped different gods, the victory of one side over another could only be because the god of the victors was more powerful than the god of the losers. People in the ancient world would observe events that happened and then attribute them to the successful or unsuccessful intervention of this or that god. However, if God is truly one, as in true monotheism, then the results of human actions can only be placed *on ourselves*. (That understanding would come much later in Israelite history during their in exile in Babylon)

For example, the Israelites observed that they were able to escape from Egypt by a series of remarkable and miraculously timed natural events that all worked in their favor. This could only be because Yahweh *was more powerful* than the Egyptian Gods. Yahweh had favored Israel with victory and the Egyptian god had not favored the Egyptians.

They also observed that they were able to invade Canaan and successfully take over various cities and areas of the Promised Land during the time that we call The Conquest. Some of these battles were quite bloody. The biblical author would attribute this success to the actions of Yahweh because that is the way ALL events were attributed. The Biblical editor who assembled all these stories later repeats this understanding without prejudice or commentary because it was part of the “*slow unfolding*” of the message of salvation.

Archaeologists continue to debate the evidence of Conquest. There is not much archeological data but all sides acknowledge that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Not every battle leaves archeological remains and not every conquered city leaves burned stones. It is difficult to imagine, however, biblical authors making up a story of their recent past that they knew would be repeated often to people who would have their own living memory of the same events. Still, *the issue is not whether these Conquest events happened but how they were understood to have happened by the ancient biblical author. They interpreted real historical events as caused by the hand of Yahweh.*

SLOWLY UNFOLDING MESSAGE: Ancient authors would take their time getting to their point. They would start a story with persons acting, at first, in a way that was not in accord with the message the author wants to eventually make and then finish the story with the correct behavior. It was the correct behavior that was the point, but readers are forced to follow the entire slowly unfolding narrative pathway the author lays out. For example, the author of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac wants to convey that human sacrifice, a dominant feature of all other ancient religions, had no place in Judaism. The story slowly takes us from Abraham acting in accord with other pagan religions and ends with the replacement of human sacrifice with animal sacrifice by the action of God, which was the point of the story.

The OT is the slow unfolding or emerging maturity of the people's understanding of God; moving from typical cultic pagan religions of the Mediterranean world to the monotheism and unconditional love of God that would be Judaism's lasting legacy to the world. Some stories reflect the immature view of God and some reflect a more mature view. It is easy to feel confused if we enter the narrative at arbitrary points along the way.

For example, imagine you are going to ask a large number of children from the same family about their parents. If you were to line them up according to age and then ask them, from the youngest to the oldest, about their parents, their answers would range from highly emotional responses from the youngest to fairly rational from the oldest. Parental description would move from immature to more mature ideas. That is the same progression we see in the Israelite understanding of God in the OT. It begins with an immature idea and moves to deeper ideas. Asking the children in random order produces a more chaotic image that obscures the smooth progression we get from asking them in order. Similarly, if we jump around in reading the OT it obscures the smooth progression as well.

TIME AND HISTORY: Ancient authors had a different sense of history and time than we do. For example, many people today can tell the difference between a car made this year and one from last year, but in the ancient world, transportation methods had not changed in *thousands* of years. Daily life stayed pretty much the same. The clothes that Abraham wore around 1850 B.C. were about the same as what people wore two thousand years later. Farmers in his time worked their fields with the same tools and in the same way as the time of Jesus. Since the events of daily life did not change that much, ancient authors looked more to the *meaning* of events rather than their chronological sequence. Getting married, childbirth, funerals; these were the powerful events that changed the meaning and purpose of a person's life.

People in the ancient world actually had the same intelligence or IQ as we do today. While education levels are obviously higher now, intelligence has remained stable over thousands of years. In the ancient world, authors applied their considerable intelligence to describing and understanding the *meaning* of events as directed by God, not just their occurrence in some temporal sequence. Chronology took a back seat to meaning.

To give something meaning is to place it in a larger picture or perspective. For example, the birth of a child sets the direction of a parent's life for the next generation. The death of a loved one puts one's own life in a more eternal perspective rather than just being concerned about the weather. Both the OT and the NT are concerned mainly with meaning, purpose, and an eternal perspective from God rather than a strict listing of chronological events.

GOD CAUSES the SLOW UNFOLDING of Israelite HISTORY

The OT reveals these three issues to tell the story of our salvation. Abraham was given the mission from God to begin a new family that would live as a "light to the gentiles," They were chosen to finally live as human beings in the way that God had originally designed Adam and Eve to live in the Garden. The Ten Commandments given to Moses identified in a clear and codified form what those behaviors would be. Finally, the purpose of receiving the Promised Land in Canaan was to provide a real historical and concrete place from which to exercise this mission of living as a holy people who are a "light to the gentiles." The land was not a reward or something "earned" for good behavior, but a gift to be used for a clear purpose from God. It was a means to an end, which was to be that "light to the Gentiles."

The Israelites discovered, of course, that there already were a number of different people living in Canaan. Their entrance into the Promised Land introduced a legacy of violence and war that is troubling to our NT ears. Desiring to maintain their own faith traditions in the face of these pagan neighbors, some ancient authors re-interpreted the meaning of "holiness" to be a kind of "separateness." They accentuated the "differentness" of Israelite culture from their neighbors and set the definition of holiness as a radical separateness and even distance from the surrounding cultures. They lost that sense of mission to convert other nations to Yahweh.

They became estranged from God and aspired to power over others, especially under King David, rather than fulfilling their mission for them. All the OT prophets tried to call them back to their calling from God, often with little success. The OT is a cycle of prosperity, sin, repentance, return to success, then followed by sin again. Eventually, the more powerful nations of Assyria and Babylon each captured sections of the land. Tragically, the remaining Israelites found themselves once again in slavery in Babylon. While in exile, biblical authors reflected on their long history and from the very beginning of time. How is it that a people rescued from slavery in Egypt by a series of miraculous events could end up in slavery again in a strange land? How could they lose a powerful kingdom under King David and end up in the kingdom of pagans? How is the world supposed to be?

Gradually, the religious understanding of the Israelites evolved into true monotheism and the unconditional love of God. At first, they understood Yahweh as just the God of the land of Israel and the temple in Jerusalem. But during their exile in Babylon, in a foreign land and with no temple, their understanding matured into recognizing Yahweh as the One God and creator of the Universe, who is tied to no particular land at all. God is the

creator of the entire universe, and the designer of men and women as they are supposed to be, as Genesis affirms.

The Biblical author, “by the streams of Babylon,” took many of the ALREADY existing stories of ancient Israelite culture, the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua, and RE-INTERPRETED them in a new and more mature understanding that we believe is inspired by God but written in their own ancient style. The biblical authors in exile recognized that Yahweh was the ONE God of the universe and that His love is permanent, unconditional, and everlasting. They finally understood that all of the bad things that happened to them were the result of their OWN actions, and not other more successful pagan gods. Because God is ONE, the tragic consequences of their behavior could be placed only on themselves. Their exile was the result of their own sin, not living as designed, and not an angry God. The form of the OT that we have today was assembled, edited, and re-formed by profoundly inspired biblical authors while in exile by the streams of Babylon about 500 years B.C.

CHRISTIANS, ISRAELITES, AND PAGANS

The sense of “holiness as separateness” meant that Israelites were not that involved in seeking converts. While there was a large Jewish Diaspora it did not extend much farther than the eastern Mediterranean area. Converts were accepted if they observed Jewish life, and asked to join, but active convert-seeking was largely unknown. Judaism remained mostly an inherited faith. Conversely, Christians burst out of the Pentecost room and spread rapidly throughout the known world, even during times of intense persecution by the Romans.

Missionaries ventured out to their non-Christian neighbors around the world that they sought to convert. Ironically, the Catholic Church “saved” the OT from marginalization by joining it to the NT and then taking it around the world, thereby introducing the ancient Jewish faith to people who had never heard of it before.

No other ancient religion actively sought converts as the Christians did, or even remotely for the same purpose, or to the extent other religions ever did even on a small scale. Other ancient religions rarely made moral demands on behavior. If you offered incense to the gods you could expect to curry their favor just as you might with any number of important patrons in your village. Religion made no difference in daily life beyond these “commercial” or “payoff” rituals. Moreover, ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks or Romans did not care if you followed their religion unless they felt it was advantageous to their empire. If your conversion was good for the State, *they would not think twice to use force and violence to get it*. Conversions, if ever sought, were to help serve the security interests of the State, e.g. to make Macedonia, Athens, or Rome stronger and more unified.

Christians had no empire to strengthen at all. They burst out of their hiding place on Pentecost to convert the world to Christianity because they sincerely believed that Christianity was something good ..for you. They believed that the way of Christ would

make your life happier, healthier, and holier, both in this life and the one to come. They correctly interpreted “holiness” as love of God, neighbor, and self. Since they profoundly believed in the freedom of each person to make up his or her own mind, they could never countenance using force or fear in accepting a faith based on Faith, Hope, and Love. *Violence and Christian faith could never co-exist in the same person.*

However, the Jewish and the new Jewish-Christian communities gradually grew apart. At that time, the Christian ideal of love, even for enemies, led to a more non-violent stance toward Rome than other Jews. Eventually, violent Jewish insurgency led to a ferocious Roman invasion in 66 A.D. Over a million Jews died and the Temple was destroyed. Around 90 A.D., Jewish leaders determined that the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the Massoretic Text, would be the standard Jewish scriptures and no longer the Septuagint Text, a Greek version from around 250 B.C. which the Jewish world had used and were the scriptures of Jesus. Christians became separate from Judaism as they remain today, in religious practice and in interpretation of the OT.

How do Catholics read the OT and the NT?

The first name that the first followers of Christ used for themselves was simply, “Jews.” Later they used, “People of the Way” and still later, “Christians.” But first they were simply Jews continuing the authentic interpretation of Judaism that they received from the person of Jesus. They revered the OT because of the many passages they felt pointed to Jesus and His mission of salvation. Since they believed the whole OT pointed to Jesus, they read EVERY verse from a Christian viewpoint. We do the same today. We read the OT “through” the NT. But from where does the NT arise?

The Church existed for several decades before any NT text was written and several centuries before the NT was finally assembled, around the years 370-390 A.D. Only some of that tradition about Jesus was written down, and only some of that written tradition was later assembled into the NT. But since it was Church communities that guided the writing and editing of the NT texts, and Bishops who determined the authentic list of books (the Canon) to go into the Bible, we believe the Church remains as the authoritative interpreter of scripture, as Jesus designed. While some passages may be symbolic, others are more concrete and reference real events. It is a good thing that Jesus founded the Church that is guided by the Holy Spirit to interpret the scriptures authoritatively, determining which stories are symbolic and which are historical, and *what both mean for our salvation*. There were literally hundreds of other texts circulating around the Mediterranean world at that time claiming to be authoritative, but the determination of which books were authentic and would go into the bible came from the Bishops of the Catholic Church in a series of Councils late in the 4th century. (The other Gospels, mostly of Gnostic origin, made it into “The DaVinci Code!”) This is why the Church has the authority to interpret the scriptures. The NT came from the Church and the Church came from Our Lord.

Therefore, the sequence for interpreting any verse in the bible is;

1. *Start with our faith as received from the Lord and handed on to the Church.*
2. *That authentic faith then helps us read and understand the NT text.*
3. *The NT text then helps us interpret and understand the OT text.*

Old Testament texts are not read in isolation but always in the larger context of our faith, from which the NT itself arose.

113 *2. Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church."*

The NT text is read remembering that it has roots in the OT and the OT is read remembering to look forward to the NT. The early Church did not have a formal opinion whether the OT authors knew that their OT stories were actually pointing to Jesus, but they believed that God did, and that He was using these OT events to continue His ultimate plan for our salvation.

129 *Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself. Besides, the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament. As an old saying put it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.*

Catholic teaching is that God is love

We must read the OT as if Jesus and the Catholic Church are standing at our side. The God of unconditional love that Jesus reveals in the NT is not different in any way from the God of the OT. The unconditional love of God in the OT is just more difficult to see because it is enveloped in a very slowly unfolding narrative and ancient writing style. We cannot acknowledge the God of love in the NT and a God of violence in the OT at the same time, nor base OT violence on a sense of "justice" where God "gets even." It is our Catholic tradition that God does not kill anyone or "send" punishment to people. The consequences of sin are of our own doing. No need for God to "send" them. We shoot ourselves in the foot by our own actions, as the biblical editor of the OT by the streams of Babylon affirmed. God is love, (1 Jn. 4) and we should keep that in mind as we read His Word.

***111** But since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another and no less important principle of correct interpretation, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written."*

***112** Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture." Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover.*

The OT authors portray a slowly unfolding understanding of that God in which it takes them some time to come to the same conclusion about God as we plainly see in the NT. Just because a biblical author places violent words in the mouth of God or has God directing some violent action does not mean that we believe God actually said these words as if they were direct quotations or did those violent things. These types of "quotations" would represent that immature, cultural, and slowly unfolding understanding of God that was referenced earlier. They lead, in a slowly unfolding and ancient writing style to the revelation of God that is just what we need for our salvation.

***107** The inspired books teach the truth. "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures."*

***117** Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.*

1. The allegorical sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism.

2. The moral sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction."

3. The anagogical sense (Greek: anagoge, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Our faith is not a collection of ideas but a relationship to the person of Jesus. We interpret everything through Him. All that Jesus said and did changed the lives of those whose

hearts were open to Him. Nothing would stop Our Lord from living the love of God for us that has been true from the beginning of time. The stories in both the OT and the NT remain one single story of the One God, creator of the universe, who loves us with an unconditional love, and who never stopped revealing that message, in the events and persons of the OT prophets, and in the events and person of Jesus.

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