Divine Provocation: Brutality and Genocide in the Old Testament

Darek Barefoot

"Blessed is the one who has not stumbled over me." Luke 7:23

Introduction

In Scripture God provokes. He confronts us with shocking images and dares us to take offense. He invites us to feel morally and intellectually superior to his purported revelation. How could the Old Testament deity who has been so often described as monstrous be the transcendent mind that gave birth to time and space? Who can put up with such an account of the world's meaning, much less defend it?

Readers eager to reject the idea of the Bible as revelation will make short work of it and move on. Those who linger will notice that the God of Scripture tantalizes even as he provokes. He who wraps himself in darkness promises that within the obscuring cloud we will find him to be pure light without the faintest shadow (Ps 97:2; 1 Jn 1:5). The same God who frequently erupts with anger claims to be patient and merciful. The divine law that seems at so many turns callous, demanding the death penalty for a tediously long list of infractions, commands that a man show kindness to his personal enemy and have empathy for the foreigner, the widow, and those who live on the margins of society (Exod 23:4; Deut 24:17-22). From the gray fabric of the law Jesus will draw out these threads of color and make of them his radical teaching of peace (Matt 5:44-48). The clash of kindness and condemnation can make us pause—or deepen our grievance.

Provocation is one of the themes of the exodus narrative, in which God and his people test and provoke one another. The New Testament book of James, in saying that God tests no one, appears to run counter to this sacred history (Jas 1:13). A closer look at James reveals that the testing under discussion there has the object of inducing someone to sin. The Pentateuch says that God tests his people not to cause them to sin but to dissuade them from it, to do them good (Deut 8:16). God's testing of the people draws them back from destruction, while their testing of him moves them toward it. How it is that the provocative God tests no one is less puzzling than it first appears, but larger riddles remain.

No provocation is more obvious than the early Old Testament accounts of genocidal holy warfare against the inhabitants of Canaan, including multiple massacres either at God's command or carried out as a devotion to him. Wholesale killing in honor of a tribal or national deity is also a stock feature of ancient near eastern culture, sickeningly familiar from sources such as the Mesha Stele.

I will argue in what follows that the record of divine commands to exterminate populations, showing no mercy to non-combatants including women and children, ought to be read by Christians as inspired provocation. Mass killing as an act of religious devotion is intended to disturb and test the reader, who can only interpret it correctly by drawing on spiritual resources, not

merely the tools of historical and literary analysis. It seems that nothing but the image of genocide portrayed as actual history is sufficient to shake the reader into awareness of the gravity of the sins the accounts condemn.

My goal is not to paint the God of the Bible as a doting, grandfatherly figure who would under no circumstances bring terror and destruction upon human beings. It is undeniable that the Orchestrator of nature and human history has seen fit not only to allow misery and death but to channel them to ends that he proclaims are good. God's sovereignty acknowledged, commanding people to carry out massacres of non-combatants as as a holy act falls into a different category than divine superintendence of calamities. Imagine a sermon entitled, "Would You Have Chopped to Death Little Boys and Girls to Prove Your Devotion to God?" Until pastors are willing to make such a sermon a regular part of Christian worship, warnings that we imperil the integrity of the Bible by seeking an interpretive solution are hollow, particularly when set alongside invitations to recoil in horror at, for example, partial birth abortion.

Neither is my goal to escape from biblical moral limits that don't appeal to modern sensibilities. There were first century Jews whose literal reading of the biblical prophecy led them to expect that Elijah of old, who disappeared into the sky, would reappear dramatically before the coming of the Messiah (2 Kgs 2:11; Mal 4:5; Mk 15:36). By interpreting prophecy other than literally Jesus did not undermine the challenging message given through the new "Elijah" (John the Baptist, Luke 1:17), instead he affirmed that message (Mal 4:6; Mk 9:12-13).

For Christians the answers to the most profound moral questions the Bible raises, to the extent they can be discovered, will be found in Jesus (Col 1:2-3). To understand the provocation posed by divinely commanded massacres we must consider the way Jesus communicates and the light he casts backward on all that led up to him. First, however, we will look at some peculiarities in the Old Testament text itself.

Preliminary Observations

Is there evidence in the early Israelite histories of a recognizable moral terrain lying beneath the horrific surface?

Turning to the book of Joshua, where war takes center stage, curiously absent from its accounts of wholesale killing is the graphic detail that is provided, for example, in the account of the execution of the five kings who conspired to attack Israel's allies, the Gibeonites (10:22-27). In all of the Hexateuch (Genesis through Joshua), in fact, there is only one colorful narration of the killing of a woman, and in that case the woman was slain along with the Israelite man whom she had brazenly lured into fornication associated with idolatry (Num 25:1-8). Women and children are always described as being killed along with the men, inclusively, with one exception. The provocation reaches its limit in Numbers 31:1-24 with the order to slaughter all Midianite women and children prisoners other than virgin females. Significantly, the brutal command is put on the lips of Moses rather than Yahweh and its execution is implied but not narrated (more about this story below).[1]

The effect of this lack of detail is that the populations who are condemned to death in these

1 Notably, Yahweh expresses his anger with the Israelites over their joining in Midianite idolatry and fornication by ordering the execution of all the leaders of Israel (Num 25:4). Moses softens the command by saying that guilty men should be slain (v. 5). In the event only the most flagrant violator among the Israelite men seems to have been executed (v. 14). Likewise, although condemnation of Midianite sexual license is eventually expressed as an order by Moses to slay Midianite women (Num 31:1-3, 17), the death of only a single Midianite woman is actually described (25:8, 15).

histories come across as cardboard figures or placeholders rather than real human beings who might fear, plead for their lives, bleed, and suffer.

The failure of the Old Testament to portray slain populations with anything approaching realistic detail is the more riveting in light of details that are included when the killing of individuals occurs. When King Saul is ordered to wipe out the Amalekites to the last man, woman, and child, he disobeys by sparing not women and children but the Amalekite king, Agag. The prophet Samuel later kills Agag, declaring the execution to be vengeance for the children Agag himself has killed (1 Sam 15:33). Considering that the Amalekites had long been condemned to extermination it is strange that Samuel justifies his act from Agag's personal bloodguilt (Exod 17:13-16; Deut 25:17-19; 1 Sam 15:3). Why is Agag's ethnicity not justification enough for his death?

Some years after the Agag incident, Saul's successor, David, orders the killing of a young Amalekite man. In order to ingratiate himself with David the young man claimed to have killed King Saul as he lay dying on the field of battle. David justifies the killing from the Amalekite's self-admitted guilt. "Your blood is on your own head," David tells him (2 Sam 1:16). David treats the Amalekite no differently than he does the two Israelites who later murder Saul's son Ishbosheth (2 Sam 4:1-12). Again, why would there be any question of responsibility for an Amalekite's blood if Amalekites were under a blanket condemnation?

The apparent need to justify the killing of individuals from condemned nations recurs often enough to form a pattern (cf. Judges 1:5-7; 8:18-21). The pattern exists in tension with the seeming duty to slaughter people from those nations indiscriminately. The tension is heightened by the right to life and property attributed to Uriah the Hittite and Araunah the Jebusite (2 Sam 12:9; 24:18-24). The Hittites and Jebusites were condemned peoples whose lives and land were forfeit (Deut 20:17). Uriah worshiped Yahweh and probably Araunah did, but if they had assimilated to Israel why were their ethnic identities retained? It is hard to believe these two were lone exceptions. The survival of the forebears of Uriah and Araunah had reinforced rather than diminished devotion to the God of Israel.

The inhabitants of the town of Shechem are called Hivites and Amorites, both of which are listed among condemned peoples (Gen 34:2; 48:22; cf. Deut. 20:17). The area of Shechem is shown as having come fully under the control of Joshua (Josh 8:30-35; 24:1). Nevertheless, Shechem was not on the list of Hivite cities that had made peace with Israel (Josh 9:17). Native people of Canaan were still living in Shechem years after the time of Joshua (Judges 9:1-3). This might imply that Joshua was negligent in failing to exterminate the inhabitants of the area, except that he is commended for carrying out Yahweh's battle orders faultlessly (Josh 11:15). How despite Joshua's zeal did so many of Shechem's Canaanites survive?

In the area of Makkedah west of Hebron, where Joshua administered a crushing defeat to an alliance of Canaanite chieftains, enough local people remained so that it could be said that none them afterward raised their voices against the people of Israel (Josh 10:21).

Equally mysterious is the wording of Deuteronomy 7:1-5, one of the commands to annihilate the Canaanites. After listing the condemned peoples in verse 1 and ordering their utter destruction in verse 2, verses 3 and 4 warn against the corrupting effects of covenant-making and intermarriage with them. Verse 5 concludes, "But this is what you shall do to them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire." Here we expect what is not explicitly stated in verse 2, that neither man nor woman, old nor young is to be spared. Instead, what is to be done to "them" is that the accessories of Canaanite worship are to be destroyed. The same idea occurs in Exod 30:12-13, Num

33:51-51, and Judg 2:2. It is odd to summarize the essence of total war on enemy people as destruction of inanimate objects. Is it possible that the real target of Yahweh's fury, the decadent side of Canaanite culture, is being personified in the historical narratives as Canaanite people?

One school of opinion has long held that Deuteronomy was written as propaganda to justify the centralizing reforms of King Josiah of Judah. Whatever might be said for or against the theory, Josiah did not strictly follow Deuteronomy's commands concerning Israelite towns that adopted worship of foreign gods. According to Deuteronomy 13:12-17 every inhabitant of the apostate village was to be killed along with its livestock, and all the material goods were to be placed under sacred ban and the town burned as was the Canaanite city of Jericho (Josh 6:21-24) and turned into a heap of rubble as was Canaanite Ai (Josh 8:28).

Josiah is credited with no massacres of wayward villages even in chronically apostate northern Israel, the command of Deuteronomy notwithstanding (2 Kgs 23). He is said to have killed a number of idolatrous priests who, it could be argued, would have been carrying out child sacrifice among other acts of Canaanite-style worship. The larger part of the narrative of Josiah's reforms concerns his destruction of altars, shrines, asherim (tokens of goddess worship) and similar objects associated with idolatry. Despite his failure to carry out massacres the account of 2 Kings praises Josiah for serving the God of Israel "with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses" (2 Kgs 23:25).

In curiously symmetrical contrast to Josiah, Joshua is credited with massacres but not with destruction of altars and shrines to Canaanite deities. Accessories of worship must have existed not merely in villages but across the countryside at the time of the entry. In the entire narrative of the book of Joshua there is no mention of the destruction of idolatrous infrastructure as commanded in Deuteronomy. If Joshua carried out such demolition, as presumably he must have, was that fact not worth mentioning? The thought cannot but arise that the destruction of shrines might be represented in the narrative indirectly—even provocatively—by the killing of populations.

An equivocation also exists between the expulsion of the Canaanites and their extermination. References to either God or Israel driving out the natives of Canaan are frequent in the Old Testament (Exod 23:28-31; Josh 24:12; etc.). To be expelled (Heb, *garash*) as Adam and Eve are said to be from the garden in Genesis is a harsh sentence, but only one verse—and in a poetic passage at that—directly links expulsion of the Canaanites with their destruction (Deut 33:27). The claim near the end of Joshua that Yahweh had indeed driven out enemy peoples might imply that a combination of massacres and mass flight depopulated the areas where Israel was victorious (Josh 24:18). Among the conquests and attendant massacres earlier in the book, however, there is no record of migrations of native populations other than retreats from the battlefield into fortified cities. The ambiguity carries over into the New Testament insofar as parallel summaries of Israelite history in Acts refer, respectively, to God having driven out the Canaanite peoples and to his having destroyed them (Acts 7:45; 13:19).

The Strange Tale of Gibeah

The book of Judges concludes with a curious episode involving only Israelites, in which elements of the most provocative narratives of the Hexateuch recur. The Benjamites of Gibeah rape and murder the concubine of a Levite traveler, reenacting the sin of the Canaanite city of Sodom (Judg 19; cf. Gen 19:1-29). In response the other tribes gather a great army against Benjamin but are routed as was Israel itself in its original assault on the Canaanite town of Ai (Judg 20:19-26; cf. Josh 7:4-6). The Benjamites are subsequently lured into ambush and defeated as in Israel's second assault on Ai (Judg 20:28-44; cf. Josh 8:1-25). Aside from a few hundred men who es-

cape, all the people of Gibeah are massacred. The city is burned and even domestic animals are killed, as in Israel's destruction of Jericho (Judg 20:48; cf. Josh 6:24).

Those who go into battle take a vow that any Israelites who decline to side with them against Benjamin should be killed, and another vow not to give any of their daughters to the Benjamites as wives (Judg 21:5-7). This second vow echoes Law's prohibition against intermarriage with Canaanites (cf. Deut 7:3).[2] In the wake of the razing of Gibeah the Israelites are struck with regret over the near-extinction of one of the covenant tribes. To prevent the disappearance of Benjamin the people resolve to provide wives for the surviving Benjamite men.

The story reads as a dark satire even before we reach the point where the victorious Israelites, grieving over the blow they themselves have struck at the tribe of Benjamin, notice that the town of Jabesh-gilead failed to send fighters to join them. The Israelites of Jabesh-gilead are attacked and only virgin females are spared, just as in the disturbing incident of the Midianite prisoners in Numbers. All the other residents of the town are slain without regard to age or sex. In this way wives are supplied to most of the surviving Benjamite men (Judg 21:1-14).

We need not doubt that behind the Gibeah tale is a real incident in which a murder provoked tribal conflict, but has the bloodshed been amplified to make a point? The rape and murder that prompts the carnage is not of a Helen-of-Troy character. The victim, a secondary wife, not only occupied a low rung on the social ladder but was guilty of adultery and stood condemned to death under the Law of Moses (Judg 19:2; Lev 20:10). When the husband of the woman sends parts of her corpse to tribal leaders to shock them into action they exclaim that such a callous murder is unheard of in Israel, a statement that appears absurd in light of the butchery that follows (Judg 19:29-30).

The lesson of the bloody story of Judges 19-21, paradoxically, is the preciousness of blood. Even the murder of a lowly, compromised woman (in a patriarchal culture) must not be tolerated. The callous taking of one life endangers lives across the nation, even the nation itself. It cannot but be intentional that the wholesale killing in the story contrasts jarringly with its concern for the the value of a single human life. The writer has sharpened the narrative by importing brutal images from Israel's earlier history, suggesting that the earlier accounts themselves are likewise provocative exaggerations.

A Clue from a Related Question

To continue in the direction in which these hints are pointing it is necessary first to detour through another area of difficulty in biblical studies, what is commonly called the problem of large Old Testament numbers. The implausibility of the numbers given for the population of Israel during the exodus, as well as the census tallies and numbers of battle casualties in Old Testament histories is a long-standing puzzle for which in-depth material from various perspectives is easy to locate. It will be enough to sketch the problem here in order to see how it relates to divinely sanctioned massacres in Scripture.

The number of able-bodied Israelite men coming out of Egypt is given in the Bible as just over six hundred thousand, indicating a total population of at least two million (Exod 12:37; Num 2:32). Even so, the camp of Israel was capable of traveling the narrow roads leading north from the desert into southern Canaan without overrunning adjacent land (Num 21:22; cf. 22:24-27). With five people walking abreast and a mere ten feet between ranks, the camp of Israel would stretch 750 miles—approximately the distance from northern Egypt to the territory of Edom.

2 It was unnecessary to prohibit taking Benjamite women as wives since Benjamite females allegedly were slain.

Traveling at a speed of three miles per hour for eight hours each day (an unrealistically rapid rate; cf. Gen 33:12-13), the column would take a month to pass any spot. Large as those figures are, they are impossibly low, for they fail to allow for the crowd of non-Israelites and "very large" flocks and herds which the Israelites took with them (Exod 12:38). There is no making sense of statements that an assembly of that size moved from one encampment to the next along the Sinai peninsula, much less that they were supplied with water flowing out of a rock at a particular location and time (Exod 15:22-23, 27; 17:6).

Anyone willing to do simple math with the biblical numbers applied to geography and other physical limits will quickly be confounded. Envision, for example, the logistics of an army of more than a half-million men marching seven times in a single day around any plot of ground large or small (Josh 6:3-4). In mechanized war in several theaters of combat around the globe, fielding more than ten million military personnel, the United States suffered approximately 425,000 killed during two-and-a half years of World War II; 2 Chron 13:17 tells us that from a population subsisting on rain-dependent iron age agriculture in one small part of the ancient Near East, Judahite men using primitive weapons killed a half-million Israelite men in a single battle. 1 Kgs 20:30 says that the wall of a minor town fell killing 27,000, ten times as many people as died in the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 2001. To argue that such numbers even might be historical is to abandon anything resembling rational discussion of the Bible.

One strategy for dealing with the problem of large Old Testament numbers is to speculate about mistranslation, erroneous transcription, or misconstrued notation having systematically inflated the population figures in the original text. Such an approach ignores a pattern of unrealistic values for quantities having nothing to do with population. Examples include Absalom's handsomeness as attested by his growing 200 shekels' weight of hair per year (=2.3 kg=5 lbs., 2 Sam 14:26), David wearing a crown weighing a talent (=3,000 shekels=34.2 kg=75 lbs., 2 Sam 12:30), and each Israelite on a single occasion gathering a minimum of ten homers of quail meat (=2,220 liters by volume=2 metric tons by weight, Num 11:32).

Examples of unrealistic values could be multiplied, but among the most instructive is the statement in 1 Kgs 10:27 that Solomon made silver "as plentiful as stones in the streets of Jerusalem." If rational judgment prevents believers, regardless of how conservative, from arguing that Jerusalem's streets were literally paved with silver in the days of Solomon, neither does it demand that inspiration be abandoned or that the text be severed from history. Beyond conveying at the historical level that Solomon's reign was one of unprecedented prosperity, in the context of the Old Testament as a whole the passages about Solomon's splendor prophetically anticipate universal regeneration under the reign of a future son of David, the Messiah (Ps 72).

We read that at the dedication of the first temple Solomon and the people sacrificed so many animals as peace offerings that the bronze altar of the temple could not accommodate them all (1 Kgs 8:62-65). By law sacrifices had to be made at the sanctuary, so an additional plot in front of the temple was dedicated (cf. Deut 12:5-11). The actual numbers given are 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep during just the two weeks of the dedication, which would require the slaughter of more than four hundred animals per hour, day and night, for the entire period (1 Kgs 8:62-66). That would equal the output of the one of the largest fully mechanized slaughterhouses in the world running around the clock, supplied by truck or rail transport.

To say that it is difficult to envision how the numbers given for Solomon's sacrifice could be accomplished with hand labor and primitive tools on a plot of open ground without industrial infrastructure, putting aside the question of how so many animals were raised and transported by

the limited population of Israel in the tenth century BCE, is to understate the case with a vengeance. Whatever the actual number of animals, it was through inspiration deemed inadequate to the meaning of the occasion. A sea of sacrifices so vast that that they tax the imagination is enlisted to convey the immensity of what the temple represented: God taking up permanent residence among his people.

Returning to the exodus, several passages indicate a literal number for Israel somewhere in the range of five to ten thousand. Two midwives were sufficient to assist with childbirths for all the people, and the assembly could be summoned by means of two trumpets (Exod 1:15; Num 10:1-4). The nation could ford the Jordan River at a specific location (opposite Jericho) within a few hours, animals and all, while the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stood in the shallows of the river (Josh 3:1-17). Populations were relatively low at this period. The archaeologist Kenneth Kitchen, in a book defending the historicity of the Old Testament, gives an estimate of less than 100,000 people in all of Canaan at the time of the entry.[3]

While a reasonable figure for the Israelite population during the exodus appears modest now, at the time several thousand nomads along with their animals would have constituted an imposing, even threatening, crowd. The mental image generated by the Bible of a multitude many times as vast conveys spiritual weight. The literal number would mislead about the greatness of what God was doing in forming a people for himself.

What can be said of certain historical episodes such as the exodus and dedication of the temple can in principle be extended to the rest of the Old Testament. The punctuation of Old Testament narratives with unrealistically large numbers is appropriate to the outsized spiritual dimensions of Israel's history. David M. Fouts, notably, has discusssed large Old Testament numbers as inspired hyperbole.[4]

The Language of Divine Revelation

The story-telling conventions, idioms, and stock images of ancient Near Eastern culture are pressed into service in the Hebrew writings, uniquely, as vehicles of inspired truth. Further examples help to demonstrate. The Mosaic tabernacle had precedents in royal and cultic tents and pavilions from Egypt to Mari to Phoenicia.[5] Solomon's temple plan reflects earlier non-Israelite temples such as that at Ain Dara, Syria.[6] Among the features the House of Yahweh shared with other near eastern temples was an inner sanctum where the image of the god might be housed (the ark of the covenant in the case of Israel). The combination of man, bull, lion, and eagle occurs in artifacts from ancient Cyprus and Syria that date to many centuries before tetramorphic cherubs appear in the first chapter of Ezekiel.[7] Yahweh's giving of his law through Moses satisfied the aspiration represented by the earlier image of Shamash (or Marduk) giving his law through the Babylonian king Hammurabi, famously depicted on the Stele of Hammurabi.[8] The

3 Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003): 277-79.

4 David M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 377-87.

5 Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reiability of the Old Testament*, 265.

6 John M. Monson, "Contextual Criticism as a Framework for Biblical Interpretation" in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention*, ed. Daniel I. Block (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2008): 45-46.

7 See Elie Borowski, "Cherubim: God's Throne?," *Biblical Archeology Review* 21, No. 4 (1995): 39; John H. Rogers, *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 108; No. 1 (Feb, 1998): 24.

8 The relief of the enthroned god giving the law to his servant the king is at the top of the stele, which is a seven-and-a-half-foot black stone pillar carved in the shape of an index finger (cf. Exod 31:18). Underneath the image are engraved 282 laws including the precept "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" (cf. Exod 21:24).

list of cultural tropes, which could be extended, includes inflated numbers and sacred massacres of enemy peoples.

Strategic recasting of cultural idioms continues into the New Testament. As we will see in greater detail below, hyperbole typical of Hebrew literature is evident in the way Jesus teaches.

In the New Testament we encounter recycling of yet other material from extra-biblical sources. For example, stock Greek philosophical concepts are taken over, shifted, and reconstituted. Platonic dualism was known in the Greco-Roman world from popular metaphors such as the Chariot Allegory in *Phaedrus*, in which Plato portrayed the human soul as a the driver of a chariot pulled in different directions by two horses. The horse striving upward toward divine rationality in Plato runs generally parallel to the influence of the Holy Spirit of God in the writings of Paul (e.g. Rom 8:3-14; cf. John 6:63). The chariot horse pulling downward is a base nature resembling what Paul refers to as "the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other," writes Paul (Gal 5:17).

Another Platonic staple, the Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic*, portrays visible objects as mere shadows compared with substantial realities, which are the eternal forms (ideas) seen only by the mind's eye. Similarly, the New Testament refers to the institutions of the Mosaic Law as being a shadow of the spiritual reality found in Christ.[9] Paul even takes over the evocative Greek term *atomos*, atom, as applied to time in describing the instaneousness of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:52). Greek philosophy is not being adopted in these cases, rather its terms and concepts are being put to new uses.

"In the law it is written," says Paul, "'With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak to this people, and yet for all that will they not hear me,' says the Lord" (1 Cor 14:21). By seeing Isaiah 48:11 as a prophecy of charistmatic utterance in the first century church Paul caused the verse itself to speak with a meaning foreign to its original, which concerned Mesopotamian armies invading Israel. Such fluidity of interpretation is a reminder that God indeed speaks in "many portions and many ways" in the Scriptures (Heb 1:1). The human language through which God communicates includes idioms, conventions, and popular images that serve as as vessels into which new meanings can be poured. We need not be experts in ancient culture to understand the Bible, but when certain portions of Scripture clash with others we should ask whether we are interpreting correctly the sometimes strange tongues in which God chooses to express himself.

Commands to exterminate idol-worshiping people are best understood as an intensified expression of God's desire that idolatrous practices be expunged from covenant territory, as we already saw is implied by Deuteronomy 7:1-5. To further examine this possibility we now turn to expressions employed in the gospels by Jesus and the four evangelists.

Provocation and Hyperbole in the Words of Jesus

In all four New Testament gospels, Jesus exaggerates and provokes in a way that would jar us were we not habituated to those documents. A typical yield for a grain crop in first-century Palestine was seven to ten times the seed planted,[10] but in the parable of the sower Jesus raises it to the miraculous level of a hundred-fold (Mark 4:20 and pls.; cf. Gen 26:12). This is not bald antirealism as is sometimes claimed. The wonder of farming is indeed the multiplication of what is sown. Jesus does not illustrate from fantasy, he paints the mystery of multiplication in the bold colors warranted by his outsized subject of the divine kingdom. One might even say that the seed

9 Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:4-5; 10:1; cf. 2 Cor 4:18; Heb 12:27-28.

10 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 150.

of mundane agriculture has yielded a super-abundant harvest in Jesus' teaching.

Again and again Jesus cultivates the germ of everyday reality into the heightened image of a parable. The mustard seed, which in reality becomes a weedy bush, in the parable puts out the "great branches" of a tree which birds can nest under (Mark 4:32) or even in (Matt 13:32). The overstated growth links the parable to an Old Testament figure of rulership that extends to the future dominion of the Messiah (Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:12).

To recover a single lost animal a middle eastern shepherd would never leave ninety-nine sheep alone and vulnerable (Matt 18:12; Luke 15:4). The shepherd would ask an assistant (if he had one) or another shepherd to watch his flock if he needed to conduct an extended search. Jesus captures the moment in which the shepherd, counting his flock, discovers a sheep to be missing and can think of nothing but the need to find it. Jesus then expands this moment of concern into a single-minded quest. The exaggeration or simplification bends the example toward the mystery of divine love, in which every lost creature can be the object of God's unalloyed concern.

In saying that his followers can depend on God because he feeds the birds Jesus seems to imply that birds never starve, something that a moment's thought reveals to be untrue (Matt 6:26). We are tempted to turn away from his quaint assurance unless we reflect more deeply. The hallmark of nature is neither suffering nor death, common though they are. Fundamentally the living world is just that, a *living* world, teaming with life from the ocean to the sky (Gen 1:21-24). Jesus reminds his listeners that He whom they must trust would not provide life if his ultimate purpose were not to sustain it.

Jesus provokes not just by stretching the boundaries of everyday events for illustrative purposes but by using language that he knows will be misunderstood. John has the most examples, among which are the sayings about the rebuilding of the temple, spiritual rebirth, and living water (John 2:18-21; 3:3-5; 4:10-14). Matthew and Mark preserve the saying about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod (Mark 8:14-17). Luke has the reply regarding the alleged malice of Herod, in which Jesus says he will be "completed" on the third day (Luke 13:31-32). All the Synoptics have the saying about defilement from what goes out of a man, which offends the Pharisees and confuses the disciples until Jesus explains further (Matt 15:10-20; pls.). The Synoptics also record Jesus' claim that Jairus's daughter has not died (Matt 9:24; pls.).

The last example, Jesus' statement that the young daughter of Jairus is not dead even though her death has been witnessed, is greeted with scorn on the part of onlookers. Jesus makes a similar statement about the dead Lazarus in the fourth gospel (John 11:11-14). Although Jesus' language is figurative in the broadest sense of the term his audience could not be expected to understand it—initially, at least—other than literally. Jesus comments indirectly on his power over death, challenging his listeners in the process.[11]

John's gospel leaves no doubt that on occasions Jesus intended to provoke. In its account of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus asks Philip where food can be found for so many. "This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he had in mind to do" (John 6:6). Jesus forces the disciples to acknowledge that human resources and ingenuity are not up to the task, and to yield the situation into Jesus' hands alone (John 6:7-9).

Jesus' coyness casts a backward light on God's seemingly impatient utterances in the Old Testament. Consider Yahweh's provocative suggestion to Moses that He destroy Israel for their idolatry and make of Moses a great nation instead (Exod 32:10). The expression of divine wrath moves Moses to plead for the people and remind God of his covenant promises to the patriarchs.

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11 The remark concerning Jairus' daughter also preserved a measure of public doubt about the girl's condition, blunting sensational reports about her recovery (Mk 5:43).

By testing Moses God makes him a prophetic type of the Messianic intercessor (Heb 7:25; cf. 3:2). Some other tests in the Old Testament also take the form of divine invitations (1 Kgs 3:5-14; Isa 7:10-16).

A less direct but more common type of provocation used by Jesus is heightened contrast. "This rather than that" can serve as an emphatic idiom for "this more than that." Where Matthew, Luke, and John have some close variant of the saying that "he who receives me receives him who sent me," Mark has the stronger, "whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me" (Mt 10:40; Lk 9:48; Jn 13:20; cf. Mk 9:37). Obviously, Jesus does not mean that the one who receives him does not in fact do so, but that the response to him determines one's relationship to God in all respects. "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me," similarly must mean that Jesus' teaching was not solely his but reflected truth from the Father (John 7:16).

John has the heightened contrast, "No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Jesus in fact continued to call the disciples his servants (Jn 18:36), but the bond of affection between Jesus and his people is a reality more profoundly mysterious even than his authority over them (cf. Jas 2:23). An Old Testament model for this saying is in the account about Jacob wrestling with an angel in human form who tells him, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel" (Gen 32:28). Jacob's birth name would in fact continue to be used, but then name "Israel" would become preeminent.

A familiar example of heightened contrast is Luke's version of the saying about the need to hate family members and even one's own life in order to follow Jesus (Lk 14:26). Matthew's version says the disciple must not love family members more than Jesus (Mt 10:37). In condemning love of money, Jesus says that a person who tries to serve two masters will end up loving one and "hating" (disregarding) the other. Hatred as an idiom for lesser love or devotion is found in the Pentateuch, where the man with two wives is said to "hate" the one whom he loves less (Deut 21:15; cf. Gen 29:31-33).

"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly," writes Paul, meaning not that an ethnic Jew is disqualified from being a member of the covenant people of God, but that ethnicity by itself is not enough (Rom 2:28). "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" was Paul's way of saying that teaching people about salvation through Christ was more important than the ritual of baptism, which Paul had nevertheless performed in the course of his ministry according to the same passage (1 Cor 1:14-17). The admonition, "let us not love in word, neither with the tongue, but in deed and truth" means that deeds are even more important than words in showing love, not that loving words are actually to be avoided (1 Jn 3:18). These and other examples, while subtle, show how ingrained hyperbole was a means of forceful expression in Israelite and Jewish culture.

Historical hyperbole is evident where Matthew states that all of Jerusalem was in an uproar at the words of the Magi to Herod, and in Acts where all disciples other than the apostles are forced to flee from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen (Matt 2:3; Acts 8:1). Mark comments that after Jesus' exorcism of a demonized man in the synagogue at Capernaum, "Immediately the word about him spread abroad throughout all the region around Galilee" (Mk 1:28). The next passage, about events that same day, says that people waited until evening to bring the sick to Jesus, confirming that Sabbath restrictions on burden-bearing and travel were in force (cf. Acts 1:12). Word about Jesus must have spread widely and quickly but cannot have reached beyond Capernaum on the very day of the synagogue exorcism.

Mark is realistic about what happens when Jesus curses a fig tree as a graphic sign of judgment upon unbelieving Israel (Mk 11:12-14; cf. Jer 8:13). In Mark's version it is only on the

following day that the disciples observe that the tree has withered (Mk 11:20-21). Matthew has the tree withering immediately and the disciples remarking on the fact (Mt 21:18-20). Matthew adopts the same type of exaggeration for the fig tree incident that Mark does for the news of the synagogue exorcism.

In Luke the advice to flee when Jerusalem is threatened with destruction (Lk 21:21) is also given concerning the day when the Son of Man is revealed at the end of the age (17:30-32). Luke envisions the present world order continuing for some time after Jerusalem's fall, so the two events though related are not identical for him (Lk 21:24). The consummation of the age in Luke 17:22-37 is universal, therefore flight from one location to another would be futile (vv. 34-35). Because taking the warning in literal terms makes no sense, we must bring interpretive discernment to bear. Not returning to one's house to recover possessions must represent the disciple's attitude of detachment from worldly belongings, the opposite of the enslavement to material wealth represented by the wife of Lot (v. 32). The dramatic image of a person fleeing without recovering so much as a cloak serves as a caution that unless the disciple holds worldly possessions lightly the judgment will expose him or her as as having a divided heart (1 Cor 7:31).

Brutal Hyperboles Used by Jesus

According to John's gospel many disciples express dismay when Jesus says that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53-57), which is not surprising since Jesus intensifies the image of cannibalism with a word, *trogo,* that means not merely to eat but to masticate.[12] Jesus asks those who complain about the saying whether they are stumbled by his words, showing that the provocation is deliberate. Peter and the disciples who remain with Jesus must simply trust him, knowing that the meanings of puzzling sayings will become clearer with time (John 6:60-61; 66-69).

The exclusion of eunuchs from the worshiping community of Israel and the horror with which Israelites viewed castration lies in the background of Jesus' saying about men making themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God (Matt 19:12; cf. Deut 23:1). To those disciples who are capable of it Jesus recommends the celibacy practiced by John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and later Paul of Tarsus (1 Cor 7:32-33; 9:5). Classifying celibate disciples with males who are congenitally malformed or surgically castrated gives the teaching a provocative edge, but it cannot justify literal castration of anyone.

Another of Jesus' admonitions says that if a disciple's hand or foot causes them to sin, cut it off. Better to gouge out an eye and enter into the kingdom half-blind than to be tossed with two eyes into the fire (Matt 5:29-30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-47).

For thousands of years self-mutilation and cannibalism have played a part in the religious rituals of a variety of cultures. Not only does Jesus employ imagery furnished by these offensive practices, he declines to clarify his appropriation of them directly. Only after our initial shock and disturbance over Jesus' language gives way to reflection can we arrive at the interpretation that discernment demands.

Reflecting on Slaughter of Non-combatants as Provocative Teaching

As we have just seen, Jesus *actually commands* cannibalism and self-mutilation. There is no mistaking the literal meaning of his words. It is the direction of his teaching in the context of the Scriptures as a whole that prevents us from stopping at the literal meaning and instead moves us

12 The same word has the connotation of eating with gusto in Matt 24:38.

past it toward a figurative or spiritual understanding. Likewise, the Old Testament *actually says* that massacres of women and children were carried out by the Israelites at God's command. The direction of the teaching in the Scriptures as a whole, including Law's prohibition on putting children to death for the sins of parents, leads us to a meaning beyond the provocation on the surface (Deut 24:16).

The Bible does not disclose what warfare between Canaanites and Israelites looked like up close. The image of total war expresses God's abhorence of the idolatry, child sacrifice, divination, sacred prostitution and other sexual rituals associated with native worship in Canaan, and the need to demolish entirely the infrastructure of such worship. No living, breathing culture devoted to such practices could be tolerated. From the biblical evidence some Canaanites actively joined themselves to Israel, represented by everyone who "belonged" to Rahab whether literally or figuratively (Josh 6:17, 23). Others, including the Kenites and Gibeonites, retained their ethnicity but became Israelite allies.

Some Canaanites undoubtedly were killed offering resistance to Israel, some fled, and some remained in the land but ceased to exist—for a time at least—as members of a community devoted to worship of local gods. We have precedent for a such an ambiguous population in the large, mixed company of Egyptians and non-Israelite peasants who accompanied the Israelites at their departure from Egypt (Exod 12:38). These are excluded from the census figures yet their continued presence is clear from other texts (Num 11:4; Lev 24:10; Deut 29:11). These non-Israelites, who are specifically said to be both numerous and prone to chafe at the Lord's provisions, cease to be mentioned after Deuteronomy and quietly merge into Israel itself.

The Bible claims that in some in some locations Israelites triumphed over Canaanite resistance and supplanted the local culture. The books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua describe these victories with the hyperbole of extermination. According to the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings, Canaanites who continued to practice condemned forms of worship were a corrupting influence (e.g. Judg 3:5-7). At the same time, there were ethnic Canaanites, such as Uriah, whose devotion to Yahweh put many Israelites to shame (2 Sam 11:11).

Turning to the story of Saul and Agag, the term Amalekites is an ethnic category that also connotes banditry (cf. 1 Sam 30:1; 1 Chron 12:21). Samuel's accusation that Agag had left mothers bereft of children suggests that Agag had conducted bloody raids on Israelite villages. Saul was expected to counterattack forcefully enough to put an end to the threat once and for all. The narrative implies that Agag survived the Israelite attack by bribing Saul with a large number of livestock, which led to God's rebuke of Saul through Samuel.

The man appointed to replace Saul was David of Bethlehem. Indiscriminate slaughter, even of Israel's enemies, is irreconcilable with David's concern to show cause for the killing of an individual Amalekite, which I noted above. Yet, David allegedly massacred Amalekite men and women so that his looting of them would not become known to his temporary allies, the Philistines of Gath (1 Sam 27:9-12). If these massacres are hyperbole, what is its purpose? Because "Amalekites" seems in practice to designate nomadic marauders of the Negev, 1 Sam shows that although David and his men survived in part by conducting raids they only preyed upon those who were themselves attacking the villages of Judea. Unlike Saul, David attacked the marauding bands aggressively enough to leave them no safe haven in southern Judea and Philistia. David thereby proved himself not only competent as a defender of Israelite territory but shrewd enough to maintain alliances with outsiders when necessary.

I noted above that Jesus draws embellished pictures of ordinary situations to give his parables rhetorical power. The same can be said of the earliest stories of Israel. Scholars are prone to refer

to this material as *idealized* history but *stylized* is probably a better word. Far from an ideal of the past, stories of genocidal war comprise a tableau accented with horror but nevertheless conveying an message God bids us to decipher.

To say that sanctioned massacres ought to be understood as a provocative condemnation of decadent culture rather than literal genocide is only to make explicit the way many pastors treat these accounts in practice. It is precisely God's intolerance of a sinful practices that sermons about Israel's early wars usually emphasize. There are evangelicals who will reject the premise I present in this essay out of fear of being found soft on the issue of biblical authority but who will continue to downplay or sidestep brutality and genocide in the Old Testament.

Will those who claim that the integrity of the Bible depends on the literal killing of non-combatants, including defenseless women, children, the aged, etc., frankly portray and commend such killing? Will pastors invite us to imagine tearing a toddler from the arm of its hysterical mother and and splitting its little head or hacking at its tiny limbs and trunk as it screams in agony? Will they acknowledge the horror of skewering the belly of a pregnant woman with a bronze-tipped spear and then admit to their parishioners, "How difficult it must have been to commit such acts! And yet the faithful saints of old performed them over and over again because they were men after God's own heart. Would you have done the same, ignoring the shrieks of pain and pleas for mercy as the blood flowed?" Few of those who insist on literal interpretation of mass killing will embrace it so honestly in the pulpit, and even fewer will listen to those who do.

The Prophetic Meaning of Violent Conquest

If Israel's conquest of Canaan has a prophetic meaning it will further justify interpreting mass killing as provocative hyperbole, just as statements about Solomon's fabulous wealth and worldwide reputation make more sense when their prophetic function is understood.

The book of Acts, the Bible's only straightforward account of the first-century church, evokes both the wilderness wandering narrated in Exodus through Deuteronomy and the entry into Canaan described in the book of Joshua. Among the extensive evidence is the episode of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. Claiming to donate to the church the full price they received for some land they had sold, the couple secretly hold back part of the money for themselves. After Peter reveals their guilt the two are miraculously stricken dead in the meeting place and their bodies are carried out by young men of the assembly (Acts 5:1-10).

The story of Ananias and Sapphira echoes two incidents from the period after Israel's departure from Egypt. In the first, which occurs near the beginning of the wilderness sojourn, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offer "strange fire," perhaps presenting incense while drunk. The pair are killed by miraculous fire, after which their bodies are carried out by their cousins (Lev 10:1-5). In the second instance, just after the entry into Canaan the man Achan secretly steals plunder devoted to Yahweh. Achan's guilt is revealed by the national leader, Joshua, after which Achan along with his wife and children are put to death by stoning (Josh 7).

Oddly, the one New Testament passage in which God puts people to death in Old Testament fashion is where we find his mercy confirmed. First, however, the case of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that God refuses to play the part of a harmless benefactor endlessly begging humans to accept his offer of grace; it is precisely in the matter of willful, unrepented sin that God refuses to be mocked (Gal 6:7; Heb 10:26-27).

If there is a disturbing element in the account of Nadab and Abihu, it is that Leviticus is unclear about whether their disrespect was willful. The calculated nature of Achan's theft is less ar-

guable but the perfunctory execution of Achan's wife and children, as if their guilt consists in their belonging to Achan, is shocking and repellent. The Law of Moses explicitly says that children ought not to be killed for the sins of their parents (Deut 24:16). The narrative in Acts validates the qualms we feel about its Old Testament precedents. First, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is premeditated and entails not merely a lie but theft of money that by their own pledge has been devoted to God. Just as importantly, the guilt of the wife, Sapphira, is noted at the beginning of the story (Acts 5:2) and confirmed when she lies in response to Peter's question to her in her husband's absence (Acts 5:8). We are left with the impression that the couple has no dependent children, but in any case no children die because of their sin.

Although we lack the means to uncover the historical details that lie behind the Old Testament stories of wholesale killing, we have in the Acts parallel an added reason for understanding them as provocative hyperbole. The God of Israel's early history is the same God who inspired the story of Ananias and Sapphira, in which judgment falls on individuals in response to their own evil actions rather than because of their family or ethnicity.[13]

Before leaving the subject of New Testament history as fulfillment of Old Testament conquest, we should compare the instructions for warfare against distant nations in Deuteronomy 20:10-15 with commands concerning evangelism given to the early Christian disciples. It is strange that the law contemplates Israel's expansion by military conquest to lands beyond the borders assigned by Yahweh himself, even if Israel did fight to repulse bordering nations such Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Philistia. The prophetic aspect of the passage is best seen by setting it alongside mission instructions in Matthew and Luke:

> "When you come near a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it. And it shall be, if it gives you a peaceable answer and opens to you, then all the people found in it shall become your laborers and serve you. And if it will not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the LORD your God has delivered it into your hands you shall strike every male in it with the edge of the sword. But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city . . . you shall take for yourself . . . . Deut 20:10-14
>
> And whatever city or town you may enter, inquire who in it is worthy and stay there until you leave. And when you enter a house, greet it. And if the house is worthy let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy let your peace return to you. Matt 10:11-13
>
> And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, "Peace to this house." And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again. Luke 10:5-6
>
> Go therefore, and make disciples [i.e., servants of Jesus Christ] of all nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you. Matt 28:19-20
>
> And whoever does not receive you, nor hear your words, when you leave that house or city shake the dust off your feet. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha on the day of judgment than for that city. Matt 10:11-15

In evangelism, as in the warfare of Deuteronomy 20, the response to an appeal for peaceful submission could be met with acceptance or rejection. According to Deuteronomy those who accepted terms of peace would serve Israel, just as in the New Testament the Gentiles become servant-disciples who submit obediently to the authority of the apostolic representatives of the Lord (Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6). Those who reject the word of peace put themselves under sentence of

13 For further parallels between early Israelite history and Acts, see Appendix.

destruction in either case.

Deuteronomy makes a distinction between warfare waged against distant nations and the total destruction of native Canaanites who might tempt Israel to worship other gods (Deut 20:15-17). It does not, however, explain why conquered idol-worshipers from afar would be any less likely to corrupt the covenant people than would local idolaters. The seeming inconsistency can resolved by seeing two ideas in tension within the text, the first being that Israel must purify itself from Gentile corruption and the second that the rule of Israel's God will be extended to embrace distant peoples. The passage is a veiled prophecy of a spiritual campaign to make disciples of all nations by peaceful means.

The Fate of Babylonian Babies

Reminiscent of total warfare on the Canaanites is the seeming thirst for blood in Psalm 137:8-9: "O daughter of Babylon, who is to be destroyed, happy will be he who rewards you as you have done to us. Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock."

It is a biblical convention to refer to cities as women. Although the "little ones" of a mother city might be actual children, more often a town's children are simply its citizens, irrespective of age (Ps 149:2; Luke 13:34; Gal 4:25). It only softens slightly the Psalm's violent image to realize that as part of the woman-city metaphor it likely requests the killing of the population rather than specifically the smashing of infants' skulls.

The key to the provocation is the prophetic aspect of the passage. The Psalmist expects that Babylon will be overthrown and its conqueror will be blessed for destroying her children. The Bible praises Cyrus the Great of Persia as having been anointed by Yahweh to break Babylon's power (Isaiah 45:1-3). Surprisingly, given the tone of Psalm 137, historical sources portray Cyrus a relatively humane figure, a poor a candidate for carrying out mass killings of civilians, least of all children.

What Cyrus brought to an end were not the lives of Babylonian citizens but Babylonian policies and their effects. Babylon, like its Mesopotamian neighbor Assyria, had carried on warfare marked by terror and cruelty. The Mesopotamians were a people "fierce in countenance, who do not show regard for the old or favor the young" (Deut 28:50). When Jerusalem was captured King Zedekiah had been forced to watch as his sons were put to death (2 Kgs 25:7). So many Israelites were slaughtered in Jerusalem that the corpses could not be buried and had to be burned (Jer 19:11; Isa 5:25; 66:24). Those who were taken to Babylon as exiles were not allowed to return to their homelands (Isa 14:17).

Merciless though they were on the battlefield the armies of the Medes and Persians, led by Cyrus, did not fill Babylon with corpses. Cyrus instead proclaimed that captive peoples, including those of Judah, could return to their home country with official support (2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4).

The New Testament likens people's deeds to their children. In Luke Jesus says that wisdom is vindicated by "her children" whereas the parallel verse in Matthew, in the most reliable manuscripts, says she is vindicated by "her deeds" (Matt 11:19). According to James 1:15 illicit desire "gives birth to sin," portraying sinful actions as the children of evil intentions. "Babylon the Great" in the book of Revelation is the archetypal corrupt city and consequently the mother not only of spiritual harlots but of "the abominations of the earth" (Rev 17:5). Revelation 21:27 groups foul deeds or "abominations," *bdelugma,* with lies, which according to Jesus are the offspring of Satan (John 8:44).

Paradoxically, then, Cyrus dashed Babylon's "little ones" to pieces precisely by not imitating

the cruelty of Babylon's former rulers. The ironic reverse imagery which under close examination can be seen in Psalm 137:9 is reminscent of Yahweh "swallowing" the great swallower, the grave, and putting death to death (Isa 25:8).

Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifice in the Bible might be of an individual, even one's own child, or of an enemy population. Presumably, Jericho is slated for an especially thoroughgoing destruction and its durable spoils reserved for priestly use because as the first city to be conquered it represents the "first fruits" of Canaan.[14] Yahweh claims all that is in Jericho as belonging to him as he does sacrifice portions (Josh 6:17; Lev 27:28; cf. Isa 34:6), but since Canaanites are generally condemned Jericho's people cannot be viewed specifically as sacrificial victims.

Whatever the conquest of Jericho consisted of in terms of people actually killed, the town was set aside by decree for the Lord rather than for human occupation.[15] In consequence, the rebuilder of Jericho would forfeit his firstborn and youngest sons (Josh 6:26; 1 Kgs 16:34). In the New Testament Paul says that the first fruits of Achaiah, the heartland of Greece, consisted of the family of Stephanus, who became devoted to the service of believers (1 Cor 1:16; 16:15). As we have seen with so much of Joshua, a concept there linked to death—the devotion to the Lord of the first fruits of a new land—has a life-centered fulfillment in the activity of the early church.

A vow to take life in case victory is granted occurs in Numbers 21:1-3, where the Israelites pledge that if Canaanite enemies on the borderlands of the Negev are delivered to them they will devote their villages to destruction. The skirmish anticipates the terms of the entry into Canaan itself still to come. The Israelites will only be successful in taking territory if they are determined to leave no place for Canaanite decadence, to "take no prisoners" where Canaanite religious culture is concerned. Paradoxically, as in the later case of Babylon, one of the Canaanite "children" in need of killing was the very idea of ritually killing children (Lev 18:21; Deut 20:18; 2 Chron 28:3).

The impulse to give one's dearest possession to God in could, in the ancient mind, easily turn in the direction of child sacrifice. The rhetorical questions, "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?," are raised by Micah in order to introduce a superior form of worship: the practice of justice, kindness, and humility (Micah 6:6-8). Commands to offer first fruits to God became "bad decrees" when enacted as the slaughter of firstborn children (Ezek 20:25-26).

The story of Jepthah illustrates the allure of human sacrifice in tribal Israel, but it is not the temptation to sacrifice one's own child. Jepthah vows that if Yahweh will grant him victory over the Ammonites who threaten northeastern Israel he will offer up as a burnt offering the first person who greets him upon his return home (Judg 11:29-31). The victim so designated proves to be Jepthah's daughter and only child, who voluntarily submits to be sacrificed so that the vow will not go unfulfilled.

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14 The Law of Moses commands setting aside first fruits, whether of crops or animals, for Yahweh (Exod 13:13; Lev 23:10-14).

15 Archeology has sought in vain for a destruction layer in Jericho corresponding to the cataclysmic holocaust suggested by Joshua 6, but again the inspired drama of the biblical account adorns a historical seed that might be surprisingly modest.

Jepthah has not anticipated that his daughter will be offered, as is clear from his reaction of shock and grief when he sees her (Judg 11:35). Perhaps Jepthah intended the victim to be a Canaanite slave. The unexpected appearance of Jepthah's daughter is an ironic self-condemnation like those of David, Ahab, and Haman (2 Sam 12:1-12; 1 Kgs 20:37-42; Esther 5:14; 6:6-12; 7:10). By pledging a human life that he does not value, Jepthah deprives himself of the life he most values and brings upon himself what was to any ancient Israelite a catastrophe—the extinction of his family line.

For some the most disturbing story of human sacrifice is not that of Jepthah's daughter but of Isaac by Abraham, which is commanded by Yahweh. The New Testament interprets the Akkedah, or binding of Isaac, as an event understood by Abraham himself as a test of faith rather than human sacrifice for its own sake. Before asking Abraham to present Isaac as a burnt offering God has promised that Abraham's family line will continue through Isaac (Gen 17:21; 21:12), therefore Abraham can only conclude that somehow Isaac's life will be restored, "accounting that God was able to raise [Isaac] up even from the dead; from which also [Abraham] received him in a figure" (Heb 11:19).[16]

Many Christians see the offering of Isaac as prophetic of the sacrificial death of Jesus. The words describing Isaac's relationship to Abraham, "beloved" (*agapetos,* Gen 22:2, 12, LXX) and "only begotten" (*monogenes,* Heb 11:17) are likewise used of Jesus in relation to God the Father (Mark 1:11; 9:7; John 1:14; 3:16). Paul's statement that God "spared not his own Son [*tou idiou uiou ouk epheisato*] but delivered him up for us all" (Rom 8:32) echoes God's commendation of Abraham in Genesis 22:12, LXX, "you have not spared your son [*ouk epheiso tou uiou sou*]." As the archetypal human father in the Bible, Abraham is a natural type for the fatherly Creator of all (Mal 2:10; Acts 17:28). Even the names *Abram* (high or exalted father) and *Abraham* (father of a multitude) are appropriate to God, the heavenly Father who becomes also the Father of many children (Matt 23:9; Eph 3:14-15; Heb 2:10).

In the context of the Bible as a whole the command to Abraham to offer Isaac is as unrepeatable as is Abraham's role in the formation of Israel. It cannot be fairly judged as an inducement for emotionally unstable people to harm their own children. One might as well say the Bible tacitly encourages mentally ill people to climb Mt. Sinai in expectation of receiving tablets written by the finger of God, or to use a different kind of example, that an act of self-mutilation on the part of a psychotic individual can be attributed to Jesus' commands to gouge out an eye and cut off a hand. Nevertheless, in the cases of Isaac and Jesus the disturbing associations of child sacrifice are allowed to linger even as new spiritual meanings are attached to it.

Provocation and the Desire for Vengeance

Among the most disturbing images in the Old Testament is the longing to revel in Yahweh's retribution: "The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked" (Psalm 58:10). Here again is a stock Middle Eastern image of extreme violence and yearning for the enemy's suffering and death, and the more gruesome the death the better. At face value this sentiment clashes spectacularly with God's insistence that though he will bring death to unrepentant wrongdoers as necessary, he takes no delight in it (Ezek 18:23; 33:11).[17] "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls," says Proverbs, "and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles" (Pro 24:17). What then are we to make of the provocation of the psalm? We

16 It is often noted that Abraham tells his servants that he and Isaac will worship and then jointly return, indicating that he expects Isaac somehow to survive the sacrifice (Gen 22:5).

17 In Ezek 33:11 God even uses an oath, "As I live . . . , " to renounce pleasure in the destruction of the wicked.

can adopt its sentiment to the extent of feeling joyous relief when the reproaches of evildoers against God and their attacks upon the innocent are brought to an end (Rev 18:20), but we must account for the apparent glee the psalmist expresses over the death of enemies in and of itself.

Psalm 58:10 is a reminder that outside the boundaries of divine redemption evil acts necessarily return upon their perpetrators (1 Kgs 8:32; Neh 4:4). "His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate" (Psalm 7:16). Among the expressions of this idea in the Old Testament is the pronouncement of Joel that those who have sold the people of Judah into slavery will see their own children sold to foreigners (Joel 3:4-8). We ought not to understand from such passages that God punishes parents by tormenting their children nor that the righteous are entertained by seeing the blood of their enemies flow, but that in some way consistent with divine goodness the lovers of violence will suffer the anguish they have willfully inflicted upon others. Those who have washed their feet in the blood of innocent victims must suffer the equivalent of having their blood splashed on the feet of the justified.

The New Testament does not hesitate to take up the theme of retribution, warning that "he that sows to his flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption" (Galations 6:8). "Seeing that it is a righteous thing with God to repay tribulation to those who trouble you" (2 Thess 1:6). "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil; the Lord will reward him according to his works" (2 Tim 4:14). "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev 6:10). By embracing and identifying themselves ever more strongly with their sins unrepentant evildoers make themselves increasingly difficult to distinguish from the wickedness they practice; Paul instead draws as sharp a contrast as possible between himself and the ingrained sinfulness from which God through Christ is progressively cleansing him (Rom 7:18-20).The inevitable consequences of failure to repent are one reason why God and his people desire that their enemies experience a change of heart.

Psalm 58 is also part of the background to the cross. Jesus was accounted as a rebel, deceiver, and blasphemer, the kind of enemy whose blood ought to be shed at the feet of onlookers. His redemptive suffering gives the washing in blood a new meaning. His lifeblood and refining Spirit cleanse the sins of his people (1 Pet 1:2; 1 Jn 1:7). The washing of the feet of the disciples in John is specifically related to moral purification (John 13:10-11). In Jesus the horrific image of washing one's feet in blood, like that of cannibalism, can function as a spiritual metaphor.

A shift in meaning like that regarding washing in blood occurs in Matthew 27:25 where, as Jesus is before Pilate, the crowd shouts, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt 27:25). The crowd here utters an unintended prophecy like that spoken by the Jewish high priest in John 11:49-52. Far from justifying or even predicting antisemitic persecution, the prophecy concerns the decision that will soon face the people. Jesus' blood is "my blood of the covenant" (*to aima mou tes diathekes*, Matt 26:28) corresponding to the covenantal blood (*to aima tes diathekes*) that Moses sprinkled on the people to sanctify them at Sinai (Exod 24:8, LXX). Both Jews and Gentiles share responsibility for condemning Jesus (Acts 4:27-28) but both are given the choice of taking his blood upon themselves for redemption rather than in judgment (Acts 2:36-38; Eph 1:7).

The Provocation of the Law

The Law of Moses is provocative not merely in its severity but in its laxity. The passage on divorce, for example, says that a man may issue a certificate of dismissal if he finds "indecency" in his wife (Deut 24:1). Jesus acknowledges that this law permits (or seems to permit) men to discard their wives for vague reasons. "For the hardness of your heart [Moses] wrote you this

precept" is an explanation Jesus could not give if the problem arose from misinterpretation of the statute (Mark 10:5). The creation story in Genesis, according to Jesus, sets forth the ideal of man and woman united as "one flesh," a bond not to be broken at will (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:8-9). A deliberate tension exists within the Torah regarding the permanence of marriage. By affording an opportunity to rationalize selfish behavior, the law's indefinite instruction concerning divorce exposed the hard-heartedness of many men. Those who were attuned to the law's insistence on justice would have recognized the cruelty of dismissing a first wife in favor of a younger woman (cf. Job 31:1; Mal 2:14, 16).

In the law God warns his people against mistreating those on the margins of society. "But you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and from there the LORD you God redeemed you; therefore I command you to do this." God's order that Israelites remember their own slavery occurs twice in Deuteronomy 24:17-22, first to prevent injustice being done to the powerless and second, positively, to motivate assistance for "the alien, the orphan, and the widow" (cf. Lev 19:33-34). Slaves are not mentioned directly in the passage but the implication is unavoidable that by reflecting on their own past suffering as slaves the people will be led to empathize with those suffering similarly in their midst. Anyone who heard this early version of the Golden Rule would realize its incompatibility with harsh treatment not just of aliens but of slaves, in spite of the toleration expressed elsewhere toward the beating of slaves (Exod 21:21).[18] As with divorce, the law's varying statements about the weakest members of society exposed the quality of heart of the covenant people.

The Law of Moses contains the death penalty not solely as a deterrent but to flag the danger some behaviors pose to the community and to express the intensity of divine disapproval. The death penalty therefore posed a provocative challenge. As we have already seen, faithful Josiah declined to apply the letter of the law commanding the massacre of apostate villages, although he did execute the priests serving at idol shrines in northern Israel. We read about a man who was executed for the seemingly mild offense of gathering sticks on the Sabbath, but this was at the order of the Yahweh, who alone knew whether the act was motivated by ignorance or by willful defiance (Num 15:32-36).

In the opening narrative of the New Testament the man Joseph learns that the woman to whom he is betrothed is pregnant. Joseph apparently concludes, as would anyone of sound mind, that Mary has been with another man. "Then Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to make her a public spectacle, intended to divorce her privately" (Matt 1:19). The law prescribed death by stoning for an engaged woman who had been unfaithful (Deut 22:23-24). Even if stoning could not be carried out routinely in Roman-administered provinces, at the very least ostracism awaited a Jewish woman presumed guilty of adultery. The common assumption is that in the Bible righteousness competes with mercy, but Joseph shows mercy to Mary *because* he is righteous.

The patriarch Judah had a simple instruction concerning an unmarried woman discovered to be pregnant, which was to burn her to death (Gen 38:24). Only through extraordinary circumstances was Judah led to retract the sentence and declare the young woman, his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar, to be more righteous than himself (vv. 25-26). Many generations later Joseph of Nazareth understood that while the law signaled God's condemnation of adultery, the application of the legal penalty by an imperfect man such as himself, who lacked God's knowledge of every circumstance, would be unrighteous. With the statement about Joseph's merciful righteousness we see emerging even before Jesus' ministry the realization that the "weightier matters

18 Cf. Luke 15:17, where generosity toward slaves is noted.

of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness" might require modifying or even setting aside the law's penalties (Matt 23:23).

Provocation and Invitation

The book of Jonah closes with God's question to the prophet concerning the Assyria's capital city, "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11). What arrests our attention is not so much that Ninneveh is granted a reprieve but that Jonah is asked what course of action would be right for God to take. Jonah might have replied that he is not the one to judge what God should or should not do. From the events leading up to the question, however, we cannot understand God to be simply asserting his sovereignty, as if to say, "I have the right to spare Ninneveh if I want to."

Jonah had become distressed over the death of a plant that gave him shade, and God uses this reaction to make an *a fortiori* argument: if the death of a mere plant can be regretted, how much more so the deaths of a multitude of people and animals. Jesus will use God's argument from Jonah 4:10-11 but instead of a dying plant cite the examples of a domestic animal fallen into a pit and a sheep that has strayed from the safety of the flock (Matt 12:11; 18:12; Luke 14:5).

Let us restate the subject of this paper in terms of God's question to Jonah. Ought we to understand God to have literally commanded indiscriminate slaughter of women, babies, and the elderly? Or ought we, after allowing the shock of brutal imagery to rivet our attention, understand God's command as hyperbole for allowing no living, breathing remnants of decadent religious culture in the land of Israel?

The word for "pity" in Jonah 4:11 also appears in Deuteronomy 7:16, which commands "And you shall consume (literally, 'eat') all the people whom the LORD your God will deliver to you; your eye shall not pity them, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you." The pity to which Deuteronomy refers cannot be the valuing of human life that God tries to instill in Jonah. Deuteronomy can only be warning against sympathy for a culture one of whose hallmarks was a failure to value life, and that any attitude other than abhorrence of that culture and its gods would be disastrous.

The God revealed in Scripture will not tolerate our ignoring his provocative words, nor will he erase them in order to make us comfortable. The shock of the provocation will remain and the blessing will not be given us without a struggle that demands every resource the Spirit supplies. We press forward knowing that the God who provokes also invites us past the provocations toward the deep truths they conceal. "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" (Ps 119:165).

Appendix

Selected Parallels between the Post-Exodus and Acts

Type of Event	**Occurrence in the Post-Exodus**	**Occurrence in Acts**
1. Divine commissioning of the people as God's representatives among the nations	God's invitation to Israel to be his own and represent his holiness (". . . you shall be to me [*esesthe moi*] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," Exod 19:6, LXX)	Jesus' commissioning of his apostles to represent him to the world (". . . you shall be of me [*esesthe mou*] witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth," 1:8)
2. Organization of the people under twelve leaders with a census taken and vacancy filled	Listing of tribal leaders and effective replacement of Levi by Manasseh to maintain twelve tribes (Num 1:1-16; 47-49; cf. Josh 14:3-4) Census taken and number of the people recorded (Num 1:17-46)	Listing of apostles (1:13) Number of disciples given as 120 (1:15) Vacancy of Judas filled by Matthias to maintain twelve apostles as leaders (1:15–26)
3. Consecration of shrine and priests is attested by the manifestation of the divine presence and descent of heavenly fire	Dedication of tabernacle, after which it is filled (*plethos*) with God's glory (Exod 40:34-35, LXX) Installation of Aaron and sons as priests, at which people are amazed (*existemi*) to see fire descend upon the offerings (Lev 9:23-24, LXX)	Coming of God's Spirit, which fills (*plethos*) the disciples and their meeting room and is visible as "tongues of fire," drawing amazed (*existemi*) onlookers (2:1-12)

4. Divine judgment of named, guilty persons as a new era begins	Striking dead of Nadab and Abihu as wilderness sojourn begins, their bodies carried out of the tabernacle by their brothers (Lev 10:1–5) Theft of dedicated plunder and miraculous revelation of the offender by Joshua, leading to condemnation of Achan and family (Josh 7:16–26)	Theft of pledged money by Ananias and his wife, Sapphira (5:1-2) Miraculous revelation of guilty parties by apostolic leader, Peter (5:3-4, 7-9) Offenders stricken dead and their bodies carried out of the place of worship by young men of the assembly (5:5-6, 10-11)
5. Complaint about food on the part of Gentile-associated members of the assembly, resulting in the appointment of inspired ministers to assist the congregational leadership	Murmuring (*gogusmos*) that gives way to a complaint of the "mixed multitude" about their diet, resulting in the inspiration of seventy elders to assist Moses (Num 11:1–30, LXX)	Murmuring (*gogusmos*) of Greek-speaking disciples about lack of food for their widows, resulting in the appointment of seven inspired ministers to assist the apostles (6:1–6)
6. Confrontation by God of an agent of cursing and destruction who is on the way to bring ruin to the people, but who at journey's end becomes an agent of blessing	The hiring of Balaam to curse Israel and appearance of an angel on the road to warn Balaam of Yahweh's displeasure (Num 22:1-35) Balaam's pronouncement of a blessing instead of a curse (Num 22:35–24:25)	The deputation of Saul to arrest disciples in Damascus and the confrontation of Saul by the risen Jesus on the road (9:1-2) Transformation of Saul into an apostle and tireless missionary (9:3–20)
7. Escape by being lowered down the wall of a hostile city by sympathizers	Lowering (*katachalan*) of Israelite spies down Jericho's wall through a window (*thuris*) by sympathizer Rahab (Josh 2:16, LXX)	Lowering (*kathiemi, chalao*) of convert Saul down the wall of Damascus by disciples (9:25) (Note: Lowering is through a window, *thuris,* 2 Cor 11:33.)

8. Thwarting of threats, either by God's direct action or through agents	Protection given through war with Amalek; rebellion by Korah; seduction on plains of Moab; Canaanite resistance, etc.	Protection from plan to kill apostles, imprisonment of Peter (later, Paul), persecutions of Paul in various cities, Jerusalem plot against Paul's life, storm at sea and aftermath (Note the allusion in Rev 12:15–16 to Num 16:28–32 and cf. Acts 6:33–40; 19:29–41.)
9. The sending of two valiant men to survey territory as the initial step to conquest, and their return with a favorable report	Joshua's sending out of two spies, who encounter enemies, pledge protection to Rahab, and return with a favorable report (Josh 2:1-21)	The sending out of Paul and Barnabas, who encounter resistance, establish churches, and return with a favorable report (13:1-14:27)
10. Assignment of covenant land to non-Israelites who send emissaries to Israel's leaders	Acceptance of the Hivites of Gibeon in the land after they send a delegation to conclude a treaty with Joshua (9:1-15) Joshua comes to their cities on the third day after receiving the delegation (9:16-17) Israel's leaders explain their actions to the assembly (Josh 9:18-21)	Acceptance of Gentiles into the church after a delegation from the Roman officer Cornelius asks Peter to come and share the gospel (10:1-48) Peter arrives in Caesarea on the third day after receiving the delegation (10:23-24) Peter explains his actions to the Jerusalem church (11:1-18)
11. Forced march and battle to defend the non-Israelites who were granted a place within the covenant territory	Joshua marches his army all night to defend the Gibeonites when they are threatened (Josh 10:1-7) Joshua is given a great victory by Yahweh (Josh 10:8-15)	Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and others travel to Jerusalem when Gentile believers are threatened by Judaizers (15:1-12) Paul *et al.* are given victory in the Jerusalem council by the Holy Spirit (15:13-33; cf. Gal 2:4-5)

12. Assurance of protection is given directly by Yahweh to the battle leader of his people	"And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Fear them not, for I have delivered them into your hands; not a man of them shall stand before you.'" (Josh 10:8)	"Then the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Fear not, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you, for I have many people in this city.'" (18:9-10)
13. Battle to overcome nations and claim the territory assigned to the people by God	Conquest by Joshua of "seven nations" represented by listed cities, gaining a solid foothold for Israel in Canaan (Josh 12:1-24; 24:11; cf. Deut 7:1; Acts 13:19)	Expansion of the church in Judea under Peter and other apostles (2:47; 5:14; 6:7; etc.) Establishment of churches among the Gentiles in far-flung cities by Paul and his co-workers (13-14; 16-20) (Note: Paul preaches in seven cities in first missionary tour: Salamis, Paphos, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Perga [13:2–14:26]. Further, cf. war instructions in Deut 20:10–12, mission instructions in Matt 10:11–15; Luke 10:5–12.)
14. A false rumor of apostasy from the far reaches of the covenant territory	The building of a memorial altar by the tribes east of the Jordan, misinterpreted as a violation of the covenant (Josh 22:10-34)	False representation of Paul's Gentile mission as an inducement of Jews to violate the Law of Moses (Acts 21:20-21)
15. Convening (twice) of the elders by the congregational leader as the initial phase of conquest closes The recitation of a divine warning by the leader and a call for a decision on the part of the elders	The final summoning of the Israelite elders to Shechem by Joshua, who recites God's dealings, predicts the people's unfaithfulness, and calls them to renew their covenant with God (Josh 23:1–24:28)	Paul's meetings with Christian and Jewish elders to defend his own actions and issue divine warnings (20:17-38; 28:17–28)

16. Prominence of two faithful witnesses, representing the two broad divisions of the Israelite nation	Two faithful witness-spies: Caleb of Judah, Joshua of Ephraim (Num 13:6, 8) Nation divided between house of Judah in the south and house of Joseph, led by Ephraim, in the north (Josh 18:5) Distribution of the land bracketed by special portions in Hebron (south) for Caleb and in in hill country of Ephraim (north) for Joshua (Josh 14:6-15; 19:49-51)	First of two prominent human witnesses in Acts, Peter, presumptively of the house of Judah (as with Jews in general) Second of the two witnesses, Paul, of tribe of Benjamin and therefore of the house of Joseph (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5; cf. 2 Sam 19:16-20; Num 2:18-24; Ps 80:1-2)