

Nov 1

God and Violence

I Kings 18:20-24, 36-40

One of the perplexing questions of the Bible is this: Does God condone violence? When you read passages like the one from I Kings where Elijah kills 450 prophets of Baal after God hears his prayer and consumes the evening sacrifice it makes you uncomfortable. Did God want Elijah to do this? Or we have the story of the battle of Jericho. We sing the song about how the walls came a tumblin' down but do we recall that when the walls fell the soldiers were told to wipe out everything in the city, man and woman, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. What did the people and animals of Jericho do to deserve this treatment? We want to believe that it was punishment for their wickedness but the Bible says no such thing. Scripture suggests that Jericho's only crime was being in the way. God had promised Israel the land of Canaan and the Israelites move into Canaan meant they had to do something about the people who were already there. Starting with Jericho, Israel tore through the Promised Land indiscriminately killing all, saying it was on God's command.

How is it that God, who elsewhere in the Old Testament, commands God's people to love their neighbors and to treat the foreigners living among them as citizens, blesses and participates in genocide? There is no easy solution to this problem! When we encounter texts in which God's people slaughter their neighbors and adversaries, it is important to ask some questions.

Is God directly responsible for the deaths? Sometimes the answer seems to be yes. We see this in the destruction of Pharaoh's army when the Red Sea closed over them. Yet even Jewish rabbis from a long time ago had problems with seeing God as this heartless destroyer of humanity. In Judaism, besides the Bible, there is the Midrash. These are interpretive studies of passages in the Old Testament by rabbis. While the Midrash is not seen as authoritative, like scripture, they are seen as descriptive as to what was happening and the meaning behind the Biblical events. In the Midrash it says that the angels in heaven joined in the celebration of the Egyptians' defeat and sang along with Moses, Miriam, and the rest of the people of Israel. But God did not.

Searching, the angels found God weeping. When they inquired, God responded, “My Creatures are drowning in the sea and you want to sing praises?”

So even though God is seen as the agent of destruction, at least at times, there is still some question in the minds of the faithful, as if that is a true and accurate depiction of God. So we need to look further for possible answers to the question, of whether or not God sanctions violence.

We need to ask, if God’s people act with God’s blessing and according to God’s instruction or are the people acting on their own. We need to understand that just because it is written in the Bible a certain way doesn’t mean it happened this way. Many of the happenings recorded in the Old Testament were not set down until many generations after the event. Stories held in the collective memory tend to change in the telling so that by the time they are written down they can bear little resemblance to the actual historical events. We know, as an example, that George Washington did not cut down a cherry tree but that story told as a symbol of his truthfulness has become a part of our collective remembrance of his early life. So we have to question when it says in the Bible that Elijah killed the prophets of Baal on God’s behalf whether that is true.

So we need to ask: Might the ancients have misunderstood God’s role in Israel’s violent conquest? The people of Israel believed that the land of Palestine was given to them by God. There were people living there. It would not be much of a stretch to believe that you needed to rid the land of those occupying it so that you could have a home. And it is just a small step more to say that this is what God wanted you to do. Some of this logic has been in play recently in Palestine since the setting up of the nation of Israel after World War II. The Allies believed that the Jews deserved a homeland after the Holocaust and so carved land out of the old Ottoman Empire for that purpose. They ignored that this was a land already filled with people. The seeds of the violence happening now in Israel were sown in that moment. If you read Jewish history the land is theirs by divine right and God blesses anything they need to do to keep it. As you can imagine, the Palestinians have a different interpretation of events. This same kind of logic probably was at work in the Bible.

This leads us to ask if these are factual stories or revisionist history. What I mean is that winners always put a positive spin on their actions. If you read histories of the American Revolution written from our perspective you hear about patriots like George Washington and John Adams. You also hear about traitors like Benedict Arnold. If you read about this same time frame from the British side those titles are reversed. And almost always each side claims God is on their side, the right side.

So, where does this leave us? If there were easy answers we would not call them perplexing scriptures! Since the Old Testament has some discussions about treating the stranger with compassion we see at least one aspect of God that is not always present in some of the stories. When we come to Jesus in his parables, his actions and his life we see compassion not judgment. Think about how he praised the centurion for his faith, or the wisdom of the Phoenician woman asking only for crumbs, or his polite conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. We see in Jesus someone who has respect for non-Jews. Even within the Jewish community there were outcasts, known sinners, lepers, and tax collectors to mention a few. Yet Jesus again treated them with respect and reminded people that God loved these individuals too.

So even though we have scriptures that seem to indicate that God condones violence, the weight of evidence is much more on the side of the God of love and compassion. It makes us wonder if we really do have the old stories in their true form or if people asked God to bless their poor choices, something that still happens to this day. We don't know the answers to these questions but I am one to believe that we got the story wrong and like the rabbis of old we believe that God wept when God's children made poor choices and even more cried when they did it in God's name.

So what does that mean for today? Sometimes we still see groups saying that God blesses their hatred, their bigotry and more. They want to do it in the name of the church. They talk about how God hates the sin but loves the sinner but then acts in ways that are anything but loving because of the sin and then say this is of God. Or we see people reject people of another color or faith because they are not like us. We hear the justifications of why this is acceptable in the eyes of God. After all, since no one can

come to the father except through Jesus, that is in our Bible, we get to treat those others with contempt! Not!!

God does not bless our poor choices now any more than God blessed them in the past. We are to hear Jesus' message of love and compassion and inclusivity not the messages of violence, and see how we can live into the gracious side of our faith. Those scriptures that condone violence are in our Bible and we have to deal with them. We would like to ignore them but in reality we need to wrestle with them. For me, I see them trying to justify our all too human response to those not like us, which is to reject or attack. May we live into Jesus' vision of God who loves all and calls all beloved.