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New Living Translation, Hebrews 9:14b-15

For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. ¹⁵ That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant.

A Covenant of Grace.

I grew up in a largely Hispanic area in southern California, in a city called Oxnard in Ventura county, north of L.A. I loved living there. We were a short bike ride from the beach and the weather was beautiful, year-round. Sometimes, in the winter, from the playground at school, I could smell the ocean salt in the air. But the best part of living there is that the periphery of the city was still somewhat rural back then. There were avocado orchards, lemon and orange groves, walnut trees, and fields of beans, berries, and lettuce. Many of the farms were protected by long breaks of eucalyptus trees, which had a rich, sweet smell to them. My friends and I would ride our bikes on the narrow dirt paths that separated the windbreaks from the fields and orchards. I also, as a boy, picked oranges and lemons with migrant workers for a while. That was quite an opportunity to learn.

What I want to talk about is what happened one morning when a friend of mine crossed the line from active kid to active vandal. The one thing we never did was ride our bikes through the fields. But one day, my buddy, I'll call him Mike, rode his bike through a strawberry field, laughing and howling, riding over plants, and having a great old time. I sat on my bike at the side of the field and wondering just what I should do. He was damaging plants. I didn't have to wait long. A man, who turned out to be a member of the family who owned the small farm, came running out onto the field, pumping a shotgun. He leveled it at my friend – and pulled the trigger. I saw Mike tumble off his bike and land face-first in the dirt. I can remember my heart pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. I'll get back to my vandal buddy, the farmer, and the pump action shotgun.

But first, let's look at two quotes from that provide somewhat different views on the famous Old Testament story about the Israelites ridding Canaan of its residents so that the Israelites could claim it as their promised land - promised by God himself, as part of the Old Covenant. Here's some background on that. The oldest of the Old Testament prophets is Abram or Abraham. In Genesis Chapter 12, God makes a promise to him: If Abram answers God's call to go to Canaan, which is an area today that includes parts of modern Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and if Abram's people continue to obey the laws of God – which

were eventually written on stone tablets brought down a mountain several hundred years later by Moses – God would grant his people three things. First, God would bless his people. Second, God would ensure that these people, the Israelites, the predecessors of the Jews, would have many descendants. Third, God would give the Israelites the land of Canaan as their land. This promise of land – the Promised Land, as we know it – is repeated in Genesis to Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. Only much later, would the followers of the recently deceased Moses, under the command of Joshua, claim this land. It is how they went about claiming it that has been so controversial.

Here is a passage from Joshua, Chapter 10:

So Joshua conquered the whole region—the kings and people of the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills, and the mountain slopes. He completely destroyed everyone in the land, leaving no survivors, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. ⁴¹ Joshua slaughtered them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza and from the region around the town of Goshen up to Gibeon.

We read that God commanded Joshua to invade Canaan and kill its people.

Indeed, the passage says: “*Leaving no survivors... Joshua slaughtered them.*” The Bible seems to be ordering the wholesale massacre of the Canaanite people. The implied reason for God’s indifference to the suffering of the Canaanites is that these people are pagans who do not worship the one true God. The reason for killing all of them? If they were left alive, they would be living among the Israelites and would infect God’s people with pagan beliefs, turning them away

from God. Many people today use this story to condemn Judaism and Christianity. How could any loving God order the slaughter of all these men, women, and children, just so that the Israelites could take over the land?

But biblical stories are often not as simple as they seem to modern readers.

This is from the book that comes after Joshua, Judges, Chapter 1:

²⁷ The tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the people living in Beth-shan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, and all their surrounding settlements, because the Canaanites were determined to stay in that region.

We are told that, in truth, many Canaanites survived. And indeed, multiple

passages in the Book of Judges make it clear that Joshua did not rid Canaan of all

of its residents. Why the inconsistency? The Old Testament wasn't written as a

single document by one author. In fact, there are many more examples - besides

the story of the invasion of Canaan - of pieces of history being presented in

conflicting ways within the Bible. This is due to the fact that many people over

many hundreds of years wrote the Old Testament, and it was heavily edited

multiple times. There was never a single editor who worked on the Old

Testament with the goal that a modern literary editor would have: to create a

single, integrated, clean historical document.

The Bible wasn't meant to be a history book by modern standards, where

every fact is carefully researched and verified, and the entire document is seen as

a single document. The Bible's purpose is to tell us the story of God's presence in this world, and how Jews and Christians came to identify themselves spiritually, in particular, compared to pagans who believed in multiple gods, each one of them human-like, with a tendency to be vain, and with each god controlling a single aspect of human life. These gods fought among themselves and gave birth to each other. They were essentially humans with magical powers. The Bible tells us about our heritage as believers who believe there is a single, all-powerful God who created all of existence. The Bible conveys this heritage via vast collection of stories that existed only in oral form for hundreds of years. They were later collected together and eventually organized as a set of individual scrolls. Then, for hundreds of more years, the Bible consisted of separate documents, maintained on separate scrolls that were copied by hand by scores of scribes. Only in very modern times was it all presented as a single book, thus creating the expectation that it will be internally consistent. Most importantly, the lessons contained in the stories in the Bible are more important than the literal correctness of the storylines themselves. The ancient Scripture writers did not even have the notion we have of a modern historical document that reflects reality down to the smallest detail. This is why the inconsistencies are actually not a problem and do not represent mistakes by the Bible's authors.

With respect to the invasion of Canaan, there are scholars who believe that the Israelites only very gradually, over a period of many generations, moved into Canaan and established their dominance militarily and politically. In fact, some scholars believe that the Israelites entered Canaan more or less peacefully and settled down alongside the people there. Another theory is that only a tiny number of people migrated from Egypt to Canaan, bringing a notion of a single God, and then later, the Israelites emerged from the Canaanites as a separate ethnic culture. This would mean that the Israelites never invaded Canaan at all. In other words, the Israelites were themselves Canaanites who stopped worshipping multiple gods because of the influence of a few migrants, and established a monotheistic faith based on the one, true God of those migrants.

The superficial image that society has of the Canaanites is far from the whole truth. The Canaanites were in truth a loosely connected group of various ethnic peoples who were never unified as a single people. They were various seafaring folks who built settlements around the Mediterranean Sea. They were Phoenician peoples who had an alphabet long before surrounding cultures had any such thing. They were far from ignorant, vile people. They just didn't know God and so they worshipped a large group of gods, many of whom were, quite frankly, very un-god-like. And they were never wiped out, as the book of Joshua

suggests. DNA evidence strongly indicates that these people survived, and their descendants are alive today in various places in the Middle East, including Jordan.

The Canaanites not only survived - they apparently thrived.

But if we view the killing of the Canaanites as not literally true, why would such a violent story be used in the Bible to explain how the Israelites got their land? The answer is subtle. First, we need to see the story of the invasion of Canaan and the killing of the Canaanites under the command of God for what it is: the story of our God as a single, dependable creator. The Israelites, who became the Jews, and then later, we Christians, as well, did not buy into the widespread belief that there was a plethora of gods, consisting of the sky, the planets, and who formed a large group of individuals, each with its own special powers and weaknesses. We believe that we were created deliberately by one specific God. We know this God to be dependable, not wildly unpredictable, highly imperfect, and sometimes downright foolish like so many Greek, Roman, and other ancient gods. God promised us land, meaning that God promised us a home where we could practice our faith – and the Bible makes it clear in a very literal, easy to grasp fashion, that this promise was kept. And importantly, a common literary technique used in the Old Testament is hyperbole – a deliberate exaggeration aimed at dramatically conveying a truth about God and our relationship to God.

In order to portray God as completely dependable with respect to the promise of a faith home in which to live, and in order to convey the importance of believing in a single, all-powerful God, the Bible described the wholesale killing of the Canaanites. Thus, we were told that believing in multiple, humanlike gods was something that needed to end.

We can see more evidence of the Old Testament being written in a way aimed specifically at the Israelite people in a dramatic fashion that they could appreciate. Remember that God's blessing, our progeny, and our homeland did not come free. It was a contract, what we Christians call the Old Covenant. God's people had to do something in order to receive a blessing, progeny, and land. They had to live by God's rules, as presented to Moses in the form of the Ten Commandments. God forced a contract on the Old Testament Israelites. Why was the relationship between God and God's people portrayed in the Bible in such a formal, legalistic fashion? It's because this explained God's promise in a way that was understandable to people during the time of the Israelites. When much of the Old Testament was written, there were many peoples in the greater area around the Holy Land who lived under what would today be called a Suzerain contract, where a more powerful nation protects a less powerful one in return for that less powerful nation abiding by certain rules. So, it was natural for the

people of God to tell their story by using this concept of an unbalanced, or suzerain contract between imperfect people and an all-capable God. In such a contract, one party – the suzerain - is decidedly more powerful, but it treats the other party – the vassal - with grace and protection, as long as it obeys the law. The Israelites were vassals of God, held under a suzerain contract.

We are not Israelites. We are Christians. Paul, in his letters, tells us that the Old Covenant, this suzerain contract between an all-powerful God and an obedient, vassal people, is not our primary covenant. Jesus himself tells us the same thing in the Gospels. This covenant says that we have an ongoing relationship with God through a mediator - his son, Jesus. Our God is a personal God, not the distant God of the Old Testament. This is an extremely joyous thing.

Consider this, from Hebrews, Chapter 9:

For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. ¹⁵ That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant.

If anyone ever tells you that the Bible is too violent and that no Godly people could possibly believe it, tell them that you are a Christian and that Jesus Christ lived and died so that we would not have to live by that Old Covenant. We have a new one, rooted in love, forgiveness and the daily touch of God's grace.

What about my buddy Mike who damaged a number of berry plants? Just as the brutal story of the slaughter of the Canaanites might not be the literal truth, that farmer wasn't so meanspirited as to blow my friend away. I ran out into the field to see how badly injured Mike was. He sat up and seemed to be okay. I looked at his back. There were some small holes in his shirt, but very little blood. The farmer was trying to convey a point in a dramatic way, much like the Old Testament does. As you might have guessed, the shotgun was loaded with salt – and my friend wasn't badly hurt. But he had some bruises and a ruined shirt that he had to explain to his parents. The salt also began to burn very badly. I was there when he fessed up to his parents that he had deliberately damaged some strawberry plants in a field. His father put him in a car and drove him back to the farm – to apologize. My friend and I replanted the turned-up plants.

Luckily, my friend – as well as all of us – live under a contract of love, not a brutal Old Testament contract. That's a key aspect of the New Covenant. It is based on unearned grace, given to us by God. In the Old Covenant, people had to pay for what they got. We do not. That farmer may have gone a little Old Testament with his shotgun, but in the end, he lived out the New Covenant, by forgiving, and by acting with grace. The next time we rode by his fields, he waved at us. And as New Covenant Christians, my buddy and I continued to live with joy.