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New Living Translation, Joshua 10:40-41

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.

New Living Translation, Judges 1:27

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.

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.

From the Old To the New Covenant.

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. 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 wind breaks from the fields and orchards. I also picked oranges and lemons with migrant workers for a while, but I'll leave that story to another sermon.

What I want to talk about today is what happened one morning when a friend of mine crossed the line from active kid to active vandal. You see, 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, watching, and wondering just what I should do. He was damaging plants.

Well, 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, our first two quotes from today provide two 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, that is.

But first, here's some Old Testament background. 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, Palestine, 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, whom we know as the Israelites, the predecessors of the Jews, would have many progeny or descendents. 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.

We read today in our passage from the Book of Joshua that God commanded Joshua to invade Canaan and kill its people. That's what the passage is referring to when it 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. If they were left alive, they would infect God's people with pagan beliefs and damage the purity of their faith.

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 we make them out to be. We see this by looking at the book of the Bible that appears after the Book of Joshua. In our second quote, we are told that many Canaanites actually survived. It says: "*the Canaanites were determined to stay.*" And indeed, multiple passages in this book make it clear that Joshua did not succeed in ridding Canaan 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, many hundreds of years wrote the Old Testament.

There is another reason. The Bible wasn't meant to be a history book by modern standards, where every fact is carefully researched and verified. 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. The Bible tells about our heritage as believers. It conveys this heritage via a large number 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, written books. And like many stories, the lessons contained in the stories in the Bible are more important than the literal storylines themselves. 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 actually entered Canaan more or less peacefully and settled down alongside the people there.

Still other scholars have suggested that the Israelites never invaded Canaan at all, and that they emerged gradually as a separate ethnic group in Canaan. In other words, the Israelites were themselves Canaanites who stopped worshipping multiple gods and established a monotheistic faith based on a the one, true God.

In fact, the superficial image that society has of the Canaanites is far from the whole truth. The Canaanites were actually a loosely connected group of various ethnic peoples who were never unified as a single people. They were seafaring folks who built settlements around the Mediterranean Sea. They were actually Phoenician peoples who had an alphabet long before surrounding cultures had any such thing. They were far from being 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.

It's also true that 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 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 of all, 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, did not buy into the widespread belief that there was a plethora of gods, consisting of the sky, the planets, and 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 – and the Bible makes it clear 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 land 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. This was a way of suggesting that believing in multiple, humanlike gods was something that needed to end.

This dramatic tale of the invasion of Canaan was thus a way of making it clear to people of the day that our God has the power and the will to keep that Old Testament promise of providing a blessing, progeny, and land. In return, we need to recognize the existence of a single, almighty God.

In fact, 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 this blessing, progeny, and land did not come free. It was a contract or a covenant, what we Christians call the Old Covenant. God's people had to do something in return 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 was a way of explaining God's promise in a way that was understandable to people during the time of the Israelites. At the time that 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 in part by using this concept of an unbalanced, or suzerain contract between people and 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.

But we are not Israelites. We are Christians. Paul writes about something very important in his letters in the New Testament. He 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 presented us with a new one. This covenant tells us that we have an ongoing relationship with God through his son, Jesus. Our God is a personal God, not the distant God of the Old Testament.

The bottom line is that Jesus is the mediator of our new covenant with God. This is an extremely joyous thing. Consider our third quote for today: *“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 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.

So, what about my buddy Mike who destroyed a number of berry plants? Well, just as the brutal story of the slaughter of the Canaanites might not be the literal truth, that farmer wasn't really so meanspirited as to blow my friend away. I ran out into the field to see how badly injured Mike was. As it turned out, he sat up and seemed to be okay. I looked at his back. There were some small holes in his shirt, but only a few drops of 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 really hurt. But he had some bruises and a ruined shirt that he had to explain to his parents. 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.

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 forgiveness and love. 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.