

Joshua

Lesson #7

Joshua's Farewell

(23: 1 – 24: 33)

Review

With the defeat and death of the five Amorite kings, the other tribal warlords from the north, the western foothills and the coastal plain formed a defensive coalition to fight the Israelites, but Joshua and the Israelites *“struck them all down, leaving no survivors”* (11: 8). *“All the cities of those kings, and the kings themselves, Joshua captured and put to the sword, carrying out the ban on them, as Moses, the servant of the Lord had commanded”* (11: 12).

In all, Joshua killed 31 kings and put their cities under the ban, killing all their people—men, women, children and infants—and destroying all their cities.

After getting a solid foothold in Canaan, Joshua distributed the land—both conquered and unconquered—to the Israelites by tribe and clan, including 6 cities of refuge and 48 towns for the Levites.

Although the Israelites had made a good start, it will take another 300 years or so, until the time of David (1010-970 B.C.), to fully conquer the land and subdue it, creating a functioning nation, a united monarchy.

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Preview

As we enter Lesson #7, Joshua is *“old and advanced in years”* (23: 1). He assembles all the tribes at Shechem, the village that sits between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, and he delivers his farewell address, ending by reiterating the clear choice that Moses had so vividly posed: life or death; blessing or curse.

With this dichotomy made clear, Joshua closes memorably: *“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”* (24: 15).

The book of Joshua is profoundly troubling in many ways, but especially in its emphatic and vivid insistence on God’s commanding the Israelites to put “under the ban” entire populations, every man, woman and child in the conquered cities. Spin it how we might, *herem*—putting a population “under the ban”—is genocide, pure and simple, the total extermination of entire populations for religious, ethnic or political purposes. As we leave the book of Joshua, we examine *herem* more closely, and we seek to understand how God could possibly command this.



As Deuteronomy closed with Moses' farewell address, so Joshua closes with Joshua's farewell address.

As we shall see, his address includes words of encouragement, but it also foreshadows great troubles to come.

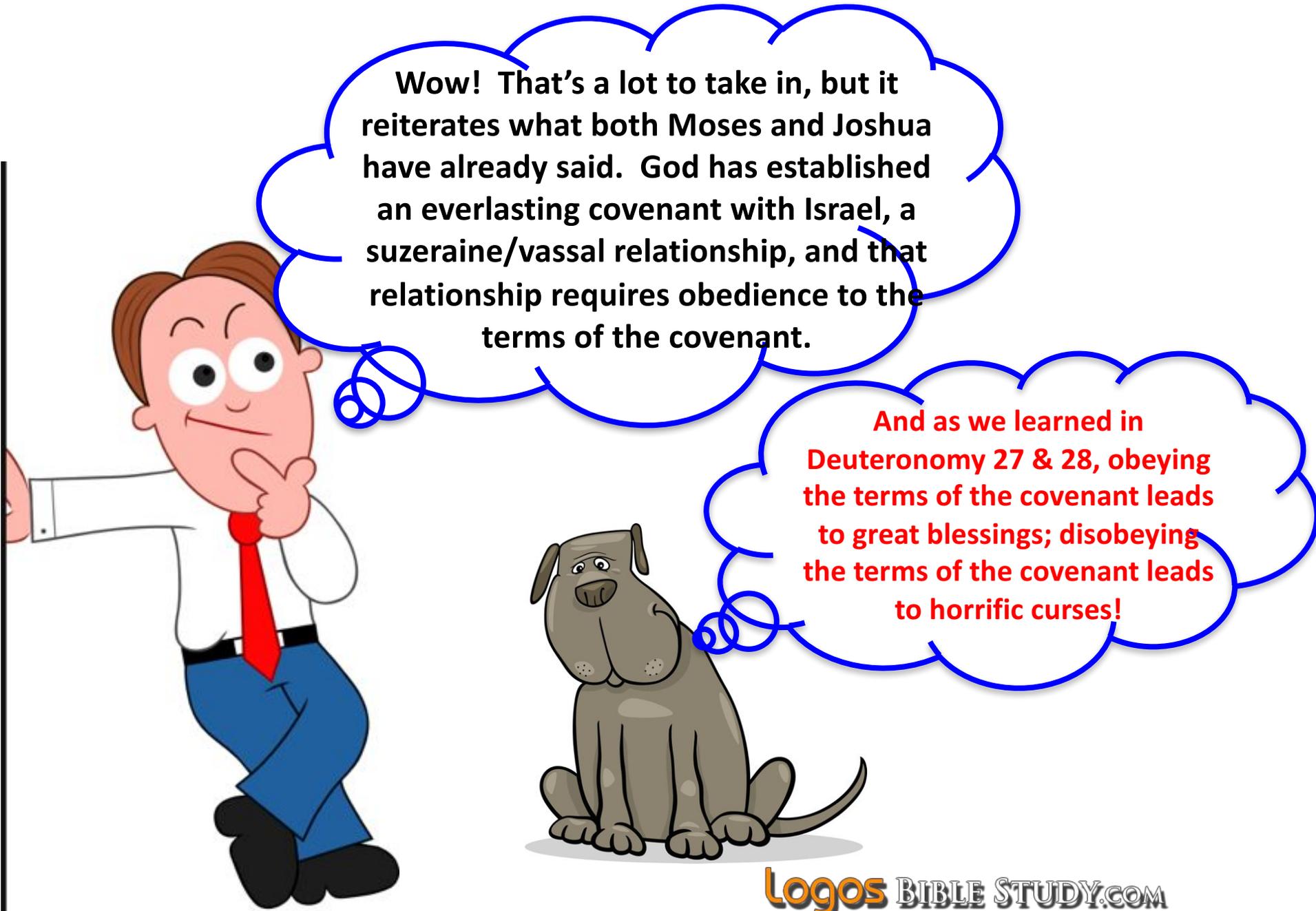
“Many years later, after the Lord had given the Israelites rest from all their enemies round about them, and when Joshua was old and advanced in years, he summoned all Israel, including their elders, leaders, judges, and officers, and said to them: ‘I am old and advanced in years. You have seen all that the Lord, your God, has done for you against all these nations; for it has been the Lord, your God, who fought for you. See, I have apportioned among your tribes as their heritage the nations that survive, as well as those I destroyed, between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west. The Lord, your God, will drive them out and dispossess them at your approach, so that you will take possession of their land as the Lord, your God, promised you. Therefore be strong and be careful to observe all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, never turning from it right or left . . .

. . . or mingling with these nations that survive among you. You must not invoke their gods by name, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them, but you must hold fast to the Lord, your God, as you have done up to this day. At your approach the Lord has dispossessed great and strong nations; not one has withstood you up to this day. One of you puts to flight a thousand, because it is the Lord, your God, himself who fights for you, as he promised you. As for you, take great care to love the Lord, your God. For if you ever turn away from him and join with the remnant of these nations that survive among you, by intermarrying and intermingling with them, know for certain that the Lord, your God, will no longer dispossess these nations at your approach . . .

. . . Instead they will be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge for your sides and thorns for your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord, your God, has given you. Today, as you see, I am going the way of all the earth. So now acknowledge with your whole heart and soul that not one of all the promises the Lord, your God, made concerning you has failed. Every one has come true for you; not one has failed. But just as every promise the Lord, your God, made to you has come true for you, so will he bring upon you every threat, even so far as to exterminate you from this good land which the Lord, your God, has given you. If you transgress the covenant of the Lord, your God, which he enjoined on you, to go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the anger of the Lord will flare up against you and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

(23: 1-13)

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Wow! That's a lot to take in, but it reiterates what both Moses and Joshua have already said. God has established an everlasting covenant with Israel, a suzerain/vassal relationship, and that relationship requires obedience to the terms of the covenant.

And as we learned in Deuteronomy 27 & 28, obeying the terms of the covenant leads to great blessings; disobeying the terms of the covenant leads to horrific curses!

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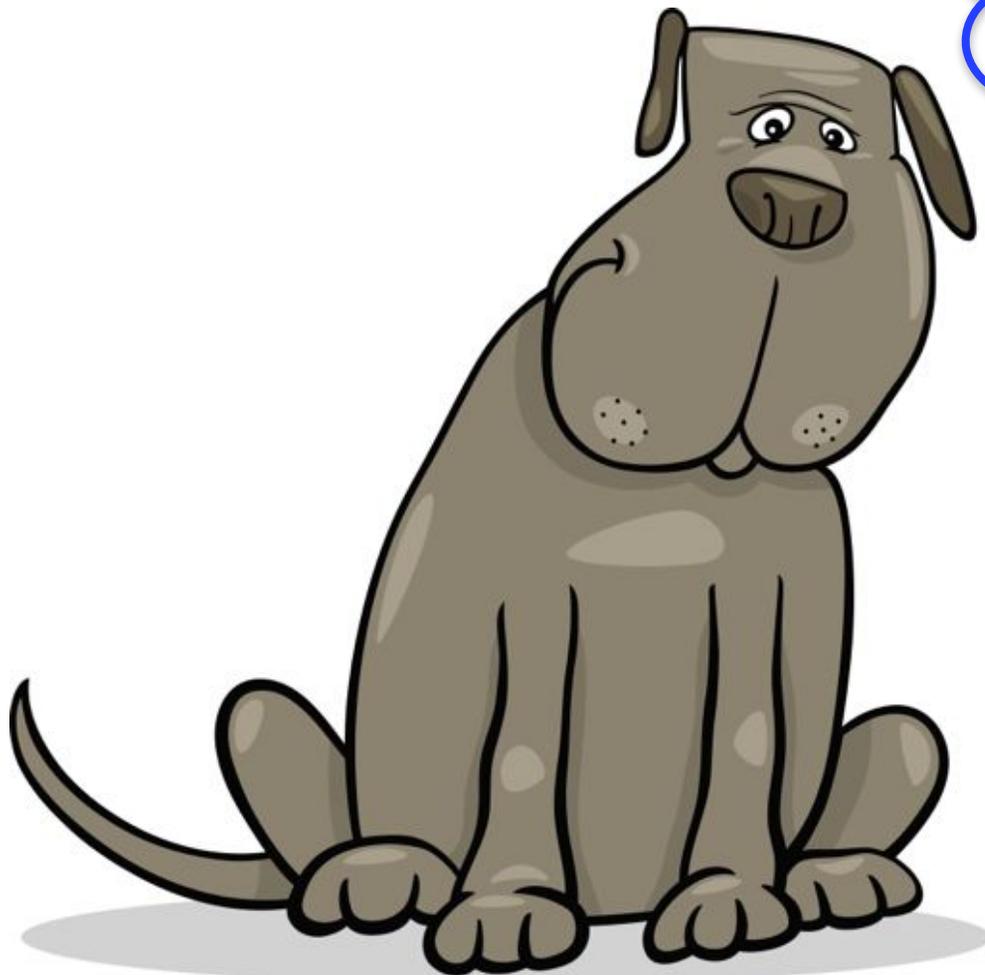
That's correct!

**So, let's work through what
Joshua said, one step at a
time.**

“Many years later, after the Lord had given the Israelites rest from all their enemies round about them, and when Joshua was **old and advanced in years**, he summoned all Israel, including their elders, leaders, judges, and officers, and said to them: ‘I am old and advanced in years. **You have seen all that the Lord, your God, has done for you against all these nations; for it has been the Lord, your God, who fought for you.** See, I have apportioned among your tribes as their heritage the nations that survive, as well as those I destroyed, between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west. The Lord, your God, will drive them out and dispossess them at your approach, so that you will take possession of their land as the Lord, your God, promised you. **Therefore be strong and be careful to observe all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, never turning from it right or left . . .**



- Joshua is now *“old and advanced in years.”* Recall that Joshua and Caleb were among the twelve spies that Moses sent into Canaan to reconnoiter the land (Numbers 13: 1-16). We learned in Joshua 14: 7 that Caleb was 40 years old when he and Joshua spied out Canaan, and we learned in Joshua 14: 10 that the conquest of Canaan took 45 years, so when Joshua allocated land to Caleb in Joshua 14, Caleb was 85 years old.
- In 24: 29 we learn that Joshua dies at 110 years old, so when he gives his farewell address he is over 100 years old!



Oh, boy, he was, indeed, *“old and well advanced in years!”* That’s 453 years old in dog years! I hope I live that long!



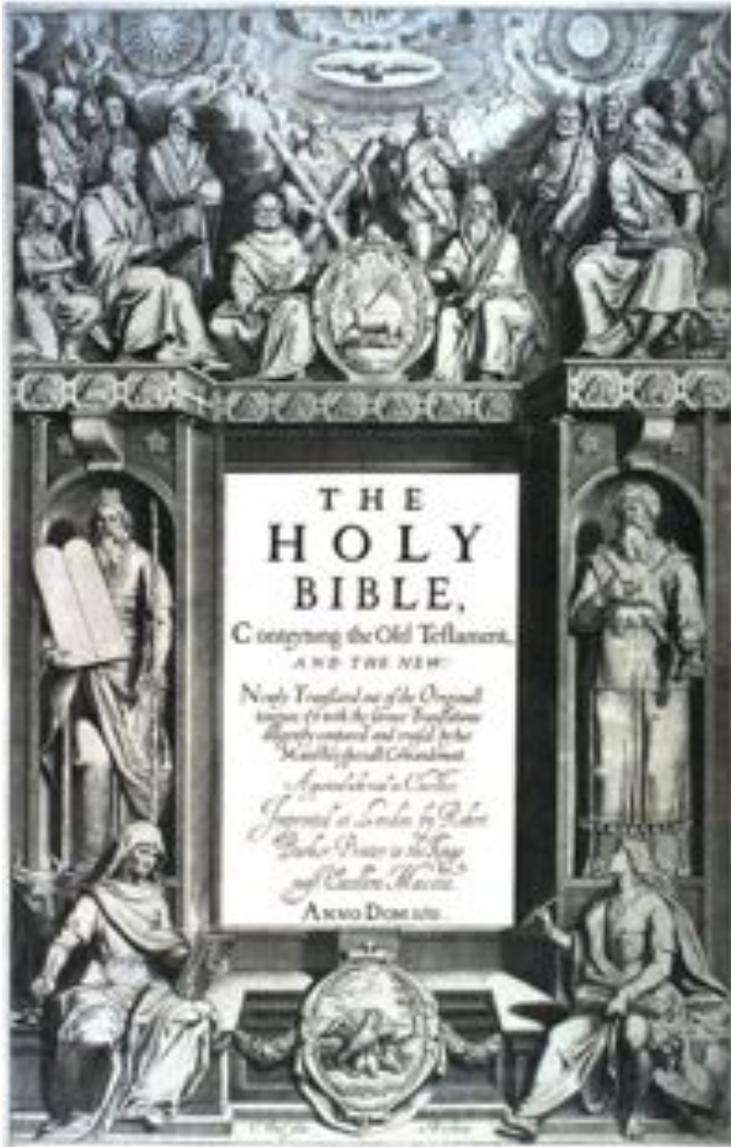
Giovanni Lanfranco. *Moses and the Messengers from Canaan* (oil on canvas), c. 1621-1624.
Getty Center, Los Angeles.

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- Although Moses and Joshua led the Israelites, Joshua makes clear that it was God who fought for Israel, God who led the Israelites, God who defeated the 31 kings and cities during Joshua’s command. Indeed, if we examine closely the story of the sun standing still, for example, we see God as the primary actor in a sequence of four action verbs:

- “After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua made a surprise attack upon them, and the Lord threw them into disorder before Israel, [who] inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon and pursued them down the Beth-horon slope, attacking them as far as Azekah and Makkedah” (Joshua 10: 9-11, NAB trans.).
 - The verbs are hamam [ha-mam,’ “threw”]; nakah [na-kah,’ “inflicted,” or better, “slew”]; radaph [ra-daph,’ “pursued”]; and again nakah [na-kah,’ “attacked,” or “smote”].
 - Importantly, “the Lord threw them into disorder . . . and inflicted . . . [and] pursued them . . . attacking them . . .” The NAB incorrectly adds “The Israelites” in verse 10, making the Israelites the subject of the action; it is not the Israelites, but the Lord who is the grammatical subject, the actor driving the verbs!



The old 1611 King James translation gets it right:

“Joshua therefore came unto them suddenly, and went up from Gilgal all night. And the Lord discomfited them before Israel, and slew them with a great slaughter at Gibeon, and chased them along the way that goeth up to Beth-horon, and smote them to Azekah and unto Makkedah.”

(Joshua 10: 9-10)

Title page to the 1611 first edition.



- Therefore, Joshua urges the Israelites to *“be strong and careful to observe all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, never turning from it right or left”* (23: 6). The reference, of course, is to the scroll Moses wrote at the end of Deuteronomy: *“When Moses had written down this law, he gave it to the Levitical priests who carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel”* (Deuteronomy 31: 9).
- It is this very scroll that Hilkiah the priest finds in the Temple during the revival initiated by king Josiah in 622 B.C., the scroll that becomes the core of the book of Deuteronomy.

. . . or mingling with these nations that survive among you. **You must not invoke their gods by name, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them, but you must hold fast to the Lord, your God, as you have done up to this day. At your approach the Lord has dispossessed great and strong nations; not one has withstood you up to this day. One of you puts to flight a thousand, because it is the Lord, your God, himself who fights for you, as he promised you. As for you, take great care to love the Lord, your God. For if you ever turn away from him and join with the remnant of these nations that survive among you, by intermarrying and intermingling with them, know for certain that the Lord, your God, will no longer dispossess these nations at your approach . . .**



- Joshua insists that the Israelites not *“mingle with”* the nations yet to be conquered or *“invoke their gods by name, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them”* (23: 7). But this is precisely what happens in the very next generation, as we will learn in the book of Judges:

- *“So the Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage, and gave their own daughters to their sons in marriage, and served their gods.”*

(Judges 3: 5-6)

- Joshua equally insists that if they do this the Lord *“will no longer dispossess these nations”* and . . .

. . . Instead they will be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge for your sides and thorns for your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord, your God, has given you. Today, as you see, I am going the way of all the earth. So now acknowledge with your whole heart and soul that not one of all the promises the Lord, your God, made concerning you has failed. Every one has come true for you; not one has failed. But just as every promise the Lord, your God, made to you has come true for you, so will he bring upon you every threat, even so far as to exterminate you from this good land which the Lord, your God, has given you. **If you transgress the covenant of the Lord, your God, which he enjoined on you, to go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the anger of the Lord will flare up against you and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.**”

(23: 1-16)

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left side of the page. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand to his chin.

Well, Joshua is very clear about this. If the Israelites adhere steadfastly to their covenant with God, all will go well; if they don't, it won't.

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog with floppy ears, sitting on the ground. It has a thoughtful expression, with its hand to its chin.

But already we have foreshadowing that things will not go well!

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Joshua now gathers all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, along with their leaders, and they stand in military formation, as Joshua addresses them, saying:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: In times past your ancestors, down to Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and served other gods . . .”

(24: 2)

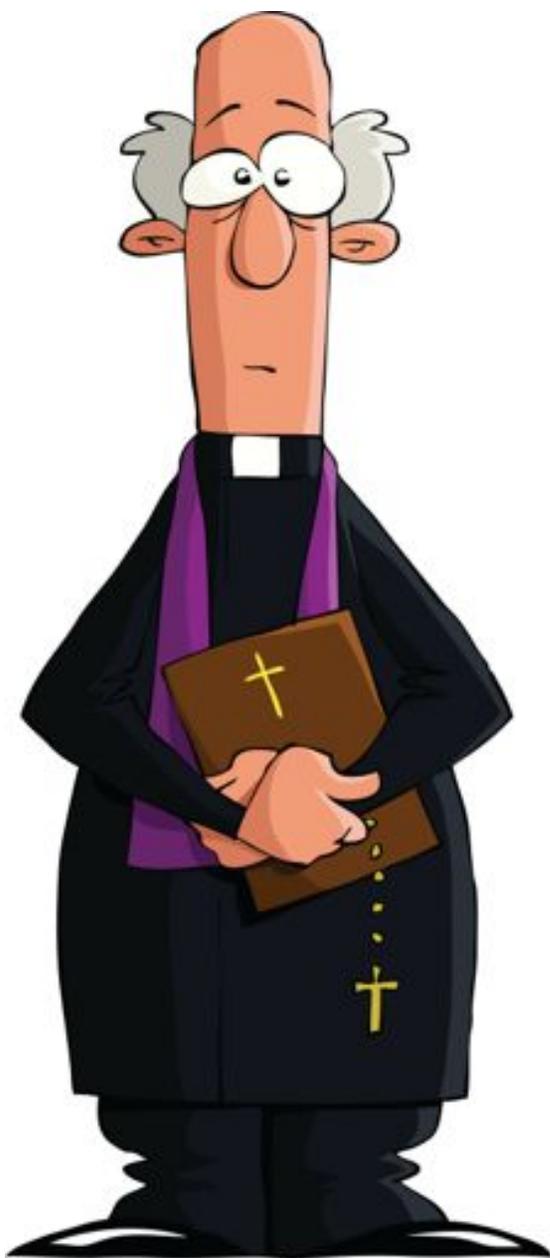
Joshua then recounts all that God has done for Israel, from Abraham through the present generation, and then he says:

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“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him completely and sincerely. Cast out the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. **As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.** But the people answered, ‘Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods. For it was the Lord, our God, who brought us and our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. He performed those great signs before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed. At our approach the Lord drove out all the peoples, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’”

(24: 14-18)

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Notice that Joshua says:

“If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose today whom you will serve”

(24: 15a)

Joshua knows that it is not a choice of people serving God or serving nothing, a choice of belonging to God or of being a free, independent moral agent. No. People must serve something. That’s a fact of the human condition.

And it holds true today. If people choose not to serve God, they will serve something else: their careers, their lust for power or wealth, their political party or their leader, be it a political leader, religious leader, business leader or cult leader.



But Joshua famously says:

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

(24: 15b)

The Israelites concur, agreeing with Joshua and insisting that they, too, will serve the Lord:

“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him completely and sincerely. Cast out the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. **But the people answered, ‘Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods. For it was the Lord, our God, who brought us and our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. He performed those great signs before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed. At our approach the Lord drove out all the peoples, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’”**

(24: 14-18)

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I'm not at all sure Joshua believes the Israelites. After all, like Moses, he's had a lot experience with them!

We've had a lot of experience with them, too. I wouldn't take any bets on their obedience!

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“Joshua in turn said to the people, ‘You may not be able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God; he is a passionate God who will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve strange gods, he will then do evil to you and destroy you, after having done you good.’ **But the people answered Joshua, ‘No! We will serve the Lord.’** Joshua therefore said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.’ They replied, ‘We are witnesses!’ ‘Now, therefore, put away the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.’ Then the people promised Joshua, ‘We will serve the Lord, our God, and will listen to his voice.’”

(24: 19-24)

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Since the people so vehemently insist that they will serve the Lord, Joshua makes a covenant with the people:

“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was in the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said to all the people, ‘This stone shall be our witness, for it has heard all the words which the Lord spoke to us. It shall be a witness against you, should you wish to deny your God.’ Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own heritage.”

(24: 25-28)



Terebinth tree [*Pistacia palaestina*] in upper Galilee.

Photo source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pistacia_palaestina

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With Joshua's covenant with the Israelites sealed, his job is over, and we conclude the book of Joshua with Joshua's death:

“After these events, Joshua, son of Nun, servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten, and they buried him within the borders of his heritage at Timnath-serah in the mountain region of Ephraim north of Mount Gaash. Israel served the Lord during the entire lifetime of Joshua, and of those elders who outlived Joshua and who knew all the work the Lord had done for Israel. The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried in Shechem in the plot of ground Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. This was a heritage of the descendants of Joseph. When Eleazar, son of Aaron, also died, he was buried on the hill which had been given to his son Phinehas in the mountain region of Ephraim.”

(24: 29-33)



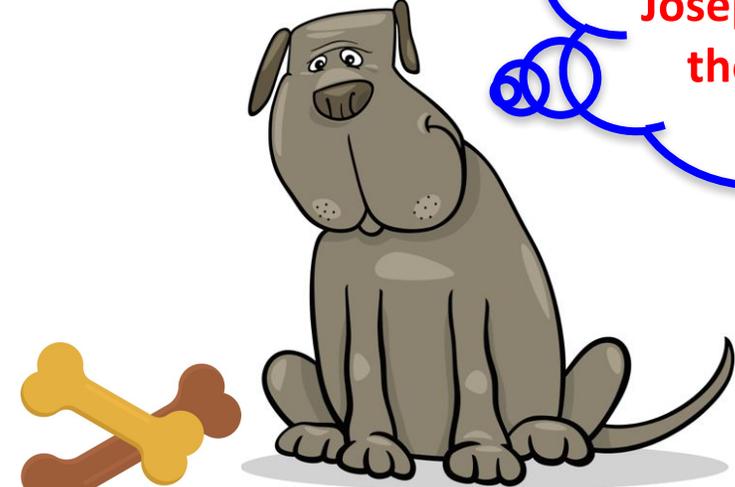
Traditional tomb of Joshua.

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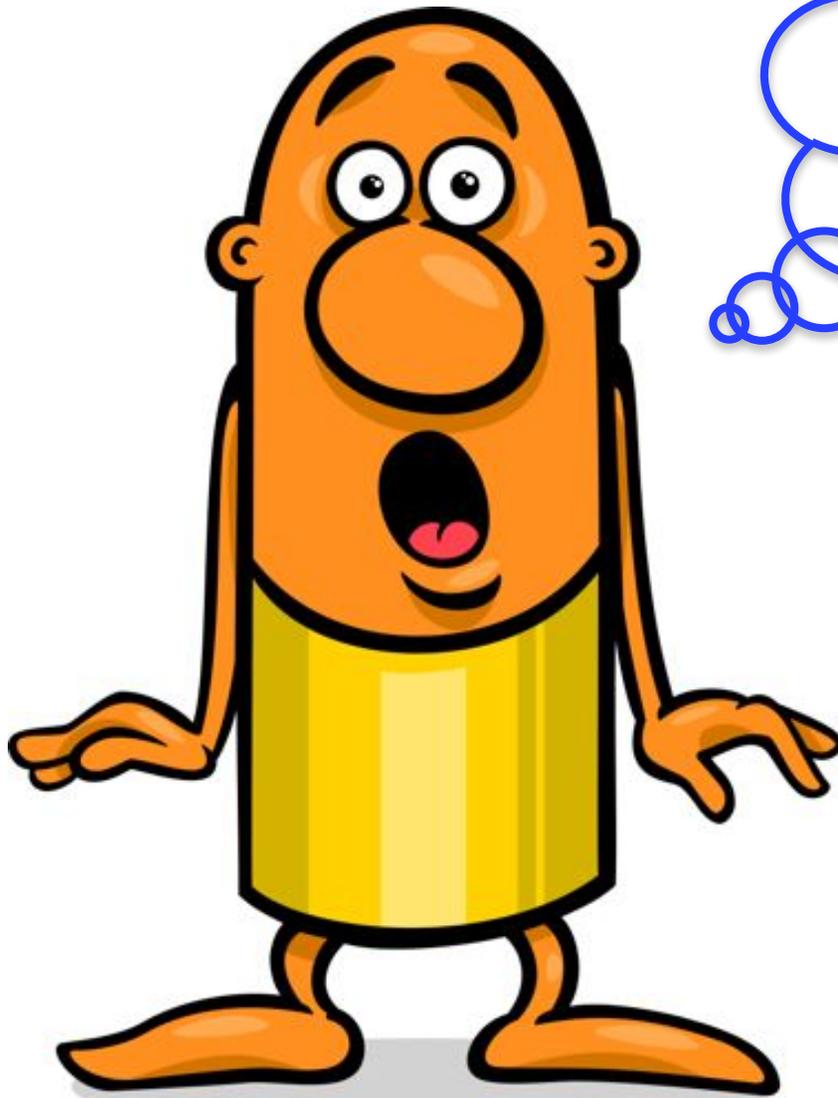


How about that! In Genesis 50: 25 we read that Joseph made the sons of Israel swear: *“When God thus takes care of you, you must bring my bones up from this place [Egypt].”* And when Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt 400 years later, *“Moses also took Joseph’s bones with him”* (Exodus 13: 19).



Apparently, the Israelites had been carting around Joseph’s bones ever since they left Egypt! I like bones.

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Holy cow!
Did they prop up Joseph's mummy in a corner of Moses' and Joshua's tent, like the corpse at an Irish wake?

Excursus:

The Problem of *Herem*

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As we are about to leave the book of Joshua, we need to pause and consider the extremely difficult issue of God commanding that all indigenous people west of the Jordan River be put “under the ban”; that is, every man, woman and child be slaughtered and their cities, towns and villages be utterly destroyed.

Spin it as we will, there is no getting around the fact that *herem*—putting a people “under the ban”—is genocide, pure and simple.



It was standard practice in ancient warfare to attack your enemies; kill their warriors in battle; execute their leaders; and take their women, children and possessions as plunder.

This is exactly what happens in the Trojan War when the Achaeans sack Troy. Set in 1184 B.C., 300 or so years after our story in Joshua, Homer's *The Iliad* recounts the tale. In Book 6 Hector, the prince of Troy and Troy's greatest warrior, speaks with his wife Andromache, who foresees her fate, and the fate of Troy:



Andromache, Astyanax and Hector.
Apulian red-figure column-crater, c. 370-360 B.C.
Museo Nazionale Jatta, Ruvo di Puglia.

*At that, Hector spun and rushed from his house,
back by the same way down the wide, well-paved streets
throughout the city until he reached the Scaean Gates,
the last point he would pass to gain the field of battle.
There his warm, generous wife came running up to meet him,
Andromache the daughter of gallant-hearted Eetion
who had lived below Mount Placos rich with timber,
in Thebe below the peaks, and ruled Cilicia's people.
His daughter had married Hector helmed in bronze.
She joined him now, and following in her steps
a servant holding the boy against her breast,
in the first flush of life, only a baby,
Hector's son, the darling of his eyes and radiant as a star . . .
Hector would always call the boy Scamandrius,
townsmen called him Astyanax, Lord of the City,
since Hector was the lone defense of Troy.
The great man of war breaking into a broad smile,
his gaze fixed on his son, in silence. Andromache,
pressing close beside him and weeping freely now,
clung to his hand, urged him, calling him: "Reckless one,
my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!
Have you no pity for him, our helpless son? Or me,
and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow,
now so soon? Yes, soon they will kill you off,
all the Achaean forces massed for assault, and then,
bereft of you, better for me to sink beneath the earth . . .*



**“Achilles” (Brad Pitt) from the 2004 movie
Troy, directed by Wolfgang Peterson.
[This is a really good movie!]**

*What other warmth, what comfort’s left for me,
Once you have met your doom? Nothing but torment!
I have lost my father. Mother’s gone as well.
Father . . . the brilliant Achilles laid him low
when he stormed Cilicia’s city filled with people,
Thebe with her towering gates. He killed Eetion,
not that he stripped his gear—he’d some respect at least—
for he burned his corpse in all his blazoned bronze,
then heaped a grave-mound high above the ashes
and nymphs of the mountain planted elms around it,
daughters of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder.
And the seven brothers I had within our halls . . .
all in the same day went down to the House of Death,
the great godlike runner Achilles butchered them all,
tending their shambling oxen, shining flocks.*

**Robert Fagels, trans. *The Iliad*
(New York: Viking Press, 1990), 6: 462-503.**



Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (c. 415 B.C.) laments Troy's fate. Given that all the Trojan warriors have been slain by their Greek victors, it is their women—mothers, daughters, wives—who give voice to the suffering of the city.

Taken as slaves and concubines by their Greek masters, Hector's widow Andromache announces that Polyxena has been sacrificed to the dead Achilles, and Hector's infant son Astyanax has been hurled from the city walls, smashed on the stones below.

As Troy's women are about to be taken captive aboard Odysseus' ship, Hecuba, wife of Priam king of Troy, laments:



Merry-Joseph Blondel. *Hecuba and Polyxena*
(oil on canvas), 1814.
LACMA, Los Angeles.

*Ah, wretched me. So this is the unhappy end
and goal of all the sorrows I have lived.
I go forth from my country and a city lit with flames.
Come, aged feet; make one last weary struggle,
That I may hail my city in its affliction. O Troy,
Once so huge over all Asia in the drawn wind of pride,
Your very name of glory shall be stripped away.
They are burning you, and us they drag forth
from our land enslaved.
Oh, gods! Do I call upon the gods for help?
We cried to them before now, and they would not hear.
Come then, hurl ourselves into the pyre.
Best now to die in the flaming ruins of our fathers' house!*

Richard Lattimore, trans. "The Trojan Women" in
Euripides III (The Complete Greek Tragedies), 3rd edition.
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1272-1283.



The concept of *herem*—of putting a people “under the ban”—differs from conventional ancient warfare by an order of magnitude, however, and it is typically motivated by a desire for religious purity or simply by raw vengeance.

And it is not uncommon.

In the Hebrew Scriptures *herem* occurs in its verb form 51 times and its noun form 28 times. For example, Israel puts the Moabites and Midianites “under the ban” in Numbers 31, killing every man, woman and child (but keeping the virgins for themselves).

They do so because, at the advice of Balaam, the Moabite and Midianite women had seduced the Israelites into worshipping their gods.



Recall the story in Numbers 31 in which *“The Lord said to Moses: Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites,”* so the Israelites proceeded to wage war *“and killed every male,”* and then executed the five kings of Midian, along with Balaam son of Beor *“with the sword”* (that is, the Israelites beheaded them).

The Israelites then *“took captive the women of the Midianites with their children, and all their herds and flocks and wealth as loot, while they set on fire all the towns where they had settled and all their encampments. Then they took all the plunder, with the people and animals they had captured, and brought the captives, together with the spoils and plunder, to Moses and Eleazar the priest and to the Israelite community . . .”* (31: 9-12).



At this stage, the captives (the women and children) would become the Israelite slaves or concubines, to be kept or sold, as happens in the post-Trojan War tales of Euripides, Virgil, Ovid and Seneca, as well as in other ancient cultures, such as Moab. But that is not what happens here in Numbers 31:

“When Moses and Eleazar the priest, with all the leaders of the community, went outside the camp to meet them, Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who were returning from the military campaign. ‘So you have spared all the women!’ he exclaimed. These are the very ones who on Balaam’s advice were behind the Israelites’ unfaithfulness to the Lord in the affair at Peor, so that plague struck the Lord’s community. Now kill, therefore, every male among the children and kill every woman who has had sexual relations with a man. But you may spare for yourselves all the girls who have not had sexual relations.”

(31: 13-18)



What goes around, comes around. During the time of Omri king of Israel, around 840 B.C., the Moabites place the Israelites “under the ban,” a story alluded to in 2 Kings 3: 4-8.

The Mesha Stele, discovered in 1868 by Frederick Augustus Klein at the archaeological site of ancient Dibon in modern-day Jordan confirms the biblical account (but with a very different ending!), telling the story of how king Mesha of Moab, with the help of his god, Chemosh, defeats Omri and his son Ahab, kings of Israel, who had subjected the Moabites for many years.



**Mesha Stele, c. 840 B.C.
Louvre Museum, Paris.**

“I am Mesha, son of Chemosh-gad, king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab thirty years, and I have reigned after my father. And I have built this sanctuary for Chemosh in Karchah, a sanctuary of salvation, for he saved me from all aggressors, and made me look upon all mine enemies with contempt. Omri was king of Israel, and oppressed Moab during many days, and Chemosh was angry with his aggressions. His [Omri’s] son [king Ahab] succeeded him, and he also said, I will oppress Moab.

In my days [Chemosh] said, Let us go, and I will see my desire upon him and his house, and Israel said, I shall destroy [Moab] for ever. Now Omri took the land of Madeba, and occupied it in his day, and in the days of his son [Ahab], forty years . . .



*... and Chemosh had mercy on [Moab] in my time. And I built Baal-meon and made therein the ditch, and I built Kiriathaim. And the men of Gad dwelled in the country of Ataroth from ancient times, and the king of Israel fortified Ataroth. **I assaulted the wall and captured it, and killed all the warriors of the city for the well-pleasing of Chemosh and Moab, and I removed from it all the spoil, and offered it before Chemosh in Kirjath; and I placed therein the men of Siran, and the men of Mochrath. And Chemosh said to me, "Go take Nebo against Israel," and I went in the night and I fought against it from the break of day till noon, and I took it: and I killed all seven thousand men, but I did not kill the women and maidens, for I devoted them to Ashtar-Chemosh; and I took from it the vessels of Jehovah [YHWH], and offered them before Chemosh.**"¹*

¹ James King. *Moab's Patriarchal Stone* (London: Bickers and Son, 1878), pp. 55-56. [Text translated by James King.]



The most vivid examples of *herem*, however, occur in the book of Joshua, where God commands Joshua to put all conquered people west of the Jordan River “under the ban,” beginning with Jericho and Ai, and continuing with all 31 kings and their cities whom Joshua defeats.

In Deuteronomy God had commanded:

“In the cities of these peoples that the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive. You must put them all under the ban—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—just as the Lord, your God, has commanded you, so that they do not teach you to do all the abominations that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God.”

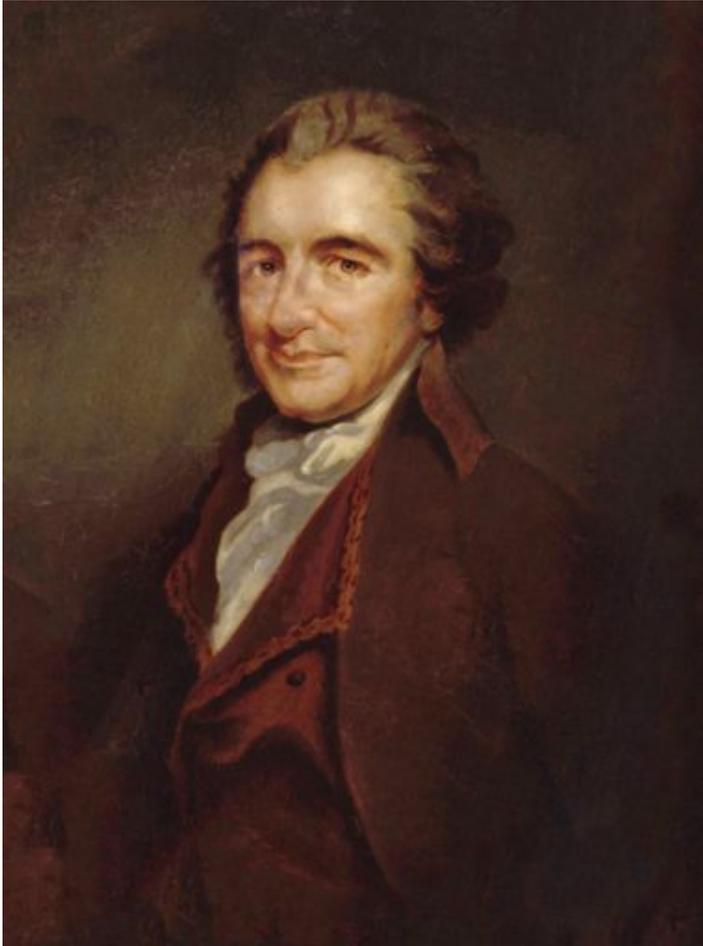
(Deuteronomy 20: 16-18)

And that’s what they do.



The concept of *herem* in Scripture has provoked intense and varied commentary, ranging from Thomas Paine's visceral scorn and contempt to Christian apologists' who attempt to justify such actions as somehow morally correct.

Here is Thomas Paine (1737-1809), philosopher, political theorist and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States in *The Age of Reason* (published in 3 parts: 1794, 1795 and 1807):



Auguste Millière. *Thomas Paine*
(oil on canvas), 1880.
National Portrait Gallery, London.

“The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion . . . [whence] arose all the horrid assassinations of whole nations of men, women, and infants, with which the Bible is filled; and the bloody persecutions, and tortures unto death and religious wars, that since that time have laid Europe in blood and ashes.”

The Age of Reason, pp. 226-227



In contrast, here is the commentary from a recent Christian apologetic web site, justifying *herem*:

“Complaining about Jehovah’s order to destroy innocent children is a vain gesture when one realizes that the children were spared an even worse fate of being reared as slaves under the domination of sin. Instead of having to endure the scourge of a life of immorality and wickedness, these innocents were ushered early into the bliss of Paradise. If the male children had been allowed to mature, they most likely would have followed the pagan ways of their forefathers, and eventually would have taken vengeance on the Israelites. Killing the males not only prevented them from falling into the same abominable sins as their parents, but also kept Israel from having to battle them later . . .”

www.apologeticspress.org



Robert Alter, in *The Five Books of Moses*, strikes a reasoned balance between such extremes:



Robert Alter
Professor of Hebrew
and Comparative Literature
University of California, Berkeley.

“The practice of massacring most or all of a conquered population was widespread in the ancient Near East (the Moabite Mesha stele records a similar ‘ban’ or ‘herem’ against a defeated enemy, using certain Semitic terms cognate to ones that are employed here), but that is not exactly a palliative. It is painfully evident that this is an instance in which the biblical outlook sadly failed to transcend its historical contexts.”

The Five Books of Moses, p. 843.



And that is the key: “historical contexts.”

As we have noted in our previous studies, all art—literary, visual or musical—mirrors the time and culture from which it emerges.

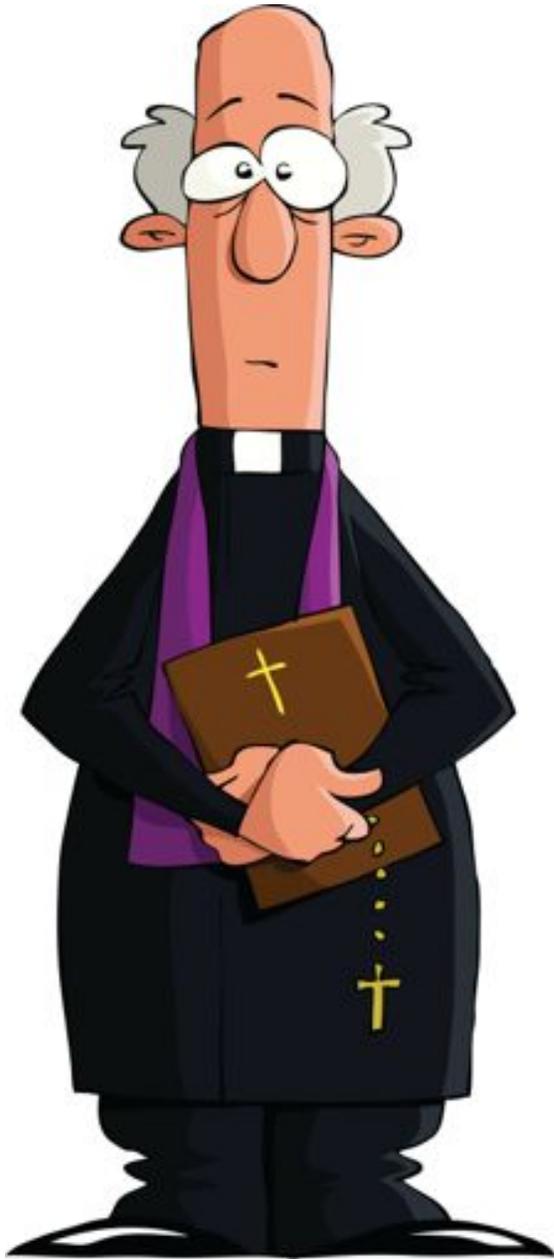
Scripture is no exception. When we read in Numbers, *“The Lord said to Moses: ‘Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites,’”* or we read in Joshua of the wholesale slaughter of an entire population, including women and children, it is a mistake to apply 21st-century Christian moral and ethical standards to a story that emerges from a 3,000-year old Near Eastern culture.



In the Hebrew Scriptures we are reading stories that reflect how people understood God and themselves *in their own time and culture*. In addition, the stories we read in Joshua through 2 Kings were written 500-1,000 years *after* the events they describe. They are literary works that embody a nation's self-created identity in the form of stories, stories that employ many of the conventions of mythopoeic and epic literature.

To apply the practices of such stories in *a literal way* to our own time and culture is a fundamental mistake, both in methodology and in theology, morality and ethics. Unfortunately, there have been those who do so, such as the now-defunct Israeli political movement *Gush Emunim* which considered modern-day Palestinians to be like the Canaanites, and they saw it as their duty to exterminate all Arabs who reject Jewish sovereignty.

Fundamentalist Moslems, such as ISIS, make the same mistake, with horrendous consequences.

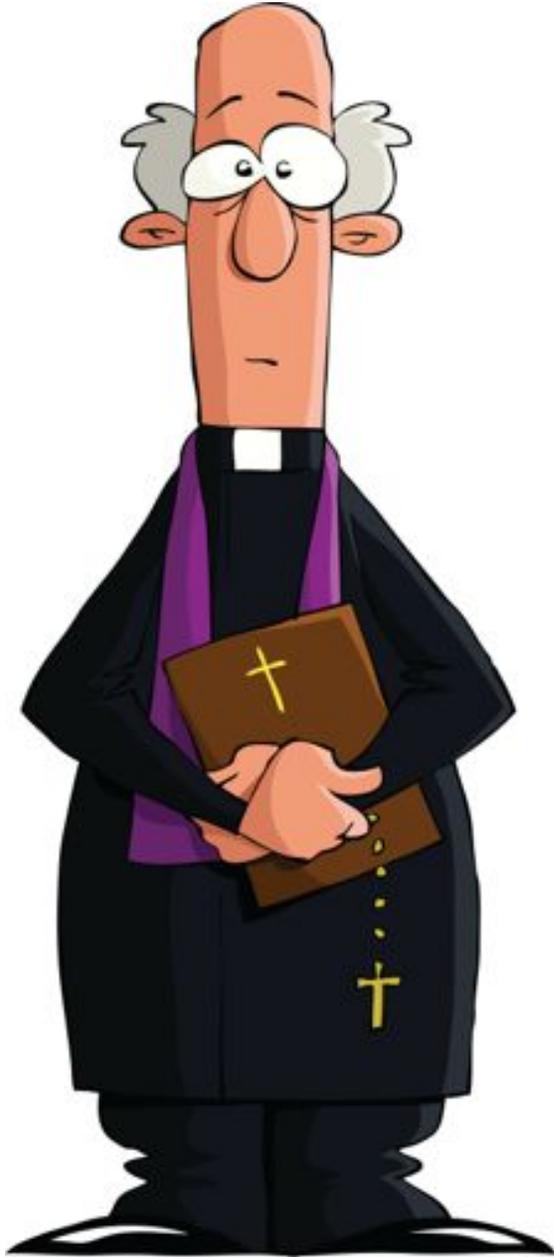


Today—in light of the catastrophic wars of the 20th century and the technological advances in modern warfare and weaponry—much thought has been given to the conditions under which war may be justly waged. The Roman Catholic church succinctly summarizes its thinking on war in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995):

“The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time:

- The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- There must be serious prospects of success;
- The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.”

(3: 2309)



The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (2004) probes deeper, placing war within the overall context of social justice. Paragraphs 500-501 are particularly instructive:

“It is important to remember that it is one thing to wage a war of self-defense; it is quite another to seek to impose domination on another nation. The possession of war potential does not justify the use of force for political or military objectives. Nor does the mere fact that war has unfortunately broken out mean that all is fair between the warring parties Therefore, engaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions.”



When we read about *herem* and the genocidal wars in the Hebrew Scriptures, we should understand that the stories we read mirror the time and culture from which they emerge, and we should understand the literary conventions embodied in those stories.

That's what becoming "educated readers of Scripture" is all about.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. How old was Joshua when he died?
2. In his farewell address Joshua recounts all that God has done for the Israelites, from Abraham through his own day. When he finishes, Joshua presents two paths for the Israelites. What are they?
3. What path does Joshua famously follow?
4. Where are Joseph's bones buried?
5. How do you explain God commanding the Israelites to place their enemies "under the ban," to kill every man, woman and child—to commit genocide?

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