

From the Pastor's Desk

The Bible's Violent God

Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' (1 Samuel 15:1-4)

This is one of the most violent passages in the Old Testament, where God is commanding genocide. How do we make sense of this when in the New Testament Jesus was the embodiment of nonviolence? John M. Buchanan, editor of *The Christian Century Magazine* made this observation:

Without intending to, I turned to the History Channel's "The Bible" recently and saw the birth of Moses, the slaughter of Hebrew babies and the rescue of baby Moses from the river.... I kept watching as Moses killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a slave and fled into the wilderness .

Along with millions of other viewers, I saw Moses return to the palace to confront the new pharaoh. The Passover angel of death moved through the city streets in a creeping fog ... Then the Red Sea parted in the nick of time for the Hebrews before it flooded back to drown Pharaoh's pursuing army. There was death and destruction everywhere, all orchestrated and carried out by God.

Who could believe in a God like this? Who could believe in a God who orders his people to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan, making certain that everyone is dead, just to make way for God's people?

The problem with most media representations of the biblical story is that they are so literal. In the effort to get the details of the story right, the storyteller misses the point. Over the years, most of us come to an accommodation with biblical texts that stretch the imagination—particularly those texts that portray God as vengeful, angry and murderous. We parse the Red Sea story as a myth, a story that reveals an important truth about God and human beings. Maybe the Red Sea was a swamp; maybe the pursuing Egyptian chariots became mired in the mud; maybe the people of God told the story of their ancestors' unlikely escape from Egypt and added details with each retelling. But for most of us the point is not the story; the point is the gracious providence of God, which operates in history as hope and justice and love.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico offers a working hermeneutic for interpreting scripture. In regard to any text, Rohr proposes: "If you see God operating at a lesser level than the best person you know, then the text is not authentic revelation." If God is love (1 John 4:16), then no person could be more loving than God, Rohr says. "God is never less loving than the most loving person you know."

Most of us, like Rohr, do not believe, cannot believe, that God told the Hebrew people to kill everyone who got in their way. No doubt the Hebrews did commit horrible acts; history is full of such stories. But the voice they heard wasn't God's voice.

It's a sad reality that many continue to believe that God orchestrates death, destruction and human suffering and orders people to kill. That, in my mind, is a gross and harmful distortion. (From "The Christian Century", April 17, 2013)

Belief in an infallible Bible leaves us stuck with a violent God, which can instill fear that's carried through life like a mild depression, only to become worse when facing death and the thought of appearing before this vengeful God. However, this can be avoided when we understand the Bible to be inspired but not infallible, and written by humans from a different culture who had an agenda. In the case of the genocide mentioned above, the author was concerned about Jewish people interbreeding with the Amalekites. In their time and culture, keeping the Jewish blood line pure was very important, so the Jewish author put this tragic command on the lips of God.

The idea that the Bible is infallible is a new phenomenon. It's a product of the scientific revolution that began in the 16th century where truth was equated with factuality, i.e. that which is true is that which can be scientifically verified. This put into doubt the stories of the Bible. And what we now refer to as "fundamentalism" arose out of the scientific revolution.

It is helpful to understand that it was no accident that the emphasis on an infallible Bible coincided with the Catholic dogma of the infallibility of the pope. Both occurred shortly after Darwin published "The Origin of Species" in 1859, which referred to evolution. It wasn't long when Protestants reacted to this by proclaiming the Bible to be infallible in 1860, prompting Catholicism to proclaim the pope to be infallible in 1870. These proclamations of infallibility gave a kind of divine status to the Bible and pope, which rightfully belongs to God alone.

As Christians, our faith is in the Living Christ whose teachings trump any violence found in the Old Testament. Pentecost proclaims that he is present at this very moment and cannot be contained or controlled, not by the Bible or any pope.

~ Henry