

Proscription of the Canaanite Nations

Rabbi Havivi's Question:

I'm teaching a tanach-reading course, and we are about to discuss Sefer Yehoshua. I'm looking for some commentary or essay or understanding that deals with the inevitable question: "How could we Jews/Israelites be so cruel to wipe out men women and children in our conquest of the land? Even if it's not historically true, why do we have this heartless portrait of ourselves?" I remember that Moshe Greensberg once wrote an essay indicating that ma'asei avot should not be taken as siman l'banim in our own day, but can any one help out beyond this?

Response 1:

What actually transpired in history is not sufficient to answer the religious question. The religious question is dealt with, however, by many sensitive readers of the text in rabbinic times and thereafter. What was it that they saw in the text once the text was fixed?

My point is that the biblical texts did at some point become fixed--and when they became fixed they retained, as you indicate, great complexity. How did our ancestors read and understand these texts in their complexity. Their teachings were religious teachings.

The question Eli started with, and which you, in essence, rephrase as "Most often, I've been challenged with this by Jews who want to see the Bible as 'their own' book, and the mitzvot therein as 'their own' mitzvot, but have a hard time doing so when it comes to genocide" is actually the question that I feel needs to be explored--a religious answer to a troubling religious issue: how could God have commanded Israel to destroy the nations who lived in Canaan. The Yerushalmi text I quoted is based on the very complexity of the text that you refer to in your note--and it is a religious answer.

Rashi saw a question and heard it in the non-Jewish world in which he lived. He answered it in a religious way. The law of herem I mentioned in my original post is very specific about what should happen. How could this be ordered by God? How did later generations understand this set of commands? It is very easy to read the text you cite about not wiping out all the people lest wild beasts take over the land as placing the value of the land over the lives of the people--destroy the people and you destroy the land, therefore don't destroy the people. Is this an acceptable moral position?

If the Israelites had sufficient settlers or if the wild beasts were wiped out would the "genocide" have been stopped? Perhaps not. Again, a question.

I am not advocating that we ignore the complexity of the text. On the contrary, I am advocating seeing how our ancestors formed their religious answers on the basis of the complexity of the text. The history

of what actually happened is not a religious answer. The religious evaluation of the history is a religious answer. The complexity of the texts that preserve varying points of view point to the religious complexity of our people during the time of the formation of the texts. Texts comment internally on other texts, in our modern parlance. Our ancestors in the time following the fixing of the texts saw the complexities and used them to form and express their own religious answers. We must learn from them as well.

Perhaps my closing remark about answering our enemies was misleading. I know that our enemies raise questions about the issue. I also know, as you can tell in the opening of my original posting that good Jews also wrestle with the issues. Learning how our ancestors through the ages dealt with this issue as a religious issue is what the discussion is all about. While history and biblical text history provide information that may help us formulate answers, they are not sufficient, as I see it, to understand how it was treated as a religious issue in Jewish thought. It is to rabbinic literature and later commentaries, as well as to philosophic writings, that we have to turn in order to see the history (and complexity) of the Jewish religious answer to these issues. The Jews you mention "who want to see the Bible as 'their own' book, and the mitzvot therein as 'their own'*" cannot ignore rabbinic writings if they want to understand the Tanakh as Jews since we are not Biblical Jews but rabbinic--or post-rabbinic--Jews.

Response 2:

Dear Friends,

How did the broad range of thought found in rabbinic literature deal with it during the centuries following the close of the biblical text? How did Jewish philosophers deal with the question? How did our commentators deal with it? How did/do those who reject Biblical Criticism deal with the issues?

The questions do not easily go away by saying "never happened" because there are those who would say that our own texts tell us that this is what was supposed to happen. That it may not have happened can be attributed to a failure of God to overpower enemies or a failure of the people to follow God's commands properly and so forth. The actual failure is not a sufficient answer. The question is also about intentions and goals.

So, there is still much to be explored in this matter. The Yerushalmi's treatment of the issue in regard to Joshua quoted in my original note (see below) is one example of what we should become familiar with in regard to the question--even though we may be personally satisfied by the current answers to the actual historical picture or the lessons we may learn through biblical criticism. Rashi's commentary on the reason the Torah begins Bereshit bara rather than with Hah.odesh hazeh... Is another example of how our ancestors wrestled with the issue with an eye on criticism from others. We do not have to be personally convinced by the approaches our ancestors suggested, but when our enemies attack us we

should be able to access a wide variety of weapons with which to defend ourselves.

With all due respect to Stephan, when I have heard people ask the question about the Biblical commandment to wipe out the Canaanite nations, it is neither as an historical issue nor as a rabbinic one. Most often, I've been challenged with this by Jews who want to see the Bible as *their own* book, and the mitzvot therein as *their own* mitzvot, but have a hard time doing so when it comes to genocide.

That's more a religious issue, on a personal level, than anything else. And it is, of course, a doozy.

I'd point out to them that the commandment(s) given in the Torah were not carried out in the way one might think, so it is necessary to read both Joshua and Judges. It's clear that not only do we in the 21st century have a problem with genocide, but the contemporaneous texts do, as well. It wasn't carried out in a genocidal fashion, even though the book of Joshua says that the Canaanites were completely wiped out. It also turns around and says, in the next verse, that Canaanites remained, and that the inhabitants were NOT to be wiped out lest wild beasts overrun the cities (a rationale also found in the Torah).

In other words, reading an isolated verse in the Torah and taking it at face value, even one as explicit as the commandment we're discussing, is simply an improper and cavalier way of embracing the Bible.

If we read these texts in all their complexity, however, we see issues of invasion and victory that even shed light on wars being fought to this day (in Iraq, for instance).

That's why the Bible is a great, if misunderstood, book, and why the Jewish people would do well to continue to study it and embrace it.

Response 3:

Dear Eli and colleagues,

The questions you raise are key to understanding one of the most fascinating eras in Biblical History. It's really important that we not allow ourselves to be fundamentalists about this.

The short answer is that the annihilation of the Canaanites, *lo haya v'lo nivra*. In order to understand why, we need to immerse ourselves in documentary hypothesis, which many scholars don't bother extending beyond the Pentateuch.

Some German Bible scholars began talking about the "Hexateuch" in the late nineteenth century, when they noticed that many of the duplications / contradictions they were used to were also noticeable in Joshua. They didn't go far enough. Moshe Weinfeld wrote a groundbreaking article in *Vetus Testamentum* in 1967, showing how the same composite nature of the text that is familiar in the Pentateuch is operative throughout the Former Prophets.

Once we recognize the difference between early and late segments, we can understand why "good kings" before the Josianic Reform were regarded as having failed for "permitting" the bamot to remain, why some texts oppose the institution of Monarchy, while others applaud it, and above all, why some texts report the annihilation of Canaanites, while others clearly show Canaanites (or their descendants, at least) embedded in the mainstream Israelite population.

Deuteronomy "commands" the annihilation of the Canaanites, because by the time it was written, there were no more Canaanites. Narratives based on Deuteronomy, assume the wholesale extermination of Canaanites under Joshua. Earlier segments, which show the precariousness and vulnerability of the Israelites during the period of the "Judges" make it clear that there was much more going on than what later generations tell about the Conquest.

There's much more, but, as usual, tafasta merubeh, lo tafasta. All I can say is v'idakh, zil g'mor.

Response 4:

Dear Eli,

This topic came up during my Torah study with the congregation this past Shabbat (H. Erem). I took a moment and noticed that Michael Graetz has an essay in the back of the Etz Hayim entitled "War and Peace." H. Erem is one of the topics he covers. This may not be as extensive a discussion as you are seeking, but it is a good beginning. I haven't read it yet, but Conservative Judaism Spring 2005 contains "War and the Possibilities of Peace: A Response to Michael Graetz's 'War and Peace' in Etz Hayim," by Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, and "Response" by Michael Graetz.

If you click this link (<http://tinyurl.com/39939I>) you can read a review essay about this topic as it is treated in Etz Hayim. Comparisons are made with other treatments, including Plaut's Humash and something written by Jeff Tigay. At bottom of the page you can also read David Golinkin on a related matter, "Are Jews still commanded to blot out Amalek?"

In a listserv discussion (Mail.Liberal-Judaism, archived on the web) some years ago, Michael Graetz was quoted on this topic in a different context (The Malleability of Halakha, which you can read in full at <http://tinyurl.com/3ab6ow>). The discussion is about Betzalel going beyond what God has commanded Moses and that this is approved by God

In addressing such subjects, I often try to juxtapose the biblical "ideal" with the biblical "reality" rather than with assumptions about history or about the nature of our ancestors. After all, the Bible is not a history text but a theological one. The issue is not whether or not our ancestors were cruel.

And so what I often do is consider issues like the fact that although Israel is commanded to wipe out the seven nations, Joshua keeps his word to the Gibeonites, even though his word was given under false pretences, and even though keeping his word contravened the commandment to wipe them out. How

could it be right to spare the Gibeonites? How could Joshua's word trump God's?

Then, more strikingly, in II Samuel 21 we find: "Now there was a famine in the days of David...And the Lord said: 'There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death'." How could it be wrong to kill the Gibeonites when the Torah commands it? How could killing the Gibeonites warrant the killing of Saul's sons and the destruction of the House of Saul? (Hazal add a very interesting twist to this, since nowhere are we told that Saul killed the Gibeonites. Thus Hazal say that by killing the Kohanim of Nov, Saul deprived the Gibeonites of their livelihood, and so he is said to have killed them. Hardly pshat, but a very demanding drash).

Another juxtaposition can be made in regard to the "ideal" of wiping out Amalek. Samuel takes it literally, and from that literal understanding he reaches conclusions in regard to the consequences of Saul's not living up to the "ideal" by sparing the King and the livestock. Yet, at Ziklag, David permits four hundred Amalakite warriors to flee, and he establishes a dynasty.

What lessons can we learn from these examples in regard to the commandment to wipe out the Seven Nations and Amalek, and about "lo ba-shamayim hi", human understanding of the Divine message, choice and moral responsibility, and even Realpolitik?

Hope this provides some food for thought.

Response 5:

I think the more interesting question is: How and why did the transformation take place from the divinely-legitimated, merciless dispatch of our enemies to the rabbinic culture of submission and subordination. The JPS Tenach is completely honest in its superb translation of Joshua, Judges, Samuel I & II, Kings I & II. Let's be truthful. This is what our ancestors were like and we wouldn't be alive today without them. I, for one, am grateful.

Response 6:

Eliezer,

I would look at Prof. Geller's article in Prooftexts, January 1990. Cited by Chancellor Schorsch here: <http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/archives/5765/vayishlah.shtml>

In a brilliant article (Prooftexts, January 1990) on chapter 34 of Genesis, Professor Stephen A. Geller of the Seminary has argued forcefully that the Canaanite threat to ancient Israel as imagined by the Bible was an intellectual construct and not a concrete population. "Canaanism" as an idea was construed to be the polar opposite of Israelite monotheism. Whereas the Bible posited a transcendent God without form or gender, "Canaanism" embraced an immanent divinity approachable through child sacrifices, divination and fertility cults. The natural religion of the "Canaanites" especially promoted sexual licentiousness to eliminate the space separating human and divine. In response, ancient Israel transformed circumcision from "a puberty or marriage ritual intended to increase fertility of seed" into a rite of passage at birth "as a 'sign' of the covenantal promise of seed."

