

Discussed: Sodom and Gomorrah, mercy and justice, vendetta, wickedness, kooks, fanatics, and serial murderers, Puritans, Pope John XXIII, New Orleans, Hillel, love

# Israelite Genocide and Islamic Jihad

By Roy E. Gane

**O**n their way to the land of Canaan after wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites wiped out a major segment of the Midianite population and totally annihilated the people of Arad, as well as the subjects of Sihon and Og (Num. 21, 31; Deut. 2–3). These massacres were just a preview of what they were commissioned to do to the inhabitants of Canaan:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you (Deut. 20:16–17 NIV).

## Israelite Genocide and the Problem of Theodicy

Such destruction can only be described as systematic, divinely mandated genocide.<sup>2</sup> How can a God of love (compare 1 John 4:8) be so merciless? We cannot simply blame the Israelites; they were the Lord's agents. Instead of destroying the peoples of Canaan by fire as he did Sodom and

Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24–28), he used the Israelites as his terrible swift sword, at least partly to teach them faith through the discipline of war (compare Judg. 3:2, 4).

Some scholars refuse to accept the possibility that God—at least the God revealed by Jesus—could have ever commanded genocide under any circumstances. So they must posit radical discontinuity between Israel's God and the God of the New Testament and/or interpret the Old Testament as misrepresenting God's true character.<sup>3</sup> Those of us who accept the entire Bible as the Word of God have no choice but to admit that God sometimes gives up on groups of people and chooses to destroy them (Gen. 6–7, 19; Rev. 20), and during a certain phase of history he uniquely delegated a carefully

restricted part of his destructive work to his chosen nation of ancient Israel, which he tightly controlled and held accountable under theocratic rule.<sup>4</sup>

It will only be with the frank acknowledgment that ordinary ethical requirements were suspended and the ethical principles of the last judgment intruded that the divine promises and commands to Israel concerning Canaan and the Canaanites come into their own. Only so can the conquest be justified and seen as it was in truth—not murder, but the hosts of the Almighty visiting upon the rebels against his righteous throne their just deserts—not robbery, but the meek inheriting the earth.<sup>5</sup>

It is pointless either to defend or condemn God (compare Job 40:2). Our attempts at theodicy—justifying God's character—are stimulating exercises, but in the final analysis we can only stand back and let God be God, admitting that our reasonings are flawed by inadequate perspective.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, our acceptance of his character is a matter of faith. He has given us plenty of evidence to trust him, but not enough to penetrate all the mysteries of his ways (compare Deut. 29:29 [Hebrew v. 28]).

There are some clues that the Lord's treatment of the peoples in Canaan was in harmony with his character of mercy and justice:<sup>7</sup>

1. He gave them ample opportunity to know him through witnesses such as Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17–24).
2. He kept his people of Israel waiting in Egypt until the end of four centuries of probation for the Amorites (Gen. 15:13, 16). This is more than three times the 120 years he gave the antedeluvian world (6:3).
3. Depraved inhabitants of Canaan practiced gross immorality (Lev. 18:3, 27–28) and child sacrifice (Deut. 12:31). If God hadn't destroyed them, he would have owed the people of Sodom and Gomorrah an apology (compare Gen. 18–19).
4. As exemplified by what happened at Shittim (Num. 25), idolatrous and immoral men and women in close proximity to the Israelites would inevitably corrupt them and thereby cause their destruction (Deut. 7:4; 20:18). The Lord's ideal for the Israelites and the Canaanite environment were mutually exclusive.

5. The fact that the Lord threatened to treat unfaithful Israelites like Canaanites (Lev. 18:28; Num. 33:55–56; compare on 16:1–35, "Bridging Contexts") shows that his vendetta was against wickedness, not ethnicity. Those who rebel against him are subject to "equal opportunity punishment."

## Genocide, Jihad, and Theocracy

An ardent pacifist, Albert Einstein wrote: "Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism—how passionately I hate them! How vile and despicable seems war to me! I would rather be hacked in pieces than take part in such an abominable business."<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, Einstein's twentieth century witnessed war and genocide on an unprecedented scale, with the annihilation of millions of Armenians, Jews, Gypsies, Tutsis, Hutus, and others just because they belonged to certain groups.

For us, genocide evokes revulsion and instant condemnation. But then we read the Bible and find that God's chosen people carried out on their enemies—of all things—genocide! Not only does the Bible condone this behavior; God commanded holy wars of extermination and punished his people for rebellion if they failed to shed the last drop of blood (Num. 33:55–56; 1 Sam. 15).

The brutal question is: How is genocide by the Israelites different from all other genocides? What gave them any more right to massacre entire populations, including women and children, than other "holy warriors" through the centuries? After all, "Christian" Crusaders in the Middle Ages, who piously perpetrated unbelievably bloody atrocities, and their Islamic opponents both acted in accordance with sincere beliefs that they were engaged in holy war approved by their respective deities. Hans Küng pointedly observes:

Many massacres and wars not only in the Near East between Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, between Syrians, Palestinians, Druse and Israelis, but also between Iran and Iraq, between Indians and Pakistanis, Hindus and Sikhs, Singhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, and earlier also between Buddhist monks and the Catholic regime in Vietnam, as also today between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, were or are so indescribably fanatical,



bloody and inexorable because they have a religious foundation. And what is the logic? If God himself is “with us,” with our religion, confession, nation, our party, then anything is allowed against the other party, which in that case must logically be of the devil. In that case even unrestrained violation, burning, destruction and murder is permissible in the name of God.<sup>9</sup>

Today, Islamic militants view themselves as simply continuing an international jihad, “holy war.” When Yassir Arafat rallied his supporters by yelling, “jihad!” he appealed to a kind of divine mandate. However Americans and their Western allies may characterize the so-called “war on terrorism,” those on the other side have consistently said that it is a religious war motivated by zeal to carry out (their interpretation of) commands enshrined in their “holy books.”

If the jihad of firebrand groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah involves indiscriminate slaughter of men, women, children, and the elderly, why is anyone sur-

An aerial view of the Islamic holy city Mecca.

prised? Shocked, dismayed, angered, of course, but why surprised? This is the way their kind of “holy war” works. Those whom we despise as kooks, fanatics, and serial murderers are idolized as heroes and martyrs by those who share their religious worldview. If ancient Israelite holy war does not disturb us the way modern Islamic jihad does, it is at least partly because the carnage of the former is chronologically removed from us. CNN and *Time* magazine do not assault us with the visual impact of corpses and mangled wreckage in ancient Arad, Heshbon, and Jericho (Josh. 6).

For me, a believer in the divine authority of the Bible, Israel’s holy wars were unique because that nation was a true theocracy acting on the basis of direct revelation from God and carrying out retributive justice on his behalf. When God tells you to do

something, you do it, even if it is unusual and unpleasant. A towering example of such obedience was carried out by Abraham, the father of the Jews and Arabs and the spiritual father of the Christian faith. When God commanded him to offer his son as a human sacrifice, he set about to do this painful deed and was stopped only by another divine command (Gen. 22).

The problem is that other groups also claim to be theocracies acting on commands from God/god(s)/Allah. We immediately think of the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Shiite regime of Iran, which have attempted to enforce on modern civil society the rules and penalties

## Religious Belief and "Holy War"

Of course, my belief that ancient Israel was a theocracy is precisely that: a belief, which is based upon the same holy book produced by that theocracy. The Israelite holy wars were commanded by the Lord of the Bible. For Muslims, their jihad is authorized by Allah of the Koran. In spite of all the similarities between our monotheistic deities and all of our attempts at ecumenical "bridge-building," respect for other religious groups, and postmodern "political correctness," if we are not Muslim, we do not accept the Koran as authoritative revelation from the true God. Conversely,

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stated in the Koran and other sources as if Allah were uttering direct commands today. Historically speaking, Christians have not been immune from this approach. For example, the medieval church claimed divine authority and in some respects the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony tried to live as a theocracy, enforcing authoritative biblical revelation as binding on their society.

None of the groups just mentioned has been a theocracy in the sense that Israel was because they have lacked the resident, manifest Presence of the divine King in their midst and the powerful checks and balances that go with his ongoing, intimate control. With Israel, the Lord was operating the brakes as well as the accelerator, making sure that his people carried out his orders and then stopped. Thus he commanded the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan, but not people of other nations (Deut. 20) and especially not relatives of Israel (Num. 20; Deut. 2), unless their hostility made them dangerous (Exod. 17; Num. 21, 3 1; Deut. 2-3). When King Saul, in his misguided zeal, broke Israel's sworn treaty with the Gibeonites (Josh. 9) by attempting to wipe them out like other peoples of Canaan, God held him and his family seriously accountable (2 Sam. 21).

The Lord's goal was to provide a spiritually and physically secure home for his people within a limited geographic area so that they could flourish in their own land without being destroyed by idolatrous, corrupt, and predatory neighbors. By sharp contrast with Islam, Israel was not commissioned to use military force anywhere in the world for propagating the faith and attempting to destroy polytheism.<sup>10</sup>

Muslims do not accept the Bible the way we do.

We confront the hard reality that our approach to the ethics of "holy war" genocide depends upon our answer to a religious question: Which deity is true and therefore has ultimate authority over human life? Problems such as the Middle East and its political and ideological environment will never be satisfactorily and permanently solved at any conference table as long as moral attitudes and ethical judgments are founded on different religions the way they are. If we could agree that because theocracy no longer exists on Planet Earth, there is no such thing as "holy war" in the twenty-first century and therefore indiscriminate slaughter is unconscionable, inhumane, and universally condemnable, we have a solid basis for resolution of conflict. The catch, however, is that this is a religious statement alien to the worldview of many Muslims.

Given that we have different religions, we must ask: "Can people with fundamentally different truth claims live together without killing each other?"<sup>11</sup> Hans Küng argues in the context of gruesome modern history that "there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. In short, there can be no world peace without religious peace."<sup>12</sup> The prognosis looks bleak indeed unless/until some kind of dramatic change occurs. Pope John XXIII was on target when he said, "The world will never be the dwelling-place of peace, till peace has found a home in the heart of each and every man, till every man preserves in himself the order ordained by God to be preserved."<sup>13</sup>

Jonathan Swift, the British satirist, wrote that we have just enough religion to make us hate but not

enough to make us love one another. This reminds me of a Schnauzer named "Bear." His owners enrolled him in a training course for guard dogs with two parts: the first to develop aggression and the second to control it. Bear passed the first with flying colors but flunked the second.

Obviously we cannot force other people to change their worldviews, but we can improve our own contribution to world peace. A first step is to get acquainted with those of different persuasions as human beings. Philip Yancey describes his reaction to a conference in New Orleans between Muslims, Jews, and Christians:

Suffering sometimes serves as a moat and sometimes as a bridge. The Muslim who fled from the soldiers at Deir Yassin years later had an automobile accident in the United States. It was a Jewish nurse who stopped, tied a tourniquet with her scented hanky, and painstakingly plucked glass from his face. He believes she saved his life. The Muslim man's wife, a physician, went on to say that she had once treated a patient with a strange tattoo on his wrist. When she asked about it, he told her about the Holocaust, a historical event omitted from her high school, college, and graduate school education in Arab countries. For the first time, she understood Jewish pain.

Why do human beings keep doing it to each other? Yugoslavia, Ireland, Sudan, the West Bank—is there no end to the cycle of pain fueled by religion? As Gandhi observed, the logic of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" cannot sustain itself forever; ultimately both parties end up blind and toothless.

Our meeting in New Orleans did not, rest assured, change the Middle East equation, or make peace between three major religions any more likely. But it did change us. For once we focused on intersections and connections, not just boundaries. We got to know Hillel, Dawud, and Bob, human faces behind the labels Jew, Muslim, and Christian.<sup>14</sup>

As Christians, what we need is not less of religion, but more of truer religion (compare Matt. 5:20) that is permeated by Christ's self-sacrificing love. Leaving vengeance up to God to administer according to his wisdom (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30), our mandate from our Lord is to love others as ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt 22:36–40; John 13:34–35; Rom. 13:8, and so forth). The holy war we are to wage is love.

## Notes and References

1. Adapted (with very few changes) from R. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 771–77.
2. Compare on Lev. 27 regarding herem devotion to God for destruction.
3. C. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 13–44; J. J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122 (2003): 3–21.
4. Compare E. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," in *Show Them No Mercy*, 63–94; D. Gard, "The Case for Eschatological Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy*, 113–41; "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy*, 161–87.
5. M. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 163.
6. See the extensive bibliography on this fascinating subject compiled by B. L. Whitney: *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil 1960–1990* (New York: Garland, 1993).
7. Compare on Num. 16:1–35, "Bridging Contexts"; R. Gane, *God's Faulty Heroes* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1996), 21–22.
8. A. Einstein, "My Views," in E. Knoebel, ed., *Classics of Western Thought: Volume 111—The Modern World*, 4th ed. (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 3:539.
9. H. Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1993), 73–74.
10. R. Firestone, "Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'nic Tradition," *JRE* 24 (1996): 105–7, 111–18.
11. Question formulated by a rabbi at an interfaith meeting in New Orleans with Jews, Muslims, and Christians, cited by P. Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Publications, 1997), 56.
12. Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, 76.
13. Pope John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris," in D. Gochberg, ed., *Classics of Western Thought: Volume IV—The Twentieth Century* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 4:463.
14. Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, 54–55.

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