

Jesus and Genocide: Another Alternative

By David R. Larson

Virtually everyone agrees with Roy Gane that we Christians should not practice genocide. The question before us is whether we can think of God ordering ancient Israel to act so ruthlessly (Num. 21:1–35, 31:1–54; Deut. 2:1–37, 3:1–29, and 20:1–20).¹ He answers Yes and I say No. Instead of criticizing his thought-provoking essay, I offer another alternative that displays our differences in the article that follows. “I believe that” precedes each of the following assertions.

The primary sources of truth for Christians are Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Because it creates the Christian community like a constitution invents a nation, Scripture is the most important of the four. The idea that Scripture is the Christian’s only source of truth is accurate if it means that none other shares its primacy. It is false if it suggests that we can flourish as Christians by studying only it.

The history of the first Seventh-day Adventists illustrates how experience can trigger changes in our interpretations of Scripture. Following October 22, 1844, the day on which they had mistakenly expected the triumphant return of Jesus Christ,

they reconstructed their views. Even those who disagree with their changes concur that they had to revise their interpretations because their experience of the Great Disappointment proved they had been wrong. This is what experience can do to our interpretations of Scripture. Discoveries about the Christian tradition and the conclusions of sound reasoning, scientific and otherwise, can do this, too.

When interpreting any portion of Scripture, we should be sensitive to its linguistic, historical, and religious contexts. We should also trace the direction in which the whole of Scripture is moving so that in our day we can travel even further down the same road. It is right to move



THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC; GENESIS 22:1-14 FROM THE "TREASURY OF BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS" BY JULIUS SCHNOHR VON CAROLS-FELD, DOVER PUBLICATIONS, N.Y., 1999

beyond Scripture in the same direction but wrong to go against it. To be a Christian today is not the task of simply believing and doing what the ancients did. It is the adventure of plotting the trajectories of Scripture and doing all we can to advance them in our time.

The abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century is illustrative. Although some portions of Scripture assume or maybe even endorse it (Gen. 16:1-16; 17:1-27; 21:1-21; Exod. 20:8-11; 21:1-36; Lev. 19:1-37; 25:1-55; 25; Deut. 15:1-23; 23:1-25; Philem. 1-25), many Christians eventually concluded that faithfulness to God required them to oppose it. What's more, although a number of texts in Scripture suggest otherwise, once they reached this

conclusion they inferred that even in antiquity slavery could not have been God's will. How we view God in the present properly shapes what we think God did in the past. Because God's character is like this, we rightly reason, God might or might not have done that.

Any occurrence is of God only if it fits with God's character. No sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, dream, vision, or prophecy can prove otherwise. Neither can a cloud by day or a pillar of fire by night. These are

all too easy to counterfeit and misunderstand.

Jesus Christ provides our clearest picture of God's character. It is true that "All Scripture is inspired by God." One way or another, every line "is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Yet we Christians measure everything in Scripture and elsewhere against what we learn from Jesus Christ. We remember that "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-4).

Only of him do we say that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). It is this Son and no

for any of them to be spared. But God saved Noah and his family. Heavenly messengers dragged Lot, his wife, and his daughters from their doomed city. And God delays the end "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). None of these occurrences counts as genocide.

Many say that the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:1-14) shows that God's character can command people to do evil. This is a mistake. In his time Abraham's willingness to kill his son and offer him to God as a burnt offering was not unusual (Lev. 18:1-30). Many of his neighbors followed the ancient custom of sacrificing to their gods the "first to open the womb" of

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one else "who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). Only he can declare, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). We neither discard nor disdain anything in Scripture because each text helps us plot its trajectories; nevertheless, how we interpret each passage depends upon how it fits with Jesus Christ. He is the norm within the norm.

The practice of genocide is not compatible with the character of God as embodied in Jesus Christ. This fact is decisive for everything else we Christians say about it. We cannot hold that genocide is wrong for us today but that it was right for those who lived in ancient Israel because Jesus Christ manifests what God has always been like (John 8:34-59). As it is with slavery and some other issues, our position should be that our religious ancestors honestly believed that God commanded them to practice genocide but that now we see this differently. The gap between Jesus and genocide is just too wide. Remembering Israel's savage conquest of Canaan helps us understand how far we have come and the direction we should keep traveling; however, we should not justify it.

Some appeal to events like Noah's flood (Gen. 6:1-8:22;), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-38), and the ultimate extermination of the wicked (Rev. 20:1-15) to establish that genocide can fit with God's character. Each of these instances lacks its defining features, however. Genocide is the extermination of entire groups with no regard for the relative guilt or innocence of individual members and no opportunity

all their livestock and wives.² Centuries later, even some descendants of Abraham sacrificed their firstborn (Ezek. 20:1-49; Jer. 7:1-34). The fact that Abraham's God stopped him from sacrificing Sarah's first and only son must have shocked his neighbors. This is why God's disapproval of human sacrifice is this story's primary point. All other interpretations are secondary though often worthy applications.

God is this story's supreme hero, not Abraham. Over the centuries many reversed their roles, regrettably. This happened most severely when commentators, like Martin Luther and John Calvin in the sixteenth century, and Søren Kierkegaard, in the nineteenth, shifted their emphasis from God's rational nature to God's inscrutable will. This made God appear arbitrary and capricious. The results have been disastrous in theory and practice, even contributing to the Holocaust, as many historians hold.

Because he lived when he did, Abraham learned the hard way that God prefers the slaughter of animals to the sacrifice of humans. Centuries later, the prophets taught that God does not want the sacrifice of animals either (Micah 6:6-8). Many generations after that, Paul appealed to the Christians at Rome "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." The word Paul used for "spiritual" literally means *logical*. He invited his readers to "be transformed by the renewing of your *minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom.

12:1, 2, emphasis supplied). Here, then, with respect to the idea of “sacrifice,” we plot one of Scripture’s most important trajectories.

Without endorsing what they did, we can understand why many in ancient Israel thought that God commanded them to practice genocide when we recall their communal view of moral responsibility. Several passages of Scripture indicate that they functioned as though one person’s sins made his or her entire clan guilty (Num. 16:1–15; Josh. 7:1–26). In his time, Ezekiel did all he could to change this view. “It is only the person who sins that shall die,” he argued in great detail (Ezek. 18:1–32). Because many did not yet understand this, they held that each member of any group that sins deserves punishment. In time, most agreed with Ezekiel that God judges us as individuals. This gradual shift from the communal to the personal is another important trajectory in Scripture.

On at least one occasion Abraham acted more maturely. When he learned that the three strangers for whom he and Sarah had provided a special meal were on their way to incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah, he objected. “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” Abraham respectfully implored. “Far be it from you,” he pled, “to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!” In words that should thrill us, Abraham inquired of the Lord, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25).

I do not know what I would have done if I had lived in ancient Israel when it practiced genocide. I hope I would have protested and invited others to join me. I hope I would have implored, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” I hope I would have fallen on my sword before I shoved it through the belly of my neighbor’s screaming baby.

Notes and References

1. All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. As Dalton Baldwin has brought to my attention, we can detect echoes of this ancient ritual in Exodus 13 and Leviticus 27. Note the provisions for sparing human firstborns by “redeeming” them. This was an important step in the right direction.

David R. Larson teaches in the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University.

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