

Killing Canaanites

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

With the increase and spread of antisemitic discourse, many have only just become aware of the viciousness and irrationality of the attacks on Jews and Judaism, which have in fact been endemic in all supposedly monotheistic societies. Mainly since the rise of ideologies claiming to be the sole and only possessors of one truth. We believe there are other ways to the Almighty and to ethical, good behavior. We see nothing to be gained by trying to force or even encourage others join us. So long as they are good human beings adhering to ethical standards and abjuring idolatry. Since the rise of Marxism, the bias against all religions has facilitated the expansion of antisemitism in nonreligious societies. And crude nationalism has encouraged the hatred that started as intertribal and has now extended to competing nationalities.

Stories of Jews as Christ-killers or members of an international cabal out to dominate the world and subvert other cultures have now become commonplace on the internet, probably more widespread than in Medieval times, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Facts have never got in the way of conspiracy theories. According to cyberspace, Jews (Mossad in particular) are responsible for every manmade or natural disaster that has ever struck.

A line of attack one often sees nowadays is how cruel the Jews are and I am not talking about Israeli occupation or self-defense. The source given is the Bible. Isn't the Bible cruel, permitting slavery, killing the Canaanites, and giving preference to its own above others, so out-of-date it cannot be relevant today? And what about treatment of women?

It is rather strange to try to compare a culture and a text that is over 3,000 years old with modernity without allowing for new developments within a tradition. Nothing ever stands still. Shall we now condemn the USA as unworthy because of how it treated its tribes? Or fought a bloody civil war less than 200 years ago? Or allowed some States to perpetuate racism? Where's the common sense?

Three thousand years ago Judaism offered a legal and moral tradition that contrasted with the paganism of that era, which rejected civil equality, constraints, and human values. But it did so by weaning people off old practices in stages. Compare the Torah with, for instance, the Code of Hammurabi. Then one would see how other Middle Eastern legal codes treated women, slaves, lower classes, and aliens. Any text has to be seen in the context of its time.

You may say that the Bible claims to be the Word of God and therefore taken literally and at face value, as some religious people actually do. There are indeed Jewish fundamentalists and literalists. But I am not one of them. The Torah was given in a specific time and context. Some of its laws were eternal and some clearly temporary or conditional. Maimonides points out that 3,000

years ago sacrificing animals was the universal norm for religious ritual. To have started a religion without would not have made sense during a time when people sacrificed children, let alone sheep and oxen. It would be almost impossible for a modern religious person to conceive of starting a religion nowadays in which there would be no prayer or meditation of any kind.

If Moses said, "Do not steal," he meant sheep and goats. But we can interpret that to apply to computers and cars, can we not? Capital punishment still exists in the USA. The Oral Law already frowned on it and made it inoperable 2,000 years ago. A biblical law allowing jealous husbands to arraign their wives on suspicion of infidelity was stopped by the rabbis then too. Maimonides in his *Laws of Kings*, which discusses such biblical obligations as to go to war against pagans and other enemies, says explicitly that any non-Jew who agrees to observe the Noahide laws must not be put to death.

The biblical tradition is like the American Constitution in many ways. It is constantly adding new decisions, precedents and adaptations. The original text was modified by the Amendments, and the Amendments were modified by successive Supreme Courts who interpreted the laws, originalists versus evolutionists. The constitution as understood nowadays is very different to the initial text but still derived from it.

Whereas the Torah commanded the Israelites to kill off the Canaanites, it is clear that in practice they did not. On the contrary, the Canaanites conquered the Israelites during the period of the Judges. The Mishna (Yadayim 4:4) says that all Biblical laws related to fighting the Canaanite tribes no longer applied 2,500 years ago. When the Assyrian Senacharib conquered the whole area he destroyed or exiled all the local tribes. There has been no mention, no archaeological trace of a living Canaanite community since then.

In addition, a whole slew of Biblical rules on purity, worship, and civil law were declared no longer applicable. Slavery was not abolished in the West until William Wilberforce succeeded in passing a bill in Parliament in 1807. It still exists in parts of the world today. Recent clips have shown slave markets in North and Central Africa. It is hardly surprising that 3,000 years ago no one looked at slavery as unreasonable. Even so, the Torah was way ahead of its time in insisting on standards and protecting freedoms. "Do not hand back a fleeing slave to his master" is a Biblical Law after all (Deuteronomy 23).

As for women, Switzerland did not give them a vote until 1971 and one Canton didn't concede until 1990. And look how many cases are reported in the USA now, let alone elsewhere, where women are still sexually abused, bought and sold, and suffer appalling disadvantages. Of course so were poor men. I know two wrongs do not make a right. But to pick on Jews for particular odium seems to be the most widespread blood sport of our era.

It is true that Judaism puts helping its own first. Even so, it welcomed the poor of other nations, as the Book of Ruth demonstrates. The Oral Law insisted on giving charity and alms to non-Jews (Talmud Gitin 61a). Today America, like all sovereign states, accords privileges and benefits to citizens that it denies to non-citizens. The Bible too gave benefits to

citizens. But the Bible welcomed aliens, strangers, non-Jews, who simply had to agree to abide by the basic civil laws. Then they were accorded equal civil rights, regardless of race, gender, or religion. Twenty-six times the Bible says, "Be kind to the stranger, because you were strangers once." And that was 3,000 years ago.

You can find plenty that's wrong with Jews and Jewish life today to criticize if so inclined. Perhaps we are not all that lovable. Pray who is? But criticism of Judaism on the basis of some laws in the Bible, many of which no longer apply, is like someone who judges English law by the laws of William the Conqueror, or Christianity on the basis of Crusader massacres, or Mohammad on his treatment of women. It can only result in increased hatred in this world instead of trying to make it better.