

GOD ... AND ETHNIC CLEANSING?

A personal reflection on Exodus 17:14-16

Exodus 17:8-16 records the first human opposition to the people of Israel after they cross the Red Sea. The passage is chiefly known for the role of Moses, who spends the entire battle raising his staff towards heaven, and that of Aaron and Hur, who raise his arms when he no longer can.

However, the passage is also one of the most controversial and contentious in the Old Testament, recording God's words after victory has been won:

¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.' ¹⁵ Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner. ¹⁶ He said, 'Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.' Exodus 17

God's declaration sounds uncomfortably like ethnic cleansing to modern ears, and indeed has long been used (along with other similar passages) to lay precisely that charge at his door.

So how do we respond? By 'we' (just to be clear) I am talking about those who believe the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God, and that it portrays a good God who is love personified. This double belief will permit us neither to airbrush unpalatable passages out, nor allow our God to be portrayed as just one more petty, vindictive deity.

It is always helpful to remember that the Old Testament, while part of our story, is not our chapter in the story. When we think of God, his nature, character, and his activity, we follow scripture in declaring that God is love (1 John 4:8). Nowhere does the bible say that God is wrath (or, indeed, anything else). Love defines God. Yet he is also just, and hates sin, because it ruins the wonderful earth he created and the creatures with which he peopled it. It follows that his response to sin is a function of his love, just as when a human mother disciplines her child.

Most of us are willing to acknowledge that we are all in part responsible for that ruin; although few of us will have done so with G K Chesterton's elegance or brevity. When, early in the 20th Century, The Times asked, 'What is wrong with the world today?', its editor received many well-argued and lengthy answers. Chesterton wrote simply, 'Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G K Chesterton.' At two words, it remains the shortest letter published by the paper.

Another common human trait is the cry for justice. On 12 May this year, militants stormed a hospital in Kabul, killing 12 mothers & nurses, and 2 newborns. On the same day, a bomb at a funeral killed 24. Two single incidents in a vast ocean of hatred and cruelty leading to immeasurable and unimaginable misery and suffering throughout history. Could any God worthy of the name not ensure that justice is served on such actions? Yet, if he is to do so, do we not also stand condemned? We may not have committed such 'great' sins, but do we dare claim that our little sins are of no account? C.S. Lewis wryly noted that every human is eager for justice ... until it is applied to them.

But indeed, God must, and will, one day, right every wrong, restore what is broken, straighten what is crooked, redeem what is lost. He must and will bind up the broken-hearted, and end poverty, injustice, inequality, oppression, sin and death. So why, we cry, doesn't he do so NOW? The answer, according to the bible, is that judgement is not God's *desire*. In one of the most famous verses in scripture, Jesus declares

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3

Justice cannot be delayed forever, but the bible indicates that God does delay it in the hope that as many as possible may be saved:

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-9

And this, I believe, can help us approach a passage as challenging as Exodus 17:14-16.

The Amalekites first appear in Genesis 14, which describes war between a number of city states at the time of Abraham. Also mentioned are the Amorites, whose name came to be used by the Old Testament writers as a general term for all the peoples living in Canaan, and so stands as a sort of collective reference point for the unchecked wickedness of those peoples, including the Amalekites (Genesis 48:22; Joshua 24:15). Renewing his covenant with Abraham, God prophesies both his descendants' move to Egypt under Joseph and their escape under Moses 400 years later:

In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. Genesis 15:16

God here reveals that he intends to delay rescuing his own people and giving them the Promised Land for 400 years because of his patience with a group of peoples (including the Amalekites) whose collective practices included sacrificing babies to the god Molech (Leviticus 18:21).

The Old Testament focuses almost entirely on one people, Israel, but gives us the occasional glimpse into God's activity in other nations: Ruth the Moabitess, Rahab in Jericho, and the people of Nineveh, are but three examples. The citizens of Nineveh responded to Jonah's message with repentance and God spared them. *There* is God's true desire, which is why James can declare that *mercy triumphs over judgement* (2:13). We can only imagine how God tried to draw the Amalekites & others away from their violent ways and to himself. Yet whenever they appear, they are in deep and longstanding opposition to God's people.

God simply could not be the God of justice scripture declares him to be if he did not, one day, execute perfect justice, which only he is qualified to do (Romans 2:1-3). I trust him to know when the wickedness of a particular nation or world system has reached the point where it has to be tackled; just as I trust that, one day, *he will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity (Psalm 98:9)*. For nor could he be the God scripture declares him to be if it were possible for anyone to sustain an allegation of unfairness against him.

We see very clearly from this the biblical tension between God's love and his desire to show mercy on the one hand; and the fact that he cannot simply declare that sin, and all the misery and death it causes, doesn't matter on the other. And that is the glory of the Cross, where the two forces creating that tension collide in the body of Jesus. In Jesus, God takes all judgement for sin upon himself, so that no one need experience judgement, if they will only choose to trust in him.

Many Christians are justifiably and commendably concerned for those who, so it would seem, have never had the chance to respond to Jesus. Surely the Egyptian soldiers who drowned in the Red Sea had no choice but to obey the Pharaoh who held the power of life and death over them? Were all the Amorites, Amalekites and other peoples equally guilty? Were there not some individuals who were as repulsed by child sacrifice as we are?

I believe that those worthy questions are, if not fully answered, then at least addressed and held, in the account of the thief on the cross. This unnamed man makes neither confession nor statement of faith, and falls well short of the classic 'prayer of commitment.' He simply says, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*, and Jesus welcomes him in. This suggests a number of things. It suggests that the Holy

Spirit is active in every human life, constantly calling people home. It suggests that Jesus sets the bar for admission to his kingdom far lower than the church has historically done; and that I must not underestimate what Jesus is able to effect in the moment of death. I would never preach complacency on this basis nor encourage anyone to put off a decision for Christ: the gospel message is that only by placing trust in him can we be *sure* of salvation: my point here is that we are not privy to nor should we seek to limit the extent or reach of his activity.

Above all, the cross tells me that, even though these tough questions may not ever fully settle in my mind, the God whose answer to the world's brokenness was to allow himself to be broken, the God who promises that he will, one day, *swallow up death for ever ... [and] ... wipe away the tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8)*, can be trusted with the destiny of all humankind. So I choose to leave in God's hands the eternal fate of those who seem to suffer unjustly. I don't find it helpful to speak of 'innocent' victims, as the Bible is clear that none of us is innocent. But it's sadly all too clear that our human reality leads to immense undeserved suffering. And scripture's clear voice about God's goodness, compassion, love and desire to show mercy leads me to trust him to be just towards every human who has ever lived.

I choose that verse from Isaiah because, although not as famous as Revelation 21:4, which it inspires, it is from the Old Testament, and shows that God's desire and intent is found there just as much as in the New Testament. In the same way, judgement is found in the mouth of Jesus and from the pen of St Paul, and not just in the Old Testament.

I do not believe we can preach universalism, the view that the world to come involves compulsory heaven for everyone. The bible is clear that the final judgement will involve a separation. Sadly, not everyone will enter the kingdom; some will face an eternity without Jesus (or annihilation, as John Stott came to believe: both positions have their scriptural basis). But their fate will not rest at the feet of a God who can be charged with not having done more to prevent it. It will rest in their exercise of his gift of free will and a choice that God will never overturn by force.

I am always struck by the way Luke 15 ends. The lost son has returned and been welcomed home by a loving and forgiving father. The household is rejoicing, the party is in full swing, and only the fatted calf isn't having a good time. But where is the father? Not in the party celebrating with the son who has come home, but outside with another son, equally lost in the darkness of bitterness, resentment and self-pity, beseeching him to come in to the light and the warmth. And that's where the narrative ends, Jesus leaving us with the image of God roaming the darkness of this world's brokenness while anyone may yet be saved.

I am under no illusion that this brief paper will satisfy or do justice to every question, concern and doubt. Ultimately, as with everything else, our response is a matter of faith.

I choose to believe the major voice of scripture about the nature, character and activity of God, rather than allowing its minor voices to unsettle me. It's not that I refuse to face and engage with these hard passages; it's that I choose, along with the apostles, to interpret all of scripture through the centrepiece of human history – the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

I focus on his voice and actions in the gospels, because Jesus is perfect theology. I rejoice in his compassion for the least, the little, the last and the lost. I meditate on his passion and suffering as he died for me – for me! – and can neither imagine nor believe that anyone will ever justly accuse him of not being fair.

I look deep into his eyes and whisper, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. And know that he will. He will. Which is enough, until I see him face to face and all my questions either find their answer, or else dissolve like mist at the rising of the sun.

Paul Langham, May 2020

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