

Turning the Bible Inside Out:
The Conquest of Canaan by Israel

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21).

Strangely, frighteningly, this sentence (or one like it) could be taken from any number of stories in the Word, and this despite the Lord’s own clear commandment not to commit murder. So much bloodshed is described in the Old Testament, in fact, that many people have rejected the book out of hand, and some have even used it as an excuse to reject religion altogether, suggesting that “if this is what religion teaches, I want none of it.”

Strangely, and even more frighteningly, many people who view the New Testament as the non-violent answer to the Old Testament, still think of the crucifixion as a divinely ordained blood sacrifice that atones for all the sins of the world thus – again – affirming brutal violence as the necessary means to the end of our salvation.

But, you know, it just isn’t so. The commandment stands, and the clear message of the New Testament *is* one of non-violence. What a lot of people don’t realize, though, is that the message of the Old Testament is also non-violent *when it is properly understood*.

This is the key. So today we are going to explore this whole concept of what might be called murder and mayhem in the Bible, see if we can recognize what it is *really* all about, and take some serious lessons from it for our personal lives. You could call this “turning the Bible inside out” because it takes us to a deeper, inner level of meaning that involves spiritual things – states or conditions of our own minds – using the imagery of conquest to represent the subjugation of our own selfish wills, our own hereditary inclinations to what is evil and false.

You know, even though the Lord taught non-violence, “turning the other cheek,” and so on, He did also say that He “did not come to bring peace, but a sword,” and that our enemies would be “those of our own household” (Matt. 10:34-39). So in this apparent contradiction He taught a deeper truth: the real battles for our spiritual life are not “out there,” but “in here” (in our own hearts and minds), for the household He referred to is the household of our minds with all their related thoughts and affections, ideas, concepts and inclinations. Some are good, some are bad! But the good and bad can’t live peacefully together; one or the other has to be rooted out.

This is what the warfare of the Bible is really all about. Not that it isn’t actually historical! But it’s history that’s written like a play on a stage, except that the Lord used the actors’ own loves and intentions to create representative scenes that tell a story beyond their wildest dreams. And in this drama really ALL the characters were flawed – as we are – but they *represent* both good and evil, Israel in general the good or truth from the Lord, and the Canaanites the evil or falsity of our own human nature. In fact, as flawed as the Israelites were, the Canaanites were generally worse, often including human sacrifice and ritual prostitution in their worship.

So the death of a Canaanite in Israel, no matter how awful it may be in the literal sense, or how

dreadful in its own right, *represents* in the Divine allegory the removal of some negative spiritual trait in our own lives – in this case some particular hereditary evil, such as the selfish tendency to do everything for the sake of reward. These evils can be extremely hard to get rid of (and pretty easy to justify, too!) but in order to enter into a heavenly state we simply must get rid of them. Now this takes time, of course, not to mention courage and a good strategic plan, but it must be done. And if it isn't done, then as we read, "those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell" (Numbers 33:55, Joshua 23:13). And don't we know it!

So now let's look at the plan that the Lord developed for the Israelites entering into the land of Canaan after their long years in the wilderness (after they left Egypt). There were essentially three parts to their campaign: first they conquered the middle part of Canaan, sometimes called the spine of the land because of the central mountain range just west of the Jordan River. Then they turned to the south, driving hard into the territory that would become the inheritance of Judah, "utterly destroying all the people" they encountered, striking them all, as it says, "with the edge of the sword" and leaving no survivors. Then, seeing what was going on there, the native peoples of the north country formed an alliance, raised a huge army, and went out to stop this invasion if they possibly could. And they had, we read, "as many people as the sand that is on the seashore in multitude, with very many horses and chariots" (Joshua 11:4). But the Lord told Joshua not to worry: "Do not be afraid because of them," He said, "for tomorrow about this time I will deliver all of them slain before Israel. And you shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire."

And so it was. Joshua and his armies came up some 90 miles from their southern campaign to meet them a little northwest of the Sea of Galilee, and drove them away farther north and east, killing them all as they fled, hamstringing their horses, burning their chariots and leaving none to tell the story. What horrors must those killing fields have seen! What misery and brutality! Only the cities themselves were left standing – empty – except for the capitol, Hazor, which they also burned to the ground. Why does the sacred text so glorify this genocide? How can we honor and respect such violence?

Well, truly, we can't honor and respect the violence itself! But what we can do is see and understand the spiritual *meaning* of it, and recognize the important, *life-saving* principles that are at work in the stories about our own lives as we prepare for eternal life. For like the Ten Commandments themselves, which are all negative (except one), when we turn them inside out and see the meaning within them we have the same sort of positive things we ask for every time we say the Lord's prayer!

Let's begin with Joshua himself, the commander of the armies of Israel. As a trait or characteristic within ourselves he represents the truth of the Lord's Word fighting to protect and provide for what is good, also from the Lord, in us. The land of Canaan is the whole realm of our spiritual mind – will, understanding and determination to use. But our native will, our hereditary disposition, simply is worldly and self-centered; it has no understanding or affection for spiritual things and so must be rooted out. The inhabitants of the land of Canaan represent this natural disposition, and so in the story *they* must be rooted out.

The conquest begins in the center of the land – the hill country just west of Jordan where Joshua

finds great walled cities like Jericho and Ai that have to be overcome. (Actually, it begins at a place called Gilgal, near the fords of the Jordan, where Joshua circumcises all the men of war as an act of purification before engaging the enemy. And they return there after each campaign to renew their covenant with the Lord. But that is another whole story in itself.) Cities in the Word, like the laws and structures that shape them, represent systems of thought or understanding in our own minds. Without getting into details, Jericho in particular represents the falsities (one might say, the whole system of thought based on false principles) drawn from the abuse or misunderstanding of outward appearances and of the literal sense of the Word. The fact that it is a walled, fortified city suggests the defensive attitude that we may find in ourselves with all its excuses when such principles become well established in our minds. Somehow the walls must be broken down, the falsities exposed and the evils they are protecting wiped out.

This, of course, is not done by Joshua or his armies alone, but by the Lord as they co-operated with Him – following His plan. Marching around the city, not once but every day for a week, and seven times on the seventh day, seven priests finally blew seven trumpets and the walls came tumbling down! Of course we don't dwell on the ensuing slaughter when we teach this story to our children, but that is, after all, the main point. Simply put, we must rid our minds of all the evils and their fortifying falsities that stand in the way of truth and goodness taking control.

Now this is just one representative story in the conquest of the central hill country. There are several others, each providing important lessons about how we can overcome our hereditary nature, or what happens if we don't. But now let's skip to the southern campaign.

After Israel had won great victories in the hill country, including a treaty with the Gibeonites, who chose NOT to oppose them, five kings of the Amorites rose up in the southern region hoping to conquer Gibeon. Hearing of it Joshua rushed his army by a forced march through the night to defend their new ally and basically wiped them all out, after which he made a circuit of destruction throughout the south, killing all the people with "the edge of the sword." Again, the savagery, the brutality was breathtaking, but the spiritual lessons in the internal sense are vital.

Note, in this case Israel was not the aggressor – not at first anyway. They went to defend the Gibeonites. Now the Gibeonites represent a simple quality of obedient goodness in ourselves – the desire to serve, to be useful, albeit without deep thought or understanding. Naturally, this simple goodness is easily threatened and attacked by evil loves represented by the Amorites. But when this happens the spiritual truths we know from the Word must come to their defense.

It's like this, just to take one simple example: you say to yourself, "I want to do something nice for someone today, or help out at the church, or make a donation to some charity." Good. But right away you become aware of your selfish nature saying "No way! They don't deserve it; besides, what's in it for me? I need to look after myself first." That sort of thing. This is when the spiritual truths we know from the Word need to come to the rescue, fighting back and ultimately killing off the selfish excuses so that we can do that simple good for its own sake.

The rest of the southern campaign was a series of pre-emptive strikes, taking out the latent resistance before it had a chance to build. And note, the edge of the sword that is often mentioned specifically signifies the sharp, clear application of the truth of faith against the falsity and evil that would corrupt us. So Joshua and his armies "took the whole land, according to all that

the Lord had said to Moses,” ultimately conquering 31 kingdoms (Josh. 11:23 & 12:24).

Finally we have the northern conquest. Here again an alliance was formed of native peoples who were trying to stop the invasion of the Israelites. And note, this is the battle where the enemy brought horses and chariots into action, horses which the Israelites were told to “hamstring” and chariots which they were told to “burn with fire.” These two elements in particular point to the intellectual character of the spiritual battle that is represented, since horses correspond to the understanding, and chariots are the vehicles, essentially the wheels of the understanding, turning as they do, driven to work out the means to accomplish its purposes.

Now you know that a horse’s great strength rests entirely in its legs, and especially in the tendon that connects the upper leg to the hoof. When that tendon is damaged or cut the horse has no power – can’t even walk, much less run. So, despite the cruelty expressed in the literal command not to kill but to *hamstring* these horses, the important truth here conveyed in the spiritual sense is that we must completely disable the falsities that rise up in our own minds by cutting off our power to reason from them against the truths of faith. *How can we do this?* Certainly not by rejecting science, education or the understanding! Certainly not by denying any facts! But by cutting off the power of an argument that serves only self or the love of the world.

For example, you can argue against doing useful things for others, but why? If you win the argument and do nothing useful your spiritual life is at risk. Better to cut off that whole line of reasoning and get up out of your chair and just do the work. As for burning the chariots with fire, this is an obvious reference to the love for what is good and true simply overwhelming and consuming all the arguments against it.

In the book of Joshua we are told that the people were at war for many years during the conquest of Canaan. The stories we have reviewed today are just highlights suggesting how much is involved in our struggles to overcome our selfish nature and really enter into spiritual life. We cannot win this war in a few days or even a few years. Nor can we do so on our own, we can only do it with the Lord’s help. But the powerful message throughout the stories is that the Lord is with us to give us the victory – if we will only follow His instructions! – Not that the Lord condones or encourages outward violence of any kind; He merely used the natural dispositions of the ancient Israelites to write a history that is deeply symbolic, a long and detailed allegory that describes our spiritual journey through the challenges we must all face in overcoming our selfish, worldly, hereditary inclinations on the way to entering the Promised Land, the kingdom of heaven. This is work we can do! It is not easy work by any means, and it is often brutal when it comes to the things we naturally want, crave or think we need. But the Lord knows what we *really* need and He provides for it all through the daily confrontations we must have with our own compromising natures as we learn to trust in His Word and in His infinite strength to help.

Amen.

Lessons: Joshua 1:1-9
 Children’s talk about the courage to do what is right
 Joshua 11:1-15
 Arcana Caelestia #1659:1,3 & 1664:1
 or Divine Providence #251:3-4).